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The Schools of Indian Philosophy: A Glimpse

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ABSTRACT

The schools of Indian philosophy, both orthodox (āstika) and heterodox (nāstika), represent a rich intellectual tradition that explores the nature of reality, knowledge, and human existence. The six orthodox schools—Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta—emphasize various epistemological and metaphysical frameworks, ranging from logic and atomism to spiritual liberation and ethical conduct. In contrast, the heterodox schools—Buddhism, Jainism, and Cārvāka—offer alternative approaches, questioning Vedic authority and proposing distinct ontological and ethical systems. This study provides a comparative analysis of these philosophies, highlighting their foundational principles, epistemic methods, and approaches to liberation (mokṣa). By examining both convergences and divergences, the paper underscores the enduring relevance of Indian philosophical thought in addressing contemporary questions of knowledge, morality, and the human condition. In this article; the schools of Indian philosophy: a glimpse has been discussed.

Keywords: Schools, Indian, Philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

Indian philosophy, with its rich and diverse intellectual heritage, represents one of the most profound explorations of human thought in the world. Rooted in ancient scriptures, experiential inquiry, and logical reasoning, it seeks to understand the nature of reality, the self, knowledge, and the ultimate purpose of life. Over millennia, this philosophical tradition evolved into distinct schools, each offering unique perspectives on metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and spirituality. Broadly classified into Āstika (orthodox) and Nāstika (heterodox) systems, these schools—ranging from Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, and Advaita Vedānta to Buddhism, Jainism, and Cārvāka—reflect a dynamic dialogue between reason, experience, and revelation. Exploring these schools provides not only a glimpse into the intellectual sophistication of ancient India but also insights into universal questions about knowledge, existence, and liberation.

THE SCHOOLS OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

Commonalities in the classical Indian approaches to knowledge and justification frame the arguments and refined positions of the major schools. Central is a focus on concurrent knowledge coupled with a theory of “*mental dispositions*” called *saṃskāra*. Epistemic evaluation of memory, and indeed of all standing belief, is seen to depend upon the epistemic status of the concurrent cognition or awareness’s that formed the memory, i.e., the mental disposition, in the first place. Concurrent knowledge in turn must have a knowledge source, *pramāṇa*.



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KNOWLEDGE AND KNOWLEDGE CRADLES

Cognition is regarded as knowledge as a kind of conversational default and so to render ‘jñāna’ as “knowledge”. When the eighth-century *Advaitin Śaṅkara* says that from the perspective of spiritual knowledge (*vidyā*) the knowledge we recognize in everyday speech turns out to be illusory, *mithyā-jñāna*, “false knowledge,” this is supposed to be felt as almost a contradiction in terms (Perrett, R.W., 2016).

Buddhist *Yogācāra* as well as *Mīmāṃsā* and *Vedānta* view knowledge as inherently known to be true. Even *Nyāya*, a school championing a view of knowledge as unselfconscious of itself as true, subscribes to the epistemological principle of “*Innocent until reasonably challenged*”. Surprisingly, the sixth-century *Nyāya* philosopher *Uddyotakara*, who is famous for his attacks on *Yogācāra* positions, takes a similarly charitable attitude to be a rule applying to other philosophies:

“For it is a rule with systems of philosophy that a position of another that is not expressly disproved is to be regarded as in conformity with one’s own”

(*Nyāya-sūtra* 1.1.4: 125)

Knowledge is cognition that has been produced in the right way. Cognitions are moments of consciousness, not species of belief, but we may say that cognitions form beliefs in forming dispositions and that veridical cognitions form true beliefs. A knowledge episode to speak in the Indian manner is a cognition generated in the right fashion. Whether this be because it is (as say the realists, *Mīmāṃsā*, *Nyāya*, *Vaiśeṣika*) that it has the right origins in fact, or whether it is because it guides successful action in helping us get our desires satisfied (as say *Yogācāra* idealists and pragmatists), knowledge is cognition that arises in the right way. There are different theories of truth, but everyone sees knowledge as not only revealing the truth but arising from it. Knowledge episodes form non-concurrent knowledge and so an examination of what is crucial to the arising of a knowledge episode is crucial to the evaluations of epistemology. Knowledge cannot arise by accident. A lucky guess, though true or veridical, would not count as knowledge because it would not have been generated in the right fashion, would not have the right pedigree or etiology. The central notion throughout classical Indian epistemology is the “*knowledge source*,” *pramāṇa*, which is a process of veridical-cognition generation.

Now the word ‘*pramāṇa*’ and the result ‘*pramā*’ along with the words used for individual knowledge sources, for perception and so on, are commonly used such that the truth of the resultant cognition is implied. This runs counter to English usage, along with broad philosophic supposition, which is different with the words ‘*perception*’ and company.

For no knowledge source ever generates a false belief. *Yogācāra* Buddhists-who subscribe to the metaphysical view known as momentariness, which is a presentism claim that there is no difference between source and result, process of knowledge and effect, *pramāṇa* and *pramā*. Thus, there can be no wedge driven between cause and effect such that there could possibly be true belief by accident. The Vedic schools (*Mīmāṃsā*, *Vedānta*, *Nyāya*, *Vaiśeṣika*, *Sāṃkhya*, *Yoga*) do distinguish knowledge from true belief but also see the concepts of truth and knowledge-producing process as wedded in that, as indicated, no genuine knowledge source ever produces a false belief.



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No non-veridical cognition is knowledge-source-generated. A knowledge source is then not merely a reliable doxastic practice. Being merely reliable does not fit the bill. The concept of a knowledge source has a truth logic, like ‘*knowledge*’ in English; it is fictive. Maybe we should say perception, inference, and testimony to render the classical Indian ideas. False testimony, does not count as a knowledge-generator; the Sanskrit word for testimony is used with a hearer having knowledge in virtue of a speaker telling the truth. A non-veridical perception is not really a perception at all but a “pseudo-perception” (*pratyakṣa-ābhāsa*), “apparent perception,” a perception imitator.

Everyday patterns of speech (*vyavahāra*) are taken as a starting point for theorizing in epistemology as in other areas of *philosophy*. Therefore, perception and inference - more exotic candidate sources, too are defended as veritable knowledge-generators by the observation that people commonly regard them in that way. People cite a credence’s pedigree in questions of justification. Note that even in English we do commonly recognize perception and some of the others as certification. Thus this seems to be a common human practice, not restricted to classical Indian civilization.

“A *knowledge source*” may be thought of as a technical term, one that entails facticity, as we have seen, as a matter of definition. Similarly with justification (*prāmāṇya*), the having of which, if veritable (or objective), as opposed to the apparent (*ābhāsa*), means that the justified cognition is true.

There is much controversy over the religious goal of life among the several schools, both among schools accepting Vedic culture liberation vs. heaven, individual dissolution into the Absolute Brahman, blissful yogic *Kaivalya*, enjoyment of God’s presence and among outsider schools *Buddhist nirvāṇa* or becoming a *bodhi-sattva* or a *Jaina arhat* as well as *Cārvāka*’s entire rejection of soteriology.

However, from a distance, we can see common conceptions linking at least many of the Indian views.

- One is to draw a distinction between every day and spiritual knowledge and to theorize about the relationship. A prominent position is that thinking about the world is an obstacle to spiritual enlightenment.
- Another is that proper understanding of the world helps one disengage and to know oneself as separate from material things, and so is an aid to transcendence.

The most distinctive form of skepticism in classical Indian thought is that so-called worldly knowledge is not knowledge at all but is a perversion or deformation of consciousness.

The various Indian philosophies contain such a diversity of views, theories, and systems that it is nearly impossible to single out characteristics that are common to all of them. Acceptance of the authority of the Vedas characterizes all the orthodox (*astika*) systems but not the unorthodox (*nastika*) systems, such as *Charvaka* (radical materialism), *Buddhism*, and *Jainism*. Moreover, even when philosophers professed allegiance to the Vedas, their allegiance did little to restrain the freedom of their speculative ventures. On the contrary, the acceptance of the authority of the Vedas was a convenient way for a philosopher’s views to become acceptable to the orthodox, even if a thinker introduced a wholly new idea. Thus, the Vedas could be cited to corroborate a wide diversity of views; they were used by the Vaisheshika thinkers i.e., those who believe in ultimate particulars, both individual souls and atoms as much as by the *Advaita* (monist) Vedanta philosophers (Pal, S., 2021).



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In most Indian philosophical systems, the acceptance of the ideal of moksha, like allegiance to the authority of the scriptures, was only remotely connected with the systematic doctrines that were being propounded. Many epistemological, logical, and even metaphysical doctrines debated and decided on purely rational grounds that did not directly bear upon the ideal of moksha. Only the *Vedanta* philosophy and the *Samkhya*; a system that accepts a real matter and a plurality of the individual soul's philosophy may be said to have a close relationship to the ideal of moksha.

The logical systems-*Nyaya*, *Vaisheshika*, and *Purva-Mimamsa* are only very remotely related. Also, both the philosophies and other scientific treatises, including even the *Kamasutra* and the *Arthashastra* recognized the same ideal and professed their efficacy for achieving it.

When Indian philosophers speak of intuitive knowledge, they are concerned with making room for it and demonstrating its possibility, with the help of logic and there, as far as they are concerned, the task of philosophy ends. Indian philosophers do not seek to justify religious faith; philosophic wisdom itself is accorded the dignity of religious truth. Theory is not subordinated to practice, but theory itself, as theory, is regarded as being supremely worthy and efficacious.

Three basic concepts form the cornerstone of Indian philosophical thought: the self or soul (*atman*), works (*karma*), and liberation (*moksha*). Leaving the *Charvakas* aside, all Indian philosophies concern themselves with these three concepts and their interrelations, though this is not to say that they accept the objective validity of these concepts in precisely the same manner. Of these, the concept of karma, signifying moral efficacy of human actions, seems to be the most typically Indian. The concept of atman corresponds in a certain sense to the Western concept of a transcendental or absolute spirit self-important difference notwithstanding.

The concept of moksha as the concept of the highest ideal has likewise been one of the concerns of Western thought, especially during the Christian era, though it probably has never been as important as for the Hindu mind. Most Indian philosophies assume that moksha is possible, and the “*impossibility of moksha*” (*anirmoksha*) is regarded as a material fallacy likely to vitiate a philosophical theory.

In addition to karma, the lack of two other concerns further differentiates Indian philosophical thought from Western thought in general. Since the time of the Greeks, Western thought has been concerned with mathematics and, in the Christian era, with history. Neither mathematics nor history has ever raised philosophical problems for Indian philosophical thinkers, although Indian mathematics and historical thinking are present and prominent in India.

In the lists of *pramanas*, or ways of knowing accepted by the different schools. It includes mathematical knowledge or historical knowledge. Possibly connected with their indifference toward mathematics is the significant fact that Indian philosophers have not developed formal logic.

The theory of the syllogism; a valid deductive argument having two premises and a conclusion is, however, developed, and much sophistication has been achieved in logical theory. Indian logic offers an instructive example of a logic of cognitions (*jnanani*) rather than of abstract propositions a logic not sundered and kept isolated from psychology and epistemology; because it is meant to be the logic of actual human striving to know what is true of the world.



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INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING

There is, in relation to Western thought, a striking difference in the manner in which Indian philosophical thinking is presented as well as in the mode in which it historically develops. The pre-systematic age of the Vedic hymns, the Upanishads, and many diverse philosophical ideas current in the pre-Buddhist era. There emerged with the rise of the age of the sutras; a neat classification of systems (*darshanas*), a classification that was never to be contradicted and to which no further systems are added. No new school was founded; no new *darshana* came into existence. However, this conformism, like conformism to the Vedas, did not check the rise of independent thinking, innovations, or original insights. There is, apparently, an underlying assumption in the Indian tradition that no individual can claim to have seen the truth for the first time. Therefore, that an individual can only explicate, state, and defend in a new form a truth that has been seen, stated, and defended by countless others before him hence the tradition of expounding one's thoughts by affiliating oneself to one of the *darshanas*.

If one is to be counted as a great master (*acharya*), one has to write a commentary (*bhashya*) on the sutras of the *darshana* concerned, or one must comment on one of the *bhashyas* and write a *tika* (subcommentary). The usual order is *sutra–bhashya–vartika–tika*. At any stage, a person may introduce a new and original point of view, but at no stage can one claim originality for oneself. Not even authors of sutras could do that, for they were only systematizing the thoughts and insights of countless predecessors. The development of Indian philosophical thought has thus been able to combine, in an almost unique manner, conformity to tradition and adventure in thinking (Radhakrishnan, S., 2013).

INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL TEXTS

Some of the earliest extant Indian philosophical texts are the *Upanishads* of the later Vedic period (1000–500 BCE), which are considered to preserve the ideas of Brahmanism. Indian philosophical traditions are typically grouped according to their relationship to the Vedas and the ideas contained in them.

The origins of Jainism remain enigmatic, with scholarly consensus divided between pre-Vedic roots, parallel development alongside Vedic civilization or post-Vedic emergence. The historical presence of its 23rd *Tirthankara*, *Parshvanatha* in the 8th-7th century BCE provides one of the earliest anchors of the tradition. Despite the accepted historicity of *Parshvanath*, the historical claims such as the link between him and *Mahavira*. *Mahavira* renounced in the ascetic tradition of *Parshvanatha*, and other biographical details have led to different scholarly conclusions. Doubts about *Parshvanatha's* historicity are also supported by the oldest Jain texts, which present *Mahavira* with sporadic mentions of ancient ascetics and teachers without specific names such as sections 1.4.1 and 1.6.3 of the *Acaranga Sutra*. Even the early archaeological finds, such as the statues and reliefs near Mathura, lack iconography such as lions and serpents. *Buddhism* also originated at the end of the Vedic period. These traditions drew upon already established *Brahmanical* concepts, states Wiltshire, to communicate their own distinct doctrines.

Hindu philosophy classifies Indian philosophical traditions as either orthodox (*āstika*) or heterodox (*nāstika*), depending on whether they accept the authority of the Vedas and the theories of *brahman* and *ātman* found therein. Besides these, the "heterodox" schools that do not accept the authority of the Vedas include *Buddhism*, *Jainism*, *Ajivika* and *Charvaka*.



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This orthodox-heterodox terminology is a scholarly construct found in later Indian sources and in Western sources on Indian thought) and not all of these sources agree on which system should be considered "orthodox". There are various logical systems in Indian philosophy. Hindu sources argue that certain systems of Shaiva tantra should be considered heterodox due to its deviations from the Vedic tradition (Hiriyana, M., 2009).

One of the most common lists of Hindu orthodox schools is the "six philosophies" (*ṣaḍ-darśana*), which are:

- *Sāṃkhya* school of "Enumeration", a philosophical tradition which regards the universe as consisting of two independent realities: *puruṣa* (the perceiving consciousness) and *prakṛti* (perceived reality, including mind, perception, kleshas, and matter) and which describes a soteriology based on this duality, in which *purush* is discerned and disentangled from the impurities of *prakṛiti*. It included atheistic authors as well as some theistic thinkers and it forms the basis of much of subsequent Indian philosophy.
 - *Yoga*, a school similar to *Sāṃkhya* (or perhaps even a branch of it) which accepts a personal god and focuses on yogic practice.
 - *Nyāya* the "Logic" school, a philosophy that focuses on logic and epistemology. It accepts four kinds of *Pramā* (valid presentation):

(1) Perception, (2) inference, (3) comparison or analogy, (4) word or testimony.

Nyāya defends a form of direct realism and a theory of substances (*dravya*).

Vaiśeṣika (the school of "Characteristics"), closely related to the *Nyāya* school, this tradition focused on the metaphysics of substance, and on defending a theory of atoms. Unlike *Nyāya*, they only accept two *pramanas*: perception and inference.

- *Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā* the school of "Prior Investigation" of the Vedas, a school which focuses on exegesis of the Vedas, philology and the interpretation of Vedic ritual.
- *Vedānta* "the end of the Vedas", also called *Uttara Mīmāṃsā*, focuses on interpreting the philosophy of the Upanishads, particularly the soteriological and metaphysical ideas relating to *Atman* and *Brahman*.

Sometimes these six are coupled into three groups for both historical and conceptual reasons:

- ❖ *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika*,
- ❖ *Sāṃkhya-Yoga*,
- ❖ *Mīmāṃsā-Vedānta*.

Each tradition also included different currents and sub-schools. For example, *Vedānta* was divided among the sub-schools of *Advaita* (non-dualism), *Viśiṣṭadvaita* (qualified non-dualism), *Dvaita* (dualism), *Dvaitadvaita* (dualistic non-dualism), *Suddhadvaita* (pure non-dualism), and *Achintya Bheda Abheda* (inconceivable oneness and difference).



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The doctrines of the Vedas and Upanishads were interpreted differently by these six schools, with varying degrees of overlap. They represent a "collection of philosophical views that share a textual connection". They also reflect a tolerance for a diversity of philosophical interpretations within Hinduism while sharing the same foundation (Hamilton, S., 2001).

PHILOSOPHICAL SUTRAS AND THE RISE OF THE SIX SCHOOLS OF PHILOSOPHY

The systems of the *Six Schools (Saddarshana)* of orthodox Hindu philosophy were created in terse sutras from approximately the start of the Common Era through the era of the *Gupta Empire* (320–540). The most important of the Six Schools is the *Vedanta*, also called *Uttara-Mimamsa* or, later, *Mimamsa*. The most-celebrated philosopher of this school was *Shankara*; traditionally dated c. 788–820, though he likely lived in the first half of the 8th century. Born at *Kaladi* in *Kerala*, he is said to have spent the majority of his life traveling through India debating with members of other sects. The *Shankaran* system has sounded the keynote of intellectual Hinduism down to the present, though later teachers founded sub-schools of *Vedanta*, which are possibly equally significant (Goswami, A.C., 2001).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the schools of Indian philosophy collectively present a rich and diverse intellectual tradition, each offering unique insights into reality, knowledge, ethics, and the ultimate purpose of life. The **Āstika** systems, such as Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, and Advaita Vedānta, emphasize reasoning, cosmology, and the pursuit of liberation, while the **Nāstika** schools, including Buddhism, Jainism, and Cārvāka, challenge orthodox views and explore alternative paths to knowledge and ethical living. Despite their methodological differences, all these schools share a profound concern with human existence, the nature of consciousness, and the means to attain liberation or well-being. Studying these philosophies not only deepens understanding of Indian thought but also highlights enduring questions about reality, knowledge, and morality that remain relevant across cultures and times.

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