

# INDIAN CULTURE- Philosophy

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

## Overview

Although less well-known, Indian philosophy is the foundation upon which Indian religion stands. Indeed, classical Hinduism, which began to form about 500 CE, is more or less a refinement of ideas found in just one of several schools of ancient philosophy. Like all philosophy, Indian thinking is concerned with investigating truth, and while it did not develop certain fields (such as ethics or aesthetics), it excelled in the fields of metaphysics, epistemology and logic. The complexity and historical depth of these various schools can only be summarised here, but even this short essay should serve to dispel the idea that Indian thinking has been historically dominated by a belief in god.

## Hindu

**Goals of life** Orthodox Hindu tradition recognises four aims of human life. The first is material prosperity (*artha*), the second is sensual pleasure (*kama*), the third is fulfilment of one's social duty (*dharma*) and the last is spiritual liberation from these three (*moksa*). The great bulk of Indian philosophical thinking is concerned with achieving this last goal of liberation, which is release from the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth (*samsara*) created by the law of *karma*.

**Samkhya** Samkhya (to 'enumerate,' 'deliberate,' 'reason') is the oldest school of Indian philosophy. First described in the Upanishads (c. 800-400 BCE), it has influenced all subsequent schools. Samkhya is essentially an atheist and dualist position: reality consists of consciousness (*purusa*) and matter/energy (*prakriti*). Its epistemology is based on three 'proofs': perception, inference and authority of sources. These are the bases for reaching conclusions about reality and liberation. Human life (*jiva*) is the state of consciousness bonded with matter. This bonded state endures various permutations in feelings, senses and mind (*bodhi*). These permutations result from changes in the three basic qualities (*gunas*) found in all life: purity/light/compassion (*sattva*), passion/active/dynamic (*rajas*) and darkness/lethargy/chaos (*tamas*). In other words, good, potentially good or bad, and bad. The perfect balance of these forces will result in liberation from the bonded state. There is no higher spiritual entity or deity.

**Yoga** The Yoga school, as explained in a 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE text by Patanjali, accepts most of Samkhya's premises, with one crucial exception. Yoga philosophy asserted the existence of a personal, though inactive, deity (*isvara*). In addition, while Samkhya maintained that knowledge (*jnana*) was the sole and sufficient path to liberation, Yoga (as the modern usage of the term implies) argued that 'practice' of certain physical and mental exercises are also important techniques.

**Nyaya** Nyaya texts (c. 200 BCE) were primarily concerned with logic and epistemology. Unlike the Samkhya and Yoga schools, which accepted only three proofs, Nyaya philosophers accepted a fourth proof of 'analogy and comparison.' While it follows Samkhya in arguing that liberation is obtained only through correct knowledge, Yoga developed an epistemology of 'mistaken knowledge' or 'wrong perception.' More than mere ignorance, this is delusion (*maya*). This idea, that suffering results from delusion, influenced Buddhism. By and large, Nyaya philosophers did not comment on the existence or non-existence of god, regarding that as irrelevant to the final goal of liberation.

**Vaiseshika** The Vaiseshika ('particular') school is closely associated with the Nyaya school, although it began somewhat earlier and developed two key differences. Vaiseshika thinkers were unusual in that they accepted only two proofs, perception and inference, as reliable sources of knowledge. Second, they elaborated an 'atomistic' theory of reality, arguing that everything is composed of small, indivisible and indestructible units, which exist either individually or in composites. Our experiences, feelings and knowledge are all a function of the spatial arrangement of these tiny units.

**Mimamsa** Coming somewhat later in historical time, the Mimamsa school has had enormous influence on classical Hindu thought, which continues to this day. Mimamsa philosophy added two more proofs to previous epistemologies: derivation from circumstances, and non-perception.

Mimamsa philosophers also argue that all cognition is valid, and that the burden of proof is to demonstrate that an idea is false. This argument helped these thinkers to establish the authority of Vedic texts and the performance of Vedic rituals, such as the fire sacrifice. Liberation, they claimed, is to be gained by correct action as well as knowledge. An external soul did exist, but the existence or non-existence of god was not particularly relevant to achieving liberation.

**Vedanta** The long-lasting influence of Mimamsa is that it provided the foundation for the Vedanta schools, which returned to the absolute authority of the Vedas. However, Vedanta shifted emphasis from ritual activity to spiritual activity, meditation, self-discipline and introspection. The three Vedanta sub-schools have dominated Indian thought and theology since the medieval period. The best-known is the non-dualist position (*advaita*), articulated by Sankara in the 8<sup>th</sup> c. CE. As its name suggests, this philosophy argues that reality is one and indivisible. In other words, while other thinkers had spoken of the soul/self (*atman*) and consciousness/reality (*brahman*), Sankara argued that they are in fact one and the same. A second Vedanta position, explained by Nathamuni (11<sup>th</sup> c. CE) and Ramanuja (12<sup>th</sup> c. CE), is called 'qualified non-dualism' (*visishtadvaita*) because it claims that the personal soul/self is not wholly submerged in *brahman*. The soul must maintain some distance in order for a worshipper to apprehend a deity, who itself contains physical attributes. The third and last Vedanta position is dualism (*dvaita*), as propounded by Madhvacharya (13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> c. CE), in which the soul and god exist independently.

### Heterodox schools

**Carvaka** The Carvaka school is an atheist philosophy, which influenced early Buddhism and Jainism. Several ancient strands of Indian philosophy, as we have seen, were atheistic, but this was more by default than by design. A deity, they reasoned, was irrelevant to their investigations. For Carvaka thinkers, however, the non-existence of god was a primary argument. Their only basis for knowledge, they claimed, was perception. In a famous example, they reasoned that smoke does not necessarily mean there is fire. In addition to this radical epistemology, Carvaka denied the existence of karma, the soul (*atman*) and the after-life. They went further and criticised the authority of the Vedas and Brahmin priests.

**Ajivika** Ajivika was another atheistic philosophy that developed at the same time as Carvaka and influenced Buddhism and Jainism. Although our knowledge of the Ajivika philosophy is limited to descriptions by its critics, it is clear that this was an explicitly heterodox challenge to Hinduism and Buddhism. Ajivikas were renunciants, who denied the existence of 'free-will' and believed in an iron law of determinism. Their epistemology was similar to the Vaisesika school in its idea that reality is composed of 'atoms,' but they accepted the idea that every living being has a soul/self (*atman*), as did Hinduism and Jainism. While the Ajivikas were influential in north India during the Mauryan Empire, they later became powerful in south India, up to about 1500 CE.

**Buddhism** Early Buddhism, as explained in ideas attributed to the historical Buddha, is an atheistic philosophy that also rejects the idea of a soul. It does, however, accept basic Hindu concepts such as karma and rebirth. It is essentially a materialistic view of existence that proposes an escape from the hard reality of suffering, in birth, life and death. In this respect, early Buddhism is more soteriology than epistemology. Later developments included a sophisticated theory of logic, language and metaphysics. Mahayana Buddhism (from about 100 CE onward) added new emphases, including the bodhisattva ideal of compassion, the theory of perfection and, famously, the doctrine of 'emptiness' that led to Zen.

**Jainism** Jainism, which arose at the same time as Buddhism, is dualistic and developed its own metaphysics based on the concept of the soul or *jiva*. Reality consists of individual souls and matter, which are completely separate from one another. Like Buddhism, however, Jainism is atheistic. Jain epistemology developed the novel idea of 'differential perception', that reality appears differently from different vantage points and that no single point of view is completely true. Along with Buddhism, Jainism promoted an ethics of non-violence and compassion for all living beings.

## Modern

Indian philosophy is studied in major universities all over the world, and has influenced important thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Tolstoy and Martin Luther King. Within India, a more popular understanding of Vedanta philosophy, especially the non-dualism position, was promoted by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), who also served as President of India. The Buddhist and Jain doctrine of non-violence was popularised through the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi.

## Discussion/questions

1. Of the ten schools of Indian philosophy surveyed in this essay, only one (Vedanta) is theistic. Others were avowedly atheistic or agnostic or considered the existence of god as irrelevant to the primary goal of liberation. Later, as a result of a pan-Indian devotionalist movement beginning about 500 CE, sections of both Buddhism and Jainism accepted the existence of gods and goddesses, but their philosophical traditions remain atheistic. How do these facts alter our image of Indian culture?
2. The legacy of ancient Indian atheism is evident today in various social and movements that challenge the authority of Brahmins and Hinduism. For example, the neo-Buddhist movement led by Dr Ambedkar (1891-1956) in the mid-twentieth century drew on Buddhism's critique of Hinduism in order to persuade low-caste Hindus to convert to Buddhism. A similar 'rationalist' movement led by E.V. Ramaswami Naicker during the same time based its principles on several heterodox philosophies.
3. Modern or popular Hinduism is largely consistent with the 'qualified non-dualism' school of Vedanta, which emerged in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. A study of the historical development of this school is essential to any understanding of contemporary Hindu beliefs and practices.

## Reading

- Bimal Krishna Matilal, *Epistemology, Logic and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis*(Oxford, 2005)
- Jonardon Ganeri, *Philosophy in Classical India: The Proper Work of Reason* (Routledge, 2001)
- J. N. Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2002)
- S. Radhakrishnan, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton, 1967)
- Piotr Balcerowicz, *Early Asceticism in India: Ājīvikism and Jainism* (Routledge, 2015)