



ELEMENTS OF KNOWLEDGE IN VARIOUS THEISTIC SCHOOLS OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

Shatabdi Bhattacharyya¹, Dr. Vinay Kumar Tiwari²

^{1,2}*Department of Philosophy, Mansarovar Global University, Sehore, MP*

Abstract

Like all living beings, humans struggle to survive. However, unlike animals that act mostly through instinct and without conscious planning, humans use their intelligence to understand the world and make deliberate choices. We try to live in a way that reflects our understanding of our environment, and ourselves considering not just the short-term effects of our actions but also their long-term consequences. This desire for understanding comes naturally to us as rational beings. Philosophy is an effort to fulfill this deep and reasonable desire. It's not a luxury; it's a necessity. Indian philosophy does explore the same subjects Metaphysics, Ethics, Logic, Psychology, and Epistemology but it does not treat them as entirely separate disciplines. Instead, Indian thinkers tend to approach each problem holistically, considering all perspectives metaphysical, ethical, logical, psychological, and epistemological together. Thinkers have highlighted this integrated or synthetic approach as a defining characteristic of Indian philosophy.

Indian philosophy refers to the philosophical ideas and speculations of all Indian thinkers ancient or modern, Hindu or non-Hindu, theistic or atheistic. Some people think that "*Indian philosophy*" is the same as "*Hindu philosophy*." This would only be true if the word *Hindu* is taken in a geographical sense (meaning "Indian"). However, if *Hindu* is taken to mean followers of a specific religion (Hinduism), then this view is incorrect and misleading.

In the history of Western philosophy, as knowledge in each area grew more complex, it became difficult for any one person to master everything. This led to specialization people began focusing on specific problems. Thus, different branches of science emerged Physics, Chemistry, Botany, Astronomy, and Geology, for example, each study a part of the natural world. Medical sciences focus on the human body, while Psychology studies the mind. Many topics that were once part of philosophical inquiry became independent sciences.

Keywords : *Hindu philosophy , Upanishads , Vedanta , Pramanas , philosophical debate*

1. Introduction

Indian Philosophy: A Rich and Diverse Tradition

Most of the major schools of Indian philosophy were formalized between 1000 BCE and the early centuries CE. Later centuries saw extensive commentaries and reinterpretations, continuing into the 20th century with thinkers like *Sri Aurobindo* and *Prabhupada*. Between 800 BCE and 200 CE, there was intense interaction and debate among the schools. Some traditions like *Jainism*, *Buddhism*, *Shaivism*, and *Advaita Vedanta* survived and evolved, while others like *Samkhya* and *Ajivika* declined or were absorbed.

The Sanskrit term for philosopher is *dārśanika*, meaning someone familiar with one or more systems of philosophy (*darshanas*).

Philosophy is often seen as an empirical yet abstract discipline. Rather than focusing on specific observations, it deals with broad empirical patterns. Some science-based definitions of philosophy struggle with the fact that, throughout its long history, philosophy has not progressed in the same way or at the same pace as the natural sciences. One way to address this is to consider philosophy as an early or provisional stage of scientific inquiry. According to this view, once a philosophical field becomes fully developed, it separates from philosophy and becomes its own science. For this reason, philosophy is sometimes referred to as "*the midwife of the sciences*."

Other descriptions highlight the differences between philosophy and science. These often emphasize philosophy's concern with meaning, understanding, and the clarification of language. One popular view defines philosophy as conceptual analysis identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for applying certain concepts. Another view describes philosophy as "*thinking about thinking*," highlighting its reflective and self-critical nature. Some see philosophy as a form of linguistic therapy. Phenomenologists like Edmund Husserl define philosophy as a "*rigorous science*" that investigates the essences of experience. They advocate for setting aside all theoretical assumptions about reality in order to return to direct experience what they call "*the things themselves*." This immediate level of experience, they argue, forms the foundation for more advanced theoretical knowledge, and understanding it is essential for understanding anything more abstract

Indian philosophy has a deep and varied tradition that dates back to the composition of the *Upanishads* during the later Vedic period. Philosopher *Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan* regarded these texts as some of the earliest philosophical works in the world. Indian philosophy includes the systems of thought and reflection developed by the civilizations of the Indian subcontinent. Scholar *Vidyāranya* classified Indian philosophy into sixteen schools, expanding the traditional list to include *Shaiva* and *Raseśvara* schools, among others.

Indian philosophy offers both similarities and differences when compared to Western philosophy. Indian thinkers often addressed questions that were never considered in the West, such as the origin and apprehension of truth (*utpatti* and *jñapti*). Meanwhile, many Western concerns such as the source of knowledge (experience or reason), or distinctions between analytic and synthetic truths were not central to Indian thought. This comparison shows that Western categories are not universally applicable and that Indian thought brings new perspectives to philosophical inquiry. Similarly, Indian philosophers have also benefited from engaging with Western philosophy. The *Vedas*, dating back to the 2nd millennium BCE, are the earliest records from India that reflect profound cosmological and psychological insights. The *Upanishads* introduced the concept of a universal spiritual reality, leading to radical monism (non-dualism), and offered early speculations on the nature of life, mind, body, ethics, and society.

2. Indian Philosophy: A Rich and Diverse Tradition

Philosophy, in its broadest sense, means “*love of knowledge*.” It seeks to understand the nature of the self, the world, and the divine. Questions like “*Who am I?*”, “*What is the world?*”, and “*Does God exist?*” are universal and have stirred human minds since the dawn of civilization. Philosophy tries to answer such questions. In Indian tradition, philosophy is often described as the “*vision of truth*” (*tattva darśana*). Every Indian school of thought believes, in its own way, that truth can be directly realized. A person who attains such realization is free, while one who does not remains caught in the cycle of worldly existence.

Philosophy then began to rely on the findings of these specialized sciences, interpreting and analyzing them to understand the broader nature of reality man, nature, and God. As one English writer puts it:

“People live according to their philosophy of life—their worldview. This is true even for those who appear thoughtless. It's impossible to live without a metaphysics. The real choice is not between having metaphysics or not, but between having a good one or a bad one.”

Like Hellenistic philosophers, ancient Indian thinkers viewed philosophy as a practical guide to living well. Philosophical works typically begin by explaining how the teachings contribute to the human goals (*puruṣārtha*). Recent research suggests there was significant interaction between Indian and Greek philosophy during the Hellenistic period.

Indian philosophy is especially notable for its analytical approach to metaphysics and its detailed exploration of the nature of reality, consciousness, and liberation (*moksha*). The goal of philosophical inquiry was to understand this order and the ultimate source of existence, Brahman, and to live in harmony with it, guided by Dharma (natural law).

➤ The Six Orthodox Schools (Shad-Darshana)

During the medieval period, Hindu philosophical systems were grouped into six orthodox schools that accept the authority of the Vedas. Indian philosophy represents a deep and diverse tradition of thought, originating with the Upanishads during the later Vedic period.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan described these ancient texts as “*the earliest philosophical compositions of the world.*”

(Radhakrishnan, 1936)

Indian philosophy encompasses a wide range of systems and schools developed on the Indian subcontinent. These are broadly divided into **orthodox (āstika)** systems which accept the authority of the Vedas and **unorthodox (nāstika)** systems, which reject Vedic authority.

1. **Samkhya** – A dualist philosophy that classifies the elements of reality.
2. **Yoga** – Based on Samkhya, emphasizing meditation and discipline (founded by Patanjali).
3. **Nyaya** – The school of logic and epistemology.
4. **Vaisheshika** – Focuses on atomism and metaphysics.
5. **Purva Mimamsa** – Concerned with Vedic rituals and exegesis.
6. **Vedanta (Uttara Mimamsa)** – Focused on the philosophical teachings of the Upanishads.

These are often paired into three conceptual duos:

- **Nyaya–Vaisheshika**
- **Samkhya–Yoga**
- **Mimamsa–Vedanta**

Vedanta, the most influential of these, has several sub-schools:

- **Advaita** – Non-dualism (includes *Ajativada*, the theory of non-creation)
- **Visishtadvaita** – Qualified non-dualism
- **Dvaita** – Dualism
- **Dvaitadvaita** – Dualism-cum-non-dualism
- **Shuddhadvaita** – Pure non-dualism
- **Achintya Bheda Abheda** – Inconceivable oneness and difference

3.Comparison between Eastern and Western Philosophies

These schools address a range of philosophical issues such as the nature of reality (metaphysics), the origin of the universe (cosmology), the means and limits of knowledge (epistemology), logic, ethics, and the philosophy of religion. Over centuries, especially between 1000 BCE and 200 CE, these schools engaged in vibrant debate and cross-influence. While some schools like *Advaita Vedānta*, *Jainism*, and *Buddhism* continued to thrive, others such as *Sāṃkhya* and *Ājīvika* gradually faded or were absorbed into traditions that are more dominant.

In contrast, Western philosophy refers to the philosophical traditions that originated in the Western world, beginning with the ancient Greeks. It began with thinkers like Thales and Pythagoras and later included major developments during the Christian and modern eras. The term "*philosophy*" itself comes from the Greek *philosophia*, meaning "love of wisdom" (*philo* = love, *sophia* = wisdom).

Early Greek philosophy was largely naturalistic and did not draw a clear distinction between mind and matter—a view often categorized as early materialism. Over time, Western philosophy evolved into various schools of thought and periods: Greek, Hellenistic, Christian (Medieval), and Modern. In the ancient world, philosophers like the Stoics divided philosophy into three main areas:

- **Logic**
- **Ethics**

- **Physics** (which included both natural sciences and metaphysics)

In contemporary Western philosophy, the primary branches are:

- **Metaphysics**
- **Epistemology**
- **Ethics**
- **Aesthetics**

(*Ethics* and *Aesthetics* are often grouped under *Axiology*, the study of values.)

Logic is sometimes considered a separate discipline but remains a foundational method across all philosophical inquiry.

One major distinction between Indian and Western philosophies is their approach to the inner (spiritual) and outer (material) dimensions of human life. Indian philosophy often treats the inward (spiritual or mental life) and the outward (physical reality) as interconnected and equally real. In contrast, modern Western philosophy, particularly after the Renaissance, focused more on the external world. The emphasis shifted toward reason and scientific analysis, often at the expense of inward, spiritual understanding. This outward turn led to the neglect and in some cases, denial of inner life and consciousness. While mystics in the West continued to explore the inward dimensions of being, mainstream philosophy became increasingly materialistic. As a result, concepts like "*spirit*" or "*soul*" were often reduced to religious beliefs rather than subjects of rational inquiry. Indian thought, on the other hand, maintained a more balanced integration of the inward and outward aspects of life, viewing both as essential to understanding human existence and ultimate reality.

Modern Western philosophy includes several major branches:

- **Metaphysics:** Examines the fundamental nature of reality—human beings, the universe, and God.
- **Epistemology** (Theory of Knowledge): Investigates the nature and limits of human knowledge.
- **Logic:** Studies the principles of valid reasoning.
- **Ethics:** Explores moral values, the nature of good and evil, and the highest goals of human life.
- **Aesthetics:** Concerned with beauty and artistic experience.
- **Axiology:** A newer branch, focused on the theory of values.

- **Social Philosophy:** Often studied alongside ethics, it examines society, justice, and human relationships.

Although the fundamental questions of philosophy are similar in both Eastern and Western traditions and sometimes their answers too—the methods of inquiry and the way philosophical thinking develops are different. Even in classical Hindu philosophical texts, such as *Sarva-darśana-saṅgraha* by *Mādhavācārya*, we find that views from a wide range of schools including atheistic and materialist systems like *Cārvāka*, and non-Hindu systems like Buddhism and Jainism are also included. This shows the broad-mindedness and openness to truth in Indian philosophical traditions.

4. Aspects of Indian Philosophy

Although the various schools of Indian philosophy often disagreed deeply, they still took great care to understand each other's views thoroughly before forming conclusions. This respectful attitude led to the development of a structured method of philosophical debate, which usually followed three steps:

1. **Pūrvapakṣa** – Stating the opponent's viewpoint fairly and in detail
2. **Khaṇḍana** – Critiquing and refuting that viewpoint
3. **Siddhānta** or **Uttarapakṣa** – Presenting and proving one's own conclusion

This method encouraged a rigorous and respectful exchange of ideas, which helped each school grow and refine its thinking. For example, a comprehensive text on *Vedānta* will also discuss the views of other schools such as *Cārvāka*, *Buddhism*, *Jainism*, *Sāṅkhya*, *Yoga*, *Mīmāṃsā*, *Nyāya*, and *Vaiśeṣika*. Likewise, Buddhist and Jain texts also critically evaluate other philosophical systems.

Indian philosophy became encyclopedic in its knowledge and approach. Many issues discussed in modern Western philosophy were also addressed by Indian philosophers centuries earlier. In fact, Indian scholars trained purely in their own tradition can often engage with even highly abstract problems in Western philosophy with surprising expertise.

This open-mindedness the willingness to listen to and consider different perspectives—was a major reason behind the richness and depth of Indian philosophy. If Indian philosophy is to thrive again in the future, it

must continue this spirit by engaging with new ideas coming from both the East and the West including Aryan, Semitic, Mongolian, and other global traditions.

5. The Role of the Vedas in Indian Philosophy

The Vedas are the oldest known texts in Indian literature, and all later Indian thought; especially philosophical thought was either influenced by them or reacted against them.

- **Mīmāṃsā** and **Vedānta** are direct continuations of Vedic thought:
 - ❖ **Mīmāṃsā** focused on **rituals** (karma)
 - ❖ **Vedānta** focused on **knowledge and speculation** (jñāna)

Because of this, both are sometimes jointly referred to as **Mīmāṃsā**:

- ❖ The ritual-based system is called **Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā** (Earlier Mīmāṃsā)
- ❖ The knowledge-based system is called **Uttara-Mīmāṃsā** (Later Mīmāṃsā), more commonly known as **Vedānta**

Other systems like **Sāṅkhya**, **Yoga**, **Nyāya**, and **Vaiśeṣika** relied more on **reason and human experience**, but still tried to **align with Vedic teachings**. In contrast, **Cārvāka**, **Buddhism**, and **Jainism** arose largely in opposition to the Vedic tradition and explicitly rejected its authority.

6. Objective of the study

- To investigate the source of knowledge in Indian philosophy.

7. Result and discussion

In Indian philosophy, especially within the Nyaya school, four primary sources of knowledge known as *Pramanas* are recognized. These are considered reliable means of understanding the world:

1. **Pratyakṣa (Perception):**

Knowledge gained through direct sensory experience, such as seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, or smelling. It involves firsthand contact with objects or phenomena.

2. **Anumāna (Inference):**

Knowledge derived through logical reasoning. By observing a particular situation and using prior knowledge, one draws conclusions—for example, seeing smoke and inferring fire.

3. **Upamāna (Comparison) :**

Understanding something unfamiliar by comparing it with something already known. For instance, if someone is told that a wild ox resembles a cow, they can recognize the ox later through comparison.

4. **Śabda (Verbal Testimony):**

Knowledge obtained from trustworthy sources, such as sacred texts (*śāstra*), experts, or reliable individuals. This emphasizes the importance of credible authority in gaining knowledge.

Other philosophical schools, such as *Advaita Vedānta*, also accept additional *Pramanas*:

- **Arthāpatti (Presumption)**

Gaining knowledge by assuming the only possible explanation for a situation. For example, if a person is known to be fasting during the day but is gaining weight, one might presume they eat at night.

- **Anupalabdhi (Non-apprehension):**

Knowledge acquired through the absence of perception—for example, knowing that there is no pot on a table because it is not seen there.

Overall, Indian philosophy takes a comprehensive approach to knowledge, integrating direct experience, logical reasoning, comparison, and trustworthy testimony—along with other nuanced forms of understanding to grasp the nature of reality.

8. Conclusion

The theistic schools of Indian philosophy *Nyāya*, *Vaiśeṣika*, *Sāṅkhya*, *Yoga*, *Mīmāṃsā*, and *Vedānta* offer nuanced and complementary perspectives on knowledge (*jñāna* or *pramā*). While all accept the authority of

the Vedas and acknowledge *Ishvara (God)* in varying degrees, they differ in their epistemological foundations and means of valid knowledge (*pramāṇas*).

For instance, *Nyāya* emphasizes rigorous logic and accepts four *pramāṇas*, focusing on *perception*, *inference*, *comparison*, and *verbal testimony*. *Vedānta*, especially in its theistic forms (like Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita), sees knowledge as ultimately fulfilled in realization of and devotion to a personal God (*Brahman/Ishvara*), while relying on *śabda* (scripture) as a primary source of metaphysical truth. *Sāṅkhya* and *Yoga*, though closely linked, diverge in that *Yoga* introduces *Ishvara* as a special *puruṣa*, and both stress intuitive and experiential knowledge (*aparokṣa jñāna*) for liberation.

Each school integrates knowledge not merely as intellectual understanding but as a transformative tool leading toward *liberation (mokṣa)*. Despite their differences, these traditions collectively uphold the pursuit of truth and spiritual realization through valid cognition, scriptural authority, and disciplined inquiry making epistemology a cornerstone of Indian theistic thought.

REFERENCES

- Dandisvami Damodrasram. *Praśastapādabhāṣyam*. (in Bengali). Sanskrit Pustaka Bhandar, 2010, 1.
- Sinha J. *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Sinha Publishing House, 1956, 439.
- Tarkabagish P. (Mahamahapadyaya). *Nyāyadarshana*. Paschimbagna Rajya Pustak Parsad, 2014:1:233.
- Chattopadhyaya D, Gangopadhyaya M. (Ed.). *Nyāya Philosophy*. (Part-1). Firma KLM PVT. LTD, 1992, 84.
- Sinha J. *A History of Indian Philosophy*. Sinha Publishing House, 1956:1:663.
- Dandisvami Damodrasram. *Praśastapādabhāṣyam*. (in Bengali). Sanskrit Pustaka Bhandar, 2010, 39.
- *Vaiśeṣikasūtra*, 5.2.16
- *Vaiśeṣikasūtra*, 6.2.16
- Śāstrī, Pañchānan. *Vedānta-Paribhāṣā of Dharmarājādharīndr*