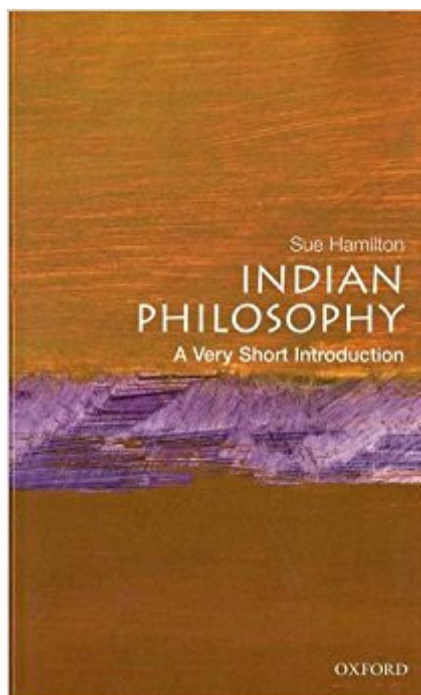


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Indian Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

India has a long, rich, and diverse tradition of philosophical thought, spanning some two and a half millennia and encompassing several major religious traditions. In this intriguing introduction to Indian philosophy, the diversity of Indian thought is emphasized. It is structured around six schools of thought that have received classic status. Sue Hamilton explores how the traditions have attempted to understand the nature of reality in terms of inner or spiritual quest and introduces distinctively Indian concepts, such as karma and rebirth. She also explains how Indian thinkers have understood issues of reality and knowledge--issues that are also an important part of the Western philosophical tradition. About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

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Hamilton opens her book by invoking India's past, which contains "a long, rich, and diverse tradition of philosophical thought," but hastens to remind us that the "role of philosophizing" in India is quite different from that of the West: India's is a philosophy of "personal destiny," "spiritual quest," and not a "professional intellectual pursuit." Hamilton echoes the Orientalists of the early-20th century when she says that "what Westerners call religion and philosophy are combined in India": in other words, philosophy in India falls short of qualifying as an "academic discipline" (p. 1). Hamilton is probably

right in pressing home the popular Western misconception about Indian philosophy that it is nothing but a "mystical," "magical" tradition of the East, where some "poor" Indians masqueraded as philosophers by elucidating their theory of the universe in "stories about an elephant supporting the earth and a tortoise supporting the elephant." Although the renowned modern Indian philosopher B. K. Matilal has tried to remove such misconceptions in one of his pioneering works, the tradition still remains. Matilal was not only responding to the 17th-century philosopher John Locke (who, incidentally, had not read any text on Indian philosophy but had only heard of the philosophy of ancient India) but was also commenting on the prejudices of some 20th-century Western philosophers, in particular one sweeping generalization about "philosophy" by Anthony Flew. Much water has flowed under the bridge since the time when such prejudices were warmly entertained, but the reluctance to pay due attention to rationality in Indian philosophy has not fully waned.

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