

# RĀMĀNUJA'S COMMENTARY ON METAPHYSICS OF THE BHAGAVADGĪTĀ: A CRITICAL STUDY (PART-I)

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*Abstract: The Bhagavadgītā is one of the great Indian scriptures. There is a long tradition of composing commentaries on the Bhagavadgītā. Rāmānuja's Gītā Bhāṣya is one of the notable commentaries in India. Rāmānuja, like other classical commentators, interprets the words of Bhagavadgītā only in the context of the verses. However, he changes the meaning of the words in different verses without giving a reason. It is doubtful whether he is faithful to his interpretation; how far is Rāmānuja able to grasp the text's original meaning and interpret it adhering to it? Is Rāmānuja interpreting the verses of metaphysics of the Bhagavadgītā according to the original meaning of the text? No attempt has yet been made to critically evaluate Rāmānuja's interpretation of the Bhagavadgītā regarding the 'Metaphysics' by comparing it with the text of the Bhagavadgītā. Therefore, the objective of the paper is to examine Rāmānuja's commentaries on the essential verses of the Bhagavadgītā related to 'Metaphysics' in order to find out the weaknesses and strengths of his interpretation. Therefore, in this paper, a textual and hermeneutical method is applied based on the study of the text of Bhagavadgītā and Rāmānuja's Gītā Bhāṣya. Both the texts in the original and available secondary literature have been consulted.*

## Introduction

The *Bhagavadgītā* is one of the great Indian scriptures. There is a long tradition of composing commentaries on the *Bhagavadgītā*. The *Anugītā* has been considered as the first gloss known to us on the *Bhagavadgītā*. Arvind Sharma writes, "...if *Anugītā* is what it claims to be – the re-presentation of the *Bhagavadgītā* – then it can be looked upon as the first comment, if not commentary, on the *Bhagavadgītā* within the Hindu Tradition" (Sharma, 1978, 262). Prof Binod Kumar Agarwala writes,

*The Anugītā is part of the Asvamedhikaparva of the Mahābhārata. In the Asvamedhikaparva, thirty-six chapters from 16-51 are recognized as the Anugītā. The Anugītā, together with the rest of the chapters from the Asvamedhikaparva, is also known as the Anugītāparva. The Anugītā is an expanded representation of some of the themes of the Bhagavadgītā and hence can be considered as one of the earliest known glosses on it (Agarwala, 2016, 407).*

Rāmānuja is undeniably a great scholar, philosopher, and exponent of *Viśiṣṭādvaita* philosophy. Being a successor of his predecessor Yāmunaçhārya<sup>1</sup>, Rāmānuja has done

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<sup>1</sup> Yāmunaçhārya, the grandson of Nāthamunī (who is known as the founder of Rāmānuja's school of thought), is said to have laid the foundation for all doctrines that are now ascribed to Rāmānuja. Yāmuna is also known for his concise work on *Bhagavadgītā*, the *Gītārthasamgraha* which is

several works most importantly *Vedārthasamgraha*<sup>2</sup>, *Vedāntasāra*<sup>3</sup>, *Śrī Bhāṣya*<sup>4</sup>, *Gītā Bhāṣya*. His *GītāBhāṣya* is one of the notable commentaries in India. He has commented on a vulgate recension of *Bhagavadgītā*. According to Tripurāri, “Among the devotional commentaries of the *Gītā*, Rāmānuja’s is the first and thus most influential” (Tripurāri 2010, xxiii). It seems that his *Gītā Bhāṣya* is free from polemics, yet it appears to be controversial because of its occasional departure from the text of the *Bhagavadgītā* and change of the meaning of words. According to J.A.B Van Buitenan Rāmānuja’s *GītāBhāṣya* is a religious rather than philosophical position, and “Rāmānuja shows himself a priest rather than a critical and polemic thinker” (Buitenan, 1968, 28). Because in his *GītāBhāṣya* Rāmānuja has employed the theory of the law of karma in almost all the verses; but *Bhagavadgītā* is not so as he claims to be so. He also says that many scholars are of the view that Rāmānuja has borrowed ideas for his interpretation of *Bhagavadgītā* from his preceptor Yāmunachārya’s *Gītārthasamgraha* (9-12).

### I. Review of Literature

Madan Prasad, in his work *Ethical Philosophy of the Gītā- A Comparative and Critical Study of the Interpretation of Tilak and Rāmānuja* explains the synthetic character of the metaphysics of *Viśiṣṭādvaita* as a system of philosophy, religion, and ethics in the light of the Rāmānuja’s interpretation of the *Gītā* and also tried to find out the difference of standpoints between Śaṅkara’s Advaita and *Viśiṣṭādvaita* of Rāmānuja.

Raghavachar, S. S, in his work *Ramanuja on the Gītā*, examines the interpretations of *Gītā* by Rāmānuja. In his view, the fundamental theme of *Gītā*, according to Rāmānuja, is the doctrine of Bhakti, which leads to the attainment of the Highest Reality. He divided eighteen discourses into three groups of six chapters, which alternatively identified as devotion to self-realization, the issues out of the realization, and the intellectual classification of the Prakṛti, Puruṣa, Brahman, and three metaphysical entities.

Cyril Veliath, S. J states on *Ramanuja’s Concept of the Individual Soul and Human Freedom*, the relationship of *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa*. *Prakṛti* is the causal agent of the body and sense organs, and *Puruṣa*, the self, is the cause of the experience of pleasure and pain and other experiences. Regarding the relation between self and body, the author argued that the self is the “great lord” because it rules over it and supports and controls it. In some particular passages of *ŚrīBhāṣya* (S. B- 2.3-38, 39, 40) of Rāmānuja, the author argued that Rāmānuja states the self alone is the agent and responsible for *Karman* and result. However, in *Gītā Bhāṣya* (G. B- 5.14), Rāmānuja makes the statement that the self is not in its essential nature subject to *Karman* and does not initiate agency and is not responsible for the result. Nevertheless, in 13.20 of *Gītā Bhāṣya*, it has been mentioned in *Gītā Bhāṣya*, 11-32 also. Therefore, it is obvious to any reader that there exists a tension between the agency of *Brahman* and that of the individual soul. Rāmānuja has not provided a satisfactory answer to the question of who is the real agent of actions and

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compiled with thirty-two verses only. His *Gītārthasamgrah* is known for bhakti interpretation, and Rāmānuja following Yāmunā’s *Gītārthasamgrah* interprets *Bhagavadgītā* in light of Bhakti.

<sup>2</sup> This is one of the major works of Rāmānuja based on the commentary on Upaniṣads. See S.S. Raghavachar, (1978) *Vedartha Sangraha of Sri Ramanujacarya*, (trans.) India. Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama.

<sup>3</sup> *Vedāntasāra* is another important work of Rāmānuja which is based on the essence of the Vedas.

<sup>4</sup> *ŚrīBhāṣya* is the commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*.

whether the human person is really and truly free. He appears to be caught between his desire to preserve the Brahman's purity and the human person's responsibility for his acts.

Eleni Boliaki in *Jnana, Bhakti and Karma Yoga. Sankara and Ramanuja on the Bhagavad Gita* argue that Rāmānuja employs a theistic interpretation of the *Ġitā* in reconciliation with monism. According to Rāmānuja, the *Ġitā* affirms the bhakti doctrine of the Upanishads. He suggests a combination of *jñāna*, karma, and bhakti, practiced at the same time because the path of knowledge, devotion, and action all are mentioned in the *Ġitā*. Nevertheless, he emphasizes Bhakti yoga, i.e., devotion, as the sole means of liberation or salvation. Rāmānuja *Ġitā* seeks to reconcile monism and theism to stress the importance of rituals and the importance of emotional religion. The author tries to make a differentiation between Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja's view on liberation.

S. M Srinivasa Chari, in *The Philosophy of the Bhagavad Ġitā - A Study Based on the Evaluation of the Commentaries of Sankara, Ramanuja, and Madhava*, makes an analytic and comparative study of the commentaries of these three commentators and assesses whether or not these are reflected and conform to the original text of the *Ġitā*?

However, none of the aforesaid reviews of literature can make a critical evaluation of Rāmānuja's *Ġitā Bhāṣya* regarding Metaphysics by comparing the *Ġitā Bhāṣya* and the verses of the *BhagavadĠitā* as a text. Therefore, there is a gap in the study of Rāmānuja's *Ġitā Bhāṣya* to evaluate whether Rāmānuja is interpreting the text of the *BhagavadĠitā* faithfully, taking into account the entire *BhagavadĠitā*.

Rāmānuja, like other classical commentators, interprets the words of *BhagavadĠitā* only in the context of the verses. However, he changes the meaning of the words in different verses without giving a reason. It is doubtful whether he is faithful to his interpretation; how far is Rāmānuja able to grasp the text's original meaning and interpret it adhering to the text? Is Rāmānuja interpreting the verses of chapter II of the *BhagavadĠitā* according to the original meaning of the text? No attempt has yet been made to critically evaluate Rāmānuja's interpretation of the *BhagavadĠitā* regarding the "Metaphysics" by comparing it with the text of the *BhagavadĠitā*. Therefore, the objective of the paper is to examine Rāmānuja's commentaries on the important verses of the *BhagavadĠitā* related to 'Metaphysics' in order to find out the weaknesses and strengths of his interpretation. Therefore, in this paper, a textual and hermeneutical method is applied based on the study of the text of *BhagavadĠitā* and Rāmānuja's *ĠitāBhāṣya*. Both the texts in the original and available secondary literature have been consulted.

## II. A Critical Assessment on Rāmānuja's Commentary on Metaphysics of the *BhagavadĠitā*

The metaphysics of the *BhagavadĠitā* starts from Chapter II (*hereafter* Ch.) and gets elaborated in Ch.VII, XIII, XIV and XV. The metaphysics concerns the real nature of the body and the soul, the Supreme Brahman, the kṣetra and kṣetrañña, three guṇas of prakṛti, etc., and also *kṣara* and *akṣara*.

Rāmānuja, in his *Ġitā Bhāṣya*, claims to find the Viśiṣṭādvaitic nature of Absolute Reality, individual self, and matter in *BhagavadĠitā*. These three are not separated from each other but are organically interconnected. Rāmānuja regards God as the Absolute Reality possessed of two integral parts, matter and finite spirits. For him, God and Brahman are identical. According to Chatterjee and Datta, "Brahman is the only reality in

the universe in the sense that out and independent of God there is no other reality. But God contains within Himself the material objects and the finite souls which are real” (Chatterjee and Datta, 417). The *jīvas* and the material nature, i.e., Prakṛti, constitute the body of God. For Rāmānuja Brahman is “*nirgūṇa*” not in the sense of being devoid of any attributes but in the sense of being free from undesirable attributes (Vyasa, 1977, 116). The author also says that *jīvas* and the material world are distinct from it and eternal (116). This paper also attempts to investigate whether or not this kind of *Viśiṣṭādvaitic* metaphysics is present in the *Bhagavadgītā*.

The teaching of metaphysics as the immortality of the soul appears in the Ch. II<sup>5</sup> of the *Bhagavadgītā* starting from verses 11 to 29. When Arjuna is perplexed and loses his natural courage due to love and the certain death of the relatives seen on the battlefield, Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Being, introduces the teaching of the nature of the self and the body. Arjuna considers the war unrighteous, even though he knows it is the warrior’s most significant duty. Arjuna takes refuge in *Kṛṣṇa* to learn the correct course of action. Then, *Kṛṣṇa* understands that Arjuna’s delusion would only be overcome by knowing the fundamental nature of the self.

Rāmānuja accepts the multiplicity of individual selves in his *Viśiṣṭādvaita* philosophy and says that individual selves are many in numbers. Anima Sen Gupta writes that according to Rāmānuja, there are three classes of souls. The first class consists of eternal souls beyond any bondage who are always in service to God; the second is liberated souls who were once in bondage but obtained liberation through their knowledge, action, and devotion. The third class of souls is “bound souls,” still steeped in ignorance and round the cycle of birth and death (Gupta, 2008, 110). Rāmānuja applies his idea of the multiplicity of selves in his *Gītā Bhāṣya* while interpreting Ch.II of the *Bhagavadgītā* to make it consistent with his philosophy rather than interpreting it adhering to the text. Rāmānuja’s in his *Gītā Bhāṣya* comments from Verses 4–29 of the Ch. II of the *Bhagavadgītā* deviating from the original meaning of the text. When *Kṛṣṇa* teaches Arjuna the character of the self in Ch.II.12,<sup>6</sup> Rāmānuja takes this verse to interpret his idea of the multiplicity of the selves in his *Gītā Bhāṣya*. Commenting on this verse, Rāmānuja says: “The foregoing teaching implies that the difference between the Lord, the sovereign overall and the individual selves, as also the differences among the individual selves themselves, are real. The Lord Himself has declared this. For, different terms like “I,” “you,” “these,” “all,” and “we” have been used by the Lord while explaining the truth of eternity in order to remove the misunderstanding of Arjuna, who is deluded by ignorance” (Rāmānuja, 2014, 63). Rāmānuja’s defense of this kind of reading of Ch.II.12 is by way of refutation of alternative readings like the Upādhi theory of Bhāskara, the Vedāntin, and the Ignorance theory of Advaitins like Śaṅkara, which deny any ultimate difference between the Lord and the *Jīvas* (63). The author, not interested in the comparative study of various interpretations, will not examine Rāmānuja’s refutation of these theories. The prime question is whether Rāmānuja is faithful to the words in the text of the *Bhagavadgītā* itself. Rāmānuja takes the use of words like “you,” “I,” “these,” “all,” and “we,” etc. in Ch.II.12 to mean the multiplicity of the selves. However, it appears that Ch.II.12, contrary to appearance, does not accept the multiplicity

<sup>5</sup> Roman numerals represent no. of chapters.

<sup>6</sup> *na te vāhaṃ jātu nāsam na tvam neme janādhīpāḥ/ na caiva na bhaviṣyamah sarva vāyamataḥ param//*

of the souls. Instead, there is one soul identical to the Supreme Reality. The plural used in Ch.II.12 concerns the distinction of bodies. On the point of whether there is one self or many individual selves and whether the plural concerns a multiplicity of individual selves or multiplicity of distinct bodies, the text of the Bhagavadgītā seems to be in favor of one self-view rather than that of Rāmānuja's view of multiple individual selves. In the text of the *Bhagavadgītā* nowhere, the soul is mentioned in the plural in Ch. It is always mentioned in the singular, e.g., Ch.II.13; 17- 26; 29-30, while the plural is used for bodies, e.g., Ch.II.18; 22;30.

The reader needs to pay close attention to how *Kṛṣṇa* is speaking in Ch.II.12<sup>7</sup>. The first thing to be noticed is that the negative particle *na* is repeated six times in the verse: four times in the first line and twice in the second line. This repetition is to draw attention to the speech itself. Secondly, all the three grammatical *puruṣas* – *ahaṃ*: *Uttam-puruṣa* (*puruṣottama*) [1st person in English], *tvam*: *madhyam puruṣa* [2nd person in English], and *ime janādhipāḥ*: *Pratham puruṣa* [3rd person in English] occur in the very first line of the verse. This is drawing attention to the metaphysics of grammatical *puruṣas*. Thirdly, the first line indicates the “I-Thou structure,” i.e., dialogical structure, and the topic between the “I and Thou” is a collectivity, “these rulers of people,” and the second line absorbs the “I and Thou” into the collectivity to make it a “We.” This indicates that the concern is not with the individual speaker or hearer but the collectivity to which one belongs, harboring that collectivity as speaker and hearer in oneself. Fourthly, instead of saying positively that “I,” “thou,” and “these rulers” were there all the time, *Kṛṣṇa* says negatively that it is not the case that “I,” “thou,” and “these rulers” were not there ever. Similarly, instead of saying we all shall be there from this time onwards, *Kṛṣṇa* says it is not the case that we all shall not be there. *Kṛṣṇa*, in his negative formulation, is ruling out the *abhāva* of the collectivity at any time, past, present, and future, as the collectivity is “eternal.” *Kṛṣṇa* will draw this conclusion in Ch.II.16. Fifthly, *Kṛṣṇa* speaks in a manner where the reference to past and future is explicit. However, the present is also covered implicitly in the very speaking dialogue that is going on in the present time between “I and Thou” with respect to presently perceived “these rulers of people” severally and collectively. And lastly, the preponderance of *sarvanāma* (pronoun in English) - *ahaṃ* (I), *tvam* (Thou), *ime* (These), and *vayam* (We) is noticeable in the verse. All the *sarvanāma* are names of the same *sarva*, “a collectivity of all,” which has been as *puruṣa* in each member of the collectivity (*sarva*). The word serves “all” indicates *samaṣṭi* “the collectivity” of all, which remains the invariable concomitant of every *sarvanāma* applied to the speaker, hearer, or the one spoken about. That a *samaṣṭipurūṣa* “collective person” is involved will become clear in the next verse, i.e., Ch.II.13.

*Kṛṣṇa* in Ch.II.12 does not begin any argument for the immortality of the soul, as it is interpreted traditionally, but uses the metaphysics of Sanskrit grammar to clarify the true nature of the speaker and hearer and by extrapolation the perceiver and doer (*kartr̥*) in each of us. If one does not take care of the speaker's true nature, hearer, perceiver, and doer in himself, he will err in performing the corresponding function. How any action is performed by the *samaṣṭipurūṣa* “collective person,” who is present as self in each, comes out in the next verse, i.e., Ch.II.13, spoken by *Kṛṣṇa* where an explanation of the involvement of the collective *puruṣa* as self in action is given.

<sup>7</sup> *na taivāhaṃ jātu nāsaṃ na tvam neme janādhipāḥ/ na caiva na bhaviṣyāmaḥ sarve vayamataḥ param//*

The *Bhagavadgītā* explicitly clarifies that there is only one soul in all the bodies in Ch. XIII. 1-2 <sup>8</sup>: “This, the body, O son of *Kuntī*, is holistically thought of as *Kṣetra*; him who feelingly knowingly resolves it, they, who feelingly knowingly resolve of them, call *Kṣetrajña* (knowledgeable resolver of *Kṣetra*). Furthermore, you [Arjuna] also penetratively know Me as *Kṣetrajña* in all *Kṣetras*, O Bhārata. The knowledgeable resolve of *Kṣetra* and *Kṣetrajña* is deemed by Me [*Kṛṣṇa*] as the knowledgeable resolve.” Ramanuja had considerable difficulty in interpreting the Ch. XIII. 2 as it indicated one soul in all bodies. He had to write one of the most extended explanations to make this verse consistent with the multiplicity of souls, and he deviated from the text without interpreting the verse as such.

Since Rāmānuja accepts not only the multiplicity of the selves but also the eternity of the multiplicity of selves, he, in Ch.II.13, has given a meaning accordingly to the analogy of the passing of the soul from one body to another with the change of the states of the body to explain the relationship between the individual self and the body. The verse says *dehino 'smin yathā dehe kaumāraṁ yauvanam jarā/tathā dehāntara – prāpīr dhīras tatra na muhyati*// Rāmānuja [giving the analogy of the body and the self or soul] explaining it says, that because of the conviction that the soul is eternal one does not grieve that the soul is lost when an embodied soul gives up the stages like childhood and attains youth and old age. Similarly, the wise man, knowing the soul to be eternal, does not grieve when there is the attainment of another body for the soul, giving up the existing body (Rāmānuja, 2002, 26). As the multiple eternal souls are subject to beginningless karma, they become endowed with bodies suitable to their karmas.

Rāmānuja's interpretation of Ch.II.13 does not fully understand the analogy's import. The soul experiences transition from one body to another just as it experiences in body transition from one state of the body to another – from childhood to youth and from youth to old age. Firstly, the transition from one state of the body to the next is continuous and not discrete, as there is no demarcating line to separate one state of the body from the next. Secondly, the body is inseparable from its state, as it is always in one or the other. None of the multiple souls, as conceived by Rāmānuja, satisfies the two points. The soul's transition from one body to another is discrete, not continuous, as bodies are demarcated. The soul can be disembodied, unlike the body, which cannot be without one condition or another. It appears that Ch.II.13 explains the relation of the collective body of the collective person (*samaṣṭipurūṣa*) as the transition of the collective person from one collective body to another is continuous without a demarcating line as some people are born. Some die in it, and the collective person is always with one or the other collective body.

Rāmānuja accepts the theory of the law of karma from the beginning without any argument. It is eternal for him. The soul acquires the body according to its past karma due to the operation of the beginningless law of karma. Since Rāmānuja accepts the law of *karma*, and *ātman*s, depending on their past karmas, get into bondage with a suitable body, he believes that the *ātman*s perform acts that are prescribed by the *śāstras*, not for the sake of results but to be released from their bondage to these bodies. So, the *ātman*s inevitably come into contact with objects through the senses of the bodies, and

<sup>8</sup> *idaṁ śarīraṁ kaunteya kṣetram ity abhidhīyate/ etad yo vetti taṁ prāhuḥ kṣetrajña iti tadvidah// kṣetrajñaṁ cāpi māṁ viddhi sarvakṣetreṣu bhārata/ kṣetrakṣetrajñayor jñānaṁ yat taj jñānaṁ mataṁ mama*//

these contacts cause sensations of pain and pleasure. These contacts with objects should be suffered until the acts have been performed. If one is persistent, one will be able to endure them, for they are transient by nature, i.e., the transitory and the transitoriness will cease to exist as such as soon as the evil which has caused the *ātman*'s bondage has been annihilated. Therefore, one should persist in performing acts and consider the pain, which invariably accompanies the performance of acts, as pleasure. If one performs acts not for the sake of their results but because they are means of attaining immortality, then one will attain immortality. One is capable of doing so precisely because the *ātman*s are immortal. However, the *Bhagavadgītā* in Ch.II.13-15 does not say anything about the concept of the law of karma. The *Bhagavadgītā* denies the law of karma in Ch.V.14<sup>9</sup> : "Neither agency nor does people's action the Prabhū sends forth, nor union with the fruits of actions. But it is own being that operates."

Rāmānujāchārya writes commenting on Ch.V.14: *Asya devatiryāṇmanuṣyasthāvarātmanā prakṛtisaṃsargeṇa vartamānasya lokasya devādyasādhāraṇaṃkartṛtvaṃ tattadaśādhāraṇāni karmāṇi tattatkarmajanyadevādīphalasaṃyogaṃ ca, ayaṃ prabhūḥ akarmavaśyaḥ svābhāvikaśvarūpeṇa avasthita ātmā na sṛjati notpādayati/ kaḥ tarhi? svābhāvas tu pravartate/ svābhāvaprakṛtīvāsanā/anādikālapravṛttapūrvapūrvakarmajanitadevādyākāraprakṛtisaṃsargakṛt atattadātmābhīmājanitavāsanākṛtam īdṛśaṃ kartṛtvādikam sarvam; na svarūpaprayuktam ityarthah//*

"The master," in its own essential nature, is not subject to Karma and therefore does not create (a) the agency that is characteristic of the body of the deities in this world consisting of animals, men, and other unmoving beings, in association with *prakṛti* or (b) their various and particular activities and (c) the results of those actions (Karma) which bring about its embodiment as a sentient being. What then creates (agency and its results)? It is the *svābhāva* alone that acts. *Svābhāva* is comprised of subliminal activators (*vāsanā*) originating from engagement with *Prakṛti*" (Rāmānuja 2014, 198-199). What is meant is that functioning from the beginningless time [or time immemorial] transformed into the form of bodies of deities, etc., arising from previous karmas, is the self-conceit [ego] generated in those bodies in association with *prakṛti*, from it arises subtle subliminal activators and from these subtle subliminal activators arise the being of agency, etc. these are not there in the self in its own form. Rāmānuja's interpretation appears to be erroneous as the non-agent nature of the self or *puruṣa* does not prevent him from the creation of fourfold *varṇa*; it also cannot prevent his creation of the agency, karmas, and the union of fruits with action for people. So, the reason for *Prabhū* not creating these things must be something else. The context makes it clear that it is meant as a denial of *karmvāda*, i.e., the doctrine of *Karma* altogether rather than its mere denial for the *prabhū* only.

It also appears that Rāmānuja failed to grasp the full import of the Ch.II.22 in the *Bhagavadgītā*. *Kṛṣṇa* says: *vāsāṃsi jīrṇāni yathā vihāya navāni gṛhṇāti nara'parāṇi/ tathā śarīrāṇi vihāya jīrṇāny anyāni saṃyāti navāni dehī//* "As a man casts off worn-out clothes and takes on new ones, even so, the embodied [Self] discards worn-out bodies and enters into new ones." Rāmānuja, commenting on this Ch.II.22, writes:

*dharmayuddhe śarīraṃ tyajatāṃ tyaktaśarīrād adhikatarakalyāṇaśarīragrahaṇaṃ  
śāstrād avagamyata iti jīrṇāni vāsāṃsi vihāya navāni kalyāṇāni vāsāṃsi gṛhṇatām iva  
harṣanimittam evātropalabhyate //*

<sup>9</sup> *na kartṛtvaṃ na karmāṇi lokasya sṛjati prabhūḥ / na karmaphalasaṃyogaṃ svābhāvas tu pravartate //*

"That those who give up their bodies in a righteous war get more beautiful bodies than before, is known through the scriptures. Casting off worn-out garments and taking new and beautiful ones, can be only a cause of joy, as seen here in the case of new garments" (76). It appears that Rāmānuja reads *Bhagavadgītā* Ch.II.22, just like *Bhagavadgītā* Ch.II.13, as concerned with the *jīvātman* and its body. However, his reading is erroneous as it is dictated not by the logic of the verse but by his prior commitment to the cycle of birth and death of *jīva* in *saṃsāra* governed by the law of *karma*. Nevertheless, his kind of reading of the verse is erroneous because he has not considered the semantic syntax of *Bhagavadgītā* Ch.II.22, which determines the meaning of the analogy given in it. The expression '*naro*' and *dehī* are in the singular, but the expressions *vāsāmsi jīrṇāni, navāni ...' parāni, śarīrāni ...jīrṇāny, anyāni... navāni* are in plural indicating that man has many old garments which he discards. He acquires many new garments; similarly, a single design has many old bodies that he discards, and it acquires many new ones. This feature of having many bodies at a time, like the man having many garments simultaneously, is satisfied by the collective self or collective person but not by any *jīvātman*. Rāmānuja, committing to the cycle of birth and death of *jīva* under the control of the law of *karma*, assumes that the multiplicity of bodies of *dehin* is due to sequentially discarded or acquired bodies but one at a time. Then, he accounts for the multiplicity of garments of a man in the same way. However, this is not a natural reading as it is reading backward as if the issue under discussion is the garments of man, which is to be understood in analogy to bodies of *jīvātman* (=man), which are sequentially acquired and discarded one at a time in the cycle of birth and death under the law of *karma*. Nevertheless, that is not the issue at all. The issue is that of discarding and acquiring (not acquiring and discarding) many bodies by a single *dehin*, which has to be understood analogously to discarding and acquiring many garments by man. Then, natural reading shows that the *dehin* is the "collective self" or "collective person." It discards many old bodies as many human beings die in the collective body of the collective person. It acquires many new bodies by the birth of many human beings in the collective body of the collective person. So, Rāmānuja is not faithful to the nuances of the terms in the verses and the semantic syntax of the verses due to his prior doctrinal commitments, which prevent him from seeing the meaning present in the verse's semantic syntax.

Rāmānuja finds arguments for the immortality of the individual soul in *Bhagavadgītā* Ch.II.17 based on its pervasiveness. The self, for Rāmānuja, is subtle, i.e., "*sukṣm*" because of its pervasiveness. It pervades everything. As it is subtle, nothing can destroy it. It cannot be divided into parts like other gross elements. It is like consciousness, which cannot be divided into parts. Since it is *sukṣhma*, there is no question of separation of parts or its destruction. There cannot be anything more subtle than self. Commenting on Ch.II.17 <sup>10</sup> of the *Bhagavadgītā* Rāmānuja writes that the self is impenetrable. The meaning is that nothing can penetrate the self.

In the *Bhagavadgītā* in Ch.II.18, Kṛṣṇa teaches Arjuna the destructibility of the body, which is a certain character of its own. The verse says: *antavanta ime dehā nityasyuktāḥ śarīriṇaḥ/anāśiṇaḥ aprameyasya tasmāt yudhyasva bhārata//* In the verse, the *saṃskṛt* words like "*antavanta*" means "have an end" "*imedehā*" means "all these bodies," "*nityasyuktāḥ*" means "*nitya* or eternal," "*śarīriṇaḥ*" means "embodied self." The

<sup>10</sup> *avināsi tu tadviddhi yena sarvamidam tatam/ vināsam avyayasya asya na kaśchit kartum arhati//*



meaning is that all these bodies, i.e., all the bodies, have an end; they will have an end sometimes. Rāmānuja reasons that the word “*deha*” indicates that the body can be increased. Things that can increase or decrease are finite. Thus, bodies are finite. “Those bodies which are conglomerated elements, enable their innate *ātman*s to undergo their previous *Karman*” (2014, 72). Therefore, if that *Karman* is consumed, then the bodies will perish. However, the embodied self is eternal or *nitya*, which does not have an end. *Ātman* is eternal because it is not the object but the subject of knowledge as it is *aprameya*. Therefore, the *ātman*, which is forming a unity by itself, cannot be understood to exist in a plurality of forms or be liable to increase and decrease, hence imperishable.

Rāmānuja appears to be speaking of the different individual selves in each body. However, the verse uses “*śarīriṇaḥ*” in the singular, unlike “*imedehā*” which is in the plural. Since he has already accepted the concept of many selves as “you,” “me,” “he,” etc., Rāmānuja does not comment on the use of singular “*śarīriṇaḥ*” and plural “*imedehā*.” It appears that Rāmānuja has not grasped the full import of the verse, which seems to speak of the same self in all the bodies. Later, in Ch.VI.29, *Bhagavadgītā* states: “The Self abiding in all existents, and all existents (abiding) in the Self, sees he whose self has been harnessed by Yoga, who sees the same everywhere.” It indicates that there is oneself in all the existents and, hence, in all the bodies. Rāmānuja interprets this verse as speaking of not the same self but the similarity of all individual selves, making them have a single nature, i.e., the nature of knowledge. In his view, when separated from the body, all selves are alike because of their being forms of centers of intelligence, and the perceived difference is only due to the body. This reading of Rāmānuja is problematic. His reading makes selves separated from the body indistinguishable, making his position that of the *advaitins*. As mentioned, it appears from the beginning that K Ṛṣṇa is speaking of the collective self, which is in all bodies, and all existents are incorporated in this single corporate self. Again, commenting on the verse, he writes, “The bodies of the embodied self are made up of a combination of elements of matter for experiencing the effects of karma” (Rāmānuja, 2002, 26). The bodies, i.e., *dehā*, are made up of elements, which is correct because *deha* has its growth, decay, etc. Since “*dih* means to grow, so bodies are marked by growth” (Agarwala, 2017, 172). They have an end and have the characteristics of perishability. However, the idea that “the bodies which are made up for experiencing the effects of karma” is problematic, and Rāmānuja has no textual evidence for this interpretation. For, Rāmānuja has just presupposed the idea of *karmavāda* in his interpretation; he is not reading the *Bhagavadgītā* on its terms rather he attempts to reconcile the verses of the *Bhagavadgītā* with his presupposed *karmavāda*. Nevertheless, the idea of *karmavāda* is not present in Ch.II.17.

*Bhagavadgītā* Ch.II.16 states an important metaphysical principle in general terms: *nāsato vidyate bhāvo nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ/ ubhayor api dr̥ṣṭo ntas tv anayos tattvadarśibhiḥ//* Rāmānujācārya turns the general principle into a specific principle in his commentary. He writes: “‘The unreal,’ that is, the body can never come into being. ‘The real’ that is the self can never cease to be. The finale about these, the body and the self, which can be experienced, has been realized correctly by the seers of the Truth. Analysis

ends in conclusion; the term ‘finale’ is used here”<sup>11</sup> (Rāmānuja, 2014, 70). Rāmānujāchārya, it appears, has failed to bring out the pairs of distinctions *sat-asat* and *bhāva-abhāva* correctly in his explanation. In his commentary on *Bhagavadgītā* Ch.II.16, he further writes: “*asattvam* is due to perishable own being and *sattvam* is due to imperishable own being.”<sup>12</sup> So, in his view, both *asat* has *bhava* and *sat* has *bhāva*. However, it is clearly against the metaphysical principle that *asat* has no *bhāva*. When confronted with the claim of Kṛṣṇa in *Bhagavadgītā* Ch. IX.19: “I am *sat* and *asa*”<sup>13</sup> Rāmānujāchārya changes the meaning of *sat* and *asat*. In his Bhāṣya, he writes, “*Sat* is that which is in the present time. *Asat* is that which was in the past and that which (maybe in the future, but) has not come into the present time.”<sup>14</sup> This new explanation of *sat* and *asat* differs from how it was explained before in *Ṛgveda*. “*sat* and *asat* always remain related together as claimed in *Ṛgveda* 10.129.4” (Agarwala, 2021, 38). Rāmānujāchārya further shifts the meaning of *sat* and *asat* while explaining the claim in *Bhagavadgītā* Ch.XIII.V.12 regarding *Brahman*: “not said to be ‘*sat*’ or ‘*asat*’.”<sup>15</sup> He writes: “The terms *sat*, and *asat* cannot express the essential nature of the self because the self [in its essential nature] is free from both the states of effect and cause.” The explanation of the two terms he gives here: *kāryāvasthāyām hi devādināmarūpabhāktvena sad iti ucyate, tadanarhatayā kāraṇāvasthāyām asat iti ucyate/ tathā ca śrutiḥ ---“asadvā idamagra āsīt / tato vai sadjāyata/”* (Tai. U. 2.7.1), “*taddhedam tarhyavyākṛtamāsīt tannāmarūpābhyāmeva vyākriyate*” (Br. U. 1.4.7) *ityādikā//* “However, it is said to be *sat* when it is distinguished in the forms of gods, humans, and animals, etc. Then, it is unfit for those (names and forms) in the condition of cause, which is said to be *asat*. So, also is *śruti* ---‘In the beginning was verily this *asat*. From that was generated the *sat* (Tait. Up. 2.7.1); ‘this was then undifferentiated. It differentiated only into name and form’ (Br. Up.1.4.7)” (Rāmānuja, 2014, 440). Rāmānuja gives the reason now why *Brahman* cannot be said to be *sat* and *asat*: *kāyakāraṇāvasthādvayānvayaḥ tu ātmanah karmarūpāvidyāveṣṭanākṛtaḥ, na svarūpataḥ, iti sadasacchabdābhyām ātmarūpaṃ na ucyate//* “The appearance of the self in the states of cause and effect occurs due to the covering by ignorance in the form of action, not because of its own form. So then, the terms *sat* and *asat* do not describe the true nature of the self.” So, in the hands of Rāmānuja, the terms *sat* and *asat* receive different meanings on different occasions of use in the *Bhagavadgītā*.

The Ch.II.27 also states a principle of metaphysics of the *Bhagavadgītā*: *jātasyai dhruvam mṛtyur dhruvan janma mṛtasya ca/ tasmāt apriharya artha na tvam śochitum arhasi//* Rāmānuja understands the metaphysical principle stated in Ch.II.27 as follows: *utpannasya vināśo dhruvaḥ avarjanīya upalabhyate / tathā vinaśṭasya api janma avarjanīyam //* “Death of that which is born is certain – inevitably seen. In the same way birth of death is inevitable” (Rāmānuja, 2014, 79). Rāmānuja answers the question:

<sup>11</sup> *asataḥ dehasya sadbhāvo na vidyate / sataś cātmano nāsadbhāvaḥ / ubhayoḥ dehātmanor upalabhyamānayoḥ yathopalabdhi tattvadarśibhir anto dṛṣṭaḥ nirṇayāntatvān nirūpaṇasya nirṇaya iha antaśabdenocyate/*

<sup>12</sup> *vināśasvabhāve hi asattvam, avināśasvabhāvaśca sattvam /*

<sup>13</sup> *sad asac cāham*

<sup>14</sup> *sad yad vartate, asad yad atītam anāgataṃ ca...*

<sup>15</sup> *na sat nāsad ucyate*

*katham idam upalabhyate vinaṣṭasya utpattiḥ iti*// “How is this [inevitable] birth of dead established?” (Agarwala, 2020, 23) He answers:

*utpattivināśādayaḥ sato dravyasya avasthāviśeṣaḥ...utpattyākhyām avasthām  
upayātasya dravyasya tadvirodhyavasthāntaraprāptiḥ vināśa iti  
ucyate...parināmidravyasya parināmaparamparā avarjanīyā/ tatra pūrvāvasthasya  
dravyasya uttarāvasthāprāptiḥ vināśaḥ; sā eva tadavasthasya utpattiḥ//*

“Birth and death are the particular states of *sat dravya* (real substance) ...when a substance having a state called ‘birth’ obtains another opposite state then it is called ‘death’ ... every changing substance’s succession of change is inevitable. There a substance-in-a-prior-state obtaining the subsequent-state is its [the substance-in-the-prior-state’s] death, and that [obtaining the subsequent second state] is its [the-substance-in-the-second-state’s] birth” (23). So, every real substance is caught in this indefinite series of birth and death. Rāmānuja understands Ch.II.27 as advocating the cycle of birth and death of individual souls.

However, it appears that Rāmānuja is erroneously taking the self as a substance, albeit real. He is saying something that contradicts *Bhagavadgītā* Ch.II.20, and also Kāṭha Upaniṣad Ch. I. Sec.II.18 (23). In Ch.II.27, the words “jātasyai dhruvaṁ mṛtyur” means somebody who is born will die. Moreover, similarly, *dhruvan janma mṛtasya ca* means somebody who has died will also be born again. It is how Rāmānuja has interpreted. However, that does not appear to be the meaning of Ch.II.27. It says, “jātasyai dhruvaṁ mṛtyu,” which means something that has birth also has death. Similarly, “*dhruvan janma mṛtasya ca*” means the thing which has death also had a birth, but it does not mean that there is a death and it will be born again as Rāmānuja has maintained. What it is ruling out is that there can be a thing that has birth but no death or has death but no birth. Birth and death are indissolubly connected together according to the metaphysics of the *Bhagavadgītā*. Hence, as per the principle, there are only two types of things: things that have birth and death and things that are birthless and deathless. There is no possibility of things with birth but no death or with death but no birth.

According to the *Bhagavadgītā*, there is one death and one birth in human life. If one takes birth, he will experience death also in time. If something has ended, it must have had a birth or beginning. So, the beginning and the end are interrelated. If there is a beginning, then there is an end; if there is an end, there must have been a birth or beginning. There cannot be such thing that which was unborn but dies. The unborn cannot die, and that which is born cannot be eternal. Nevertheless, readers understand it in the reverse way. It is also not understood by ancient thinkers. Both these principles have been termed upside down by all the classical thinkers. They have understood it as the cycle of birth and death (i.e., if somebody was born, they will die, and if somebody has died, they will be born again). However, this is not the actual meaning. The idea here is that if something has ended, it has a beginning; if something has a beginning, it will have an end. Two realities have no beginning and no end, called “*sat*.” However, that which has a beginning and end is temporary, i.e., “*asat*.” They cover the same principles. Because manifestation requires both *sat* and *asat* together; otherwise, manifestation will not be possible. Moreover, that which has neither *sat* nor *asat* is called unmanifested.

So, from the above discussion, it is seen that Rāmānuja is reading a cycle, i.e., death – birth – death and again birth, i.e., rebirth, in Ch.II.27. But this reading, as argued above, appears to be erroneous. Because “the Upaniṣads (i.e., Íśa and Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad)

explicitly deny the theory of the cycle of birth and death of *jīvātman*” (37). Īśa Upaniṣad (Kāṇva, 12; Mādhyandina 9) says, “They enter blind darkness who worship *asambhūtim*, and into even greater darkness that [enter they] who are delightfully engrossed in *sambhūti*” (37). On the other hand, Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (Kāṇva 3.9.28:4-7, and Mādhyandina 3.9.30-34) says explicitly: “When a tree that was felled grows again, a new one [grows] from the root. A mortal, when felled by death – from which root does he grow up again? Don’t say ‘from semen,’ [for] it is produced in a living man. A tree springs also from the seed; after it is dead, it certainly springs again [from the seed]. If a tree is pulled out with its root, it no more sprouts. A mortal, when felled by death – from which root does he grow up again? After he was born [once], man is not born [again]; who should engender him again?” (37)

The Ch.II.28 of the *Bhagavadgītā* says: *avyaktādīni bhūtāni vyakta-madhyāni bhārata – avyakta-nidhanāny eva tatra kā paridevanā*. Commenting on this verse, Rāmānuja writes: *manuṣyādīni bhūtāni santy eva dravyāni anupalabdhapūrvāvasthāni upalabdhamanuṣyatvādīmadhyamāvasthāni anupalabdhottarāvasthāni sveṣu svabhāveṣu vartanta iti na tatra paridevanānimitam asti*// “Human beings, etc. (i.e., bodies) exist as entities; their previous stages are unknown, their middle stages in the form of man, etc., are known, and their (final) and future stages are unknown. As they exist in their own natural stages, there is no cause for grief.” This explanation makes the verse unfitting to the context. In the previous verse (Ch.II.27), something is known to be *jāta* “born” and *mṛta* and invariable concomitance of *janma* and *mṛtu* is declared to hold good. At the same time, if it is claimed that the beginning and ends of these are unknown or unmanifest, then it appears illogical. In the next verse (Ch.II.29), what is discussed is referred to by the expression *enam* ‘this’ (masculine, accusative, singular), and it is emphasized by repeating twice in the same verse. If what is referred to by *enam* “this” is not discussed in the previous verse (Ch. II. 28), then suddenly discussing *enam* “this” in Ch.II.29 is also absurd. Previous discussion proximate to Ch.II.28 regarding what is referred to by *enam* “this” is in Ch.II.26. If *enam* “this” of Ch.II.29 is taken as referring to the referent of *enam* “this” of Ch.II.26, i.e., two verses earlier, then it makes both Ch.II.27 and Ch.II.28 as unnecessary interruption of the flow of discussion. However, Ch.II.26 via Ch.II.27 and Ch.II.28 to Ch.II.29 and beyond is single continuous reasoning. So, we have to assume that what is referred to by *enam* ‘this’ in Ch.II.29 has already been presented in Ch.II.28. So, verse Ch.II.28 is not about many *bhūtāni* ‘existents’ but about something that has unmanifest beginnings (*avyaktādīni*) and unmanifest endings (*avyaktanidhanāni*) but manifest amongst existents (*vyakta madhyāni bhūtāni*). So, it appears that Rāmānuja’s interpretation of Ch.II.28 is unacceptable.

The interpretation of Ch.II.29<sup>16</sup> of *Bhagavadgītā* is also problematic. Commenting on the verse, he writes: “Among the countless creatures of the universe, someone, through the great penance, gets rid of sins and augments his store of religious merits” (Rāmānuja, 2014, 81). Here also, Rāmānuja tries to bring in the theory of the law of karma. Nevertheless, this is not what is said in the text of the *Bhagavadgītā*. He is not reading the *Bhagavadgītā* in its own terms; instead, he attempts to reconcile what is said in the *Bhagavadgītā* with the idea of karmavādato, which he has a prior commitment. Besides, he says that the self is wonderful. It is known as wonderful after acquiring merits, i.e.,

<sup>16</sup> *āścaryavat paśyati kaścidenam āścaryavad vadati tathaiva cānyaḥ/ āścaryavat caiman anyah śṅnoti śrūtvyānam veda na caiva kaścit*//

accumulated merits. Because it is different from every other being, it is wonderful because someone speaks of it, another hears it, and no one knows it in truth after hearing it. However, it is entirely wrong (Rāmānuja, 2014). What it says is someone sees it as wonder, as what kind of thing is this, someone speaks of it, i.e., those who have heard of the Vedas, etc., speak of it, and others hear of it, even there are some others also who hears of it, i.e., the Vedas and after hearing it, yet they do not understand. It is not to say that everybody does not understand. Nevertheless, some of those who hear it may not understand it because they do not understand after hearing it. Of course, they have not spoken; they have only heard, and even after hearing, they do not understand. Some speak, some see, some hear, and even there is the fourth kind of people who do not understand after hearing. Some know it, which has been explained in the Vedas. If *ṛishis* have not understood, then how could they explain the Vedas?

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