

## INDIAN PHILOSOPHY – Ancient Period

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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.

**Vaiseshika** The Vaiseshika ('particular') school (c. 400-200 BCE) 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 (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 Vaiseshika 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.'