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## Appayya Dīkṣita's Pluralistic Theology

### Intro

The topic of my presentation is pluralistic theology of Appayya Dīkṣita, an influential Hindu intellectual from the 16th century South India. This foray into Appayya's thought is a fragment of my broader research on polymathy in classical India and its role in the consolidation of Hinduism. Appayya Dīkṣita was a polymath, who wrote on diverse disciplines, ranging from Mīmāṃsā to poetics, and composed devotional poetry. Appayya was known as *sarva-tantra-svatantra*, independent and skillful expositor capable of defending any system of thought as if it was his own or refuting any system as if it was his rival. He wrote as an orthodox follower of Vedic laws, as a devotee of the god Śiva, sometimes as a devotee of Viṣṇu, and occasionally as a worshipper of other deities.

It is difficult to establish to which religious tradition Appayya actually belonged, as in his writings he defended a number of competing traditions. Why did he choose to defend conflicting views? Was Appayya a professional rhetorician lacking any personal commitment of his own? Or a versatile scholar demonstrating his intellectual force? Or something else? And given that Appayya was a public philosopher influencing generations of religious thinkers throughout India, what is the broad social and historical appeal of his polymathic enterprise? In order to understand Appayya's motives and his public resonance, I explore the interrelations among various systems of thought in Appayya's writings. In other words, I examine the relations between the participants of an inter-sectarian dialogue, all of whom are the same person – Appayya Dīkṣita.

In this talk, I will focus on Appayya's discussion of meditation on *brahman,* the first principle of reality, as presented in his works, written from the perspectives of two competing scholastic traditions - Advaita Vedānta and Śivādvaita. [1] I will begin by presenting briefly the debate on the nature of *brahman* among these two traditions. I

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will further proceed with [2] Appayya's discussion of different kinds of meditations on *brahman* as conducive to liberation from the cycle of rebirth. [3] I will explain further Appayya's claim that Advaitin and Śivādvaitin views on brahman are equally justified, based on Bādarāyaṇa's *Brahmasūtras* – a text, authoritative for both traditions. In order to defend his reading of this text, Appayya develops an original hermeneutical method, based on poetical models. [4] Finally, I will propose that there is a broad historical trend, which is important for understanding Appayya's enterprise: unifying tendencies among religious movements across the Indian subcontinent during early modernity.

**1. Advaita and Śivādvaita**

It seems safe enough to say that Appayya saw himself as an Advaitin, and at the same time as a Śivādvaitin (Duquette 2014:69). There is some uncertainty whether he considered the two systems as separate or as the same system. Thus, in his *Caturmataleśasaṃgraha*, Appayya arranges four systems of thought hierarchically according to the closeness to the ultimate truth. He places Dvaita Vedānta first, followed by Viśiṣṭādvaita, then Śivādvaita and finally Advaita. This arrangement suggests that Śivādvaita is a separate system, inferior to Advaita (Duquette 2014:69).

At the same time, in his *Śivārkamaṇidīpikā* and *Śivādvaitanirṇaya*, Appayya goes into considerable pains to prove that Śivādvaita is actually compatible with Advaita Vedānta or even identical with it. Śrīkaṇṭha, the founder of Śivādvaita (between 12-14th centuries), probably modelled his teaching of brahman as Śiva in the spirit of Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita. Appayya, on the other hand, reshapes Śivādvaita in the spirit of Śaṅkara's system.[1] Appayya's efforts to harmonize the teaching of Śrīkaṇṭha with the teaching of Śaṅkara, in fact, suggest that the two form one system or two complementary systems.

Perhaps, the question whether Appayya considered the two systems as separate or not can be answered by taking into account the final goals of each system as perceived by Appayya. While Advaita is primarily concerned with knowledge of brahman without attributes (*nirguṇa brahman*), Śivādvaita is primarily interested in brahman with attributes (*saguṇa brahman*), identified as the god Śiva. Appayya argues

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[1] Lawrence McCrea convincingly argues that Appayya by his own efforts established Śivādvaita as a school, based on Śrīkaṇṭha's little-known commentary to the *Brahmasūtras* (2014).

that both systems accept the ultimate existence of brahman without attributes and the manifestation of brahman with attributes in the phenomenal world. The two systems agree on this point. However, since the systems emphasize different aspects of brahman, they also differ in respect to the method of realization of brahman. I would like to read the relation between the two systems in Appayya's works through his treatment of meditation in two systems as aimed at different aspects of brahmanhood.

## 2. Meditation on Brahman with and without Attributes

In the *Brahmasūtras*, Bādarāyaṇa lists thirty-two *vidyās*, or meditation instructions from the Upaniṣads, describing various symbols and brahman's attributes to be meditated upon. Thus, we find meditations on brahman as immortal, as the syllable OM, as the *udgītha* chant, etc. Appayya argues that the most important among these is *daharavidyā,* prescribing meditation on brahman as hidden in the small space within the heart. All other kinds of meditation are to be contemplated in the conjunction with *dahara.* In his Śivādvaitin writings, Appayya adds that the attributes of brahman as Śiva, known from various Śaiva texts, such as his blue throat, his consortship with Umā, his ability to fulfill desires, are also to be contemplated.

Appayya claims that a person meditating on Śiva, who is no other but brahman with attributes, not merely worships the highest being, but realizes his own identity with that being (ŚN 31,18-33,12; Sastri 1974:45-48). Contemplation of Śiva's attributes is performed in the form "I am Brahman" or "I am verily thou, o Lord, o Divinity, thou verily art I" (Sastri 1974:47).[2] This is an important point in Appayya's argument identifying Śivādvaita with pure Advaita, because for Viśiṣṭādvaitins, the individual self, or *jīva* is not completely identical with brahman. Appayya emphasizes that the contemplated identity with brahman is not merely imagined, but real (ŚN 33,13-34,8; Sastri 1974:48).

What is the intended effect of meditation on brahman with attributes? First, a person meditating continuously and assiduously throughout one's life, after death follows the path of light to the world of brahman (ŚN 29,21-30,18; Sastri 1974:42). Second, he or she assumes Śiva's form, due to divine grace, granted as a result of mental worship, an integral aspect of *saguṇa* meditation (ŚN 67,5-16; Sastri 1974:98). Third,

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[2] "*ahaṃ brahmāsmi;*" "*tvaṃ vā aham asmi bhagavo devate ahaṃ vai tvam asi*" (ŚN 32,13-14).

a meditator achieves firmness and one-pointedness of the mind, which will serve him later in order to directly experience pure brahman (ŚN 54,22-55,11; Sastri 1974:79).

Here, we are getting to the main part of Appayya's argument. He admits that the highest human goal, liberation from the cycle of rebirth, comes only with direct experience of pure brahman. Mystical absorption in brahman is only possible through meditation on the formless brahman. Meditation on pure brahman is extremely difficult, due to the abstractness and subtlety of its object, and is not proper for the beginning or average practitioners, whose minds are not cultivated and steady enough. Meditation on easily visualizable qualities of brahman in the form of Śiva, on the other hand, is within the reach of any person. The devotional nature of this kind of meditation is perceived as an easy path open to any person, as seen in the appeal of devotionalism for the masses.

Appayya, however, is not satisfied with this merely provisional status of meditation on brahman as god. He argues:

> Though really devoid of attributes, yet from the empirical standpoint there are of Brahman many characteristics of the nature of auspicious qualities. As endowed with these, that same Brahman without attributes, is also figuratively called Brahman with attributes. The attributes of that qualified (Brahman) meditated on in the *Dahara, Śāṇḍilya, Vaiśvānara* and other modes of contemplation are also taught in the topic concerning the non-qualified (Brahman) as a means of comprehending it and for the purpose of remembering it (Sastri 1974:94).[3]

Since brahman with attributes and brahman without attributes are the same brahman, meditation on brahman as god indirectly has as its object pure brahman. It should be remembered that attributes are symbols having as their real object brahman who is beyond any symbol or attribute.

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[3] *vastuto nirdharmakasyāpi brahmaṇaḥ santi vyavahāradaśāyāṃ kalyāṇaguṇarūpāḥ bahavo dharmāḥ/ tad upahitaṃ tad eva nirviśeṣaṃ brahma saviśeṣam ity apy ucyate/tasya saviśeṣasya daharaśāṇḍilyavaiśvānaravidyādyupāsasyasya dharmāḥ nirviśeṣaprakaraṇe 'pi tatpratipattyupāyatvena tatsmṛtyarthatvena ca ya upādīyante/* (ŚN 64,18-21).

On the other hand, the fruit of meditation on pure brahman directly affects one's relation with brahman as god:

Though from the view-point of truth, the first fruit of the knowledge of the truth is the attainment of Brahman's being, yet the same non-qualified Brahman, takes on and continues in the form of Īśvara with attributes, until the (final) liberation of all; hence, from the empirical view-point, the fruit (of knowledge) turns out to be of the form of the attainment of the nature of Parameśvara, characterized by the possession of desires which come true and so on (Sastri 1974:94).[4]

In other words, since brahman continues manifesting itself as god for all those who have not been liberated, even a liberated person, on the level of conditioned experience in the phenomenal world, is perceived as becoming one with brahman in its divine form.

Here Appayya's theory of universal salvation (*sarvamukti*) is creatively used in order to conflate Śivādvaita teaching of brahman as god with Advaita teaching of pure brahman. According to the theory of universal salvation, which Appayya probably adopts from Rāmānuja and reshapes for his own purposes, liberation of an individual soul is not complete until liberation of all souls is taking place. Upon realization of brahman by an individual soul, this soul is absorbed in brahman as god. Only after the primordial ignorance ends for all souls, the divinity of brahman is finally destroyed, all attributes disappear, and the nature of pure brahman is achieved by all. Appayya's theory of universal salvation allows viewing Śivādvaita and Advaita Vedānta as two legitimate perspectives on the same reality. Śivādvaita speaks in the language of conditioned phenomenal existence understandable by those still found in the grasp of ignorance. Advaita is the best formulation of reality as it is and as should be ultimately realized. The practical implication of this theory is that a person meditating on Śiva and his attributes is simultaneously meditating on pure brahman.

A reservation, however, should be made that in his earlier Advaitin work, the *Siddhāntaleśasaṃgraha*, Appayya makes a distinction between two kinds of divine nature achieved by meditations on pure brahman and brahman as god:

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[4] *yadyapi tattvadṛṣṭyā tattvajñānaphalaṃ nirviśeṣabrahmabhāvāptiḥ, tathāpi tad eva nirviśeṣaṃ brahma yāvat sarvamukti saguṇeśvarabhāvam āpadyāvatiṣṭhata iti vyavahāradṛṣṭyā satyakāmatvādiguṇakaparameśvarabhāvāpattirūpam api bhavati tatphalam/* (ŚN 65,1-4).

Since for those who contemplate the *saguṇa* there is no intuition of the impartite, there is neither the removal of ignorance nor the resolution of individuation etc., grounded thereon; since the obscuration is not removed, there is no manifestation of impartite bliss. For them there is equality with the Supreme Lord in respect of enjoyment […]; they are also capable of creating by their mere resolve resplendent bodies, organs, damsels etc., to subserve their enjoyment; yet theirs is not the unlimited lordship, characterized by freedom in respect of the creation, destruction etc. of the entire universe; to the released, however, who have attained the state of the Lord, in all respects, all this belongs; great therefore is the distinction (between release and the fruit of *saguṇa* meditation) (Sastri 1935:401-402).[5]

Appayya consistently argues that brahman as god is achieved as a result of both kinds of meditations. That meditation, however, by which brahman as god is specifically targeted, grants the devotee an access to only some of the divine powers, with a further promise that in the world of brahman, unlimited divine powers will be acquired as a result of meditation on pure brahman. One cannot escape the impression that the distinction between the attainment of brahman as god and pure brahman, viewed from the perspective of the conditional phenomenal reality and until liberation of all, is a matter of degree, rather than a qualitative difference.

Although the view that brahman as god and pure brahman are the same brahman originates in the Upaniṣads and held by all Advaitin thinkers, a theory that everything referring to one of brahman's natures simultaneously refers to another, as far as I can tell, is Appayya's original contribution. He emphasizes that the entire *Brahmasūtras* can be interpreted as referring to brahman as god as well as to pure brahman. The statements, interpreted in Advaita as referring to pure brahman, can be legitimately interpreted in Śivādvaita as describing Śiva (ŚN 68,17-69,3; Sastri 1974:100).

It follows that the two systems are two complementary aspects of the same teaching. Seen from the standpoint of the ultimate truth, the teaching assumes the form

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[5] *saguṇopāsakānām akhaṇḍasākṣātkārābhāvān nāvidyānivṛttiḥ, na vā tanmūlāhaṃkārāder vilayaḥ, āvaraṇānivṛtter nākhaṇḍānandasphuraṇam; "jagadvyāpāravarja prakaraṇād asannihitatvācca," "bhogamātrasāmyaliṅgācca," ityādisūtroktanyāyena teṣāṃ parameśvareṇa bhogasāmye 'pi saṅkalpamātrāt svabhogopayuktadivyadehendriyavanitādisṛṣṭisāmarthe 'pi sakalajagatsṛṣṭisaṃhārādisvātantryalakṣaṇaṃ na niravagraham aiśvaryam; muktānāṃ tu nissandhibandham īśvarabhāvaṃ prāptānāṃ tatsarvamiti mahato viśeṣasya sadbhāvāt/* (SLS 112,10)

of pure Advaita. Viewed from the standpoint of a relative empirical truth, the teaching is best expressed as Śivādvaita. But what should we do with statements proclaiming inferiority of Śivādvaita in relation to Advaita?

In the ŚN, Appayya argues that meditation on brahman as god is intended for "dull-witted" persons, incapable and unqualified for apprehending the ultimate nature of pure brahman (ŚN 59,4-16; Sastri 1974:85-86). On the face of it, the practice of Śivādvaita is relegated to the inferior status of preliminary practices, not directly conducive to the ultimate truth. Śivādvaita is definitely inferior to Advaita in its closeness to the ultimate truth and its ability to formulate the truth adequately.

It must be noted, however, that this inferiority is established from the standpoint of the ultimate truth. On the level of the empirical existence of so many suffering human beings, the practice of meditation on Śiva is the most expedient! While most people are not able to choose the path of renunciation or find time for the careful study of the scriptures and contemplation of the abstract brahman, the teaching of Śivādvaita is truly the manifestation of compassion. In terms of practical utility aimed at bringing liberating knowledge to as many people as possible, Śivādvaita is actually superior to Advaita. This practical utility is not negligible, if one is to remember that the ultimate liberation is only possible, if it takes place for all, and not only for the chosen ones. Advaita is closer to truth understood in terms of correspondence, the knowledge of which is the perfect apprehension of reality as it is. Śivādvaita, however, is more valuable in terms of the pragmatic truth, the knowledge of which allows a person to act in such a way that the realization of the highest truth becomes possible.

Curiously enough, Appayya's case for meditation on *saguṇa* brahman bears striking similarities to Bhāratītīrtha's case for meditation on *nirguṇa* brahman, discussed by Appayya Dīkṣita in his SLS. Bhāratītīrtha, also known as Vidyāraṇya, suggests that even without the study of the Upaniṣadic scriptures, brahman may be attained through meditation on *nirguṇa* brahman. This method, which he calls yoga, is an inferior method useful for people, who are not able to study the Vedānta texts, due to low intelligence, distracted and agitated mind, or in the absence of a qualified teacher. The proper method of *śravaṇa*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana* about brahman is more efficient and faster, while the method of yoga creates a delay in the attainment of liberating knowledge (SLS 94,11-95,25; Sastri 1935:359-360).

Bhāratītīrtha humbly considers his innovation in the Advaita landscape as inferior to the consensus of the requirement of studying the scriptures. Yet, his efforts to incorporate yogic, non-Upaniṣadic, practices as alternative means of realization of brahman, perhaps, aim at opening the path of Advaita Vedānta to those people who are ineligible or incapable of following the path of renunciation and study. It is plausible that Appayya takes inspiration from Bhāratītīrtha in order to justify meditation on Śiva as a valid path for those who cannot practice meditation on *nirguṇa* brahman.

Appayya further says that certain people are not even capable of meditation on brahman as god, for whom their identity with Śiva is completely inconceivable. Those people, suggests Appayya, should practice *bhakti*, adoration of Śiva as a separate being, as their master. The fruit of this devotional and less contemplative practice is the rebirth on the mountain Kailāsa, the earthly abode of Śiva, where the conditions are favorable for an individual soul to undertake meditation on brahman as god, and gradually attain liberation (ŚN 76,23-77,16; Sastri 1974:112).

At the finale of the ŚN, Appayya concludes:

Therefore, the only commentary that may be accepted by those who have regard for the means of correct knowledge is that of Śrīkaṇṭhācārya, which alone is set out (1) for the purpose of the true comprehension of the non-qualified supreme brahman, (2) for the purpose of the meditation of non-difference, to be performed by him of middling capacity, in respect of the being who has taken on the form of the qualified, to show grace to his devotees, and is characterized by the entire host of auspicious qualities, and a resplendent auspicious form, and (3) for the purpose of the meditation of the relationship of oneself and one's master, to be carried on by him of least capacity, - all these being appropriately distinguished: thus everything is consistent (Sastri 1974:118).[6]

Appayya reconciles between the teaching of pure brahman, the teaching of Śiva as brahman with attributes, and the teaching of Śiva as a separate being, the object of devotion, on the basis of its being useful for people of various abilities. This solution

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[6] *ataḥ prāmāṇikānāṃ nirviśeṣasya parabrahmaṇaḥ tattvāvabodhārtham/ tasya eva sādhakānugrahāya saviśeṣarūpāpannasya nikhilakalyāṇaguṇagaṇadivyamaṅgalavigrahaviśeṣaviśiṣṭasya madhyabhādhikārikartavyābhedopāsanārtham, avamādhikārikartavyasvasvāmibhāvopāsanārthaṃ ca tasya sarvasya api yathāvad viśiṣya pratipādakaṃ śrīkaṇṭhācāryāṇām eva bhāṣyam upādeyam iti sarvaṃ samañjasam//* (ŚN 82,21-83,4).

resembles the theory of the *upāyas* or expedient means of teaching adjusted to the peculiarities and needs of various audiences, well-tested in Buddhism as an explanation for the often-contradictory teachings of the Buddha.

At the same time, Apayya's harmonizing strategy is based on a pluralistic assumption that the same truth may be expressed in different ways, all of which are adequate. From the perspective of the ultimate truth, liberated people become one with pure brahman, but from the perspective of relative truth, they merge with brahman as god until all people attain liberation. Only then, the plurality of perspectives will end.

Appayya's *inter-systemic* pluralism in respect to the relation between Advaita and Śivādvaita is somewhat different from Appayya's *intra-systemic* pluralism regarding conflicting positions within Advaita Vedānta. In the SLS, Appayya aims at presenting points of controversy among various Advaita authorities, raising arguments for each of these views, as well as possible objections. Take for example, his discussion of primacy among three factors of liberation: *śravaṇa* (hearing), *manana* (reasoning) and *nididhyāsana* (contemplation). There is a consensus, based on the verse 2.4.5 from the *BAU*, that the method of liberation must involve the study about brahman from scriptures, rational inquiry intended for the removal of doubts, and repeated mental contemplation of brahman. While no Advaitin, including Śaṅkara, disputes the prescription of *śravaṇa*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana*, the teachers disagree over the emphasis and necessity of each of the three for the arising of liberating knowledge. Some authorities argue that scripture is the ultimate, direct cause of arising of the immediate experience of brahman, while the *prasaṃkhyāna* meditation, consisting of repetition of the scriptural knowledge is the assisting factor. Other authorities stand for meditation as the direct cause of liberating knowledge, as it transforms the indirect, theoretical knowledge of the scriptures into the actual one. Yet others argue that the mind is to be considered the primary instrument of salvation, assisted by scriptures and meditative activity (SLS 94,11-98,2).

Appaya considers all views presented in the SLS as correct views – either already established or worthy of being established. While the ancients have clearly presented the fundamental teaching of the unity of the self, on other questions, such as the relation between meditation and the intuition of brahman, they were vague enough to make room for a number of interpretations, many of which are mutually exclusive.

Appaya's assumption is that it is impossible to conclusively establish one of these interpretations or decisively refute others (SLS 1,3-12). Each of the views is legitimate and justifiable. Hence, instead of contingently choosing one position and confronting others, Appaya adopts a philosophically honest stance – accepting all positions reasonable to be accepted, even if mutually contradictory. Although philosophical pluralism may imply a contradiction of holding mutually conflicting views, it is nevertheless consistent, as long as the views are not claimed to be true, but merely possible. Appaya presents various Advaitin views as logical possibilities, implied by the fundamentals of the system, in a way somewhat similar to the procedures of contemporary analytical philosophy. Thus, since *śravaṇa, manana* and *nididhyāsana* are prescribed by scriptures for the achievement of the knowledge of brahman, the question of primacy may be equally solved in favor of each of the three, with further possibilities of conjunction and/or disjunction relations.

These two pluralistic strategies are masterfully employed by Appayya for various purposes. In order to link Śivādvaita with Advaita, without conflating the two teachings, he argues that both systems, while separate, nevertheless are two aspects of the same truth and are complementary. In order to affirm all Advaitin positions, without wiping out the contradictions between them, he regards them all as logically possible.

So far, I have examined Appayya's efforts to reconcile between Advaita and Śivādvaita through his introduction of the idea of simultaneous coexistence of brahman's natures, another idea that meditation on one of these natures has an effect on the other, and his idea of universal salvation. The question remains, how two distinct interpretations of brahman's nature can both be valid on the basis of the same text.

3. **Theology as poetry**

In order to justify his claim that Śivādvaita and Advaita are two legitimate readings of Bādarāyaṇa's BS, Appayya develops a unique hermeneutical strategy, inspired by the science of poetics. This strategy is based on his claim that the *sūtra* genre, a condensed presentation of the main tenets of a school of thought, is formulated as a poetical figure of speech (*alaṃkāra*). Appayya seems to have in mind a particular poetical form called *śleṣa*, which indicates a pun, or a piece of poetry, which might be read in two or more different ways and have several meanings. The laconic briefness of *sūtra* verses often makes it difficult to establish their exact meaning. The fact is that in all systems, a *sūtra*

gives rise to conflicting interpretations, based on the hermeneutic openness of its meaning. Appayya commonly uses his claim that a *sūtra* is an *alaṃkāra* any time that he attempts to justify two possible interpretations of Bādarāyaṇa's text. Appayya briefly mentions this strategy in the ŚN, but makes an extensive usage of it in his grand Advaitin work *Parimala.*

For example, in the first verse of the BS, Bādarāyaṇa declares the purpose of inquiry into brahman to be satisfaction of a desire to know brahman. In the *Parimala*, Appayya quotes an anonymous opponent who wants to know what kind of knowledge is intimated here. Is it the ultimate knowledge inseparable from brahman's own nature as pure consciousness and bliss? Or is it a theoretical knowledge achieved by rational inquiry? Appayya answers that the words of the sūtra have a nature of *alaṃkāra*, in that they have several meanings at the same time. Therefore, "the desire for knowledge" refers to both kinds of knowledge (*Parimala* 1938:46,33-36).

Appayya uses his claim that the words of a sūtra have the nature of *alaṃkāra* again in his commentary on the same sūtra 1.1.1, when he defends the controversial claim that the *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* and the BS are two parts of one text. He claims that when Jaimini proclaims at the beginning of the MS that his inquiry is about the objects of the Veda, we must take the word "Veda" as *alaṃkāra.* Thereby he means that the word "Veda" should be taken in the restricted sense as the text dealing with ritual, but also as the Veda in a broader sense, which also includes the Upaniṣads (*Parimala* 1938:51,12-16).

Appayya's assertion that the words of Bādarāyaṇa's sūtra can be legitimately read in two different ways is the foundation for his reading the entire text as simultaneously describing brahman with and without attributes, as we have seen in his ŚN. In the ŚN, Appayya justifies this claim by arguing that sūtra, a text written in short aphorisms is by definition a *bhūṣaṇa*, an ornament, the nature of which is to "face in all directions" (*viśvatomukha*) (ŚN 59,17-21; Sastri 1974:86). In other words, the entire BS can and should be legitimately read in two different ways. The meaning derived by Śrīkaṇṭha is just as valid as the meaning understood by Śaṅkara.[7] In other words, the

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[7] Appayya repeats the *viśvatomukha* argument in his *Madhvatantramukhamardana* (1941:2, quoted in Okita 2017:263). He makes a number of arguments in the same text similar to those he makes in the ŚN on the relation between *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* brahman, the utility of *saguṇa* meditation, etc. See Okita 2017:260-267.

entire BS can and should be legitimately read in different ways. The Śivādvaita interpretation is just as valid as that of the Advaita. In fact, Appayya seems to adopt throughout his writings a basic pluralistic principle that if there is a number of plausible views on any one subject, or several possible interpretations of the text under discussion, or a few logical possibilities of an issue in question, they all should be accepted.

4. **Unifying Theology**

Appayya's efforts to integrate competing theological systems, his hermeneutical innovations, along with his interdisciplinary methodological adoptions interconnect well with recent studies of the religious climate of early modern India. I suggest that there is a broad historical trend, important for understanding Appayya - unifying tendencies among religious movements across the Indian subcontinent during the early modern period.

As Indological research developed, our understanding of Hinduism as one religion, consisting of a mosaic of sects, practices, and doctrines, has undergone significant changes, with controversies remaining to this day. Early European Indologists believed Hinduism was established at ancient times as one religion, which has undergone fragmentation into sects and fractions. This position has been severely criticized by scholars of modern history, anthropology and postcolonial studies, who argued that the very idea of Hinduism as a unified set of beliefs and practices was a colonial construct, internalized by the English-educated Indians (Fisher 2017:3).

During the last decade, however, there is a growing body of research, supporting yet another view on the origins of modern Hinduism, represented by a young generation of scholars, such as Andrew Nicholson and Elain Fisher. According to this view, in precolonial India, there already existed an *idea* of unified trans-sectarian religion, although its precise nature and definition have been repeatedly contested. The idea of trans-sectarian unity appears in philosophical doxographies, temple inscriptions and devotional poetry. Recent studies show that during the 16th century, Advaita Vedānta reemerges as a strong candidate for a leadership of a "large-tent" of Hindu movements (to use Christopher Minkowski's coinage – 2011:223). Advaita theology, in particular, is perceived as capable of providing a conceptual framework broad enough to encompass a variety of doctrines and traditions of the Hindus.

Appayya Dīkṣita employs his exceptionally broad and thorough familiarity with various sectarian movements and systems of thought, in order to devise a meta-sectarian framework of reference, on the basis of Advaita Vedānta theology. He is comfortable crossing disciplinarian boundaries and adopting hermeneutical methodologies for his inquiry of brahman from poetics, as well as from grammar, musical and medical sciences, which I have left out of the present discussion. His theological and hermeneutical innovations, along with attentiveness to plurality of religious voices, allows him to spread his nets far enough to capture the most influential religious trends of his time.

Appayya's idea of universal salvation suggests a radical change from the elitist view of spiritual liberation for the chosen ones – the upper classes, renunciates, intellectuals, to a new project of liberation of the masses. At the same time, the idea of *sarvamukti*, literarily "liberation for all," implies certain religious subjects, referred by the "all." Who are these "all?" Appayya's pluralistic theology draws boundaries, allowing to decide, which systems and movements can be included within the camp and under which conditions. All systems accepting Vedic teachings are in, although Appayya makes reservations regarding which are closer to the ultimate truth of Advaita. Thus, he composes vehement polemical writings against the Vaiṣṇava system of Dvaita Vedānta, but also includes it at the bottom of his doxography of Vedānta teachings, indicating thus that it has some relevance to truth about brahman. Some systems, such as Vaiṣṇava tantric teaching of Pañcaratra, are legitimate, but should only be practiced by those who are not eligible to study the Vedic teachings, such as outcasts, widows, bastards and so on (Duquette 2015:279). Outside the camp remain Buddhists (who have long disappeared from India by this time), Muslims, and other so-called "barbarians."

Advaita Vedānta theology is a predominant component of contemporary Hinduism. Although today Hindu unity might reverberate as a nationalist agenda, it has important pre-colonial, pre-national predecessors in India. Appayya's recipe for a trans-sectarian religious framework on the basis of Advaita non-dualism and pluralistic theology has been mostly a successful one. While Appayya's individual inclinations, scholarly curiosity and rhetorical talents may have motivated him to defend conflicting views, it is the participation in the building of the large tent of Hinduism, which dictated the goals for his polymathic enterprise and was the source of its public appeal.

**Abbreviations**

BS - *Brahmasūtra*

MS - *Mīmāṃsāsūtra*

SLS - *Siddhāntaleśasaṃgraha*

ŚV - *Śivādvaitanirṇaya*


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