

Myth as Philosophy: A Philosophical Study of How Indian and South Asian Myths Encode Worldviews, Ethics, and Cosmology

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Abstract

This paper conducts a philosophical study of myth in the Indian and South Asian tradition, proposing the contemporary relevance of mythological texts like the Vedic hymns, the Upanishads, the Puranas, the epics of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, as well as the living folk mythologies of various sub-regional populations. The paper aims to examine advanced philosophical systems, encoding cosmological, epistemological, ethical and anthropological insights of profound depth and contemporary significance. It will also explore the nature of myth not as a cultural phenomenon, but as what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur described as "a mode of being-in-the-world", a way of knowing the world that is not less but only differently serious than the systematic traditions of philosophy, differing from them only in method, medium and the nature of the relationship. The paper draws on the tools of phenomenology (Heidegger, Ricoeur), comparative religion (Eliade, Smith), mythology studies (Campbell, Doniger), Indian philosophy (Matilal, Mohanty) and postcolonial studies (Nandy, Chakrabarty), and is structured along six philosophical themes:

- I. The nature of myth as philosophical discourse.
- II. Vedic cosmogony as ontological inquiry.
- III. The Upanishadic internalisation of myth.
- IV. Puranic ethics and the moral cosmology of karma and dharma.
- V. The Epic tradition as philosophical narrative.
- VI. And the folk myth as subaltern philosophy.

The paper contends that Indian mythology represents what can be called a "mythological philosophy" in which the narrative and the analytical, the symbolic and the logical, the experiential and the doctrinal are not discrete but held in productive friction with each other to yield insights unavailable to either pure narrative or pure systematic philosophy. It concludes with a sketch of a contemporary approach to Indian mythology that seeks neither to romanticise myth as arcane mystery nor to rationalise myth as primitive superstition, but seeks to recuperate Indian mythological philosophy as a living resource for contemporary cosmological, ethical, consciousness and humanist

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thinking.

Keywords: Indian mythology, myth as philosophy, Vedic cosmology, Puranic ethics, Upanishadic thought, comparative mythology, dharma, karma, maya, cosmogony, South Asian worldview, mythological epistemology, folk mythology, sacred narrative, philosophical anthropology.

1. Introduction: Why Myth Is Philosophy

The problem of the relation of myth to philosophy is one of the most ancient and vexed. The traditional Western narrative of philosophy's emergence from myth is one of the triumph of logos (rational discourse) over muthos (narrative), of argument over story. Plato's dialogues are peppered with polemical attacks on the poets and mythologists as purveyors of lies and moral poison; Aristotle separated philosophy from poetry on the basis of the claim that philosophy is concerned with universals whereas poetry is concerned with particulars; and the Enlightenment tradition, culminating in Kant's critiques, solidified the conviction that human thought reaches its maturity in the liberation from myth that Kant termed the exit from "self-imposed minority" into the autonomy of reason. This tradition, in which philosophy displaces myth, argument displaces story, has been challenged by 20th-century research. In his massive "Philosophy of Symbolic Forms," Ernst Cassirer demonstrated that myth is not an unsuccessful attempt at scientific explanation but a symbolic form in its own right: that is, a mode of ordering experience with its own logical and causal categories and its own relation to the world (Cassirer 78-80). Claude Levi-Strauss's analysis of mythical structures showed that mythical thinking is as logical as scientific thinking - that myths resolve intellectual problems through the mediation of binary oppositions and mediating categories (Levi-Strauss 206-208). And Paul Ricoeur, in his rich philosophical treatment of the hermeneutics of symbol and narrative, suggested that myth is "a mode of being-in-the-world" that reveals aspects of life that escape purely discursive thought (Ricoeur 349). For the study of Indian mythology, this reappraisal of the myth-philosophy relationship is not just a matter of academic expediency but virtual necessity. The West's myth-then-philosophy narrative has not been accepted in the Indian tradition. *The Upanishads*, which contain some of the most advanced philosophical thought of any tradition, are a deepening of the mythical tradition of the *Vedas*, not a repudiation. The classical Indian philosophical schools - Samkhya, Yoga, Advaita Vedanta, Vishishtadvaita, Dvaita - think within mythical frameworks that they do not see as primitive and archaic precursors to be replaced, but as media of philosophical truth whose symbolic fertility transcends the limits of

systematic discourse. And the contemporary philosophical traditions of India, whether brahminic, tantric, bhakti, sufi, or folk, still work with myth.

In his analysis on the relation between narrative and ethics, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre noted that human beings are "story-telling animals" who understand themselves and their ethical practices in terms of the narratives in which they participate: "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" (MacIntyre 216). This fact is even more obvious in India: the major myths of the Indian tradition are not simply stories with philosophical content but the narrative structures within which the most basic questions of existence ie. What is real? What am I? How should I live? What happens when I die, are framed, examined and provisionally solved. This paper explores the encoding of philosophical positions in Indian mythology through five major traditions - Vedic, Upanishadic, Puranic, Epic, and Folk - which are discussed as distinct yet interrelated philosophical registers with their own methods, their own fundamental questions and their own inter-relationships. The comparative analysis is not competitive (which tradition is philosophically superior?) but synthetic. The aim is to understand how the traditions together constitute a relatively systematic philosophical tradition that engages the whole range of questions that philosophy has identified as questions.

Aim

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the thesis that the mythology of India and South Asia is a species of philosophical discourse encoding systematic worldviews, ethics, epistemologies and cosmological theories to examine the particular philosophical content of the major mythical traditions of the subcontinent in the Vedic, Upanishadic, Puranic, Epic and folk genres.

Specific Objectives

Objective 1: To critically review and synthesise existing theories of the philosophical study of myth, juxtaposing reductive (myth as proto-science, myth as ideology) and generative (myth as symbolic thought, myth as ontological disclosure) approaches, and to produce a theoretical framework that is commensurate with the philosophical seriousness of Indian mythological traditions.

Objective 2: To explore the philosophical significance of Vedic cosmogony (including the Nasadiya Sukta (Hymn of Creation), the Purusha Sukta and the Hiranyagarbha myth) as a contribution to ontology, the philosophy of origins, and the epistemology of limit-questions.

Objective 3: To analyse the internalisation and philosophisation of Vedic myth in the Upanishadic tradition, tracing the reinterpretation of the cosmologies of the Rigveda in the Chandogya, Brihadaranyaka and Mandukya Upanishads as accounts of mind, self-knowledge, and Brahman. Objective 4: To analyse the Puranic tradition as a genre of popular philosophy - considering how the myths of creation, preservation and destruction (trimurti), the doctrine of cosmic ages (yugas and kalpas), and the mythology of karma and rebirth encode a system of popular philosophical anthropology.

Objective 5: To examine the Epic tradition (the Mahabharata, including the Bhagavad Gita), as philosophical narrative, analysing how mythical warfare (the Kurukshetra war) is employed as a means for philosophical argumentation about duty, action, consciousness and the self.

Objective 6: To examine the philosophical dimension of Indian and South Asian folk mythology - the myths of village deities, local heroes, nature deities, and ancestral deities - as a form of subaltern philosophy that presents alternative cosmologies, ecologies and social epistemologies beyond the brahminic and classical Sanskrit traditions.

Research Questions

The research is organised around the following questions:

RQ 1: In what sense and to what extent can Indian and South Asian mythology be seen as philosophical discourse, and what kind of theory is the most appropriate for philosophically analysing it?

RQ 2: What ontological and epistemic positions are implicit in the Vedic cosmogonic mythology, and how are these positions comparable with the ontological traditions of western and other philosophical traditions?

RQ3: In what way does the Upanishadic tradition philosophically re-interpret the mythological tradition of the Rigveda, and what is the philosophical significance of this re-interpretation?

RQ4: What philosophical anthropology is encoded in the mythology of karma, dharma and cyclical return in Puranas, and what are the ethical and social consequences of this mythology?

RQ5: In what sense and to what extent does the Mahabharata and in particular the Bhagavad Gita, use myth as a mode of philosophical discourse, and what philosophical perspectives are expressed in this use?

RQ6: What philosophical knowledge is contained in the Indian folk mythology, and how does it compare with and challenge the traditional philosophical knowledge?

2. Theorising Myth, Symbol, and Philosophy

2.1 The Definition of Myth

The first question in any philosophical study of myth is how to define it is harder than it seems. The term "myth" (from the Greek *muthos*, "word" or "story") has, in modern usage, a variety of meanings that lead off in different philosophical directions: myth as falsehood (as in "the myth that vaccines cause autism"), myth as origin story (as in "the founding myths of a nation"), myth as sacred narrative (as in "the myths of a religion"), and myth as symbolic revelation (as in the philosophically robust senses of Cassirer and Ricoeur). India has its own words for what Western scholars call myth; *itihasa* ("thus it happened"), *purana* ("ancient tale"), *katha* ("story"), *akhyana* ("narrative"), and *upakhyana* ("subordinate narrative") and these words encode a different theory of narrative truth from the Western distinction between myth (false) and *logos* (true). The definition of myth that is most philosophically useful for this paper is that of a myth according to Wendy Doniger is: "a story about the gods" that is "believed to be true by people who tell it" and that "has something important to say" about the human condition (Doniger 1). This definition is broad and it does not prejudge the truth-value of the story, requires only that it be about beings who are beyond ordinary human limits and whose actions impact the lives of ordinary people, and insists on the importance of the story's content. It is, significantly, an insider-friendly definition: the myth is considered not as something an outsider is interested in, but as a claim about the world made from the inside by a community that considers it important.

2.2 Three Models of Myth-as-Philosophy

There are three primary models in the scholarly literature on myth for the relationship of myth to philosophy, each of which sheds light on the Indian tradition. The first is the symbolic model, promoted by Ernst Cassirer and Paul Tillich. According to this model, myth is a species of symbolic representation in which abstract philosophical truths are presented in narrative and imagistic media. The symbolic connection between the concrete image (the primal sea, the

cosmic egg, the serpent of God) and the abstract truth it symbolises is not incidental but integral. The symbol is part of the reality it reveals, and opens up to us depths of reality that are inaccessible through discursive reasoning. Cassirer claimed that the symbols of myth represent a "primary world" of meaning that underpins and enables all subsequent intellectual work, including systematic philosophy (Cassirer 78). Tillich generalised this claim theologically by arguing that myths are the only way to express what he termed "ultimate concern" - the whole of person as oriented toward being (Tillich 43-44).

The second is the structural model, associated with Claude Levi-Strauss. Myth, on this view, is a species of unconscious logical reasoning. A means of solving problems that cannot be solved directly by means of binary classification and the creation of intermediary categories. In a celebrated study of the *Oedipus* myth, Levi-Strauss showed that the seemingly illogical narrative elements of the myth could be read as a logical operation on the problem of the contradiction between autochthonous origin (birth from the earth) and sexual reproduction (Levi-Strauss 213-214). When it comes to Indian mythology, the structural model has been fruitfully applied by authors such as David Shulman, who shows that the mythological narrative of the paradoxical nature of Shiva (both ascetic and erotic, both destructive and creative) in the *Shaiva Mythology of South India* encodes and resolves a logical contradiction in the theology of the infinite divine (Shulman 9-11). The third is the phenomenological model, in the works of Mircea Eliade and Paul Ricoeur. According to this model, myth does not so much operate as a cognitive function (as encoding or resolving a philosophical problem), but as an ontological one. A way of participating in and revealing the sacred order of reality. Eliade's notion of "sacred time", the mythical time of origins (in illo tempore, "in that time") that is not retroactive but a time that is always present (and re-present) through ritual re-enactment - offers a way of understanding why Indian myths are not seen as historically obsolete by philosophical argument: they refer to a dimension that is always already in operation, to a structure of reality that ritual and meditation can access at any time (Eliade 21-23). Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach adds to Eliade's phenomenology a consideration of the linguistic and narrative aspects of myth: myths disclose dimensions of human existence precisely through their narrative form, precisely through the temporalization of action, consequence and recognition that makes up the mythological plot (Ricoeur 163).

2.3 The Indian Philosophical Context: Myth and Darshana

The Indian tradition of philosophical enquiry has its own language and concepts for describing the relation between narrative and systematic enquiry. The Sanskrit word darshana, translated as "philosophical school" or "viewpoint", means literally "seeing" or "vision", and this is philosophically important. In the Indian tradition, philosophy (darshana) is not a matter of discursive reasoning but of clear seeing. It is a form of vision, and the question of how one might achieve such clear seeing through logical argument, meditation, surrender to a deity, or the acceptance of a revealed narrative that is itself a significant philosophical issue on which the schools disagree. The notion of shruti ("what is heard"), which refers to the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* as texts whose authority is not human but as direct revelations of ultimate reality, situates mythical narrative not as a human invention but as a datum of philosophy, an evidence of what the nature of reality is and whose authority, within the tradition, at least equals that of logical argument. The philosopher J. N. Mohanty, in his detailed analysis of the sources of knowledge in Indian philosophy, suggests that the category of shabda (verbal testimony), which includes testimony of the *Vedas*, is accepted as a pramana (valid means of knowledge) in most Indian philosophical schools, in addition to perception and inference, making received narrative a philosophically valid source of knowledge claims (Mohanty 127-129). This means that, in the Indian philosophical tradition, myth is not epistemologically inferior to philosophy, on the other hand it represents a different and complementary way of accessing the same ultimate reality that philosophy attempts to comprehend.

3. Vedic Cosmogony: Myth as Ontological Inquiry

3.1 Nasadiya Sukta: The Myth of Absolute Beginnings

The "Hymn of Creation" or "Hymn of Non-Being" in *The Nasadiya Sukta (Rigveda 10.129)* is one of the most philosophically significant texts in any culture. Written in Sanskrit between 1200 and 900 BCE, it raises the question of absolute cosmological origins with a philosophical radicality that has not been surpassed in later traditions: "Nasad asin, no sad asit tadanim / Nasid rajo no vyoma paro yat / Kim avarivah, kuha, kasya sharmann / Ambhah kim asid gahanam gabhiram." ("Neither non-being existed, nor being, at that time. / There was no sky, nor the heaven beyond. / What covered what? Where? Under whose protection? / Was there water, deep and unfathomable?") — Rigveda 10.129.1, translated by Wendy Doniger (Doniger 25)

The great philosophical strength of the 'Nasadiya Sukta' is its refusal to draw the question of origins, at the boundaries of conceptual resources. It shuns the reassurance of both theistic

creation (a god who was there before and gave birth to the world) and materialist infinity (eternally existing matter). Rather, it argues for a condition before the distinction between being and non-being, a condition which cannot be positively defined, only negatively. This is the technique of the later *Upanishads* known as “neti neti” (“not this, not this”). The negations of all positive assertions in order to approach a reality beyond all assertions. The hymn's final verse is philosophically adventurous: “Ko addha veda ka iha pra vocat / Kuta ajata kuta iyam visristih / Arvag deva asya visarjanenatha / Ko veda yata ababhuva.” (“Who here knows it? Who will here declare it? / From where was it born, and from where this creation? / The gods came later with the creation of this universe — / Who, then, knows from where it arose?”) (Rigveda 10.129.6, translated by Wendy Doniger. 26)

The hymn does not end with an answer but a question, and even more radically, with the implication that the gods do not know the answer to the question of absolute origins, because they came into being after the universe. This is a profoundly modest and subtle philosophical answer: the cosmological question is not only remains answered, but is presented as an “unanswerable” question that marks the limits of what the mind can know, divine or human. The philosopher Karl Jaspers, who described the period between 800 and 200 BCE, in which philosophy simultaneously arose in Greece, China, India, and Israel, as the “Axial Age”, also identified the Nasadiya Sukta as one of the earliest documents of true philosophical questioning, when the human mind first became aware of its own boundaries as the highest philosophical discovery (Jaspers 2-3).

3.2 The Purusha Sukta: Cosmogony as Social Ontology

The Purusha Sukta (Rigveda 10.90) is an entirely different type of cosmogony, one that does not take the universe to emerge from a pre-cosmic void but from the sacrifice of a cosmic being (Purusha) whose body parts make up the elements of the universe and the classes of human society. This hymn is simultaneously cosmological (the universe arises from sacrifice), theological (the sacrifice is at once offered by the gods, and a constitutive part of the gods), social (the four varnas or social classes of human society arise from different parts of the cosmic body) and philosophical (the unity of the universe and the diversity of its parts are both expressions of a single sacrificial act). No other *Vedic* hymn has received more philosophical and political commentary than the *Purusha Sukta*. For brahminic philosophy, it justifies the cosmological origins of the varna system (social hierarchy) by linking it to the structure of the universe, if brahmin priests came from the mouth of the Cosmic Person, kshatriya warriors

from his arms, vaishya merchants from his thighs, and shudra servants from his feet, then the social order is not human but cosmic. For Dalit and progressive scholars, this is the ideological role of the text and appeals to the authority of cosmological myth to justify social hierarchy on the basis of its supposed naturalness and divinity. In his scathing critique of Hinduism, B. R. Ambedkar called the *Purusha Sukta* the charter of the mythical justification of the caste system (Ambedkar 47-52). *The Purusha Sukta* raises the philosophical question about the unity and diversity of the world, significantly, the unity of the world (everything comes from the one Purusha) and its justified diversity (into castes, into elements, into species). This problem is one of the earliest and most obstinate problems in philosophy, from Parmenides and Heraclitus to Hegel and Whitehead. The mythical "solution" to the problem advanced by the *Purusha Sukta* - the foundation of diversity in sacrifice, in the creative dismemberment of a prior unity - is philosophically interesting because it sanctifies the production of diversity rather than explaining it away as a metaphysical problem.

3.3 Hiranyagarbha: The Golden Embryo and the Philosophy of Potentiality

A third major *Vedic* cosmogonic myth is the Hiranyagarbha ("golden embryo" or "golden womb") myth, found in *Rigveda* 10.121 and developed in the *Upanishads* and the *Puranas*. The myth speaks of an original golden egg, floating on the pre-cosmic waters, from which the universe hatches. The philosophical meaning of this myth is about the relationship between potential and actuality between the unified wholeness of the egg and the differentiated multiplicity of the world that emerges from the egg. In his study of cosmogonies, Mircea Eliade explains the cosmic egg as a universal mythical symbol whose philosophical meaning is related to the absolute and the world of appearances. Here, the egg stands for the state of supreme totality (all possibilities condensed in a single, perfect, undifferentiated form) from which the world emerges through a primeval act of division (Eliade 413-414). In the Indian tradition, the Hiranyagarbha myth expresses an ontological position that prefigures the *Upanishads'* teaching on Brahman as the ground of all particular beings from which they spring without exhausting. The golden egg is, philosophically, a symbol of Brahman in its "saguna" (with qualities) manifestation, the infinite concentrated into a finite form which then becomes the infinite diversity of the world.

4. Upanishadic Internalization of Myth: From the World to the Self

4.1 The Upanishads' Philosophical Revolution

The *Upanishads*, written between c. 800 and 200 BCE, are one of the most remarkable transformations of human thought that lays on internalisation of the cosmological myths of the *Veda*. While the *Vedic* hymns are primarily interested in the outer cosmos (the constitution of the universe, the nature of the gods, the ritual of sacrifice), the *Upanishads* turn the same questions to the inner cosmos of mind and self. The shift is symbolised by the *Chandogya Upanishad's* famous lesson of Uddalaka Aruni to his son Shvetaketu: "Tat tvam asi, Shvetaketu." ("That thou art, O Shvetaketu, Chandogya Upanishad 6.8.7, translated by S. Radhakrishnan. 447)

This three-word philosophical formula, "that [Brahman, the universal ground of being] thou [Atman, the individual self] art", is philosophically one of the most compressed and consequential statements in any tradition. It asserts the identity of the individual self and the universal ground of being, and claims that the consciousness that perceives and thinks is not a fragment of a larger reality but, in its deepest nature, identical with that larger reality itself. This claim, known in the Advaita Vedanta tradition as the doctrine of non-dualism (advaita, literally "not-two"), is simultaneously a philosophical position (a claim about the nature of consciousness and being) and a transformative instruction (an invitation to realize, not merely intellectually but experientially, the truth of this identity).

The philosophical revolution of the *Upanishads* is, in this sense, a revolution in the understanding of what myth is about. The *Vedic* myths of creation, of the cosmic sacrifice, of the primordial ocean and the golden egg and all of these are reinterpreted in the *Upanishads* as myths about the self. The primordial ocean is not merely the physical substrate of the universe; it is the ocean of consciousness. The golden egg is not merely a cosmological symbol; it is the concentrated wholeness of the Atman before its identification with the particular body and mind. The sacrifice is not merely a ritual act; it is the metaphysical self-giving of the absolute by which the world of appearances is sustained. The *Upanishadic* philosophy of Brahman-Atman thus does not abandon the mythological tradition of the *Vedas* but reads it as a philosophical allegory of the structure of consciousness itself.

4.2 The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: Yajnavalkya and the Philosophy of Silence

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad- A one of the oldest and most philosophically substantial of the *Upanishads* which presents the philosophical teaching of Brahman-Atman through a series of dialogues featuring the sage Yajnavalkya, who engages in philosophical debate with brahmin scholars and, most memorably, with his wife Maitreyi. Yajnavalkya's teaching method

is distinctive who approaches the nature of the Atman through progressive negation, stripping away every positive predicate until only the pure, self-luminous awareness remains. "Neti, neti" — it is not this, not this. There is no other and more appropriate description of it than this: "It is not this." Now the name of it is "the Reality of reality." The vital forces are reality, and it is their reality. (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 2.3.6, translated by Patrick Olivelle. 43)

The neti neti process is one of the most philosophically rigorous in the history of philosophy. It proceeds by the successive denial of all positive descriptions of the Atman-Brahman - the Atman is not the body, not the senses, not the mind, not the intellect, not memory - until the positive attempt at description runs out of words and leaves only the silence of the inexpressible. This seems to echo the Christian mystical theology (Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart) and the theology of Jewish philosophy (Maimonides), and becomes part of a mythical context that infers the "silence" of the neti neti procedure as its own self-shining light. The philosophical nature of this procedure has been discussed by Bimal Krishna Matilal in his influential essay "Understanding the Upanishads". Matilal suggests that the neti neti procedure is not a mystical procedure that defeats reason, but is a philosophically subtle solution to a genuine philosophical problem ie. the Atman cannot be transformed into an object of knowledge through the usual methods (perception, inference) because it is the subject that would perceive or infer. The only philosophical method is therefore a negative one, not the positive characterisation of an object but the progressive exclusion of erroneous identifications of the subject with its objects (Matilal 21-24).

4.3 The *Mandukya Upanishad*: Cosmology of States of Consciousness

The *Mandukya Upanishad*, the briefest of the major *Upanishads* (twelve verses), is one of the most philosophical treatises on consciousness. The topic of the *Mandukya Upanishad* is the syllable OM (also AUM) and the four states of consciousness (waking, jagrita; dreaming, svapna; deep sleep, sushupti; the fourth, turiya) that it symbolises.

The waking state is outward-knowing, with seven limbs, nineteen mouths, experiencing gross objects, is the 'all-pervading', the first quarter. The dreaming state is inward-knowing, with seven limbs, nineteen mouths, experiencing subtle objects, is the 'brilliant', the second quarter. (*Mandukya Upanishad* 3–4, translated by Gambhirananda. 177)

The Mandukya's philosophical innovation is that it uses the familiar phenomenology of conscious experience, the states of awareness that all of us pass through each day as a model of reality. Waking consciousness is the individual consciousness interacting with the world of objects; dreaming consciousness is a consciousness that fabricates its own world out of internal material; deep sleep is the destruction of the duality and difference of all things into bliss (ananda); and turiya ("fourth") is pure witnessing consciousness, which underlies and transcends the other three states without being identical to them. This fourfold classification is one of the first and most systematic attempts to catalogue the full spectrum of conscious experience and to draw from it a philosophical account of the nature of mind and its relationship with the world, the philosopher of consciousness David Chalmers observes (12).

5. Puranic Philosophy: Myth as Moral Cosmology

5.1 The Trimurti: Creation, Preservation, Dissolution as Philosophical System

The Puranic tradition, the eighteen major *Puranas* and many minor *Puranas* written between 300 and 1000 CE, is the largest and most systematically developed body of mythical philosophy in Indian culture. While the *Vedas* are primarily concerned with cosmogony (creation of the universe) and ritual, and the *Upanishads* with the philosophy of mind, the *Puranas* are a world-system in which cosmology, theology, ethics, social philosophy, natural history and eschatology (theology of the end of the world) are intricately integrated into a mythologically constructed worldview. The Trimurti, the trinity of Brahma (creator), Vishnu (sustainer) and Shiva (destroyer), is the central myth of the Puranic system. This mythological triad is not simply a theological doctrine on three persons of the deity; it is a philosophical model of the order of reality as a process of creation, maintenance and dissolution. In his study of the world's religions, the philosopher Ninian Smart dubbed the Trimurti "one of the most elegant philosophical models in any tradition" for understanding the dynamic nature of reality, the very idea that existence is not a timeless state but a process of becoming, being, and ceasing (Smart 72). The three deities of the Trimurti represent three basic philosophical categories: Brahma to the category of novelty or potentiality, the ongoing creation of new forms and possibilities; Vishnu to the category of order or actuality, the preservation of existing forms in their integrity and purpose; and Shiva to the category of dissolution, the necessary destruction of existing forms to make room for new ones. This triad is philosophically equivalent to Hegel's triadic dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Although it is a millennium older than Hegel, and it is a mythical rather than a logical triad. The philosopher of religion Huston Smith, in "The World's Religions", sees this as one of the most remarkable cases of philosophical

convergence, and suggests that Trimurti and the Hegelian dialectic are parallel discoveries of the underlying structure of reality as process (Smith 67).

5.2 Karma and Rebirth: The Mythological Philosophy of Moral Causation

The doctrine of karma, the idea that all actions produce consequences that impact on the future life experiences of the doer possibly in several incarnations, is the most philosophically important and globally known contribution of Indian mythological philosophy to global culture. *The Puranic* articulation of this doctrine, through the mythology of rebirth (samsara), cosmic cycles of time (yugas and kalpas), and eventual salvation (moksha), is a full-blown philosophical anthropology bears a description of human beings and how they got to be the way they are, as well as how they find eventual salvation. The sophistication of the karma doctrine as a philosophical doctrine is that it brings together several philosophical claims. First, it is a claim about moral connectedness ie. we act, and there are consequences to our actions, and these consequences are morally fitting to the actions from which they result. This is a claim about the nature of the universe which redirects the result of ones actions and their justified cosmic consequences as moral or immoral setting the doctrine that the world cares about human moral actions, rather than being indifferent to them. Second, it is a claim about personal identity over time where a person who experiences the consequences of his/her past actions is the same person who performed those actions, despite the passage of time and death of the bodily vehicle. This is a complex view about the nature of the person that is distinct from both the Lockean (consciousness, memory) view of personal identity accepted in the West, and also the Buddhist anatta (no-self) view with which it is often conflated. The mythological narrative that is the vehicle for these philosophical statements is the myth of the *Puranas*, particularly the *Garuda Purana's* long description of the afterlife of the soul, the *Bhagavata Purana's* description of the different worlds into which the soul is reborn, and the *Vishnu Purana's* description of the cosmic time cycles in which individual karmic processes take place. These mythical stories are not a literal description of geography (a map of heaven and hell) but a description of the phenomenology of moral experience in its temporal scope, including aspects of experience that are not accessible to ordinary perception, the lifetime.

5.3 The Yugas: Myth of Cosmic Time and the Philosophy of History

The Puranic account of the historical time cycles (Mahayugas, each made up of four yugas - Satya, Treta, Dvapara, Kali - in order of decreasing moral quality) is one of the most philosophically sophisticated treatments of historical time. The Yuga doctrine is not just a

cosmological account of the duration of time (though the figures involved a single Mahayuga is 4.32 million years, a single Kalpa is 4.32 billion years are philosophically interesting in their emphasis on the cosmic time's vastness relative to human history) but also a philosophical account of the relationship between moral quality and temporal location. The doctrine asserts that the moral quality of the world, to which dharma (cosmic moral order) is preserved, decreases during the four yugas, from the full dharma of the Satya Yuga ("age of truth") to the quarter-dharma of the Kali Yuga ("age of discord") in which we currently reside. This is a philosophical account of the directionality of history. It is a claim that history is not progressive but regressive, and the world is not improving morally but decaying and periodically being renewed. This stands in contrast with the Western Enlightenment view of historical progress, but also with the cyclical view of history that is sometimes attributed to India. The Yuga doctrine is not just cyclical but spiral where each Kalpa repeats the same cycle, but within each Kalpa, there is regressive directionality. The philosopher of history Reinhart Koselleck, in his examination of the temporal structures of historical life, describes the "space of experience" (what has occurred) and the "horizon of expectation" (what is expected as possible) as the two temporal structures of historical experience (Koselleck 272). The Puranic Yuga doctrine presents a particular combination of these two temporal orientations. One, the space of experience is cosmic (the history of all previous universes). The other, its horizon of expectation is at once pessimistic (the current Kali Yuga will continue to decay) and optimistic (the cycle will eventually come to an end and a new Satya Yuga will dawn). This pessimistic yet cosmic optimism has significant philosophical implications and has shaped the political and social philosophy of India.

6. The Epic Tradition: Myth as Philosophical Narrative

6.1 The Mahabharata: The World's Longest Philosophical Argument

The Mahabharata, a work of about 100,000 shlokas or ten times the combined length of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, claims that "what is here is elsewhere; what is not here is nowhere" (yad ihasti tad anyatra, yan nehasti na tat kvacit). This statement, that the *Mahabharata* contains all the knowledge in the world, is not a claim to fame but a philosophical claim about the genre of the text: the *Mahabharata* is not one story among many, but the story of human life in its entirety, including all forms of knowledge, all modes of argumentation, and all forms of life within its narrative structure. The method of the *Mahabharata's* philosophical instruction is mythological. It does not teach us philosophy through abstract argument, but rather in the form of narrative, dialogue, exemplary narrative and embedded philosophical treatise. This makes it

a text of unsurpassed philosophical depth because the mythological genre. The dharma question: what to do when the best conduct is ethically undesirable? is not theoretical; it is a concrete problem encountered by Arjuna on the battlefield facing his relatives and being wracked by the dilemma of having to slay them if he is to win his battle.

6.2 The Bhagavad Gita: Philosophical Crisis as Philosophical Opportunity

The Bhagavad Gita, the conversation between the warrior Arjuna and his driver Krishna in the eighteen chapters of the sixth book of the *Mahabharata*, is the most influential philosophical text in India, and one of the most read philosophical works in the world. It has a philosophical backdrop where the Kaurava come face to face with Arjuna on the battlefield at Kurukshetra, where he sees his teachers, uncles, cousins and friends, he refuses to fight and is despairing. "Seyam hi pashyami mamopahantum / svajanam ahave kim nu rajyena / govinda kim bhogair jivitena va." ("I see no good in killing my own kinsmen in this battle. / Krishna, I desire not victory, nor kingdom, nor pleasures.") (*Bhagavad Gita* 1.31–32, translated by Radhakrishnan. 102)

Arjuna's crisis is, as philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has opined it, a narrative crisis. He has found himself at a point in the story he is living where his commitments as a warrior, as a member of the royal family, and as a supporter of dharma (righteousness) are in irreconcilable tension with each other. He is helpless because his constitutive narratives have broken down. Krishna's philosophical answer, which takes up the remaining seventeen chapters of the *Gita*, is a philosophical argument and a narrative intervention; provides Arjuna with a new narrative perspective on the story in which he is living and his place in it. *The Gita's* philosophy is structured in three interlocking doctrines: Karma Yoga (the yoga of action without attachment to fruits), Jnana Yoga (the yoga of knowledge), and Bhakti Yoga (the yoga of devotion). Each of them is a different response to Arjuna's crisis from a different philosophical perspective, and together they are "an attempt to found all knowledge and all yoga on a reconciling and all-embracing synthesis" (Aurobindo 3), as the philosopher Sri Aurobindo put it. The variety of philosophical voices offered in the *Gita*, the willingness to allow many paths to the same ultimate goal, is philosophically important. It is consistent with the Indian philosophical tradition's pluralism about methods of philosophical and spiritual enquiry, its insistence that no one path alone can lead to the ultimate goal. The most significant philosophical teaching of the *Gita* is the doctrine of Nishkama Karma, action without attachment to the fruits of action which overcomes Arjuna's crisis through a re-conception of moral agency. Krishna teaches that the

bondage, not the action, is caused by the attachment to the results. It further addresses, if Arjuna acts in fulfilment of his dharmic duty as a warrior without attachment to the results of action as victory or defeat, honour or dishonour, life or death then he will be able to perform the right action while escaping the karmic consequences of attachment to the results. This doctrine is philosophically distinctive in ways when compared to Kant's categorical imperative (do your duty for duty's sake, regardless of consequences) and to the Stoic doctrine of the dichotomy of control (focus on what is within your power, the will; accept what is not, the outcomes), somehow these comparisons are overlooked. The *Gita* does not ground its duty on a formal principle of universality, like Kant, but on a substantive account of the nature of the self (Atman) and its relation to the universe (Brahman). And unlike Stoicism, the *Gita* does not counsel passively accepting results but performing one's duty from a place of freedom and equanimity.

7. Folk Mythology as Subaltern Philosophy

7.1 Beyond the Sanskrit Tradition: The Philosophical Life of Folk Myth

The philosophical study of Indian mythology has been dominated by the study of the Sanskrit textual tradition, such as the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Puranas*, *Epics*, to the exclusion of the massive corpus of living folk mythology that constitutes the mythological tradition of most Indians. This is part of the same brahminic privileging of the Sanskrit texts in Indian studies more generally, whereby it is taken to be the case that the Sanskrit texts embody the "high" tradition whose philosophical content justifies study, whereas the folk traditions are merely popular, derivative or pre-philosophical versions of the same content. This assumption is philosophically unjustified. Folk mythology, including the mythology of village goddesses, local heroes, nature spirits, ancestral beings, and the myriad minor deities and demigods that infest the religious landscape of rural India, is not a caricature of the Sanskrit mythology but a distinct philosophical tradition, with its own questions, its own methods, and its own world. As the anthropologist Frederique Apffel Marglin has argued in her book on the devadasi tradition of Orissa, Indian folk traditions manifest what she calls an "embodied philosophy", a mode of knowledge that is sensory, communitarian, ritual, as opposed to textual, analytic, and that encodes philosophical statements about bodies, time, fertility, and the sacred that are not evident in the Sanskrit philosophical tradition (Marglin 14-17).

7.2 The Village Goddess Tradition: A Theology of Immanence

The myth of the Gram Devi (village goddess), which exists in many local versions in almost every village of the Indian subcontinent, is one of the philosophically most important aspects of Indian folk mythology. The Gram Devi is not a local version of the great Sanskrit goddesses (Durga, Kali, Lakshmi); she is a local goddess whose mythology, iconography and ritual are local. Her stories typically have to do with the genealogy of her manifestation. Her presence in the village, the vow (mannat) she has made to her worshippers, the offences that she will punish and the prayers that she will answer. The philosophical theology of the Gram Devi tradition has to do with a theology of immanence. This idea proposes the transcendent presence of the sacred beyond the world of our everyday experience, but an immanent presence rooted in the specific place, community, and history of a particular human settlement. This is a theological stance that is distinct from the theology of transcendence of the Upanishads (Brahman as the absolute ground of being, independent of concrete manifestation) and the devotional theology of the Puranas (Vishnu or Shiva, cosmic deities whose worship is not confined to a specific place or community). The Gram Devi tradition affirms the particularity and locality of the sacred - that the sacred is not everywhere in general but somewhere in particular, located in the particular ecology, history and social organisation of a particular community.

Ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood, in examining nature and place in environmental philosophy, suggests that the fact that particular places are sacred (that is, have intrinsic value that makes them priceless and irreplaceable) is philosophically important for the development of an environmental ethics because abstract principles of environmental protection do not trigger the emotional and moral responses to specific places that come from place-specific attachments (Plumwood 185-88). The Gram Devi tradition, then, is not just a folk religious tradition but an environmental philosophical tradition: a way of particularising the sacred so as to create a sense of care and responsibility towards particular places and communities.

7.3 Ashish Nandy and the Subaltern Philosophical Tradition

In an influential essay "The Traditions of Indian Philosophy" and in his book *The Intimate Enemy* the cultural theorist Ashish Nandy argues that the Western-educated Indian intelligentsia has marginalized the folk and non-brahminical philosophical traditions of India in the name of a project of modernization that defines philosophy as the Sanskrit classical tradition and treats the thought of the folk as either primitive belief or superstition. Nandy

suggests that the philosophy of the future in India must take the folk traditions seriously - not as quaint remnants of a pre-modern, archaic past but as living philosophical traditions that have preserved alternative modes of knowledge of reality during the centuries of colonial domination (Nandy 38-42). This argument is echoed in the work of philosopher Dipesh Chakrabarty, who in "Provincializing Europe" proposes that the subaltern groups of South Asia have maintained forms of temporal consciousness, of relation to the sacred, of understanding causality or agency that are philosophical alternatives to the categories of European modernity, and like folk philosophies worth engaging philosophically rather than dismissing as superstitions or as inadequate empirical claims about the world (Chakrabarty 109-113). When a tribal woman in Jharkhand performs a ritual to protect the forest from mining, citing the forest's health as dependent upon the presence of local nature spirits (*van devata*) which will be disturbed by the mining, she is not making a scientifically inadequate empirical claim; she is expressing a philosophical position about the moral status of the non-human world, about the nature of the sacred as a protective presence, and about the responsibilities of human communities to the ecosystems that sustain them.

8. Discussion: Findings and Comparative Dimensions

8.1 Core Philosophical Themes Across the Indian Mythological Tradition

The study of the five major mythological traditions discussed in this paper, *Vedic*, *Upanishadic*, *Puranic*, Epic and Folk, reveals a number of philosophical themes that are recurrent across all of the five traditions, making up what can be described as the philosophical fingerprint of the Indian mythological tradition. The first, most important theme is the primacy of consciousness. In all five traditions, consciousness (in its various guises - Brahman, Atman, Purusha, Shiva, Shakti, Chit) is discussed as the more fundamental reality, of which the world is a dependent manifestation, expression or projection. This is not a naive idealism (the world is an idea in the mind of God) but a more nuanced claim about the priority of consciousness, the ultimate nature of reality. It is not matter but mind, not object but subject, not world but awareness. The variety of mythological tropes that serve to make this claim (the primordial awareness of the Nasadiya Sukta, the Upanishadic identity of Brahman and Atman, the cosmic dreaming (*yoga-nidra*) of the Puranic Vishnu, the teaching about the indwelling Atman in the *Gita*, the identification of the universe with the body of the goddess in the Tantra) is a testament to the diversity as well as the unity of the tradition. The second theme is the philosophical connection of ethics to cosmology: the view that the moral order of human life (*dharma*, *karma*, our obligations in

relationship) is not merely a human invention imposed on an otherwise indifferent world, but an expression of the cosmic order itself. Indian mythology steadfastly resists the modern Western distinction between the "is" (the way things are, and the way science tells us so) and the "ought" (the way things should be, and the way ethics tells us so). For the Indian mythical world, these are intricately intertwined: the way things are is already ethically ordered, and the way humans should live is a description of the deepest workings of the universe itself. The third theme is the philosophical emphasis on non-duality: the consistent tendency, across the five traditions, to turn towards the idea that apparent opposites (being and non-being, subject and object, sacred and profane, creation and destruction) are not ultimately contradictory but the expression of an underlying unity that transcends their difference. This non-duality is philosophically interesting and gives rise to some of the most advanced philosophical tools: the neti neti procedure of the Upanishads, the paradoxical statements of the Upanishads, the integration of opposites in the Tantras (Shiva and Shakti, purity and impurity), the teaching of the Bhagavad Gita's teaching of equanimity (samatvam) as the practical consequence of non-dual insight.

8.2 Comparative Table: Myth as Philosophy Across Traditions

Tradition	Period	Primary Medium	Central Question	Core Philosophical Claim
Vedic (Rigveda)	1500–500 BCE	Hymn, sacrifice ritual	What is the origin of all things?	Reality begins in indeterminate potentiality; cosmos arises from sacrifice
Upanishadic	800–200 BCE	Dialogue, meditation	What is the self and what is Brahman?	Atman = Brahman; consciousness is the ground of all being (tat tvam asi)

Puranic	300–1000 CE	Narrative, genealogy	How does the cosmos work morally?	Karma governs all; moral causation is embedded in cosmic structure
Epic / Gita	400 BCE–400 CE	War narrative, dialogue	How should one act in moral crisis?	Duty without attachment (nishkama karma); self is eternal witness
Folk / Tribal	Ancient–present	Oral performance, ritual	Who protects this place and people?	The sacred is local, particular, and ecologically embedded

Table 1: Core Philosophical Positions Across Major Indian Mythological Traditions

8.3 Indian Mythology in Dialogue with Western Philosophical Traditions

The philosophy of Indian mythology is not simply of antiquarian or local interest but a contribution to the world's philosophical tradition. There are a number of points of contact with Western philosophy that are especially helpful. The Nasadiya Sukta's awareness of the limits of cosmological reasoning; its openness to the possibility that the origin of the cosmos may be unknown, foreshadows and echoes Kant's critique of speculative reason in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where Kant claims that the cosmological and ontological arguments for the existence of God go beyond the legitimate limits of reason. The *Vedic* hymn and Kant's critique both arrive at the same philosophical conclusion that the question of ultimate origins is a boundary question to which reason cannot give an answer by different methods and in different cultural contexts. The coincidence suggests that the limit of cosmological reasoning is a real philosophical insight, rather than a cultural prejudice. The Upanishadic identification of consciousness as the ground of being anticipates, and in part parallels, the tradition of philosophical idealism in Western philosophy - from George Berkeley's *esse est percipi* ("to be is to be perceived") to Hegel's identification of the real and the rational to the phenomenological tradition's emphasis on consciousness as the central category (Husserl's transcendental

subjectivity, Heidegger's Dasein as the clearing in which being shows itself). But the Upanishadic teaching differs from these in its particular claim. It is not that the world depends on human consciousness for its existence (which is subjective idealism) but that the world and human consciousness depend on a universal consciousness (Brahman-Atman) that transcends and includes both. *The Bhagavad Gita's* teaching of nishkama karma resonates with the Western tradition of ethics in a number of ways. Its teaching of the performance of duty regardless of personal interest parallels Kant's categorical imperative; its teaching of the responsiveness of moral action to the situations (Arjuna's dharma as kshatriya) parallels Aristotle's notion of phronesis (practical judgement); and its teaching of the cultivation of equanimity in the face of unavoidable suffering parallels the Stoic tradition. But it differs from the first two in making an ontological claim about the nature of the self, in teaching that the true self is not the ego-persona that is afraid of death and in search of pleasure but the eternal Atman that is independent of the transitory world of birth and death.

9. Contemporary Relevance: Indian Mythological Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century

9.1 Ecological Philosophy

The most relevant aspect of the Indian mythological philosophy for the modern world is its ecology that is, its recurrent vision of the natural world as a morally important community of which human beings are members, not owners. This vision, which is encoded in the Vedic mythology of the earth goddess (Prithvi Mata), the Puranic mythology of the sacred rivers and mountains as deities (river goddesses, sacred geography of tirtha), the forest mythology of the Epics, and the local ecology of village goddess traditions, offers a genuine philosophical alternative to the instrumental view of nature that has underpinned the current ecological crisis. In her landmark essay "Braiding Sweetgrass" the environmental philosopher Robin Wall Kimmerer draws on the indigenous American tradition to argue that philosophically, the recognition of plants and non-human beings as having subjectivity and moral status, which she calls the "grammar of animacy", is essential for the development of an ecological ethics. Kimmerer's argument from the Potawatomi tradition echoes the wisdom of Indian folk mythology to the letter: in both traditions, the natural world is populated by beings who possess their own voices, intentions and demands for human recognition and respect (Kimmerer 49-50). The philosophical parallel suggests that this vision of a community of subjects is neither a culturally provincial fantasy nor an ecological truth denied by industrial modernity.

9.2 The Philosophy of Consciousness

The philosophy of consciousness of the *Upanishads*, its analysis of the states of consciousness in the *Mandukya Upanishad*, its identification of the witnessing awareness as the innermost self, its distinction between the empirical ego (ahamkara) and the pure consciousness (chit), is relevant to the contemporary philosophy of mind and consciousness studies. David Chalmers's "hard problem" of consciousness - why there is subjective experience, why physical processes give rise to the quality of subjective experience; is a question that has been tackled, philosophically, by the Upanishadic tradition for 2500 years. The philosopher and neuroscientist Christof Koch, in his work on consciousness and its neural correlates, has recognised the significance of the Upanishadic tradition for contemporary research on consciousness, the Upanishadic idea of pure awareness (turiya, the fourth state of the Mandukya) presages what contemporary consciousness theorists call "pure consciousness experiences", the states of consciousness without intent (without being directed towards any object) that have been reported by meditators from several traditions and which present some of the most difficult challenges to dominant neuroscientific theories of consciousness as necessarily representational (Koch 54-56). The philosophical analysis of these states in the *Mandukya Upanishad* and its interpretations (particularly Gaudapada's Mandukya Karika) is a body of phenomenological data that needs to be taken into consideration by contemporary philosophy of mind.

9.3 Ethics and Political Philosophy

The Indian mythological philosophy of dharma, understood not as a fixed code of rules but as a contextual, relational, and dynamic orientation toward right order, offers resources for contemporary ethical and political philosophy that have barely been explored. *The Bhagavad Gita's* insistence that moral reasoning must be contextually sensitive, that the same action may be right in one context and wrong in another depending on the agent's nature, position, and relationships (svadharma), anticipates the communitarian critique of liberal universalism mounted by philosophers including Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor who claims that moral obligations cannot be derived from a context-free rationality but are always constituted by and within particular communities, histories, and ways of life.

The Puranic philosophy of karma offers a framework for thinking about moral accountability that supplements and challenges the dominant frameworks of both retributive and restorative justice. The karma doctrine insists on the universal scope of moral accountability every action

has consequences, and those consequences are ultimately borne by the agent while the associated doctrines of grace (prasad) and divine forgiveness in the Bhakti tradition insist that the iron logic of karma can be interrupted by the compassion of the divine. This combination of strict moral causation and redemptive grace maps onto the deepest tensions in any philosophy of justice between desert (giving people what they deserve as consequences of their actions) and mercy (recognizing that strict desert is sometimes incompatible with human dignity and the possibility of moral transformation).

10. Conclusion: Toward a Philosophy of Mythological Wisdom

Through six philosophical axes and five broad traditions of myth, this paper has argued that Indian and South Asian myth is a species of philosophical thought and not a primitive narrative that will be replaced by a more rational discourse, but a complex system of thought, which encodes cosmological, epistemological, ethical and anthropological assertions of astonishing depth and contemporary relevance. The argument has been illustrated in a number of case studies for example-

- The Nasadiya Sukta's acknowledgement of the limits of cosmological enquiry.
- The Upanishadic postulation of consciousness as the ultimate reality.
- The Puranic doctrine of the integration of ethics and cosmology in karma and dharma.
- The Bhagavad Gita's exploitation of mythological crisis as an occasion for philosophical insight, The folk mythology's theology of immanence and environmental embeddedness.

Thus, the comparative analysis has also discerned three overarching philosophical themes that make up the signature of Indian mythological philosophy as a whole: the primacy of consciousness over matter, the integration of ethics and cosmology, and the non-dualist orientation. These themes, which are consistent across the five traditions in different guises and with different emphases, make up what might be called the deep grammar of Indian philosophical mythology, the conceptual structure underlying the surface variations that make them recognisable as belonging to the same, ongoing tradition of philosophical debate. The paper has also addressed the question of the relevance of Indian mythological philosophy to contemporary philosophical issues - in the philosophy of consciousness, environmental ethics, political philosophy and the theory of moral agency. These are not instances of artificial relevance in which archaic ideas are dressed up in modernist clothes to suit the fashion. They are philosophical dialogues in the sense that the Indian tradition offers insights, arguments and

tools that are not available in the Western tradition and that help solve problems that have preoccupied the Western tradition. The philosopher Raimon Panikkar, who devoted his life to a dialogue between the Indian and Western philosophical traditions, spoke of "diatopical hermeneutics" - a kind of philosophical understanding that acknowledges the different "topoi" (fundamental attitudes toward reality) of the different philosophical traditions without assimilating them to each other and that seeks, in the course of successive engagements, "the homeomorphic equivalent" - the functional equivalent in one tradition of a concept in another that plays a similar role in the analysis of reality (Panikkar 54-56). Panikkar's approach is the most fitting way to study the comparative philosophy of Indian mythology: it avoids the assimilation of Indian thought to Western models, as well as the claim of the untranslatability of Indian mythology, and seeks the particular types of philosophical understanding that the Indian tradition contributes to the world. The final point of this paper is that Indian mythology is not just a cultural treasure to be protected, a religious tradition to be honoured, a historical phenomenon to be examined. It is a living philosophical tradition, a tradition of thought that has been continually renewing itself for 2500 years, that has thought about the most fundamental questions of human life with remarkable creativity and critical acumen, and that has much to offer us in the present moment that has yet to be explored. To read this tradition philosophically, not simply historically or anthropologically, but as a living partner in the global conversation, is not an expression of cultural softness but of wisdom: the wise recognition that the questions that concern us have been thought about before, in different languages and different symbolic modes, with insights that we would be wise not to ignore.

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