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## **UNIT 3    PROMINENT THEISTIC PHILOSOPHERS OF INDIA**

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### **3.0 OBJECTIVES**

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The objective of this unit is to make the students acquainted with the background, origin and development of Indian Theism. The discussion will bring out the philosophical significance of Indian theism by highlighting a few prominent Indian theistic philosophers.

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### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

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Theism as understood commonly is a philosophically reasoned understanding of reality that affirms that the source and continuing ground of all things is in God; that the meaning and fulfillment of all things lie in their relation to God; and that God intends to realize the meaning and fulfillment. Theism is, literally, belief in the existence of God. Though the concept is as old as philosophy, the term itself appears to be of relatively recent origin. Some have suggested that it appeared in the seventeenth century in England. At the end one could say that the term is used to denote certain philosophical or theological positions, regardless of whether this involves a religious relationship to the God of whom individuals speak. Let us discuss the basic philosophies of the theistic philosophers of India from ancient period to contemporary period following one or the other above schools of philosophical tradition.

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### **3.2 SANKARA (788 – 820)**

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Adi Sankara following the thought of Upanishadic teaches and that of his teacher's teacher Gaudapada consolidated one of the deep theistic philosophies of all time. Advaita was his main philosophy. Advaita literally means "non-duality." Adi Sankara wrote extensive commentaries on the major Vedantic

scriptures and was successful in the revival and reformation of Hindu thinking and way of life.

Adi Sankara's Advaita is best summed up in the following verse: *Brahma satyam jagan mithya jiva brahmaivah naparah*. Brahman alone is the real, the world is illusory and the individual and universal soul are one. According to this school the appearance of dualities and differences in this world is an superimposition of Brahman, called Maya. Maya is the illusionary and creative aspect of Brahman, which causes the world to arise. Maya is neither existent nor non-existent, but appears to exist temporarily, as in case of any illusion (for example mirage). In fact Sankara began his whole deliberation with the *sutra*: "Atha to brahmam jignasa" – "now therefore the enquiry into Brahman", a call to free enquiry which sets the tone for all speculation.

When a person tries to know Brahman through his mind, due to the influence of Maya, Brahman appears as God (*Isvara*), separate from the world and from the individual. In reality, there is no difference between the individual and soul (*Jivatman*) and Brahman. The spiritual practices such as devotion to God, meditation and self-less action all purify the mind and indirectly helps in perceiving the real. One whose vision is obscured by ignorance he does not see the non-dual nature of reality; as the blind do not see the resplendent Sun. Hence, the only direct cause of liberation is self-knowledge which directly removes the ignorance. After realization, one sees one's own self and the Universe as the same, non-dual Brahman. Existence-knowledge-Bliss-Absolute.

Adi Sankara had a two-level theory of Brahman, perceiving it as *nirguna*, without attributes, but manifesting itself with personal attributes, *saguna*. Nirguna being ultimately true and *saguna* false Sankara maintained the strict monism in understanding the philosophy of Reality. The Brahman-world relation in Shankara is explained in the snake and rope analogy where the illusion is caused by mistaking a rope for a snake.

Sankara's appeal lay as much in his erudition and dialectical skill as in his being a child prodigy. He lived for barely 30 years: yet he set ablaze the intellectual world of his times, redefinition, revamping and revitalizing old concepts with great strength.

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### 3.3 RAMANUJA (1017-1137)

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Sri Ramanuja was a *Vedanta* philosopher (Vedanta means the end of the Vedas and refers to the philosophy expressed in the end portion of the Veda, also known as the Upanishads), born in Tamil Nadu in 1017 CE. At his earlier state he studied *Advaita Vedanta* (Absolute Idealistic Monism) under the monist teacher Yadavaprakasa, but in later period he disagreed with this teacher and went on to propagate *Visistadvaita* philosophy. He was a great thinker, philosopher and scriptural exegete. He is seen by Vaishnava sects of Hinduism as the third and most important teacher (*Acarya*). He got his initial inspiration from Yamunacharya who inspired him: to teach the doctrine of *Saranagati* (surrender to God) as the means to reach Moksha; to write *Visistadvaita* Bhashya for the *Brahma Sutras* of Vyasa; and then to perpetuate the philosophy of Parasara the author of *Vishnu Purana*.

#### Main Tenets of Ramanuja's Philosophy:

From the outset it should be noted that Ramanuja's philosophy is referred to as Vishishtadvaita because it combines Advaita (oneness of God) with Vishesha

(attributes). Adi Sankara had argued that all qualities or manifestations that can be perceived are unreal and temporary. On the other hand Ramanuja believed them to be real and permanent and under the control of the Brahman. God can be one despite the existence of attributes, because they cannot exist alone; they are not independent entities. Ramanuja taught Vishishtadvaita (qualified non-dualism) that states that the world and Brahman are united, like a soul and body. He acknowledged the existence of differences, and believed that the identity of an object as a part was as important as the unity of the whole. The theology espoused by him posits that Brahman is not devoid of attributes but is expressed as personal as opposed to impersonal. According to him qualities are real and permanent and under the control of Brahman. Brahman can be one despite the existence of attributes, because they cannot exist alone; they are not independent entities. They are *prakaras* or modes. *Sesha* or the accessories, and *Niyama* or the controlled aspects, of the one Brahman.

In this philosophy, *Isvara* has two inseparable *prakaras* viz., the world and the *jives*. These are related to him as the body is related to the soul. They have no existence apart from him. They inhere in Him as attributes in a substance. Matter and *jivas* constitute the body of *Isvara*. *Isvara* is their indweller. He is the controlling reality Matter and *jivas* are the subordinate elements. They are termed *visesanas* or attributes. *Ishvara* is the *visesya* or that which is qualified. Ramanuja sought to define that the followers of Sankara (Monistic) are wrong when they state that understanding the philosophy of the Upanishads without knowing and practicing *dharma* can result in knowledge of Brahman. The knowledge that leads to Brahman that ends spiritual ignorance is meditational, not testimonial or verbal.

Ramanuja's main contention was that there is no knowledge source in support of the claim that there is a distinction less (homogeneous) Brahman. All knowledge sources reveal objects as distinct from other objects. All experience reveals an object known in some way or other beyond mere existence. Testimony depends on the operation of distinct sentence parts (words with distinct meanings). Thus the claim that testimony makes known that reality is distinction less is contradicted by the very nature of testimony as knowledge means. Even the simplest perceptual cognition reveals something as qualified by something else. Inference depends on perception and makes the same distinct things known as does perception.

Against Advaitic contention that perception cannot make known distinctness but only homogeneous being since distinctions cannot be defined, well, sorry, perception makes known generic characters that differentiate things. According to Ramanuja remembering could not be distinguished from perceiving, because there would be only the one object (being). And no one would be deaf or blind. Furthermore, Brahman would be an object of perception and the other sources (*prameya*). He also holds that Advaitin argument about prior absences and no prior absence of consciousness is wrong. Similarly the Advaitin understanding of *avidya* (ignorance), which is the absence of spiritual knowledge, is incorrect, "If the distinction between spiritual knowledge and spiritual ignorance is unreal, then spiritual ignorance and the self are one."

### **A few Objections of Ramanuja to Adi Shankara:**

1. The nature of Avidya: Avidya must be either real or unreal; there is no other possibility. But neither of these is possible. If *avidya* is real, non-dualism collapses into dualism. If it is unreal, we are driven to self-contradiction or infinite regress.

2. The incomprehensibility of avidya: Advaitins claim that *avidya* is neither real nor unreal but incomprehensible (*anirvacaniya*). All cognition is either of the real or the unreal: the Advaitin claim flies in the face of experience, and accepting it would call into question all cognition and render it unsafe.
3. The grounds of knowledge of avidya: No *pramana* can establish *avidya* in the sense the Advaitin requires. Advaita philosophy presents *avidya* not as a mere lack of knowledge, as something purely negative, but as an obscuring layer which covers Brahman and is removed by true *Brahma-vidya* (knowledge of Brahman). Avidya is positive nescience not mere ignorance. Ramanuja argues that positive nescience is established neither by perception, nor by inference, nor by scriptural testimony. On the contrary, Ramanuja argues, all cognition is of the real.
4. The locus of avidya: Where is the avidya that gives rise to the (false) impression of the reality of the perceived world? There are two possibilities; it could be Brahman's *avidya* or the individual *jiva*. Neither is possible. Brahman is knowledge; *avidya* cannot co-exist as an attribute with a nature utterly incompatible with it. Nor can the individual *jiva* be the locus of *avidya*: the existence of the individual *jiva* is due to *avidya*; this would lead to a vicious circle.
5. *Avidya's* obscuration of the nature of Brahman: Shankara would have us believe that the nature of Brahman is somehow covered over or obscured by *avidya*. Ramanuja regards this as an absurdity; given that Advaita claim that Brahman is pure self-luminous consciousness, obscuration must mean either preventing the origination of this (impossible since Brahman is eternal) or the destruction of it – equality absurd.
6. The removal of avidya by *brahma-vidya*: Advaita claims that *avidya* has no beginning, but it is terminated and removed by *brahma-vidya*, the intuition of the reality of Brahman as pure, undifferentiated (*nirguna*) Brahman, arguing that whatever exists has attributes: Brahman has infinite auspicious attributes. Liberation is a matter of divine grace: no amount of learning or wisdom will deliver us.
7. The removal of *avidya*: For the Advaitin, the bondage in which we dwell before the attainment of Moksha is caused by *maya* and *avidya*; knowledge of reality (*brahma-vidya*) releases us. Ramanuja, however, asserts that bondage is real. No kind of knowledge can remove what is real. On the contrary, knowledge discloses the real; it does not destroy it. What exactly is the saving knowledge that delivers us from bondage to *maya*? If it is real then non-duality collapses into duality; if it is unreal, then we face an utter absurdity.

Some of Ramanuja's most important philosophical works include:

- Sri-bhasya ( a commentary on Vedanta Sutras),
- Vedanta Sara (essence of Vedanta),
- Vedartha Sangraha (a resume of Vedanta)
- Vedanta Dipa (the light of Vedanta)
- Gita-bhasya (a commentary for the Bhagavad-gita).

**Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** Use the phase provided for answers.

- 1) How does Ramanuja differ from Adi Shankara?

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- 2) Explain critically the basic philosophy of Ramanuja.

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### 3.4 MADHVA (1238-1317)

Madhvacharya was the most fascinating of the Hindu sage-philosophers and one of the greatest theistic thinkers of all time. He was an Indian Wittgenstein whose rapier-sharp critiques matched his memorable and profound aphorism. More to the point, he was an intellectual juggernaut who single-handedly reversed the slide toward monism and re-established theism as a dominant force.

Born near Udupi in South India, he left his family at the age of 16 to take up life as a religious ascetic. From beginning Madhava would believe only in his experience and the principles of reason. Rejecting Advaita on rational and religious grounds, he systematically laid out the case for theism, eventually convincing even his own Guru. By the time of his death he had written 37 books, converted the most prominent Advaita scholars in India to theism, and assembled eight disciples to carry on his work.

Madhvacharya's task was two-fold: 1) to show that theism is taught by experience, reason and the Hindu scriptures and 2) to refute the monism that was popular in his time. He was motivated by four principles:

1. A determination to remain true to experience above all, in the spirit of science,
2. A commitment to sound reason,
3. A fervent devotion to a personal God that drove all his actions,
4. Fearless tenacity in expounding his vision in the most hostile environments.

The underlying theme in all Madhvacharya's work was his famous exposition of the five differences:

1. The difference between the *jiva* (soul) and *Ishvara* (Creator),
2. The differences between *jada* (insentient things, e.g. matter) and *Ishvara*
3. The difference between various *jives*,

4. The differences between *jada* and *jiva*: and
5. The differences between various *jades*.

Madhvacharya presented a very simple vision of the world. It was clear to him that there were differences and distinctions in the world. Matter was distinct from mind. One material thing was distinct from another, one person from another. Above all, there was a radical difference between God and the world. This in a nutshell is his doctrine of Panchabeda or five differences, which stated that there was an absolute distinction between God and the soul, God and matter, souls and matter, each individual soul and another, and each material thing and another. There is an unbridgeable gulf between God and all other beings because God is the only independent Reality.

The theme of difference, individuality and uniqueness is fundamental in Madhvacharya's thought as it was for John Duns Scotus in the West. By the very fact that something is what it is, says Madhvacharya, it is obviously different from everything else, and this is shown to us by both reason and our senses. The substance of each particular thing is a unique combination of many properties. While many other things could possess these same properties, the difference between each and everything is the uniqueness of the specific combination of properties. At the very least there is a difference in location for physical things.

The source of all these properties and their unique combination is God the great inventor and sustainer. "God Himself", said Madhvacharya, "is the determining cause of the distinctive natures of the various tastes, their essences and their characteristics themselves, in a special sense. It is not to be understood that those special characteristics and essences are determined by the intrinsic nature of the substances themselves. But far from it. Not only the substances, but their respective essence and characteristics and the characteristics of those characteristics themselves are all derived from his immanent powers and presence in them."

In understanding the five differences, we come to grasp the properties of all the things in the world and the relationships between them. Most important of all, we come to realize our total dependence on God.

Starting with the five principles, Madhva focused his attention on three areas:

1. How we know. We are able to know what is the case about things through three sources: experience, reason and divine revelation. The primary guarantor of truth and certainty in our coming to know something is a capability he called Sakshi. His theory of knowing and truth is very important because it stands in sharp contrast to the skepticism of his contemporaries.
2. God and World. Reality may be divided into that which is independent and dependent. God is wholly independent and the world is entirely and always dependent on God. God is infinitely perfect.
3. Matter and Spirit. The world is made up of two kinds of substance, matter and spirit, material things and souls. The individuality and uniqueness of each and every thing is an obvious fact of experience.

He further affirmed that:

1. We really do exist,



2. We have a consciousness and an individual identity that we will retain permanently,
3. We can know things,
4. God exists and we are distinct from and dependent on God; God has attributes that can be known,
5. The ultimate goal of life is union with God, a union in which we retain our distinctive identities.

### Check Your Progress II

**Note:** Use the phase provided for answers.

- 1) What are the four philosophical principles of Madhava? Explain.

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- 2) What was his main attention to develop the philosophy?

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## 3.5 NIMBARKA (1130-1200)

Nimbarkacarya was a great proponent of Vaishnava Philosophy of Dvaitadvaita that is duality in unity. Though there is a controversy about his time, S. N. Dasgupta dated Nimbarka to around middle of 14<sup>th</sup> Century. On the other hand Dr. S. A. Rizvi assigns the date of 1130-1200. But Dr. Bhandarkar has placed him as a philosopher after Ramanuja and has maintained his demise date as 1162 AD.

### Basic Philosophy of Nimbarkacarya:

Nimbarka belonged to the school of Vaishanava philosophy that is known as Dvaitadvaita (duality and non-duality at the same time). The categories of existence, according to him, are three that is: *cit*, *acit*, and *Ishvara*. According to him *cit* and *acit* are different from *Ishvara*, in the sense that they have attributes and capacities, which are different from those of *Ishvara*. *Ishvara* is independent and exists by Himself, while *cit* and *acit* have existence dependent upon Him. At the same time *cit* and *acit* are not different from *Ishvara*, because they cannot exist independently of Him. Difference means a kind of existence which is separate but dependent, (*para-tantra-satta-bhava*) while non-difference means impossibility of independent existence (*svatantra-satta-bhava*).

He thus equally emphasizes both difference and non-difference as against Ramanuja, who makes difference subordinate to non-difference; in as much as,

for him *cit* and *acit* do not exist separately from Brahman, but its body or attributes. Thus, according to Nimbarka, the relation between Brahman, on the one hand, and the souls (*cit*) and universe (*acit*) on the other, is a relation of natural difference-non-difference (*svabhavika-bhedabheda*), just like between snake and coil, or between sun and its rays. Just as the coil is nothing but the snake, yet different from it, just as the different kinds of stones, though nothing but earth, are yet different from it, so the souls and the universe, though nothing but Brahman (*brahmatmaka*), are different from Him because of their own peculiar natures and attributes.

Thus, according to Nimbarka, there are three equally real and co-eternal realities, viz. Brahman, the *cit* and the *acit*. Brahman is the Controller (*niyantr*), the *cit* the enjoyer (*bhoktr*) and the *acit* the object enjoyed (*bhogy*).

Nimbarka accepts *parinamavada* to explain the cause of animated and inanimate world, which he says exist in a subtle form in the various capacities (*saktis*) which belong to Brahman in its natural condition. Brahman is the material cause of the universe in the sense that Brahman brings the subtle rudiments into the gross form by manifesting these capacities. For Nimbarka the highest object of worship is Krishna and His consort Radha, attended by thousands of *gopis*, or cowherdesses, of the celestial Vrindavan. Devotion according to Nimbarka, consists in *prapatti*, or self-surrender.

### Five Sadhanas:

Sri Nimbarka propounded five methods of salvation:

#### 1. Karma (ritual action)

This is performed conscientiously in a proper spirit, with one's *varna* (caste) and *ashrama* (phase of life) thereby giving rise to knowledge which is a means to salvation.

**2. Vidya (knowledge):** This is not a subordinate factor of karma but also not as an independent means for everyone; only for those inclined to spending vast lengths of time in scriptural study and reflection of deeper meanings.

**3. Upasana or Dhyana (meditation):** It is of three types. First is meditation on the Lord as one's self that is meditation on the Lord as the Inner Controller of the sentient. Second is meditation on the Lord as the Inner Controller of the non sentient. Final one is meditation on Lord Himself, as different from, the sentient and non-sentient. This is again not an independent means to Salvation for all, as only those qualified to perform the *upasana* (with *Yajnopavitam*) can perform this *Sadhana*.

**4. Prapatti (surrender to the Lord):** This is devotion and surrender to the lord God as Shri Radha Krshna. This method of attaining Salvation, known as Prapatti Sadhana, contains elements of all the other means, and is most importantly, available to all. This is Sadhana and this in turn leads to Para Bhakti – the highest devotion characterized by Madhurya Rasa – the sweet emotions of devotion experienced by those perfected in Sadhana Bhakti.

**5. Gurupasatti:** This is the devotion and self surrender to guru. Best realized as a part in Prapatti, and not as an independent means, although it can be so.

Shri Nimbarka made the “Bhasya” (commentary in which all the words of the verses are used, in contradistinction to a *tika*, which is a more free commentary)



of the Brahmasutra on his Dvaitadvaita Vedanta (Principle of Dualism-Non-dualism in his famous book “Vedanta Parijata Sourabha”).

### Check Your Progress III

**Note:** Use the phase provided for answers.

1. What is the basic philosophy of Nimbarka?

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2. Develop philosophically his five Sadhanas.

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## 3.6 AUROBINDO (1872-1950)

Sri Aurobindo was a thought provoking Philosopher who was a freedom fighter, guru and a yogi. The central theme of Aurobindo’s vision is the evolution of human life into life divine. According to him human being is a transitional being. Human being is not final. The step from man to superman is the next approaching achievements in the earth evolution. It is inevitable because it is at once the intention of the inner spirit and the logic of nature’s process. His main philosophical writings are *The Life Divine* and *The Synthesis of Yoga*, while his principal poetic work is *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*.

### Basic Philosophy of Involution and Evolution

Sri Aurobindo propounded two movements: that of involution of consciousness from an omnipresent Reality to creation, and an evolution from creation onward. The process by which the Energy of creation emerged from a timeless, space less, ineffable, immutable Reality, Sri Aurobindo refers to as the Involution. In that process the Reality extended itself to Being/Existence (Sat), Consciousness (that generated a Force) – Chit; and Delight (Ananda) – self enjoyment in existing and being conscious. Through the action of a fourth dimension, Supermind that is Truth Consciousness, the Force (Chit) of Sat-Cit-Ananda was divided into Knowledge and Will, eventually formulating as an invisible Energy that would become the source of creation. Through its own willful self-absorption of consciousness, the universe would begin as In-conscious material existence. The process of conscious existence emerging out of the Inconscious is referred as evolution. Initially, it emerges gradually in the stages of matter, life, and mind. First matter evolves from simple to complex forms, then life emerges in matter and evolves from simple to complex forms, finally mind emerges in life and evolves from rudimentary to higher forms of thought and reason. As each new principle emerges, the previous stages remain but are integrated into the higher principle.

## Aurobindo's Philosophy of Reality

A central tenet of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy is that the Truth of existence is an omnipresent Reality that both transcends the manifested universe and is inherent in it. This Reality, referred to as Brahman, is an Absolute: it is not limited by any mental conception or duality, whether personal or impersonal, existent or nonexistent, formless or manifested in form, timeless or extended in time, spaceless or extended in space. It is simultaneously all of these but is bound by none of them. It is the Transcendent beyond the universe. In its highest manifested poise, its nature may be described as Sachchidananda – infinite existence, infinite consciousness, and infinite delight or bliss – a triune principle in which the three are united in a single Reality. In other words, it is fully conscious and blissful infinite existence. This Brahman is our deepest and secret Reality. This is the metaphysical bliss for Aurobindo's yoga. Yoga is thus a discipline given to consciously unite our phenomenal existence and life with our essential Reality.

This Brahman is not bound to its infinite existence, not bound to its infinite consciousness and the force inherent in that consciousness, not bound to its infinite bliss. He also explains that by definition Brahman is capable of manifesting within its absolute existence innumerable, limited, even distorted and contrary forms of its being.

According to Aurobindo it is the Brahman who suffers for us, it is not imposed on someone or something outside the Brahman. Secondly, the limitation and ignorance are inherent consequences of the plunge of the Absolute consciousness into the inconscience and its slow evolutionary awakening – pain, suffering, and evil developed as consequences or corollaries of limitation and ignorance. Thirdly, while pain, suffering, and evil are abhorrent to our limited ethical sensibilities, they also may serve a purpose in the larger scheme of the evolutionary process.

## Aurobindo's Philosophy of Human Being

Aurobindo argues that Man is born an ignorant, divided, conflicted being; a product of the original inconscience (unconsciousness) inherent in Matter that he evolved out of. As a result, he does not know the nature of Reality, including its source and purpose; his own nature, including parts and integration of his being; what purpose he serves, and what his individual and spiritual potential is, amongst others. In addition, he experiences life through division and conflict, including his relationship with others, and his divided view of spirit and life. To overcome these limitations, Man must embark on a process of self-discovery in which he uncovers his Divine nature. To that end, he undertakes a three-step process, which he calls the Triple Transformation: 1) Psychic Transformation, 2) Spiritual Transformation and, 3) Supra-mental Transformation.

Aurobindo's greatest discovery was the existence of a Psychic Being (an Evolving Soul) within that is the essence of our spiritual selves. If we forge our way into the deepest parts of our being the subliminal realm, we will come upon a Personal Evolving Soul. From this Psychic Being we can overcome the limits of consciousness of the individual human. From there we perceive our true nature and essence; we become more aware of our surroundings; we become one with others and life; we experience an inner Guide that influences to move in the right direction and catches our negative propensities as they arise on the surface; we come in touch with the transcendent reality.

The development of human society and world culture is another important aspect of Aurobindo's future vision. In his book *The Human Cycle*, Aurobindo described the various stages of the development of human society which have led to the present subjective age that is beginning, and the possibilities of a future spiritual age. This spiritual age would be characterized by the dominance of a spiritual ideal and trend in world culture.

### 3.7 RAMAKRISHNA PARAMAHAMSA (1836-1886)

Ramakrishna Paramahansa was a Bengali religious leader. A worshipper of goddess Kali. He was a teacher of Advaita Vedanta of Hinduism and preached that all religions lead to the same goal, placing spiritual religion above blind ritualism. The Hindu renaissance that India experienced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century may be said to have been spurred by his life and work. Though born in a Hindu family he followed Islam for sometime and then embraced Christianity for a while, this in many ways changed his philosophy of life as an enlightened person.

The Vaishnava Bhakti traditions speak of five different moods, referred to as *bhavas* – different attitudes that a devotee can take up to express his love for God. They are: Shanta, the “peaceful attitude”, Dasya, the attitude of a servant; Sakhy, the attitude of a friend; Vatsalya, the attitude of a mother toward her child; and Madhura, the attitude of a woman towards her lover. Sri Ramakrishna at some point in the period between his vision of Kali and his marriage practiced Dasya Bhava, during which he worshiped Rama with the attitude of Hanuman, the monkey-god, who is considered to be the ideal devotee and servant of Rama. According to Ramakrishna, towards the end of this Sadhana, he had a vision of Sita, the consort of Rama, merging into his body. In 1864, Ramakrishna practiced Vatsalya bhava under a Vaishnava guru Jatadhari. During this period, he worshipped a metal image of *Ramlala* (Rama as a child) in the attitude of a mother. According to Ramakrishna, he could feel the presence of child Rama as a living God in the metal image. After certain time he dressed himself in women's attire for several days and regarded himself as one of the Gopis of Vrindavan. He thus practiced a Madhura Bhava to root out the idea of sex, which is seen as an impediment in spiritual life. According to Ramakrishna, towards the end of this Sadhana, he attained Savikalpa Samadhi – vision and union with Krishna. After his vision of Kali, he is said to have cultivated the Santa Bhava – the child attitude – towards Kali.

#### Teachings

Ramakrishna used stories and parables to convey his messages. His teachings rejected caste distinctions and religious prejudices. His main philosophy was to emphasize God-realization as the supreme goal of all living beings. He taught that *kamini-kanchana* is an obstacle to God-realization. *Kamini-kanchana* literally translates to “women and gold,” Partha Chatterjee wrote that figure of a woman stands for concepts or entities that have “little to do with women in actuality” and “the figure of woman -and-gold signified the enemy with: that part of one's own self which was susceptible to the temptations of ever-unreliable worldly success”.

Ramakrishna's mystical realization, classified by Hindu tradition as *Nirvikalpa Samadhi* (that is constant meditation thought to be absorption in the all-encompassing Consciousness), led him to believe that the gods of the various religions are merely so many interpretations of the Absolute, and that the Ultimate

Reality could never be expressed in human terms. This is in agreement with the Rigvedic proclamation that “Truth is one but sages call it by many a name.” As a result of this opinion, Ramakrishna actually spent periods of his life practicing his own understandings of Islam, Christianity and various other Yogic and Tantric sects within Hinduism.

Ramakrishna looked upon the world as Maya. His experience of *Nirvikalpa Samadhi* gave him an understanding of the two sides of *maya*. He referred this as *Avidyamaya* and *Vidyamaya*. . He explained that *avidyamaya* represents the dark forces of creation (e.g. sensual desire, evil passions, greed, lust and cruelty), which keep people on lower planes of consciousness. These forces are responsible for human entrapment in the cycle of birth and death, and they must be fought and vanquished. *Vidyamaya*, on the other hand, represents higher forces of creation (e.g. spiritual virtues, enlightening qualities, kindness, purity, love, and devotion), which elevate human beings to the higher planes of consciousness. He concludes that with the help of *vidyamaya*, devotees can rid of themselves *avidyamaya* and achieve the ultimate goal of becoming *mayatita* – that is free from *maya*.

The four key concepts in Ramakrishna’s teachings were the following:

- The oneness of existence
- The divinity of human beings
- The unity of God
- The harmony of religions

Ramakrishna practiced several religions, including Islam and Christianity, and taught that in spite of the differences all religions are valid and true and they lead to the same ultimate goal – God. Ramakrishna taught that *jatra jiv tatra Shiv* (wherever there is a living being, there is Shiva). His teaching, “*Jive daya noy, Shiv gyane jiv seba*” (not kindness to living beings, but serving the living being as Shiva Himself) is considered as the inspiration for the philanthropic work carried out by his chief disciple Vivekananda.

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### 3.8 RAMANA MAHARSHI (1879-1950)

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Sri Ramana Maharshi was born in a village called Truchuli near Arupukkotai, Madurai in Tamil Nadu. He maintained that the purest form of his teachings was the powerful silence which radiated from his presence and quieted the minds of those attuned to it. Though his primary teaching is associated with Non-dualism, Advaita Vedanta, and Jnana yoga, he recommended Bhakti to those he saw were fit for it, and gave his approval to a variety of paths and practice.

#### Basic Teachings of Ramana Maharshi:

Ramana’s teachings about self-enquiry, the practice he is most widely associated with, have been classified as the Path of Knowledge (*Jnana Marga*). Though his teaching is consistent with and generally associated with Hinduism, the Upanishads and Advaita Vedanta, there are some differences with the traditional Advaitic school, and Sri Ramana gave his approval to a variety of paths and practices from various religions. His earliest teachings are documented in the book *Naan Yaar?* (who am I ?), first written in Tamil. We can describe his philosophy in the following manner:

1. As all living beings desire to be happy always, without misery, as in the case of everyone there is observed supreme love for one's self, and as happiness alone is the cause for love, in order to gain that happiness which is one's nature and which is experienced in the state of deep sleep where there is no mind, one should know one's self. For that, the path of knowledge, the inquiry of the form "Who am I?" is the principal means.
2. Knowledge itself is "I". The nature of this knowledge is existence-consciousness-bliss.
3. What is called mind is a wondrous power existing in Self. It projects all thoughts. If we set aside all thoughts and see, there will be no such thing as mind remaining separate; therefore, thought itself is the form of the mind. Other than thoughts, there is no such thing as the world.
4. Of all the thoughts that rise in the mind, the thought "I" is the first thought.
5. That which rises in this body as "I" is the mind. If one enquires "In which place in the body does the thought "I" rise first?" It will be known to be in the heart (spiritual heart is 'two digits to the right from the centre of the chest'). Even if one incessantly thinks "I", "I" it will lead to that place (Self).
6. The mind will subside only by means of the enquiry "Who am I?" The thought "Who am I?" destroying all other thoughts, will itself finally be destroyed like the stick used for stirring the funeral pyre.
7. If other thoughts rise, one should, without attempting to complete them, enquire, 'To whom did they arise?' it will be known 'To me'. If one then enquires 'Who am I?' the mind (power of attention) will turn back to its source. By repeatedly practicing thus, the power of the mind to abide in its source increases.
8. The place where even the slightest trace of the 'I' does not exist, alone is Self.
9. Self itself is God.

Sri Ramana warned against considering self-enquiry as an intellectual exercise. Properly done, it involves fixing the attention firmly and intensely on the feeling of "I" without thinking. It is perhaps more helpful to see it as 'Self-attention', or "Self-abiding'. The clue to this is in Sri Ramana's own death experience when he was 16. After raising the question 'Who am I?' he "turned his attention very keenly towards himself". Attention must be fixed on the 'I' until the feeling of duality disappears. Although he advocated self-enquiry as the fastest means to realization, he also recommended the path of *bhakti* and self-surrender (to one's Deity or Guru) either concurrently or as an adequate alternative, which would ultimately converge with the path of self-enquiry.

Sri Ramana followed the basics of Advaitic school of thought; however, he differed from this school on certain issues. Advaitic school recommends a negationist *neti, neti*, ("not this", "not this") path, or mental affirmations that the Self was the only reality, such as "I am Brahman" or "I am He", while Sri Ramana advocated the enquiry "*Naan Yaar*" (Who am I). Furthermore, unlike the traditional Advaitic school, Sri Ramana strongly discouraged most who came to him from adopting a austere lifestyle. In other words, the traditional Advaitic (non-dualistic) school advocates "elimination of all that is non-self (the

five sheaths) until only the Self remains”. The five *kosas*, or sheaths, that hide the true Self are: Material, Vital, Mental, Knowledge, and Blissful. Sri Ramana says, “enquiry in the form ‘Who am I’ alone is the principal means. To make the mind subside, there is no adequate means other than self-enquiry. If controlled by other means, mind will remain as if subsided, but will rise again”.

His method of teaching was characterized by the following:

He urged the people who came to him to practice self-enquiry;

He directed people to look inward rather than seeking outside themselves for Realization. He viewed all who came to him as the Self rather than as lesser beings. He never promoted or called attention to himself. Instead, Sri Ramana remained in one place for 54 years, offering spiritual guidance to anyone of any background who came to him, and asking nothing in return. He considered humility to be the highest quality. He said the deep sense of peace one felt around a seer was the surest indicator of their spiritual state, that equality towards all was a true sign of liberation, and that what a true seer did was always for others, not themselves.

#### Check Your Progress IV

**Note:** Use the phase provided for answers.

1) Explain Aurbindo’s Philosophy of Reality and Human Person.

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2) Bring out the salient features of Ramakrishna’s Philosophy of life?

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3) What are the basic philosophical nuances of Ramana Maharshi?

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### 3.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit on the Prominent thinkers of theism in India, we have first of all summarized the meaning of theism in Indian philosophical context. Secondly, we gradually analyzed the basic philosophy of theism against atheism. We took resort to the a few prominent thinkers in that line of thought. We began from Ramanuja’s Vishishtadvaita and then saw how Madhava differed from Ramanuja, who is most fascinating of the Hindu sage-philosopher and one of the greatest theistic thinkers of all time. Madhava by rejecting Advaita on rational and



religious grounds, systematically laid out the case for theism. Later Nimbarka with his Dvaitadvaita (duality in unity) assessed the significance of theism. He equally emphasized both difference and non-difference, as against Ramanuja, who makes difference subordinate to non-difference, as much as, for him *cit* and *acit* do not exist separately from Brahman, but its body or attributes. In the following period we seen Aurobindo synthesizing Eastern and Western theism with the philosophy of Involution and Evolution. The central tenet of Aurobindo's philosophy is that the Truth of existence is an omnipresent Reality that both transcends the manifested universe and is inherent in it. This Reality, referred to as Brahman, is an Absolute which is not limited by any mental conception or duality. Ramakrishna Paramahansa revitalized the modern understanding of theism with his human perspective of understanding the Reality. His four key concept bring out the essential elements of this philosophy: the oneness of God, the divinity of human beings, the unity of God and the harmony of religions. It was Ramana Maharshi who came out authentically to ask the fundamental question of, "Who I am" which will take one into the inner journey getting to know the reality within. Though his primary teaching is associated with Non-dualism, Advaita Vedanta, and *Jnana-Yoga*, he recommended Bhakti to those he saw were fit for it. He conclude that the place where even the slightest trace of the "I" does not exist, alone is Self. And the Self itself is God.

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### 3.10 KEY WORDS

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**Vedanta** – ved ka anth or 'end of the Vedas'. **Advaita** - non-duality. **Maya** - illusionary and creative aspect of Brahman which causes the world to arise. **Jivatman** – individual soul. **Visishtadvaita** – qualified non-dualism. **Dvaita**– dualism. **Dvaitadvaita** – independent existence of Brahman. **Sri Arunachala Aksharamanamalai** – The Marital Garland of Letters in praise of God. **Prapatti** – surrender to the Lord. **Nirvikalpa** – constant meditation.

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### 3.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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