

# INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

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**Overview** Although less well-known, Indian philosophy is the foundation upon which Indian religion stands. Indeed, modern-day Hinduism is more or less a refinement of ideas found in just one of several schools of classical philosophy, and Buddhism similarly evolved in its various forms through intense philosophical debates. Like all philosophy, Indian thinking is concerned with investigating truth, and while it did not develop certain fields (such as ethics and aesthetics), it excelled in others (such as ontology, epistemology and logic). The complexity 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. If we had to single out the primary strand of traditional Indian philosophy, it would not be theism but idealism. Atheism and materialism were also strong philosophical traditions.

## Prehistory

There is no evidence of philosophical thought during the prehistory period.

## Indus Valley Civilisation

Likewise, there is no evidence of philosophy in the Indus Valley Civilisation, although it is reasonable to assume that such a sophisticated culture did include speculation on logic and the nature of truth.

## Indo-Aryan Period

**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, life has three elements: the good, the potentially good or bad, and the bad. The perfect balance of these forces will result in liberation from the bonded state. There is no higher spiritual entity or deity.

## Classical Period

**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 the ‘practice’ of certain physical and mental exercises are also important techniques.

**Nyaya** Nyaya texts (c. 300-100 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.

**Vaisesika** The Vaisesika (‘particular’) school (c. 400-200 BCE) is closely associated with the Nyaya school, although it began somewhat earlier and developed two key differences. Vaisesika 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 (c. 100 BCE), 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.

**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, another atheistic philosophy that developed at the same time as Carvaka, was also influenced by 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.

**Theravada Buddhism** The underlying philosophical principle of early Buddhism (c. 500-100 BCE), or Theravada, is the ontological claim that all existence is impermanence. Everything is transient. This leads, in contrast to most Hindu schools of thought, to the theory of *an-atman*, literally 'no-soul.' Thus, there is no self, no personality, and no solid objects, only fleeting perceptions and moments. This foundational theory was refined later to include the idea that the universe is composed of five elements: form and matter, sensations, perceptions, psychic dispositions and consciousness. Despite this concession to the reality of sensations, the doctrine of impermanence remains intact because these five elements mix and shift constantly.

**Mahayana Buddhism** By the second century CE, another philosophical tradition had emerged within Buddhism. This was Mahayana ('The Great Way') Buddhism, sometimes called the 'northern school' because it is the form of Buddhism that spread north to Central Asia, Tibet, China and Japan. Mahayana itself has two divisions: Madhyamika ('Middle Doctrine') and the Vijnanavada ('Consciousness Doctrine'), sometimes called Yogacara. The Madhyamika school held that the phenomenal world had only a qualified reality. For example, if a monk with bad eyesight may think he sees a fly in his begging bowl, the fly is unreal but the perception of the fly is real. This school thus maintained the impermanence that was at the heart of early Buddhism, while still allowing for a practical acceptance of our feelings of things. In other words, we may still believe in the Buddha and his many manifestations. The Vijnanavada school, on the other hand, and similar to idealist philosophy in the West, took a more uncompromising stance on impermanence and refused to accept that anything outside our perceptions is real. For this reason, this school is also sometimes called the way of 'pure consciousness.'

### Early Postclassical Period

**Vedanta** The earlier Mimamsa school 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. Three Vedanta sub-schools have dominated Indian thought and theology since the medieval period. The earliest and best-known is the non-dualist or monism 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. Everything else, any perception of a separate deity or soul, was illusion or *maya*.

**Vajrayana Buddhism** Vajrayana, the third great tradition of Buddhism, marked a shift away from the esoteric speculations of Mahayana and toward an enactment of enlightenment. The word *vajra* means ‘thunderbolt’ or ‘diamond’ and refers to the permanent core of a human being, in contrast to the illusory ideas and perceptions he or she may possess. Vajrayana is also often called *mantra*-yana, because of its emphasis on the role of mantras in meditation to concentrate the mind in its pursuit of truth. Vajrayana combined the idealism and scepticism of early schools, and added a highly symbolic language of meditation, in order to create the original experience of the Buddha’s enlightenment.

### Late Postclassical Period

**Visishtadvaita** A second Vedanta position, expounded 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*. In other words, it rejects the argument of the *advaita* (non-dualism) school that the individual soul and the underlying consciousness (*brahman*) are one and the same. Instead, this school argues that the soul must maintain some distance from *brahman* in order for a worshipper to apprehend a deity, who itself contains physical attributes.

**Dvaita** The third and last Vedanta position is dualism (*dvaita*), as propounded by Madhvacharya (13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> c. CE). This school set out to refute the earlier *advaita* (non-dualist) school’s claim of uncompromising monism. Instead, Madhvacharya and other thinkers argued that the soul and god do exist independently, and this independence is what allows us to worship god outside ourselves. Although *dvaita* thinkers accept that there is illusion and transience in the world, they argue that this does not mean that all things are illusory or *maya*.

**New Nyaya** This Hindu school of thought developed in the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century CE as a merger of the earlier schools of Nyaya and Vaisesika. Thus it was called Navya Nyaya or ‘New Nyaya.’ Despite its name, Navya Nyāya incorporated classical Vaisesika metaphysics and classical Nyāya epistemology. The Navya Nyāya authors also developed a precise technical language through which many traditional philosophical problems could be clarified and resolved. This linguistic precision proved to be so versatile that they were employed, not just in philosophy, but in poetics, linguistics, legal theory, and other domains of medieval Indian thought. The foundational text of this school was Gaṅgeśa’s brilliant and innovative *Jewel of Reflection on the Truth* (*Tattvacintāmaṇi*) in the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE.

### Early Modern Period

**Theism** Hindu theistic philosophy underwent an intellectual ‘Sanskritisation’, that is, a reinterpretation in terms of earlier Vedanta philosophy. For example, Madhusudana Saraswati, a theologian in Benares, argued for a synthesis between the devotional and *advaita* (non-dualist) positions on the nature of god. Another scholar who achieved a similar reconciliation was Appaya, who wrote a long treatise justifying ritual worship in terms of non-dualism. Appaya maintained that the soul of the worshipper could join with the deity, who nevertheless had qualities. The ultimate goal of the Upanishads, enlightenment or moksha, was thus retained but deferred: an individual soul would not fully merge together until all souls had become liberated from the karmic cycle of life and death.

**Mughal** During his reign in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Emperor Akbar brought together a wide spectrum of philosophers in his court. Sufi, Shia, Sunni, Hindu, Buddhist, Jaina and Christian thinkers debated theories of existence and truth. However, the dominant strand in Akbar’s ‘new religion’ was Shia and in particular the idea that god had created a ‘divine light’ that was transmitted from generation to generation through individuals called ‘imams.’ The primary advocate of this idea was Abu’l Faz’l, who was part of Akbar’s court in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Faz’l was deeply influenced by Platonic philosophy and its concept of the ‘philosopher-king.’ Thus, theology became political philosophy because Faz’l held that the emperor was superior to Islamic law (*shari’a*), which upset orthodox scholars.

### 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Traditional Indian philosophy did not make any notable advances in this colonial century. Instead the principal intellectual impetus came from the encounter of university-educated Indians with the philosophy of the West. Through books and lectures, urban elites, who in centuries past might have become pundits, became acquainted with the empiricist thinking of Locke, the utilitarianism of Bentham and the political philosophy of Mill. Many of these ideas inspired the leaders of what is known as the Bengal Renaissance, such as Ram Mohun Roy.

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century

**Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan** Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) played a major role in the reinterpretation of Vedanta philosophy, especially the *advaita* (non-dualism) school. As a university professor, and later President of India, Radhakrishnan developed the speaking and writing skills to translate ancient, esoteric ideas into modern English. In particular, he was influenced by Hegel, whose idealist philosophy argued that human history can be traced as an evolution of consciousness, an idea that resonated with traditional Indian thought. At the end of Hegel's trajectory there is an Absolute, a rational endpoint of existence.

**Sri Aurobindo** Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), formerly Aurobindo Ghose, was a towering figure of 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian thought. He, too, was influenced by Hegel. A Bengali Brahmin, he was educated at a Christian School, and went on to become a poet, nationalist and philosopher. Drawing on Vedanta and Buddhist influences, he developed his own evolutionary philosophy, which held that yoga and meditation enabled people to rise through a series of stages, closer and closer to enlightenment. In the process, the terrestrial and material components of life would be transformed into pure consciousness or something he called the 'supermind.'

**N.V. Banerjee** (1901–81) made important contributions to this modern synthesis of Indian and western philosophical thinking. He was influenced by Heidegger rather than Hegel, especially in the German's concept of 'Being.' In *Language, Meaning and Persons* (1963), Banerjee examines the development of personhood from a bondage to freedom in a sort of communalism with others, which involves a consciousness free from the material world.

**Kalidas Bhattacharyya** Kalidas Bhattacharyya contributed to the study of logic and metaphysics in India. Through a number of closely-argued books in the decades after 1950, he presented his theory of science as a system of non-empirical elements that are first understood as empirical but later recognised as consciousness. In this respect, he continues the ancient Indian tradition of truth as non-material, but he also injected a note of 20<sup>th</sup> century scepticism in arguing that no one can actually comprehend the true nature of consciousness.

## Discussion/questions

1. Of the many schools of Indian philosophy surveyed in this essay, only the three types of Vedanta are 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. Impermanence is the central tenet of early Buddhism. Trace the origin of this concept in earlier Hindu thought and follow its legacy in later schools of philosophy.
3. The colonial encounter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century introduced India to the philosophies of the West. A fascinating example of the synthesis that emerged from this encounter is the thought of Sri Aurobindo. At first he appears to be a typical Hindu sage or ascetic, but reading his works (especially *The Life Divine*) reveals the undercurrents of western influences.

## 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)  
Jonardon Ganeri, *The Lost Age of Reason: Philosophy in Early Modern India 1450-1700*, Oxford University Press, 2011  
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)