The Infinite
An International Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 3 | Issue 9 | September 2026
ISSN: 3048-9539 (Online)
Website: www.theinfinite.co.in

# The Architecture of Indian Philosophy: Epistemological Foundations, Metaphysical Systems, and Axiological Ideals

**Gautam Mishra**

Advocate, Supreme Court of India, New Delhi

**ARTICLE DETAILS**

**Research Paper**

**Keywords :**

***Indian Philosophy, Bharatiya Darśana, Epistemology, Pramāṇa, Metaphysics, Āstika and Nāstika, Jainism, Buddhism, Sāṃkhya-Yoga, Nyāya, Vedānta, Mokṣa.***

**ABSTRACT**

*Indian philosophy, classically designated as Darśana, encompasses a diverse range of traditions concerned with the nature of reality, knowledge, value, and human flourishing. The term darśana is conventionally associated with "seeing" or "vision," and many Indian philosophical traditions connect philosophical understanding with a transformative orientation toward freedom from suffering and bondage. This paper examines the principal classical traditions through their epistemological, metaphysical, and axiological commitments. For analytical convenience, it discusses the three major non-Vedic traditions—Cārvāka, Jainism, and Buddhism—and the six systems conventionally grouped as āstika: Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta. The paper compares their theories of valid cognition (pramāṇa), accounts of reality (tattva and padārtha), theories of action and moral causation, and conceptions of liberation. Particular attention is given to Jain anekāntavāda and syādvāda, Buddhist dependent origination and non-self, Nyāya epistemic realism, Vaiśeṣika ontology, Sāṃkhya dualism, Pātañjala Yoga, Mīmāṃsā theories of knowledge and Vedic authority, and the major Vedānta interpretations of Brahman, self, and world. The paper also considers the contemporary relevance of these traditions for debates in epistemic pluralism, philosophy of mind, ethics, and comparative philosophy. Rather than treating classical Indian systems as anticipations of modern*

*science or as simple equivalents of Western philosophical positions, the paper argues for historically sensitive comparison and recognizes the distinctive conceptual resources of Indian philosophical thought.*

## 1. Introduction: Conceptual Foundations and the Idea of Darśana

The intellectual traditions of India developed a rich philosophical vocabulary that cannot be reduced to the history of the Western term "philosophy." One of the most important indigenous designations is darśana, derived from the Sanskrit verbal root dṛś, "to see." In philosophical contexts, darśana can signify a considered vision or standpoint concerning reality and its proper apprehension. Several Indian traditions therefore connect philosophical inquiry with a transformation in cognition and conduct, although the precise goal and method differ substantially from one school to another.

Another important term is ānvīkṣikī, associated with systematic critical inquiry. Kauṭilya's Arthāśāstra famously describes ānvīkṣikī as a discipline that illuminates other sciences and assists practical deliberation. This intellectual heritage demonstrates that Indian philosophy included rigorous debate, analysis of inference, semantics, ontology, and theories of knowledge alongside contemplative and soteriological concerns.

It is important, however, not to homogenize the Indian traditions. Cārvāka rejects the religious-soteriological framework accepted by most other systems; Jainism, Buddhism, Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and the Vedānta traditions differ substantially regarding self, causation, language, Vedic authority, God, and liberation. The unity of Indian philosophy is therefore better understood as a family resemblance created by shared intellectual questions and sustained traditions of debate rather than as a single philosophical doctrine.

### 1.1 Salient Characteristics of Bharatiya Darśana

- **Existential and practical orientation:** Many Indian systems connect philosophical inquiry with the problem of human limitation, suffering, bondage, or the attainment of a desirable form of life. The diagnosis and remedy, however, differ: Buddhism emphasizes suffering and craving; Sāṃkhya emphasizes discriminative knowledge; Yoga emphasizes the cessation of mental fluctuations; Nyāya links liberation with true cognition; and Mīmāṃsā gives central importance to dharma and Vedic injunctions.

- **Moral causation and karma:** Karma is a major feature of Jain, Buddhist, and several Brahmanical traditions, though its metaphysical explanation varies. It should therefore not be presented as a single universally identical doctrine across all Indian schools.
- **Ignorance and erroneous cognition:** Several traditions identify ignorance, misapprehension, or defective cognition as a central source of bondage. The proposed corrective differs considerably, ranging from discriminative knowledge and self-realization to insight into dependent origination and the cessation of craving.
- **Liberation as a major philosophical concern:** Mokṣa, mukti, apavarga, kaivalya, and nirvāṇa denote different conceptions of freedom or release. They should not be treated as exact synonyms because the underlying metaphysical and psychological accounts differ.
- **Dialectical and commentarial methodology:** Indian philosophical literature developed sustained traditions of pūrvapakṣa, critique, and siddhānta. Philosophers frequently stated rival positions before defending their own, producing an argumentative culture of extraordinary sophistication.

## 2. Canonical Classification: Āstika and Nāstika Traditions

The conventional classification of Indian philosophical schools into āstika and nāstika should not be equated simply with theism and atheism. In many standard philosophical contexts, the distinction concerns acceptance or rejection of the authority of the Vedas. Consequently, Sāṃkhya and Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā can be classified as āstika even though their conceptions of God differ from theism in other traditions. Likewise, the classification of Buddhism, Jainism, and Cārvāka as nāstika primarily reflects their rejection of Vedic authority rather than a single shared position on God.

The classification is also a historical and doxographical convention. Different texts and authors use the terms in somewhat different ways, and the six āstika systems themselves are internally diverse.

## 3. The Nāstika Traditions: Materialism, Pluralism, and Anti-Essentialism

### 3.1 Cārvāka (Lokāyata): Materialism and Perception

The Cārvāka or Lokāyata tradition is generally reconstructed as a materialist and strongly empiricist school. Its original literature has not survived in complete form, and much of what is known about it comes from accounts written by opponents. Accordingly, claims about Cārvāka doctrine should be stated with appropriate historical caution.

Cārvāka is commonly associated with the view that perception (pratyakṣa) is the primary, and in many reconstructions the only, independently reliable pramāṇa. It criticized inference when inference was used

to establish unobservable entities or universal conclusions without adequate justification. The traditional Cārvāka critique of Vedic authority, afterlife, rebirth, and an immaterial soul forms an important strand of Indian philosophical skepticism and naturalism.

Cārvāka accounts of consciousness are commonly interpreted as emergentist or materialist: consciousness is explained in relation to the organization of material elements rather than as an independently existing spiritual substance. The famous analogy involving intoxicating properties emerging from fermentation illustrates this explanatory strategy. Because the original Cārvāka texts are lost, however, detailed claims about its social ethics or a systematic theory of utilitarianism should be made cautiously rather than treated as securely established.

### 3.2 Jainism: Pluralism, Anekāntavāda and Syādvāda

Jain philosophy presents a realist and pluralist account of reality. It distinguishes jīva, the conscious principle, from ajīva, which includes non-conscious categories such as matter (pudgala), space (ākāśa), time (kāla), and the principles conventionally called dharma and adharma. Jain metaphysics holds that reality is characterized by permanence in one respect and change in another: substances persist while their modes undergo transformation.

Jain epistemology is especially associated with anekāntavāda, the doctrine that reality possesses multiple aspects and cannot be adequately captured by an absolute assertion from a single standpoint. Syādvāda provides a disciplined method of conditional predication, conventionally expressed through sevenfold predication (saptabhaṅgī). The seven forms qualify statements according to a standpoint or respect in which they are made.

The comparison between Jain conditional predication and modern many-valued or modal logics can be intellectually fruitful, but it should be presented as a comparative analogy rather than as a claim that Jain thinkers historically anticipated modern formal logic or quantum theory. The historical contexts, logical aims, and formal systems are different.

Jain soteriology explains bondage through karmic matter associated with the jīva and liberation through the stopping of karmic influx (saṃvara) and the elimination of accumulated karma (nirjarā), culminating in the liberated state of the perfected soul.

### 3.3 Buddhism: Dependent Origination, Impermanence and Non-Self

Buddhist philosophy begins from a diagnosis of suffering and its conditions. The Four Noble Truths identify suffering (duḥkha), its origin, its cessation, and the path leading to cessation. The Buddhist Middle Way rejects both crude eternalism and annihilationism and emphasizes conditionality.

Pratītyasamutpāda, or dependent origination, expresses the principle that phenomena arise in dependence upon conditions. The doctrine should not be reduced to a single formula of physical causation; it has important psychological, ethical, and existential dimensions.

The doctrine of impermanence (anitya/anicca) emphasizes the conditioned and changing character of phenomena. Certain Buddhist Abhidharma traditions developed sophisticated theories of momentariness, but the phrase "mathematical instant" is inappropriate as a general characterization because it imports a modern conceptual framework into a diverse historical debate.

Anātman or anatta rejects the conception of an eternal, independent, unchanging self. Buddhist analyses of the person commonly employ the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness—to explain personal experience without positing a permanent soul.

Buddhist philosophical traditions subsequently developed diverse approaches, including Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, Madhyamaka, and Yogācāra. The older label "Hīnayāna" is avoided here because it is historically polemical and is not an appropriate umbrella term for the non-Mahāyāna schools. Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka emphasizes śūnyatā, while Yogācāra develops sophisticated analyses of consciousness and cognition. These traditions should be studied on their own terms rather than treated as straightforward equivalents of modern phenomenology or idealism.

## 4. The Āstika Traditions: The Six Classical Systems

The six systems conventionally grouped as ṣaḍ-darśana are Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta. They are often presented in pairs because of substantial historical interaction and later syntheses, although each system possesses its own textual and doctrinal history.

### 4.1 Nyāya–Vaiśeṣika: Logic, Epistemology and Realism

Nyāya, traditionally associated with Akṣapāda Gautama, developed a rigorous theory of knowledge, inference, debate, and error. Classical Nyāya recognizes four principal pramāṇas: perception (pratyakṣa), inference (anumāna), comparison (upamāna), and verbal testimony (śabda). Its sixteen categories (ṣoḍaśa-padārtha) provide a framework for philosophical inquiry, including means of knowledge, objects of debate, fallacies, and the means to liberation.

The Nyāya five-membered argument is conventionally expressed through pratijñā, hetu, udāharaṇa, upanaya, and nigamana. It is better understood as a structured inferential argument than as a simple equivalent of the modern Western syllogism.

Vaiśeṣika, associated with Kaṇāda, developed a realist ontology organized around categories (padārtha). The classical system is usually presented as recognizing six categories—substance (dravya), quality (guṇa), action (karma), universal (sāmānya), particularity (viśeṣa), and inherence (samavāya). Later Vaiśeṣika thinkers incorporated absence or non-existence (abhāva) as a seventh category. Its atomistic theory (paramāṇuvāda) constitutes one of the most elaborate premodern Indian theories of matter. It is historically significant in its own conceptual context and should not be described as being "ahead of modern Western science," because the two traditions operate within fundamentally different explanatory frameworks.

## 4.2 Sāṃkhya–Yoga: Dualism and the Discipline of Mind

Sāṃkhya, classically associated with Kapila and systematized in Īśvarakṛṣṇa's Sāṃkhyakārikā, distinguishes two fundamental realities: puruṣa and prakṛti. Puruṣa is pure consciousness, while prakṛti is the primordial material principle constituted by the three guṇas—sattva, rajas, and tamas. The system explains cosmological manifestation through the evolution of prakṛti and its tattvas.

The familiar enumeration presents prakṛti together with twenty-three evolutes, producing the traditional framework of twenty-five tattvas when the plurality of puruṣas is included. Bondage is explained through the failure to discriminate between puruṣa and prakṛti, while liberation (kaivalya) is associated with discriminative knowledge (viveka-khyāti).

Pātañjala Yoga shares important metaphysical commitments with Sāṃkhya but develops a distinctive practical and psychological program. The Yoga Sūtras define yoga in terms of the restraint or cessation of the fluctuations of consciousness (citta-vṛtti-nirodha). Patañjali also introduces Īśvara as a special puruṣa. The eight limbs—yama, niyama, āsana, prāṇāyāma, pratyāhāra, dhāraṇā, dhyāna, and samādhi—form an integrated ethical, bodily, attentional, and meditative discipline culminating in advanced states of concentration and liberation.

### 4.3 Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta: Vedic Hermeneutics and Metaphysical Inquiry

Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā, associated with Jaimini and developed in the commentarial traditions of Śabara, Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, and Prabhākara, places central emphasis on dharma as disclosed through Vedic injunctions. The school develops sophisticated theories of language, interpretation, cognition, and the

authority of the Veda. Its doctrine of the Veda as apauruṣeya—literally, not the product of a person—should be understood within its own theory of linguistic and scriptural authority.

Mīmāṃsā philosophers made major contributions to theories of the validity of cognition. The doctrine commonly described as svataḥ-prāmāṇya holds that cognition is intrinsically valid unless defeated by appropriate conditions or subsequent cognition. Prabhākara and Kumārila differ in important details concerning epistemology and the number of pramāṇas they recognize.

Vedānta, rooted in the Upaniṣads, Bhagavad Gītā, and Brahma Sūtras, investigates Brahman, the self, the world, and liberation. The tradition developed several influential sub-schools, among which Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, and Dvaita are especially prominent.

### 4.3.1 Advaita Vedānta

Advaita Vedānta, most influentially associated with Śaṅkarācārya, maintains the non-duality of ultimate reality. Brahman is the ultimate reality, and the individual self is ultimately non-different from Brahman. Advaita employs the concepts of māyā and avidyā to explain why non-duality is not ordinarily recognized. The empirical world is not adequately characterized simply as a nonexistent "illusion"; the technical concept of mithyā indicates a status that is dependent and not absolutely real in the same sense as Brahman.

The celebrated expression "brahma satyam jagan mithyā…" is a traditional summary of Advaita doctrine and should not be presented without qualification as a verbatim quotation from a specific work of Śaṅkara. Liberation is associated with knowledge (jñāna) of the identity of Ātman and Brahman.

### 4.3.2 Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta

Viśiṣṭādvaita, associated with Rāmānuja, understands Brahman as qualified non-dual reality and identifies Brahman with Nārāyaṇa. Individual selves (cit) and matter (acit) are real and stand in a body–self relationship (śarīra–śarīrin-bhāva) with Brahman. Liberation involves loving devotion, knowledge, and surrender, and does not amount to the dissolution of individual identity into an undifferentiated absolute.

### 4.3.3 Dvaita Vedānta

Dvaita Vedānta, associated with Madhva, defends an enduring distinction between God, individual souls, and matter. Its doctrine of five differences (pañca-bheda) emphasizes real distinctions, and liberation is understood in relation to devotion to and grace of the supreme Lord, identified with Viṣṇu.

## 5. Epistemological Paradigms: The Pramāṇa-Śāstra Debate

One of the most remarkable achievements of classical Indian philosophy is the development of detailed theories of valid cognition (pramāṇa). Different schools disagree about which pramāṇas are independent and valid, and these disagreements are themselves central to Indian epistemology. The six pramāṇas discussed below are not accepted by every school.

- **Pratyakṣa (Perception):** Direct cognition associated with appropriate contact between sense faculties and objects. Different schools analyze its structure and stages differently; the familiar distinction between indeterminate and determinate perception is particularly important in Nyāya discussions.
- **Anumāna (Inference):** Knowledge mediated through a reason (hetu) connected by vyāpti, or invariable concomitance, with what is to be established (sādhya). Nyāya distinguishes inference for oneself and inference formulated for another.
- **Upamāna (Comparison):** A means of knowing the relation between a word and its referent through an appropriate comparison, classically illustrated by recognition of the gavaya through a prior description and subsequent similarity.
- **Śabda (Verbal Testimony):** Knowledge arising from reliable linguistic testimony. Different schools offer different accounts of authority; Mīmāṃsā gives the Veda a distinctive status, while Nyāya emphasizes trustworthy testimony.
- **Arthāpatti (Postulation):** Accepted by Mīmāṃsā and Advaita, this is a mode of cognition used to explain otherwise apparently incompatible known facts by positing an explanatory condition.
- **Anupalabdhi (Non-apprehension):** Accepted as an independent pramāṇa by Kumārila's Mīmāṃsā and Advaita Vedānta, especially for cognition of absence. Other schools analyze absence differently.

## 6. Comparative Framework of Major Classical Traditions

| School | Broad Classification | Major Pramāṇas | Central Orientation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cārvāka | Nāstika | Primarily perception | Materialism and critique of supra-sensible claims |
| Jainism | Nāstika | Traditionally perception, inference and testimony, with | Pluralist realism; anekāntavāda; karmic liberation |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | broader epistemological classifications | |
| Buddhism | Nāstika | Varies by tradition; Dignāga-Dharmakīrti traditions emphasize perception and inference | Dependent origination, impermanence, non-self and liberation |
| Nyāya | Āstika | Perception, inference, comparison, testimony | Realism, logic, epistemic justification and apavarga |
| Vaiśeṣika | Āstika | Classically perception and inference | Realist ontology and atomism |
| Sāṃkhya | Āstika | Perception, inference and reliable testimony | Dualism of puruṣa and prakṛti; kaivalya |
| Yoga | Āstika | Perception, inference and testimony | Meditative discipline and kaivalya |
| Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā | Āstika | Varies by sub-school; includes perception, inference, testimony, comparison, postulation and/or non-apprehension | Dharma, Vedic interpretation and cognition |
| Advaita Vedānta | Āstika | Six commonly accepted pramāṇas | Non-dual Brahman and liberation through knowledge |

## 7. Contemporary Horizons: Indian Philosophical Insights in Global Discourse

### 7.1 Philosophy of Mind and Consciousness

Indian philosophical traditions provide sophisticated alternative models for thinking about consciousness, selfhood, cognition, and mental transformation. Sāṃkhya distinguishes puruṣa from the cognitive and material processes of prakṛti; Advaita analyzes consciousness as fundamental to the possibility of knowledge; and Buddhist traditions offer detailed analyses of experience without positing an eternal self. These approaches can contribute to contemporary philosophy of mind, but they should not be described as direct solutions to the modern "hard problem" of consciousness. Their conceptual frameworks arose in different intellectual contexts and address different explanatory and soteriological questions.

Comparative engagement with contemporary cognitive science and philosophy of mind may nevertheless be productive, especially concerning first-person experience, attention, self-models, meditation, and the relationship between cognition and subjective experience. Such engagement is strongest when similarities and differences are made explicit rather than when ancient doctrines are treated as predictions of modern science.

### 7.2 Epistemic Pluralism and Democratic Dialogue

Jain anekāntavāda and syādvāda offer valuable resources for thinking about intellectual humility and the limits of one-sided claims. Their contemporary relevance lies not in the assertion that all viewpoints are equally true, but in the recognition that complex objects may require multiple qualified perspectives. This can enrich discussions of pluralism, disagreement, dialogue, and responsible public reasoning.

At the same time, the historical Jain doctrines should not be converted into a simple modern political theory. Their ethical and epistemological foundations are embedded in a wider account of reality, karma, non-violence, and liberation.

### 7.3 Indian Logic and Contemporary Epistemology

Nyāya theories of inference, testimony, defeaters, error, and epistemic justification remain particularly fertile areas for comparative philosophy. Likewise, Mīmāṃsā discussions of linguistic meaning, sentence cognition, and intrinsic validity have attracted sustained scholarly interest. Buddhist epistemologists such as Dignāga and Dharmakīrti developed influential accounts of perception, inference, exclusion, and conceptual cognition. These traditions demonstrate that Indian philosophy cannot be reduced to mystical or spiritual speculation; it includes highly developed analytic and argumentative traditions.

## 8. Conclusion

The intellectual history of Indian philosophy is marked by both continuity and profound disagreement. Cārvāka naturalism, Jain pluralism, Buddhist anti-essentialism, Nyāya realism, Vaiśeṣika ontology, Sāṃkhya dualism, Yoga's meditative discipline, Mīmāṃsā hermeneutics, and the diverse Vedānta traditions constitute distinct responses to questions concerning knowledge, reality, value, and human freedom.

A historically responsible account should neither dismiss these traditions as pre-modern speculation nor portray them as straightforward anticipations of modern science. Their significance lies in the conceptual originality of the questions they asked, the sophistication of their argumentative methods, and the depth with which they connected epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and the transformation of human life.

Indian philosophical traditions therefore remain relevant to contemporary comparative philosophy, particularly in discussions of consciousness, cognition, epistemic justification, pluralism, ethics, language, and theories of liberation. Their enduring contribution is best appreciated through careful comparison that respects both their internal diversity and their historical specificity.

## 9. References and Classical Bibliography


- The Principal Upaniṣads, translated by S. Radhakrishnan, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1953.
- Bādarāyaṇa. The Brahma Sūtras, with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya, translated by George Thibaut, Sacred Books of the East, Vols. 34 and 38, Oxford University Press, 1890.
- Īśvarakṛṣṇa. Sāṃkhyakārikā, with traditional commentaries; English translations and studies by Ganganatha Jha and later scholars.
- Patañjali. Yoga Sūtras, with the Bhāṣya of Vyāsa; English translations and scholarly editions, including Swami Hariharananda Aranya, University of Calcutta.
- Gautama. Nyāya Sūtras, with Vātsyāyana's Bhāṣya; English translation by Ganganatha Jha, Motilal Banarsidass.
- Nāgārjuna. Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, translated by Jay L. Garfield, Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli. Indian Philosophy, Vols. I–II, Oxford University Press.
- Dasgupta, Surendranath. A History of Indian Philosophy, Vols. I–V, Cambridge University Press.
- Hiriyanna, M. Outlines of Indian Philosophy, George Allen & Unwin.

- Chatterjee, Satischandra, and Dhirendramohan Datta. An Introduction to Indian Philosophy, University of Calcutta.
- Sharma, Chandradhar. A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy, Motilal Banarsidass.
- Potter, Karl H., ed. Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies, Motilal Banarsidass and Princeton University Press.
- Matilal, Bimal Krishna. Epistemology, Logic, and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis, Mouton.
- Matilal, Bimal Krishna. Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge, Clarendon Press, 1986.
- Mohanty, Jitendra Nath. Reason and Tradition in Indian Thought, Clarendon Press, 1992.
- Ganeri, Jonardon. Philosophy in Classical India: The Proper Work of Reason, Routledge, 2001.
- Siderits, Mark. Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction, Ashgate, 2007.