# SCRIPTURE, STORY, AND SPIRITUALITY: INTERPRETING HINDU TEXTS THROUGH LITERARY LENSES

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# Abstract:

This study explores the intersection of scripture, narrative, and spirituality in Hindu literary traditions through a hermeneutic literary lens. By examining the Vedas, Itihāsa, and Purāṇas, it argues that Hindu scriptures are not merely doctrinal texts but narrative theologies that use story as a medium of revelation. Through poetic symbolism, metaphor, and mythic imagination, Hindu texts communicate ethical insight and spiritual truth accessible to both scholars and devotees. Using qualitative hermeneutic analysis, the study interprets how narrative structures embody dharma, how myth functions as a vehicle for theological reflection, and how the act of reading itself becomes a form of sādhanā (spiritual practice). The findings reveal that Hindu literature integrates rational exposition with imaginative revelation, transforming scripture into a living dialogue between divinity, language, and human consciousness.

**Key Words**: Hermeneutics, Hindu Scripture, Narrative Theology, Vedas, Itihāsa, Purāṇa, Spirituality

# 1. Introduction

Hindu scriptural tradition unfolds as a continuum of revelation, expressed not through dogmatic assertion but through literary imagination. Across millennia, the sacred word (śabda) manifests in multiple aesthetic and narrative forms—mantra, dialogue, parable, and epic poetry—each serving as a vessel of divine communication. Within this vast corpus, the Vedas articulate metaphysical insight through hymnic praise and ritual invocation; the Itihāsas (Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata) dramatize the ethical complexities of dharma in human life; and the Purāṇas weave mythic cosmologies that translate abstract theology into emotionally resonant narratives.

Together, these genres constitute not a fragmented literature but a symphony of revelation—a living dialogue between divinity and humanity mediated by language. Each text participates in the same sacred impulse: the desire to articulate the ineffable. Thus, Hindu scripture must be read not as static doctrine but as dynamic discourse, where the divine truth unfolds through story, rhythm, and symbol. As the Rgveda proclaims, "The Word has been measured out in four quarters; the wise know the hidden three" (RV 1.164.45). This verse itself suggests that scripture conceals multiple layers of meaning—literal, moral, and mystical—awaiting interpretation through inner vision.

To read Hindu scripture, therefore, is to engage in hermeneutic participation—a process of entering into dialogue with the text as a living entity. The reader is not a detached observer

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but a co-creator of meaning, interpreting symbols that bridge bāhya (outer form) and āntara (inner essence). Each śloka, story, and metaphor functions as a portal between text and transcendence, transforming intellectual comprehension into spiritual realization. Reading becomes sādhanā—a contemplative act that refines perception, much like meditation refines awareness.

The literary dimension of Hindu scripture—its use of allegory, drama, and poetic rhythm—is central to this transformative process. Allegory conveys philosophical insight through narrative embodiment; rhythm and sound evoke emotional resonance (rasa); and metaphor enables the mind to perceive the divine through imaginative participation. As Abhinavagupta (10th c.) observed, the experience of beauty (rasa-anubhava) is analogous to the experience of the Absolute (brahmānanda); through art, the individual transcends ego and unites with universal consciousness. Thus, the poetic power of scripture is not ornamental but ontological—it manifests truth through beauty.

The Vedic hymns express revelation as sound and vibration (śabda-brahman), where utterance itself is sacred. The Itihāsas transform metaphysical ideas into human drama—Arjuna's moral conflict in the Bhagavad Gītā becomes a mirror of every soul's struggle between duty and doubt. The Purāṇas, through their mythic storytelling, democratize theology, making profound truths accessible through emotion, devotion, and wonder. This interweaving of theology and narrative gives Hindu scripture its distinctive vitality: revelation becomes relational, experienced through the heart as much as the intellect.

Therefore, this paper seeks to interpret Hindu scripture through a literary-hermeneutic approach, emphasizing the symbolic and aesthetic dimensions that shape spiritual meaning. By examining representative passages from the Rgveda, Bhagavad Gītā, and Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the study explores how poetic structure, narrative design, and metaphorical depth embody theological and ethical insight. Through this exploration, the paper aims to demonstrate that storytelling in Hindu tradition is not merely didactic but sacramental—a form of sacred pedagogy (adhyātma-śikṣā) that unites revelation (śruti), memory (smṛti), and realization (anubhava).

In doing so, the discussion contributes to a broader understanding of Hindu hermeneutics as aesthetic theology—a mode of knowing in which the interpretation of scripture becomes an act of spiritual participation. By reading the sacred text through the lens of literature, one discovers that the divine is not only worshiped in temples but also spoken, sung, and imagined in the eternal dialogue between word and world.

# 2. Literature Review

## 2.1. Hermeneutics and Hindu Textual Interpretation

The discipline of hermeneutics—commonly understood as the art and theory of interpretation—has long been associated with Western scriptural exegesis, particularly within Christian and philosophical traditions (Gadamer, 1975; Ricoeur, 1976). However, Hindu civilization cultivated its own complex interpretive systems centuries earlier, reflecting a parallel intellectual trajectory. Indian philosophy recognizes two primary modes of interpretation: Mīmāṃsā, which focuses on ritual precision and semantic logic, and Vedānta, which seeks metaphysical insight and spiritual realization. Both approaches

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exemplify the Hindu conviction that language (śabda) is not a mere vehicle of communication but a sacred medium through which ultimate reality (Brahman) reveals itself.

In the Mīmāṃsā tradition, hermeneutics serves to decode the ritual injunctions (vidhi) of the Vedas to ensure correct action (karma). Textual meaning is derived through systematic analysis of syntax, context (ākāṅkṣā, yogyatā, sannidhi), and the hierarchical structure of sentences. By contrast, the Vedāntic mode of exegesis—particularly in Śaṅkarācārya's Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya and Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya—transcends literal ritualism to uncover symbolic and spiritual meaning, interpreting the Vedas as metaphors for self-realization (ātma-jñāna).

This transition from ritual exegesis to spiritual hermeneutics anticipates what modern theorists call the "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer, 1975), where understanding arises from the interplay between the interpreter's consciousness and the text's historical world. In Hinduism, this fusion is not merely cognitive but experiential—the act of interpretation itself becomes a spiritual discipline (adhyātma-śikṣā) that transforms both reader and meaning.

A profound bridge between aesthetics and hermeneutics emerges in Abhinavagupta's Dhvanyāloka (10th century). He proposed that the essence of literary beauty (rasa) is a form of brahmānubhava—a microcosmic experience of divine bliss. The connoisseur (sahṛdaya), by emotionally identifying with the text, momentarily transcends ego and participates in universal consciousness. This notion of rasa as revelation situates Hindu hermeneutics within an aesthetic-theological paradigm, where art becomes the medium of truth. To "taste" a poem's beauty (rasa-āsvāda) is to glimpse the radiance of Brahman within language itself.

Thus, Hindu hermeneutics is inherently participatory and spiritual. The interpreter is not a detached critic but a devotee (bhakta) attuned to the text's inner vibration (nāda). Through attentive recitation, contemplation, and emotional resonance, one accesses deeper layers of meaning that transcend intellectual analysis. In this sense, hermeneutics in Hindu thought aligns with śravaṇa (listening), manana (reflection), and nididhyāsana (meditative realization)—the threefold path to wisdom as outlined in the Upaniṣads.

Consequently, reading Hindu scripture through a literary-hermeneutic lens reveals that sacred texts are not confined to doctrinal interpretation but invite aesthetic, symbolic, and experiential engagement. They are designed to be heard, sung, and felt as much as to be understood—embodying a theology that is both poetic and transformative.

# 2.2. Narrative Theology in Hindu Literature

The narrative dimension of Hindu scripture forms the heart of its theological expression. Unlike doctrinal systems that separate philosophy from story, Hinduism integrates the two seamlessly—myth becomes theology, and storytelling becomes revelation. Modern scholars such as Clooney (2010), Doniger (1998), and Radhakrishnan (1956) observe that Hindu theology unfolds not through dogmatic propositions but through narrative

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embodiment: the divine is revealed in human emotion, moral struggle, and cosmic play (līlā).

The Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa exemplify this narrative theology. The former is described as itihāsa—"thus it happened"—yet it transcends historical chronicle, presenting an ethical universe where every moral decision unfolds within the complexity of dharma. Through the characters of Arjuna, Bhīṣma, and Draupadī, the Mahābhārata dramatizes the tension between individual duty, social order, and spiritual aspiration. Similarly, the Rāmāyaṇa portrays dharma through the emotional landscape of devotion (bhakti), loyalty, and sacrifice, showing that righteousness is not abstract but lived and felt. These epics thus serve as moral laboratories where theological principles are tested within the drama of human life.

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa, meanwhile, reconfigures theology as poetic devotion. Its lyrical accounts of Kṛṣṇa's divine play (līlā) embody metaphysical truths within accessible stories that evoke love (prema) and wonder (adbhuta-rasa). Myth here functions as upāya—a skillful means that translates cosmic reality into human emotion. Doniger (1998) notes that this approach "mythologizes philosophy and philosophizes myth," dissolving the divide between reason and imagination.

This hermeneutic interplay of story and spirituality extends beyond India into Balinese and Southeast Asian adaptations. As Zoetmulder (1974) and Titib (2003) demonstrate, Hindu epics and Purāṇas have been localized through oral performances, dance, and kakawin poetry, illustrating the living transmission of scripture as art. The Balinese recitation of Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa, for instance, is not merely a literary act but a sacred offering (yajña)—a performative theology in which the aesthetic and the devotional converge.

Thus, the narrative tradition in Hinduism is not a peripheral ornament but a core theological method. It unites art, ethics, and devotion into a single spiritual grammar—what could be termed "theopoetics of dharma." Through the interweaving of word, sound, and story, the divine is made perceivable, and theology becomes an act of creation.

In summary, Hindu literature embodies theology in motion: it does not only speak of the divine but performs it through story, song, and emotion. This realization positions narrative hermeneutics as a vital approach for understanding Hindu texts—not simply as mythological literature but as living scriptures that continue to sing the truth of Brahman in the language of humanity.

#### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative hermeneutic design grounded in the methods of literary interpretation and theological analysis. The hermeneutic approach is chosen because Hindu scripture itself demands interpretive participation—its truths are layered in symbolism, metaphor, and myth rather than direct exposition. Therefore, the goal of this



study is not to explain doctrine, but to interpret experience: to reveal how language, story, and poetry become vessels of divine revelation.

In this framework, texts are read as symbolic expressions of divine truth, where narrative structure operates as a theological framework. Each verse or story is treated as a unit of meaning (śabda) that reflects both human consciousness and cosmic order (rta). The research situates literary analysis within a hermeneutic-theological model, recognizing that the sacred word (śabda-brahman) functions simultaneously as art, philosophy, and ritual.

The interpretive stance draws on Ricoeur's (1976) concept of the hermeneutic arc—the movement from naïve understanding to critical interpretation and finally to renewed understanding through reflection. Similarly, Hindu hermeneutics assumes a cyclical process of śravaṇa (listening), manana (reflection), and nididhyāsana (contemplation). By engaging both traditions, this research positions literary hermeneutics as a spiritual method of reading, where interpretation becomes a contemplative act that fuses intellect and devotion (jñāna—bhakti—samanvaya).

Thus, the design of this study emphasizes interpretive depth, contextual sensitivity, and symbolic discernment, aiming to illuminate the theological meanings embedded in the aesthetic fabric of Hindu literature.

#### 3.2. Data Sources

The study employs both primary and secondary sources, integrating classical scripture with philosophical commentary and modern scholarship to ensure interpretive triangulation.

Primary sources include:

- The Rgveda, representing the earliest stratum of Hindu revelation, where sacred hymns articulate cosmic truth through metaphor, rhythm, and invocation.
- The Bhagavad Gītā, embedded within the Mahābhārata, representing the ethical and dialogical dimensions of dharma as lived philosophy.
- The Bhāgavata Purāṇa, representing mythopoetic theology (līlā-vāda), where divine play becomes a means of realizing the unity of love and knowledge.

Each of these texts is studied in Sanskrit and English translation, allowing comparative semantic analysis and cross-referential interpretation. The verses selected are representative of different literary and theological genres—hymnic, dialogical, and narrative—thereby enabling a multi-dimensional understanding of Hindu revelation.

Secondary sources include classical commentaries such as:

- Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya by Śaṅkarācārya, which provides metaphysical insight into the unity of ātman and Brahman;
- Dhvanyāloka by Abhinavagupta, which elucidates the relation between rasa (aesthetic emotion) and brahma-anubhava (spiritual experience);



 and modern hermeneutic and theological studies by Radhakrishnan (1956), Ricoeur (1976), and Clooney (2010), which provide theoretical frameworks for comparative interpretation.

Additionally, contextual commentaries from Balinese and Southeast Asian scholars (Titib, 2003; Zoetmulder, 1974) are included to demonstrate how these texts continue to live through performance and local interpretation, thereby enriching the scope of the study's cultural hermeneutics.

Together, these sources enable a holistic reading that bridges ancient textual authority and contemporary interpretive insight, grounding analysis in both theological authenticity and literary sophistication.

# 3.3. Data Analysis

The process of analysis follows Ricoeur's hermeneutic circle—a continuous movement between part and whole, text and context, experience and interpretation. This cyclical engagement allows meaning to emerge gradually through layered reflection rather than fixed conclusion.

The analytical stages are organized into three interrelated phases adapted from Miles and Huberman's (1994) qualitative model:

# 1. Interpretive Reading

The first phase involves close reading of selected verses to identify recurring poetic, narrative, and symbolic patterns. This includes attention to imagery (fire, light, sound), literary devices (metaphor, repetition, paradox), and rhythmic cadence. Each element is treated as a potential theological signifier, revealing how the aesthetic structure conveys metaphysical content.

# 2. Contextual Correlation

The second phase situates the textual findings within broader theological and ritual frameworks. For instance, hymns of the Rgveda are correlated with Vedic cosmology and sacrificial ritual (yajña); the dialogues of the Bhagavad Gītā are contextualized within ethical and existential dimensions of karma-yoga; and the myths of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa are analyzed through their devotional and performative enactments in bhakti traditions. This step ensures that interpretation remains faithful to both literary integrity and spiritual purpose.

## 3. Reflexive Synthesis

The final phase synthesizes insights from textual and contextual analysis to articulate how aesthetic experience leads to spiritual realization. Here, the researcher reflects on the convergence of beauty, emotion, and theology—demonstrating that rasa and dharma are not separate domains but mutually illuminating. This stage also involves hermeneutic reflexivity, where the interpreter acknowledges their own cultural and spiritual standpoint within the interpretive process, echoing the Hindu principle of desa–kāla–patra (place, time, and circumstance).

Throughout these phases, interpretive validity is maintained through triangulation of perspectives—comparing classical commentaries, modern analyses, and lived devotional

practices. The goal is not to impose external theory but to let the text speak in its own voice, allowing the literary form itself to disclose theological meaning.

By uniting systematic method with contemplative awareness, this study exemplifies how hermeneutic reading functions as a spiritual discipline—an act of listening, reflection, and realization that honors both the aesthetic and sacred essence of Hindu scripture.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

# 4.1. The Vedas: Poetic Revelation and Sacred Language

The Rgveda, as the earliest known expression of Hindu revelation, demonstrates that scripture itself is a literary act of divine communication. Far from being a collection of dogmatic statements, it represents a symphony of sound, rhythm, and imagery that encodes metaphysical insight in poetic form. The rsi (seer-poet) is not merely a composer but a mediator of revelation, one who perceives truth in the vibration of cosmic sound (sabda brahman). Through disciplined intuition (tapas), the rsi "hears" what transcends the senses and translates it into human language.

The Rgvedic hymns employ metaphor, rhythm, and sound as vehicles of transcendence. The language of fire (Agni), dawn (Uṣas), and sacrifice (Yajña) does not describe external phenomena but encodes inner realities—the awakening of consciousness, the light of knowledge, and the offering of ego into divine order (rta). Each hymn becomes a microcosmic ritual, transforming cosmology into lyric theology, where meaning arises not from argument but from resonance.

From a hermeneutic perspective, Rgvedic poetry invites interpretive listening rather than analytical reading. Its truths are experiential, accessible through recitation, rhythm, and contemplative repetition. The poetic act itself becomes a form of yajña, where words are oblations and understanding is illumination. This literary theology suggests that revelation in Hinduism is auditory and participatory—the divine is not merely to be known but to be heard and felt. In this sense, Vedic hymns anticipate a theory of sacred poetics: art as the vibration of divine consciousness articulated through human voice.

# 4.2. The Itihāsa: Narrative Ethics and Human Dharma

The Bhagavad Gītā, embedded within the epic Mahābhārata, stands as the quintessential example of narrative hermeneutics—a dialogical scripture that merges ethical reflection, emotional tension, and metaphysical insight. Its setting—the battlefield of Kurukṣetra—symbolizes the field of moral struggle (kṣetra), where the soul (puruṣa) must discern right action amid conflict. Within this dramatic framework, the conversation between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna functions as both theological discourse and existential revelation.

The Gītā's poetic structure mirrors its spiritual message. Its rhythmic couplets (śloka) create a meditative cadence, enabling the reader to move between intellectual comprehension and contemplative absorption. The alternation between question and answer, doubt and resolution, represents the hermeneutic circle in narrative form—each turn deepening understanding through self-reflection. Arjuna's paralysis before war reflects humanity's universal dilemma: the tension between svadharma (personal duty) and saṃnyāsa (renunciation), between worldly action and spiritual liberation.

Through Kṛṣṇa's teaching, the battlefield is transfigured into a field of consciousness, where ethical decision becomes a means of self-realization. The Gītā transforms moral reasoning into mystical vision (yoga), uniting the philosophical with the poetic. Its beauty lies not merely in its doctrine of karma-yoga but in its aesthetic paradox—it turns violence into awareness, conflict into communion.

Literary analysis reveals that metaphor and rhythm in the Gītā are integral to its theology. Kṛṣṇa's repeated injunctions—"Do your duty without attachment"—resonate as mantras, reshaping the reader's consciousness through sound and repetition. The narrative thus becomes a mirror of the soul's inner dialogue, illustrating that spiritual wisdom emerges through the poetics of ethical struggle.

In hermeneutic terms, the Gītā embodies what Ricoeur (1976) describes as "symbol giving rise to thought." Its story invites the interpreter not to extract abstract meaning but to participate in the unfolding of truth. As such, it stands as a bridge between philosophical exegesis and narrative art, demonstrating that Hindu scripture communicates through beauty as much as through reason.

# 4.3. The Purāṇas: Myth as Theological Imagination

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa represents the culmination of Hindu literary theology, where myth becomes the language of transcendence. Unlike philosophical texts that argue through logic, the Purāṇas reveal through story—through the luminous play (līlā) of the divine manifest in the world. The tales of Kṛṣṇa's childhood, cosmic dance, and miraculous deeds are not mere entertainments; they are mythopoetic meditations that transform theology into emotion, and emotion into devotion.

In the Bhāgavata, theology is expressed through imaginative participation. The divine does not speak from beyond the world but through it—appearing as child, lover, and teacher. Myth here serves as upāya (a skillful means) that translates metaphysical truth into human terms. The aesthetic of līlā reveals the paradox of divine play: God acts, yet remains detached; the world moves, yet is eternally still. Through storytelling, the Purāṇa awakens spiritual insight by engaging empathy, wonder, and love.

From a hermeneutic standpoint, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa invites what might be called affective exegesis—an interpretation through emotion and devotion (bhakti). The believer becomes both reader and participant, enacting śraddhā (faith) as interpretive openness. As Ricoeur (1976) suggests, "narrative enlarges the horizon of understanding"; in this context, it sanctifies imagination as a mode of knowing. Myth is not illusion but revelation clothed in story—truth rendered audible to the heart.

The Purāṇic imagination thus affirms that theology and aesthetics are one: to narrate the divine is to participate in divine creativity. Each act of recitation (kathā-śravaṇa) becomes a liturgy of remembrance (smaraṇa), where word and worship merge. In ritual performances and oral traditions across India and Bali, the Purāṇic tales continue to live, embodying revelation through sound, gesture, and devotion.

# **Synthesis: A Threefold Theology of Literature**

The Vedas, Itihāsa, and Purāṇas together illustrate a threefold theology of sacred literature:

- The Vedas speak through sound—their revelation is sonic and vibrational, perceived through listening (śravaṇa).
- The Itihāsa teaches through dialogue—its revelation is ethical and reflective, realized through moral participation.
- The Purāṇas reveal through imagination—their revelation is emotional and symbolic, experienced through love and wonder.

These three modes correspond to the triad of śruti, smṛti, and kathā, forming a holistic system of spiritual communication that unites intellect, emotion, and devotion. In each case, revelation becomes art, and art becomes revelation. The sacred word (śabda) does not merely describe truth; it enacts it through rhythm, image, and story.

Through this hermeneutic synthesis, Hindu scripture emerges as a literary theology of transformation—a living continuum where sound, meaning, and devotion converge. The act of reading thus becomes an act of worship, and interpretation becomes sādhanā (spiritual practice). As the Vedas proclaim, "The Word itself is Brahman" (Taittirīya Upaniṣad, II.8); to engage with sacred language, therefore, is to encounter divinity itself.

#### 5. Conclusion

The findings of this study affirm that Hindu scripture constitutes a unified continuum of revelation, in which scripture (śruti), story (smṛti), and spirituality (adhyātma) are inseparable dimensions of sacred expression. Each textual tradition reveals a distinct yet interconnected mode of divine communication. The Vedas articulate metaphysical truth through sound and poetic rhythm, allowing the reader to experience reality as vibration (nāda-brahman). The Itihāsas transform abstract philosophy into narrative ethics, dramatizing dharma within the moral struggles of human life. The Purāṇas elevate myth to theological imagination, sanctifying emotion and creativity as valid paths toward divine understanding.

Viewed through the lens of literary hermeneutics, these sacred texts cease to appear as static repositories of doctrine; they emerge as living dialogues between the word and the world, between the finite and the infinite, between the human and the divine. The act of reading becomes a ritual of participation—a form of yajña performed through interpretation. Each encounter with the sacred word is not a passive decoding of meaning but a dynamic act of communion in which understanding is simultaneously intellectual, emotional, and spiritual.

This study thus reaffirms that Hindu hermeneutics is inherently aesthetic and participatory. To read is to worship; to interpret is to participate. The hermeneutic act (vyākhyāna) itself becomes a sacred performance where beauty (sundaram), truth (satyam), and goodness (śivam) converge. In this synthesis, the narrative imagination functions as a sacred bridge—linking reason with revelation, logic with devotion, and art with theology. Through poetic form, rhythm, and allegory, Hindu texts lead readers to internalize virtue, evoke compassion, and awaken spiritual consciousness.

Ultimately, Hindu scripture embodies a theology of beauty—a spiritual epistemology in which the aesthetic and the divine are one. The word (śabda) is not a human invention but the echo of Brahman, the eternal source of sound and meaning. Every story, hymn, and metaphor becomes a mirror of that ultimate reality. When interpreted with awareness and devotion, literature transforms into revelation, and revelation into lived experience. In this light, the beauty of scripture is the beauty of truth itself—a timeless expression of the divine unfolding through language, art, and consciousness.

#### 5.1. Author Contributions

The author conceived the research design, selected the primary and secondary textual sources, and conducted the comprehensive hermeneutic and literary analysis. The author synthesized classical Hindu commentarial traditions with contemporary theories of interpretation to develop a coherent framework for understanding Hindu scripture as a literary-theological dialogue. The manuscript represents the author's original reflection on the unity of art, ethics, and spirituality in Hindu textual traditions.

#### 5.2. Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest related to the conception, execution, or publication of this study. All interpretations, analyses, and conclusions were produced independently, guided solely by academic integrity, respect for the Hindu intellectual tradition, and commitment to objective scholarship.

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# 5.4. Funding

This research was conducted without external funding, relying solely on the author's academic initiative and institutional resources. The independence of this project ensured full interpretive freedom and methodological authenticity, reflecting the spirit of satya (truthfulness) and ahimsā (intellectual non-violence) that underlies Hindu epistemology. The absence of sponsorship or external influence allowed the study to remain faithful to its central purpose—to interpret Hindu texts as living expressions of divine beauty and moral wisdom.

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