Only much later did thinkers assert that the differences between astikas and nastikas were too large to be bridgeable, whereas the internal differences among the various astika positions were deemed to be less significant. At first, schools such as Samkhya and Mimamsa did not explicitly state that they had commonalities that differentiated them from non-Hindu philosophies of the Jains and Buddhists. But over time, there emerged codifiers who consolidated what became known as the six systems of Indian philosophy and gave them prominence over the rest. Later still, these six got further consolidated with a shared commitment to Vedic authority, by which they differentiated themselves from Jains and Buddhists.[6]

The grand consolidation into what we now call Hinduism evolved only after Shankara's death, when his own followers incorporated the rival schools into a 'Vedic family' which included the Samkhya and Yoga schools. A number of venerable sages played an important role in the consolidation and crystallization of the astikas as a well-bounded category, including Madhava (fourteenth century), Madhusudana Sarasvati (sixteenth century) and Vijnanabhikshu (sixteenth century). Madhava was important not only because he was a minister of the powerful Vijayanagara Empire, but also because he became the head of the Sringeri matha founded by Shankara. Madhusudana even argued that some of the astikas were deliberately teaching in ways that would keep people from following the nastikas such as Jains and Buddhists.[7] Vijnanabhikshu, in the sixteenth century, continued the consolidation further.[8]

It is fair to say, however, that by the sixteenth century, astika had crystallized and solidified to correspond roughly to today's Hinduism and that nastika meant Buddhists, Jains, and materialists. This sense of being a Hindu continues to this day. The goal of each of these thinkers was to organize, classify and rank different philosophies in order of merit, thereby showing them to be part of the astika family. The Sanskrit term for such a compendium is 'samgraha' or 'samuccaya' (collection).

Many intellectuals within what is now considered the Hindu family developed their own organizing principles in which all astika schools were neatly arranged in a hierarchy. The specific organization and hierarchy differed, but there gradually emerged a growing consensus that astika was one who 'affirms the Vedas as the source of ultimate truth'.[9] While this served as the big tent now called Hinduism, competing authorities differed on the ranking inside the tent among the various ideas, paths and practices. Each group formulated its own hierarchy of validity among various astika systems. For instance, Madhusudana espoused Advaita Vedanta as the highest level of his hierarchy, while Vijnanabhikshu espoused Bhedabheda Vedanta, but both shared the desire to reconcile all the astika schools.[10]

The consolidation of Hinduism involved moving towards an expanded sense of astika with many more schools of thought and lineages gradually being absorbed into it. This process required selectively co-opting from those who had been previously rejected and admitting some of their ideas into the hierarchy of legitimate means for spiritual advancement.

Despite all the apparent contradictions among the astikas, they were seen as sharing in the higher cosmic unity expressed by the dharmic traditions as a whole. The astika/nastika evolution was the mechanism by which medieval compilers and classifiers assimilated the terminology and ideas of Samkhya and Yoga into their own frameworks.

This method of the evolution of ideas is not a problem for the dharma traditions. The history centric religions are another matter, for they operate by a single standard involving the historical record. Criteria for compliance are hard, and policing is both constant and ecclesiastically sanctioned. The whole dogmatic enterprise would fall apart if there were flexibility of the kind found in dharma.

Pre-Colonial Hindu Unifiers: Example of Vijnanabhikshu

Andrew Nicholson places the growing consolidation of Hindu 'big tent' unity in roughly the fourteenth to sixteenth century CE period.[11] He shows that the categories of astika/nastika were fluid previously, but in this period they became solidified and hardened. He sees the

the latter too closely associated with medieval struggles between Christians and Muslims). The terms "affirmer" and "denier" are better, since these are neutral with regard to the question of right opinion versus right practice. An affirmer (astika)might be one who "affirms the value of ritual" (Medhatithi), one who "affirms the existence of virtue and vice" (Manibhadra), one who "affirms the existence of another world after death" (the grammarians), or one who "affirms the Vedas as the source of ultimate truth" (Vijnanabhikshu Madhava, etc.). The typical translations for the terms astika and nastika, "orthodox" and "heterodox", succeed to a certain extent in expressing the Sanskrit terms in question.'

2   Manusmriti 2.11.

3   Nicholson, 2010, p. 173: 'The words astika and nastika are derived from Panini's rule *Astadhyayi* 4.4.60. Panini simply provides the derivation of the two words (along with a third, *daistika*) without suggesting what exactly is being accepted by the astika or rejected by the nastika. The first substantive definition of the two words in the Paninian tradition comes in the *Kasikavrtti*, a commentary by the seventh-century authors Jayaditya and Vamana. They write, "The astika is the one who believes that 'there exists another world: The opposite of him is the nastika'".'

4   Estimates for the period when he lived vary from fifth to eighth century CE.

5   Nicholson, 2010, p. 175.

6   Nicholson, 2010, pp. 3, 5, 25.

7   Nicholson, 2010, writes that 'the sixteenth-century doxographer Madhusudana Sarasvati, argues that since all of the sages who founded the astika philosophical systems were omniscient, it follows that they all must have shared the same beliefs. The diversity of opinions expressed among these systems is only for the sake of its hearers, who are at different stages of understanding. ... According to Madhusudana, the sages taught these various systems in order to keep people from a false attraction to the views of nastikas such as the Buddhists and Jainas.' (p. 9)

8   Rukmani, 1981, argues that Vijnanabhikshu was influenced by the Navya-Naiyayika thinker, Raghunatha Siromani.

9   Nicholson, 2010, p. 179.

10   Another example of how astika got contested and redefined was the debate between Mrtyunjay Vidyalankar, a highly respected Calcutta based Hindu scholar of the early 1800s, and Ram Mohan Roy. The debate occurred

in 1817. Whereas Ram Mohan became famous as a result of his Western patronage, Vidyalankar has not been studied enough. He wrote pamphlets claiming that Hinduism was neither amorphous nor did it manifest in response to Westerners. His 'Vedanta Chandrika' (Moonlight of the Vedanta) was directly aimed at Ram Mohan's view of Vedanta. Many of these ideas were later adopted by Vivekananda. He defended the variety of Hindu institutions, ideas and practices over its long history. He referred to Ram Mohan's camp as 'intoxicated moderns' for recklessly transforming Hinduism into a 'marketplace theology'. He saw no contradiction between the Puranas and Vedanta, defended the worship of images, and emphasized the importance of Sanskrit. Initially, it was this approach to Vedanta that was translated as 'neo-Vedanta', but later on, the Christian missionaries appropriated that term, and gave it a whole new meaning, i.e., to signify a fabrication. (Kopf, 1969, pp. 204-6.)

11   One may ask why this consolidation into modern Hinduism took place in the medieval period. Some scholars have theorized that the arrival of Islam might have led to a coalescing of various Hindu streams into closer unities than before. It has been surmised that the attempts by Akbar and then Dara Shikoh to synthesize Hinduism and Islam into one hybrid might have been seen threatening Hindu digestion into a subset of Islam. This threat could have been a factor in this trend to bring many nastika outsiders into the tent as astika insiders. Regardless of the causes for this, there is ample evidence to suggest that multiple movements began to organize diverse Hindu schools into a common framework or organizing principle. Each of these rival approaches had its own idea of the metaphysical system in which it was at the highest point in the hierarchy, with the rest located in lower positions in terms of validity and importance, but the point here is that highly expansive unities were being constructed. Another scholar espousing this thesis of the development of an 'insider' sense of Hinduism as a response to Islam is David Lorenzen. He notes that between 1200 and 1500, the Hindu rivalry with Muslims created a new self-consciousness of a unified Hindu identity. Lorenzen draws his evidence from medieval literature, including the poetry of Eknath, Anantadas, Kabir and Vidyapati, and argues that the difference between Hinduism and Islam was emphasized in their writings. This emphasis showed the growth of an implicit notion of Hindu selfhood that differed from Islam. For instance, many bhakti poets contrasted Hindu ideas that God exists in all things, living and not living, with Islam's insistence on banning this as idolatry. Lorenzen concludes: 'The