

Decoding Hindu Religious Literature and Philosophy through Folklore Medium in Andhra Society

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Abstract

Hindu literature and philosophy have been one of the oldest traditions of humankind. This philosophy was a conglomeration of various faiths and traditions of people that emerged over a period of time. This ever accommodating and ever-changing philosophical thought process emerged from cultural roots of the people. Most of the Hindu scriptures were written in Sanskrit language and ordinary people were not in position to understand this philosophy due to language barrier. In this paper, an attempt was made to understand Hindu philosophy and literature through folklore. The greatest challenge in Hindu philosophy was the language in which these scriptures were written. Sanskrit had been the language of few and the masses could never actually understand about this language considering the social practices of that time. Folklore played an important role in transmitting the Hindu philosophy to the masses especially with the emergence of Bhakti Movements.

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Introduction

Hinduism can be likened to a congregation of many religious faiths, encompassing a variety of traditions and schools of thought that blend harmoniously, all united by the common bond of *dharma*, which shapes its characteristic attitude towards life. From the high spiritual aspirations of Vedanta philosophy to the diverse practices of idolatry with its rich mythology, and even the apparent agnosticism of Buddhism, and atheism of Jainism, each perspective finds its place within Hinduism. At the heart of this belief system is the understanding that "each soul is potentially divine." The goal is to manifest this divinity by mastering both external and internal nature. This can be achieved through various paths-be it through work, worship, psychic control, or philosophy. Individuals may engage in one or more of these practices, or even all of them, to attain freedom. Ultimately, this encompasses the essence of religion. Doctrines, dogmas, rituals, texts, temples, and forms are considered secondary details in the pursuit of spiritual realization.^[1] Hindu religious philosophy holds significant importance for several reasons, both within the context of Hinduism and in broader philosophical and cultural discussions. It has diverse perspectives like Vedanta, Samkhya, Yoga etc. offering rich

tapestry of ideas about the nature of reality, self and the Universe. It also helps us to understand Dharma, exploration of existence, integration of spiritual and practical life. The Hindu Philosophy shapes rituals, art, literature and social practices, providing a sense of continuity and belonging. Concepts like moksha and karma helps us to understand the purpose of life and journey towards spiritual freedom. In essence, Hindu religious philosophy offers profound insights into existence, morality, and the human experience, making it a vital area of study and contemplation.^[2]

The greatest challenge in Hindu philosophy was the language in which these scriptures were written. Sanskrit had been the language of few and the masses could never actually understand about this language considering the social practices of that time. Because of its complex grammar, contextual meanings and philosophical concepts, Sanskrit religious scriptures, such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and various Puranas, pose several linguistic challenges even for readers and scholars. It was very much necessary to take this great philosophy to the broader sections of Hindu society. It is in this context the rise of Bhakti Movement played a crucial role in taking Hindu philosophy to the masses in their local languages. The Bhakti Movement was a significant spiritual

and social reform movement that emerged in India between the 7th and 17th centuries. It emphasized devotion (bhakti) to a personal god and sought to make spirituality more accessible to the masses, transcending caste and ritualistic barriers.^[3] The Bhakti Movement played a crucial role in shaping Indian spirituality, culture, and society. It fostered a sense of community among diverse groups and encouraged the idea that devotion, rather than birth or status, was the path to spiritual fulfilment. Its legacy continues to resonate in contemporary spiritual practices and social movements in India.^[4] With rise of Bhakti Movement especially from 12th Century onwards, the regional languages started taking an important place in religious and philosophical discourses which in turn contributed in dispersing Vedic and other Hindu philosophical knowledge to the grass root level population. Folklore refers to the traditional beliefs, customs, stories, songs, and practices of a particular culture or community, passed down through generations. It encompasses a wide range of expressions, like oral traditions, customs and rituals proverbs and sayings. Through entertainment, the folklore created cultural identity, educated people by transmitting values, morals and knowledge and also social cohesion.^[5] The Bhakti literature broke the Sanskrit centric of Hindu Philosophy by promoting the writings in regional literature. In the initial phase of the Bhakti movement, the literary writings were Sanskrit only with writings from Shankaracharya, Nimbarka, Vallabhacharya, Madhvacharya etc. However, when the Bhakti movement started spreading towards northern part of India, the Bhakti saints like Nanak, Kabir, Mirabai conversed and also wrote in local languages. With the growth of this new linguistic revolution in Hindu religious scriptures, the laymen started understanding the true spirit of Hindu philosophy. Bhakti literature, with its focus on personal devotion and love for the divine, fostered a deeper emotional connection between devotees and their chosen deities. Works like those of Mirabai and Kabir expressed intense feelings of longing and devotion, making spirituality more relatable. The movement gave rise to a variety of regional languages and dialects, enriching the literary tapestry of Hinduism. Saints from different regions, like Tulsidas in Hindi or Dnyaneshwar in Marathi, contributed to a more localized expression of faith. Many Bhakti texts were written in vernacular languages, making spiritual teachings accessible to a broader audience. This democratization of knowledge allowed more people to engage with spiritual ideas, regardless of their social or educational background.

It is in this back drop, folklore aspects like Hari katha, Burra Katha, Tholu Bommalata (Puppetry) etc became a subaltern medium to understand Hindu religious traditions and knowledge. Puppetry contributed in large scale in transmitting oral traditions and Hindu philosophy to the masses through simple narration of stories, songs with impressing visuals. Puppetry is one of the oldest art forms followed in Egyptian, Greek, Chinese and Indian civilisations. Its history is traced back to 4000 years in the above civilisations.^[6] Since times immemorial, puppetry has become an integral part of oral traditions in the culture of Andhra society. "Tholu Bommalata" as it is locally known as, is a traditional puppetry art form from Andhra. It features intricately crafted leather puppets that are brought to life through storytelling, often accompanied by music and dance. The performances typically convey folk tales, moral lessons, and cultural stories, making it a vibrant part of the region's heritage.

In puppetry, intricately designed and coloured leather puppets are utilized to tell stories from Hindu epics and philosophies,

such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and various *Puranas*. Music and dialogue are integral to the narration, accompanied by traditional instruments and vocal performances. A light source behind the screen illuminates the puppets, while a white cloth or screen serves as the backdrop. The performance typically begins with an introduction, known as *Prarambham*, which presents the story and characters. This is followed by *Katha Nayanam*, the main narrative derived from mythology and epics. Within the main story, sub-plots, referred to as *Prakaranam*, enrich the performance. The show concludes with *Upsamharam*, a recap that emphasizes moral teachings and the philosophical insights behind the plot. These performances are traditionally held in temples, during village festivals, and in royal courts. Recently, puppetry has also been showcased in urban areas, helping to preserve this remarkable oral tradition for future generations.^[7] Tholu Bommalata performances convey moral teachings and philosophical insights, reflecting the core values of Hindu culture. This makes the stories not only entertaining but also instructive. Typically performed in temples and during festivals, Tholu Bommalata offers a communal experience that reinforces cultural identity and shared beliefs. The performances are often conducted in local languages or dialects, ensuring accessibility for a broader audience, including those who may not be literate. This art form distills complex mythological themes into engaging narratives that resonate with people of all ages. By combining visual artistry, music, and storytelling, Tholu Bommalata serves as an effective medium for conveying the rich tapestry of Hindu mythology, making it both accessible and engaging for diverse audiences.^[8]

Many aspects of Hindu philosophy are intricately woven into puppetry, allowing complex spiritual concepts to be conveyed in relatable and engaging ways. Puppetry shows frequently feature animals as characters that embody human traits, teaching valuable moral lessons. For instance, the story of The Tortoise and the Hare highlights the virtues of perseverance and humility, reflecting the philosophical idea of *dharma* (righteousness). Stories from epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are often retold through puppetry. The tale of Rama's exile, for example, illustrates concepts of duty, honour, and sacrifice, emphasizing the importance of adhering to one's responsibilities even in challenging circumstances. Proverbs derived from folklore frequently encapsulate deep philosophical insights. The saying "*Satyam vada, dharmam chara*" (Speak the truth, follow righteousness) conveys fundamental principles of honesty and ethical conduct. Puppetry also features archetypal characters, such as wise sages like Vishwamitra and heroic figures like Lord Krishna, who embody philosophical ideals. Their adventures and teachings illustrate essential concepts like *karma* (action and its consequences) and *bhakti* (devotion). Many puppet performances explore themes of transformation and redemption. The story of Ganga's descent depicts the river goddess's journey and her role in cleansing sins, reflecting the philosophical ideas of purification and the cycle of birth and rebirth. Moreover, stories emphasizing harmony with nature reflect the Hindu belief in the interconnectedness of all living beings. Tales of Lord Krishna playing with cows and nurturing the environment highlight this reverence for nature. Puppetry serves as a vital means of passing down collective wisdom and social values. Stories about caste equality, as seen in the tales of Kabir, promote inclusivity and challenge social hierarchies.^[9] By using relatable characters, engaging narratives, and accessible language, Puppetry effectively conveys complex Hindu philosophical concepts,

making them understandable and relevant to diverse audiences. This oral tradition not only entertains but also educates, instilling values and insights that resonate across generations. The Hindu philosophy had been transmitted to the masses through music and dance (Bhajans and Kirtans), oral traditions like, story tells, Hari katha, Puppetry etc and in contemporary period through television and cinema. Hindu philosophy encourages questioning and debate, valuing personal experience and understanding over dogma. This openness fosters a culture of intellectual exploration. It often integrates various aspects of life-physical, mental, and spiritual-promoting a holistic approach to well-being and self-realization. Its teachings have transcended geographical boundaries, influencing various spiritual and philosophical movements worldwide, and contributing to discussions on ethics, spirituality, and psychology.

Conclusion

Hindu philosophy, with its vast spectrum of ideas and spiritual insights, has always sought to guide humanity towards self-realization and moral living. Yet, its transmission beyond the Sanskrit-educated elite required new cultural pathways. The Bhakti Movement, by embracing vernacular languages, opened the doors of spiritual knowledge to the common people, while folklore traditions such as music, storytelling, and puppetry ensured that these teachings became embedded in everyday life. Among them, *Tholu Bommalata* stands out as a unique medium that translated profound philosophical truths into engaging narratives of devotion, morality, and social values. By weaving together art, entertainment, and instruction, such traditions preserved the essence of Hindu philosophy while making it accessible to diverse audiences. Even in contemporary times, these cultural forms continue to remind us that philosophy is not only to be studied but also to be lived-experienced in community, expressed through creativity, and passed on across generations.

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