

# The Origin of Indian Philosophical Thought

**Dr. Chidambar H. Takkalaki**

Guest Faculty Department of Sanskrit, Karnatak University, Dharwad – 580001

## ABSTRACT

Indian Philosophy encompasses various traditions that originated in the Indian Subcontinent in exploring the fundamental questions about Satya (reality), Jnana (knowledge), Naitikate (ethics) and Moksha (liberation). These philosophies are categorized into Astika and Nastika (orthodox & Heterodox Schools) based on their acceptance or rejection of the Vedic authority.

Indian philosophical thought is among the oldest and most continuous intellectual traditions in the world. Its origins stretch back several millennia, developing through oral traditions, sacred texts, ritual practices, social institutions, and reflective inquiry into the nature of reality, self, knowledge, ethics, and liberation. Unlike philosophy in the narrow Western academic sense, Indian philosophy emerged as an integrated way of life, where metaphysical speculation, ethical discipline, spiritual practice, and social order were closely interconnected.

The origin of Indian philosophical thought cannot be attributed to a single thinker, school, or historical moment; rather, it evolved gradually through a long process of questioning human existence and the cosmos. The early Indian thinkers were deeply concerned with fundamental questions: Who am I? What is the ultimate reality? What is the nature of suffering? How can one attain freedom from bondage? These questions gave rise to a rich and diverse philosophical tradition that includes both orthodox (Āstika) and heterodox (Nāstika) systems. To understand the origin of Indian philosophical thought, it is necessary to examine the historical, cultural, religious, and intellectual contexts from which it emerged.

**Keywords:** Philosophy, Astika and Nastika, etymological, autonomous system, Vedanta Philosophy and Prastanatraya

## INTRODUCTION

The etymological meaning of the word Philosophy is the friendship or love of wisdom. As far as western philosophy is concerned, this is true. The Sanskrit equivalent to the word philosophy. As Darshan Conveys both true knowledge and the means of knowledge. In Indian philosophy, this knowledge does not mean the empirical knowledge. but one that leads to Moksha (Liberation). All the philosophical systems in India seek the liberated State. This search after which the true knowledge which leads to liberation

made the thinker search one's own self and his relation to the cosmos, gave rise to the systems of thought in India.

## Historical and Cultural Background

### The Indus Valley Civilization

The roots of Indian philosophical thought can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization (c. 2500–1500 BCE). Archaeological findings from sites such as Harappa and Mohenjo-daro suggest a highly organized society with urban planning, ritual practices, and symbolic representations. Although no philosophical texts from this period have been deciphered, seals depicting meditative postures, ritual bathing structures like the Great Bath, and symbolic motifs indicate early spiritual and religious tendencies. These elements later found expression in Indian philosophical and religious ideas such as purification, meditation, and cosmic order.

While it would be incorrect to directly equate Indus Valley practices with later philosophical doctrines, it is reasonable to assume that early reflections on nature, life, and ritual laid the foundation for subsequent developments in Indian thought.

The significations of Indian philosophy may be traced in the Vedas the oldest literary monument of Indian culture and one among the earliest documents of human mind. According to Nehru, the early Indian thoughts influenced the later Philosophies, not only in India but in Greece, Iran and Christianity of that time. But the Indian Philosophy, being an autonomous system, has independantly developed practically unaffected by external influences. In India philosophy is a way of life. The Indian systems of thought conveyed philosophical as well as religious values.

The Indian mind, being independent in thought gave rise to several philosophical systems. Traditionally, Indian philosophy is divided into two groups first one is Astika Darshan another one is Nastika darshan(Orthodox group and Heterodox). The Astika darshanas accept the Vedas as authority where as the Nastika darshanas do not owe any allegiance to the Vedas.

## The Vedic Period: The Earliest Philosophical Expressions

### The Vedas as the Source of Early Thought

The most significant and explicit origin of Indian philosophical thought is found in the Vedas, the oldest sacred texts of India, composed between approximately 1500 and 500 BCE. The Vedas—R̥gveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda, and Atharvaveda—are primarily collections of hymns, rituals, and prayers. At

first glance, they appear religious rather than philosophical. However, embedded within these hymns are profound philosophical insights into the nature of reality, cosmic order (*ṛta*), and the relationship between humans and the universe.

The *R̥gveda*, the earliest of the Vedas, contains hymns that question the origin of the universe itself. The famous *Nāsadīya Sūkta* (Creation Hymn) expresses philosophical skepticism and wonder by asking how the universe came into existence and whether even the gods know its origin. Such questioning marks the beginning of speculative thought in India.

### Concept of *Ṛta*

One of the most important philosophical ideas in the Vedic period is *ṛta*, the cosmic order that governs both natural phenomena and moral law. *Ṛta* represents the harmony underlying the universe, ensuring the regularity of seasons, the movement of celestial bodies, and ethical conduct among humans. This concept later evolved into *dharma*, a central idea in Indian philosophy encompassing duty, righteousness, and moral order.

The Astika darshanas are generally known as the six systems of Philosophy. They are Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Poorvamimamsa and Uttaramimamsa (Vedanta). The Nastika darshan are Lokāyata (Charvaka), Buddhism, and Jainism. Among these systems, Buddhism was recognised as a world religion and system of thought. But, later it declined in India, though it was originated in India.

Among the six systems of philosophy, Vedanta acquired the most prominent place among modern thinkers - both Indian and western. It became the representative philosophy of India. As remarked by C. Rajagopalachari, Vedanta is the living philosophy of India, a part of the mental structure of Indians.

Vedanta is the philosophy of the Upanishads. Upanishad advises man to know the self through scriptures, rational thinking and meditation. The Vedic literature from the foundation of the Indian culture. The word Vedanta itself denotes the teachings of Upanishads, because Upanishads form the last portion of the Vedas. Even the heterodox systems like Buddhism cannot deny their roots in the Upanishads. Buddhism was indebted to the Upanishads to a great extent for some of its basic doctrines and moral tenets. Nehru quotes the words of Bloomfield. "There is no important form of Hindu thought, heterodox Buddhism included, which is not rooted in the Upanishads.

"Vedanta, being the living Philosophy of India. Its regarded with great respects by the great thinkers. Max Muller says The Upanishads are the source of Vedanta Philosophy, in which human speculation seems to have reached its very acme. The prevalence of Vedanta thought can be found in various forms of literature. Such as the epics, lyrics, drama etc. The teachers of modern age like Sri Ramkrishna and Swami

Vivekananda, have shown that Vedanta includes and implies all Stages and Varieties of human experience and Knowledge.

### Transition from Ritualism to Speculation: The Upanishadic Revolution

#### From Karma to Jñāna

As Vedic thought evolved, dissatisfaction arose with the excessive emphasis on ritual sacrifices (*karmakāṇḍa*). This dissatisfaction led to a more inward-looking and reflective approach, culminating in the composition of the Upanishads (c. 800–300 BCE). The Upanishads mark a decisive shift from ritualism to philosophical inquiry and are considered the foundational texts of Indian philosophy.

The Upanishads focus on knowledge (*jñāna*) rather than ritual action as the means to liberation (*mokṣa*). They explore the nature of ultimate reality (*Brahman*), the inner self (*Ātman*), and the relationship between the two. The famous Upanishadic declaration "Tat Tvam Asi" (That Thou Art) encapsulates the core philosophical insight that the individual self and the universal reality are essentially one.

### Key Philosophical Concepts

The Upanishads introduced several fundamental concepts that shaped Indian philosophy:

- **Brahman:** The ultimate, infinite, and unchanging reality underlying the universe.
- **Ātman:** The inner self or soul, identical with Brahman in its true nature.
- **Samsāra:** The cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.
- **Karma:** The law of moral causation governing actions and their consequences.
- **Mokṣa:** Liberation from *samsāra* through self-knowledge.

These ideas form the metaphysical and ethical core of Indian philosophical thought.

Though the Upanishad teachings are regarded as Vedanta generally, the system of Vedanta has many sub-divisions. It can broadly be classified into two- absolutistic and theistic. This classification is made due to the concept of Brahman in each system. To the absolutist, Brahman is an impersonal principle and to the theist Brahman on a personal God. Shankaracharya's (788-820 AD) Advaita doctrines represent the absolutistic school and the schools of Ramanujacharya (1017-1137 AD) and Madvaacharya (1238-1317 AD) are the important ones among theistic Schools.

Upanishads are the source books for all these Systems of Vedanta, since the Upanishads are not the composition of a single hand, diverse kinds of thoughts can be formed scattered in them. The later system-builders worked them out in a systematic manner. As pointed out by R.D. Ranade Upanishads do not advocate only one single thought. The roots of various Philosophies like Buddhist and Jain philosophy,

Saankhya, and yoga, mimamsa, Dvaita, Advaita and Visitadvaita can be traced in the Upanishads. So each interpreter could make the text in favour of his own doctrine. Among the various interpretations of the Upanishads, Shankara's interpretation acquired wide reputation and hence, the system of Shankara has become prominent among the schools of Vedanta. Next to it came the thoughts of Ramanuja and Madhva. While Shankaracharya interpreted them in a monistic manner, the interpretation of Ramanuja and Madhva were theistic. Since the Upanishads are the treasures of diversified thoughts, none of these systems can claim to be superior to the others.

### **Social and Intellectual Factors in the Development of Philosophy**

#### **The Role of the Guru–Śiṣya Tradition**

Indian philosophy originated and developed largely through oral transmission in the guru–śiṣya (teacher–student) tradition. Philosophical knowledge was imparted through dialogue, questioning, and direct experience rather than written treatises alone. This method encouraged critical inquiry, introspection, and personal realization, distinguishing Indian philosophy from purely speculative systems.

#### **The Influence of Social Change**

The later Vedic period witnessed significant social and economic changes, including urbanization, the rise of new social classes, and questioning of rigid ritual and caste hierarchies. These changes created an environment conducive to philosophical debate and experimentation. Thinkers began to challenge traditional authority and explore alternative paths to truth and liberation.

### **Emergence of Heterodox Schools (Nāstika Traditions)**

#### **Buddhism and Jainism**

Around the 6th century BCE, heterodox philosophical systems such as Buddhism and Jainism emerged, rejecting the authority of the Vedas. These traditions represent an important phase in the origin and diversification of Indian philosophical thought.

- **Buddhism**, founded by Gautama Buddha, emphasized the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, impermanence (anicca), non-self (anattā), and the cessation of suffering (nirvāṇa). Buddhist philosophy introduced rigorous logical analysis and psychological insight.
- **Jainism**, founded by Mahāvīra, focused on non-violence (ahimsā), self-discipline, and liberation through purification of the soul. Jain philosophy developed a unique theory of reality known as *anekāntavāda* (many-sidedness of truth).

These systems enriched Indian philosophy by broadening its ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical horizons.

### **The Systematization of Orthodox Schools (Āstika Darśanas)**

Between 200 BCE and 500 CE, Indian philosophical thought was systematized into six orthodox schools, collectively known as the Śaḍ-Darśanas:

1. **Nyāya** – logic and epistemology
2. **Vaiśeṣika** – atomistic metaphysics
3. **Sāṃkhya** – dualism of consciousness and matter
4. **Yoga** – practical discipline for liberation
5. **Mīmāṃsā** – interpretation of Vedic rituals
6. **Vedānta** – metaphysics based on the Upanishads

Each school offered a distinct approach to understanding reality, knowledge, and liberation, demonstrating the pluralistic nature of Indian philosophical thought.

### **Distinctive Features of Early Indian Philosophy**

Indian philosophical thought, from its origin, exhibits several distinctive features:

- **Spiritual Orientation:** Philosophy is closely tied to the pursuit of liberation.
- **Practical Emphasis:** Theory is inseparable from practice and ethical living.
- **Pluralism and Tolerance:** Multiple viewpoints coexist and engage in dialogue.
- **Continuity:** A continuous tradition spanning thousands of years.

These characteristics reflect the holistic vision that shaped Indian philosophy from its earliest beginnings. Along with the Upanishads, the 'Brahmasutras' of Badarayana and Bhagavadgita are regarded as the source book of Vedanta philosophy. These three texts collectively known as "Prasthanatraya". As the Prasthanatraya is regarded as the foundation stone of Vedanta philosophy, the exponents of each system thought it necessary to seek support from the books for establishing their System. Hence they paid special attention in interpreting them in accordance with their Philosophy.

### **CONCLUSION**

The origin of Indian philosophical thought is a complex and dynamic process rooted in ancient cultural, religious, and intellectual traditions. Beginning with early ritualistic and mythological ideas in the Vedic period, Indian philosophy gradually evolved into a profound system of speculative and practical inquiry through the Upanishads, heterodox movements, and classical schools. Its central concern has always been the understanding of reality, the self, and the path to liberation from suffering.

Rather than being confined to abstract speculation, Indian philosophy emerged as a way of life, integrating knowledge, action, devotion, and meditation. The richness and diversity of its origins continue to influence contemporary philosophical, religious, and

spiritual thought, making Indian philosophy a timeless and universal intellectual heritage.

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