

Reimagining Spiritual Horizons: Critical Reflections on Reinventing *Sanatana Dharma*

Haritha Pavithran^{†*} and B. Sivakami[‡]

Abstract

This commentary critically examines Mukundan P.R.'s significant work, *Reinventing Sanatana Dharma: The Spiritual Movement of Navajyoti Sree Karunakara Guru for a New India and a New World Order*, New Delhi, India, Authors Press, 2024, Pages: 212, Rs. 500, Paperback, ISBN: 97-93-5529-976-5. The book astutely reinterprets the Indian philosophical concept of *Sanatana Dharma* through the teachings of Navajyoti Sree Karunakara Guru, a spiritual visionary born in Kerala, India. The book challenges the traditional perceptions of Hindu philosophy, presenting *Sanatana Dharma* as a universal, non-discriminatory spiritual science. It explores key distinctions between *Sanatana Dharma* and mainstream Hinduism, addressing themes such as the spiritual evolution of consciousness, the significance of a true guru, and the reinterpretation of certain key Upanishadic concepts. While the book's non-linear structure challenges narrative flow, its interdisciplinary approach—bridging Indian scriptures and contemporary scientific insights—offers a fresh perspective on spirituality. This review, therefore, highlights the book's contribution to spiritual discourse and its potential to inspire a re-examination of Indian philosophy. In addition, the commentary also hints at what the author names a 'syncretic monotheism', which integrates the most profound principles of various religions into the overarching framework of *Sanatana Dharma*, contributing to sustainable development, making it an engaging resource for scholars, seekers, and readers interested in the intersection of religion and spirituality.

Keywords: *Sanatana Dharma*; Spirituality; Guru; *Upanishads*; Sustainability

[†] Research Scholar, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai Campus

^{*}Corresponding Author Email: haritha.pavithran2022@vitstudent.ac.in

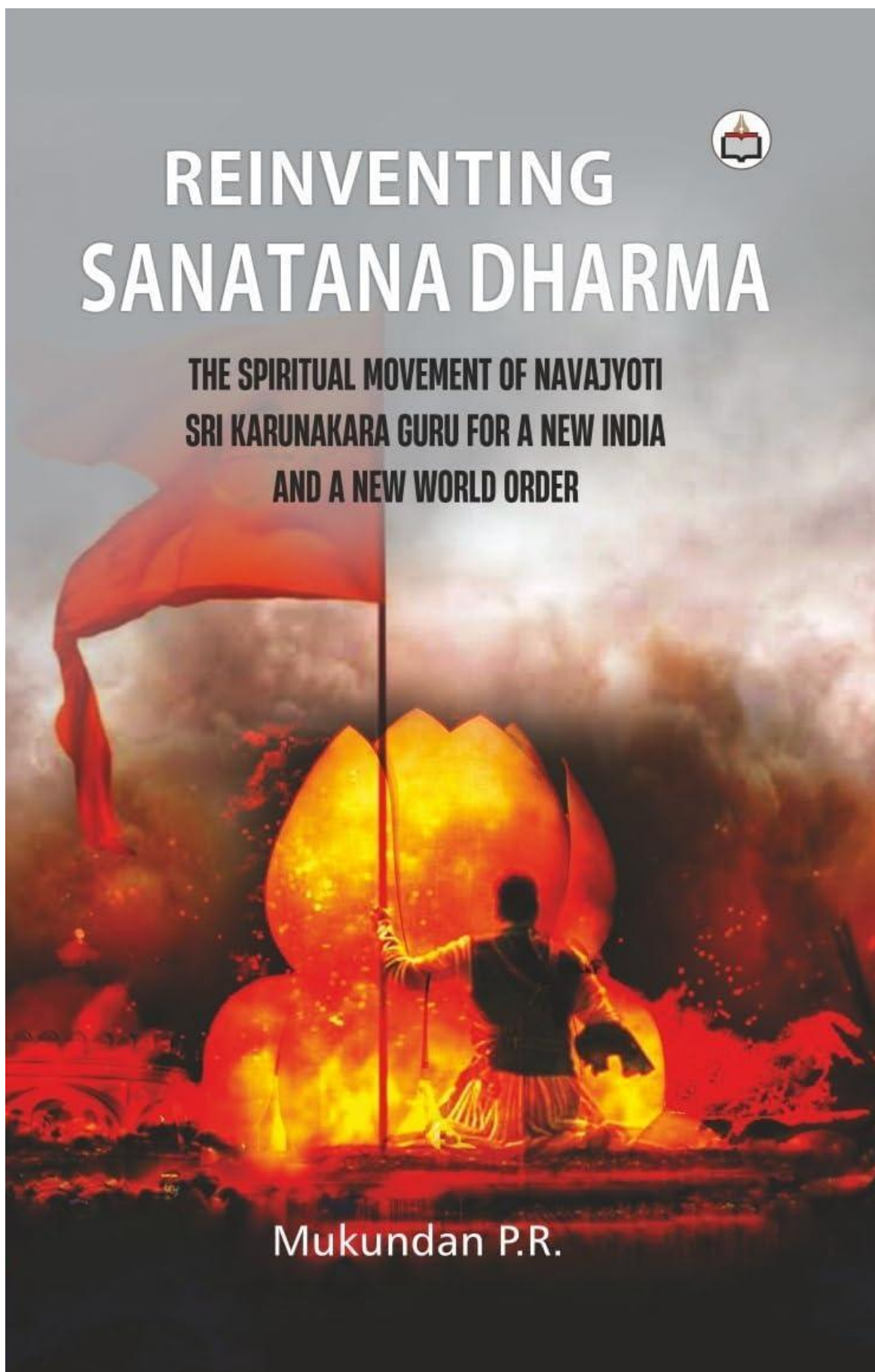
[‡]Assistant Professor (Sr.) - Grade I, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai Campus. Email: sivakami.b@vit.ac.in

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REINVENTING SANATANA DHARMA



**THE SPIRITUAL MOVEMENT OF NAVAJYOTI
SRI KARUNAKARA GURU FOR A NEW INDIA
AND A NEW WORLD ORDER**



Mukundan P.R.

Introduction

Sanatana Dharma has recently garnered significant attention in India, emerging as the focal point for various political and contentious debates—from its association with the consecration of Lord Ram's idol in Ayodhya to the inciting remarks of political leaders. In this context, Mukundan P.R. offers an enlightening perspective of *Sanatana Dharma*, which serves as a counter-narrative to the puranic or traditional perception of the same in his latest work. He does this seemingly contrarian exercise by interpreting the various dimensions of this philosophical thought through the teachings of Navajyoti Sree Karunakara Guru, the late spiritual luminary and founder of Santhigiri Ashram in India. What the author underscores is its non-discriminatory and non-Brahminical essence.

The book's thesis stands out thus: "Sanatana Dharma is the science of spiritual evolution that India has gifted to the world" (P.R., 2024, p.37). What can be loosely translated as the "Eternal Order", *Sanatana Dharma*, is the fundamental cornerstone of the Indian philosophical system and spirituality. It transcends any religious boundaries and encompasses the idea that the cosmos is governed by eternal laws, highlighting how each yuga, or epoch, in the cycle of time—*Satya*, *Treta*, *Dvapara*, and *Kali*¹—prescribes unique ethical standards and cosmic order for humanity to uphold. For this, *Kalanthara* or intertemporal gurus take birth in each yuga to

guide the world and unite humanity. One can think of Lord Krishna, Jesus Christ, or Prophet Nabi as those great souls. According to the book, 2444 gurus have come into the world since the onset of *Kali Yuga*. As per the divine revelations in the book, Navajyoti Sree Karunakara Guru is a continuation of this sacred lineage.² The profound vision of *Sanatana Dharma*, however, is thoroughly distorted today. Here arises the need for its re-examination to understand its importance in Indian and global spirituality. The author provides us with some of the stepping stones for this reanalysis.

The book, *Reinventing Sanatana Dharma: The Spiritual Movement of Navajyoti Sree Karunakara Guru for a New India and a New World Order*, explores its theme in 21 major chapters along with appendices that include the gist of Navajyoti Sree Karunakara Guru's female successor, *Shishyapoojitha*, and the testimonies of the followers. Mukundan P.R.'s eye for detail and scholarship on Indian scriptures and Guru's vision prove instrumental in the current work. A prime example of this would be the discussion on Manu presented in the first chapter, *Manu, the Architect of the Solar System*. The chapter demands scrutiny of the difference between the Manu of the *Manusmriti* (the so-called law book of human conduct in Hinduism) that the puranic Hinduism highlights and the Manu as the first cosmic man or creator of humanity, as mentioned in the *Upanishads*.³ The section highlights the potential for significant

¹ According to the Hindu cosmology, time is infinite but cyclic. Each cycle or *Chaturyuga* comprises of four age-quartets which are *Satya* (17,28,000 years), *Treta* (12,98,2000 years), *Dvapara* (8,64,000 years), and *Kali* (4,32,000 years) and in total lasts for 4,320,000,000 years. 71 such *Chaturyugas* make 1 *Manvantara*. *Satya Yuga* is regarded as the golden age where ideal humanity thrived, and dharma reigned through austerity, cleanliness, compassion and truth. The dharma gradually weakens in the subsequent yugas, and the length of each yuga shortens in the ratio 4:3:2:1 starting from *Satya Yuga*. The *Treta Yuga* is considered the age when the avatars of Lord Vishnu lived. Epics like *Ramayana* is believed to have been written in this era. Lord Krishna and *Mahabharata* characterise *Dwapara Yuga*. *Kali Yuga*, the age we are currently in, is regarded as a spiritually dark age. However, according to the book reviewed, there lies an apt chance in this age for the evolution of

life and consciousness in the presence of a true guru. For a detailed description, please refer to pages 46 & 64 of the book.

² P.R. mentions in the work (pp.24-27) that the birth of the Guru has been prophesied in multiple sources, such as *The Gospel of Buddha* (2015), compiled by Paul Carus, *The Prophecies in Century 1* (2019) (stanzas 50, 53, 71, 73, 76) by Nostradamus, and in *The Promised Mahdi*, Vols. 51-53 (2012) corresponds to the 13th volume of the famous Arabic work, Bihar—ul—Anwar, by Mohammed Baqir al-Majlisi, among others.

³ *Upanishads* are a collection of philosophical texts that constitute the core of Indian spiritual thought composed between 700 and 400 B.C.E. They explore ideas such as *Brahman* (the ultimate reality), *Atman* (the self), *Moksha* (liberation), and the nature of existence. Since they form the concluding part of *Vedas*, they are often referred to as *Vedanta* ('ending of Veda'). However, while

misinterpretations that may have occurred within the realm of Indian spirituality. As per the teachings of the Guru, the earliest reason for this corruption is attributed to the rishi Satyatrana of the 3rd Chaturyuga of the 7th and current Manvantara, who, in deep spiritual ecstasy, considered himself as the Brahman and thus uttered “*Aham Brahmasmi*”.⁴ This error in perceiving the symbiosis of the Brahman and the Atman (which is also resonant in expressions like “*Tat Twam Asi*” (“thou art that”) or “*Ayam Atma Brahma*” (“This self (atman) is Brahma”) (P.R.,2024, p.99)) is the beginning of the great fall of humanity and the distortion and interpolations of many Hindu scriptures. The chapter thus sets the tone for reading the rest of the book, effectively justifying its title. The author consistently and eloquently draws on passages from the *Rig Veda*,⁵ *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, *Chandogya Upanishad*, *Vishnu Purana*, and *Bhagavata Purana*,⁶ along with the insights from Guru’s teachings to emphasise multiple distinctions in the book. In Chapter 4, entitled *Puranic Hinduism and Sanatana Dharma*, he further expands on the

differentiation between the core tenets of *Sanatana Dharma* and the *Trimurti* tradition (the triad of *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Maheshwara*) of Hinduism. Here, P.R. draws parallels between the object of worship, creator god, institution, mediator, and presence of the caste system.⁷ *Sanatana Dharma* is monotheistic, with Brahman as the object of worship and Manu as the creator. Its institution is the Ashram, where an omniscient Guru serves as the mediator, and there are no divisions based on the caste system. In contrast, mainstream Hinduism worships the *Trimurtis*, with Brahma as the creator, and temples as the institutional centres, where priests or tantris act as mediators. This system is accompanied by a caste hierarchy (P.R., 2024, p.66).

Analysis

The book also delves into the graphical representation of the universe’s origin (pp.59-61) and aims to piece together a logical and interdisciplinary explanation of life from the *Upanishads* and Quantum Physics. It is widely recognised that the *Upanishads* had an unmistakable influence on quantum physicists

Upanishads refer to the original texts, *Vedanta* refers to the philosophical tradition that interprets and systematises the ideas in the *Upanishads*. The ten principal Upanishads are: *Isha*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Prashna*, *Munda*, *Mandukya*, *Taittiriya*, *Aitareya*, *Chandogya* and *Brihadaranyaka*. The discussion on Manu, or the first cosmic man, appears in the Upanishad, known as ‘the great forest of knowledge’ of knowledge’. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* “touches upon the internal meaning of almost every phase of human life” (Krishnananda, 2008, p.8) and is from *Yajurveda*. The *Chandogya Upanishad* is embedded in *Samaveda* and deals with meditation and *Brahmavidya* or the knowledge of the ultimate reality.

⁴ This saying from *Bhridaranyaka Upanishad* (verse 1.4.10) translates as “I am Brahman” or “I am the ultimate reality”. While it forms one of the foundational teachings of the *Advaita Vedanta*, it is precisely this notion that is reinterpreted in Mukundan P.R.’s book. He reiterates how we (the living and the non-living) are a part of *Brahman* and not the *Brahman* itself (which further re-emphasises the symbiotic nature of *dvaita* (duality) as opposed to *advaita* or the absence of duality).

⁵ *Vedas* are considered to be the earliest scriptures in Hinduism that predominantly contains hymns and rituals for appeasing Hindu deities. The four *Vedas* are *Rig*, *Yajur*, *Sama* and *Adharva*.

Rig Veda contains hymns that praise *Agni* (the god of

fire), *Indra* (associated with war and rain), *Varuna* (guardian of cosmic order), and others, while delving into themes such as creation, nature, and cosmic principles.

⁶ *Vishnupurana* and *Bhagavata Purana* are two of the 18 *Mahapuranas* that detail Hindu mythology and religious philosophy. They are regarded as a less authoritative body of Hindu texts since they fall under the category of *smriti* or ‘that which is remembered’ (in contrast to *sruti* or ‘that which is heard’). *Vishnupurana* focuses on the worship of Lord Vishnu and stories of his incarnations while also discussing on *dharma* (righteous living). *Bhagavata Purana* on the other hand elaborates on Lord Krishna’s life, emphasising on the role of *bhakti* (devotion) in spiritual liberation.

⁷ According to Anderson & Parker (1965), “caste is the extreme form of closed class systems and social class organisation in which the position of the individuals in the status hierarchy is determined by descent and birth” (p.370). Caste system in India is said to have its origins in the *Varna* system of *Vedic* Hindu society (which categorises society into *Brahmins* (priests and scholars), *Kshatriyas* (warriors and rulers), *Vaishyas* (merchants and farmers), and *Shudras* (labourers and service providers), rooted in birth, occupation and social status. Endogamous marriages and strict restrictions on mobility between castes are some of the key features of the caste system in India.

such as Schrödinger. P.R. compares the observer-observed system of Quantum science (wave-particle duality) and the *Drashta* (seer) and *Drishya* (the seen) concepts of the *Upanishads*. Ancient sayings like “*Manomatram Jagata, Manah Kalpitam Jagata*” (the world is as the mind sees and feels it, the world is as the mind thinks of it) essentially mean that the mind creates the universe. This interplay between observation (awareness) and manifestation (physicality) resonates with the concept that observation affects quantum systems and is often linked to cosmological ideas about the origins of the Universe, such as the Big Bang (P.R., 2024, p. 88).

In addition, the book mentions the 10 stages in the spiritual evolution of human consciousness, which can be considered a form of radiance, on the path of realisation of God, as per the teachings of Navajyoti Sree Karunakara Guru. These stages are *Marthya Loka* (the primary stage of man where the world is perceptible through the sense organs), *Pitru Mandala* (the secondary stage of ancestral souls), *Trimurti Mandala* (the stage of *Devi* and *Devas*), *Indra Loka* (Heavenly stage), *Moola Ganapathi, Parashakthi Mandala, Rishi Mandala* (the stage of a transcendental sage above heaven), *Ishwara Mandala* (the abode of supramental souls), *Brahm-Mandala* (the Cosmic mind - the plane of *Adi Sankalpa* or ideation), *Parabrahm Mandala* (the ultimate seat of non-dual brahman, the absolute truth) (P.R., 2024, p.50 & p.63). In connection to this, Chapter 10, titled *God does not Sit in Heaven*, presents intriguing perspectives about the realm of God as “one of pure blissful radiance beyond heaven and hell, untouched by jealousy, hatred, punishment and so on” (P.R., 2024, p.140). A notable highlight of the book is its emphasis on a guru's pivotal role in guiding humanity, reiterating that the concept of God is realised through the guru. Chapters such as *Guru, the Only Means to Attain God*, *The Signs of a Poorna Guru*, and *A Dialogue between Shiva and Parvati* also highlight *Sri Guru Gita*, a collection of verses from the *Skanda Purana*, which is not widely recognised in mainstream Hindu worship. Continuing this exploration of the guru, much like in his previous works, *The*

Modi-God Dialogues (2022) and *The Riddle of Manu* (2012), the author sheds light on the spiritual journey and vision of Navajyoti Sree Karunakara Guru. Guru's spiritual tradition embodies what can be termed as practical spirituality, focused on holistic well-being through *Aathurasevanam* (helping the ailing), *Annadanam* (feeding the hungry), and *Athmabodanam* (spiritual realisation). In this tradition, the material and the spiritual realms are seen as two sides of the same coin. Additionally, according to the Guru, for a sustainable life, “an education system that blends spiritual knowledge and material sciences should evolve” (P.R., 2024, p. 198), and here, India can lead the way for the rest of the world. A potential shortcoming of the text is its lack of narrative flow, as the presentation of ideas is structured in a non-linear manner. While this approach enables readers to engage with any chapter independently, it also detracts them from a sense of progression. A more integrated or thematic arrangement, where each chapter flows seamlessly into the next, could have enhanced the overall readability of the work. For instance, Chapter 8, *The Future of Indian Spirituality* could have been presented at the end. Similarly, Chapter 5, *The Fundamentals of Guru Margam*, could follow the chapters that discuss the indispensability of a Guru (Chapters 12 and 13).

Conclusion

Nevertheless, the book represents a critical development in Mukundan P.R.'s body of work, which explores a renewed take on spirituality from an Indian philosophical perspective. As Professor Velassery notes in his appreciation of the work, “Reading this book will unquestionably bring feelings of curiosity and offer a piercing challenge to human intelligence” (P.R., 2024, p.7). The book is a compelling read for scholars of the field and anyone intrigued by the contradictory nature of worship in Hinduism or who ponders the difference between religion and spirituality. In conclusion, Mukundan P.R. presents *Sanatana Dharma* as “the process by which every living being acquires the qualities of truth, dharma, kindness, mercy, etc. through the

experience of multiple births, and gradually attains union with God by transcending different *Jnana Bhumikas* (stages of higher consciousness)" (P.R., 2024, p.142). Therefore, it is not associated with any specific deity, aligning with the essential spiritual core found in many religions.

The ambitious work is a timely and thought-provoking exploration of Indian spirituality. The author attempts to build a theoretical framework of *Sanatana Dharma* by the exegesis of Vedic scriptures and Guru's reinterpretation of concepts such as *Manvantara*, *Parabrahmam* and the importance of *Kali Yuga*. By reinventing *Sanatana Dharma*, the book also discusses the need to re-examine the Hindu religious and spiritual system's rudimentary beliefs that justify sectarian views and caste laws, thereby advocating for a paradigm shift. The work is also a valuable contribution to the erudite spiritual discourses. It delves beyond Indian philosophy to help the readers reflect on the role of spirituality in shaping a harmonious and sustainable future, making it an engaging read for academics, seekers, and anyone yearning for a deeper connection with the eternal truths of existence.

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Ethical Approval and Conflict of Interest

Not applicable to this manuscript as it is a book review. The authors of the manuscript declare no conflict of financial or non-financial interests.

Declaration

The authors declare that the manuscript is not under consideration for publication in any other journal nor is it published elsewhere.

Author Contribution Statement

HP: Responsible for choosing and critically reviewing the book.

BS: Responsible for suggestions and editing.

Informed Consent

Not applicable for this manuscript as it is a book review.

Funding

No funding has been acquired from any organisation for this work.

Data Availability Statement

The book reviewed is available for the public on all leading online stores.

Acknowledgements

The authors sincerely thank the reviewers and editors for their insightful comments, constructive feedback and support throughout the publication process.