



EXPLORING THE CONCEPT OF THE SELF IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF METAPHYSICAL AND ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

Raju Bachhar

Philosophy

Supervisor Name

Dr. Ashok Kumar

Asian International University, Imphal, Manipur

Abstract

The notion of Self or Ātman has been one of the major ideas in Indian philosophy which has influenced various aspects of philosophical discussion such as consciousness, identity, ethics, and moksha (liberation). While being thoroughly discussed within individual schools, comparative consideration including both metaphysical and ethical aspects has not been paid much attention. Thus, the current study presents a comparative analysis of the concept of the self in the Upanishads, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Mīmāṃsā, Advaita Vedānta, Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, Dvaita Vedānta, Buddhism, and Jainism. The research methodology used is a qualitative approach based on comparative philosophical analysis, hermeneutics and textual analysis through the application of classical philosophical works and modern scholarship. The results show that while most orthodox philosophical schools accept the notion of eternal self, there are disagreements concerning its connection with reality and liberation. In turn, Buddhism does not recognize a self and denies the idea of eternal soul or ātman with the help of the Anātman doctrine, while Jainism holds the eternal Jīva bound by the karma. However, despite metaphysical controversies, all the philosophical traditions stress the importance of such ethical values as truthfulness, compassion, non-violence, self-control, and spirituality.

Keywords: Self (Ātman), Indian Philosophy, Comparative Philosophy, Metaphysics, Ethics

1.INTRODUCTION

The tradition of Indian philosophy is considered to be among the most ancient and profound ones of the world. It includes various philosophical schools which try to discover the essence of the reality, knowledge, being and human existence. Contrary to the other systems which concentrate only on logical

constructions, Indian philosophical doctrines combine metaphysics, ethics and spirituality with the search for liberation. Within the orthodox (Āstika) and heterodox (Nāstika) schools of thought, the philosophers raised the basic questions about the nature of consciousness, the self, karma and the ultimate reality. Among them, the doctrine of the Self (Ātman) holds an especially prominent position because it is the basis for the concepts of the identity, ethics, liberation and relations between the individual and the ultimate reality. Even though it is perceived differently by the various philosophical doctrines, the concept of the self becomes one of the most important topics of Indian philosophy.

1.1 Background of the Study

The notion of the Self (Ātman) has been prominent in Indian philosophical thought since the Vedic and Upanishadic times. It is not merely seen as metaphysical reality but rather as the foundation of ethics, spirituality, and emancipation (mokṣa or nirvāṇa). According to the Upanishads, Ātman is one with Brahman, while Sāṃkhya differentiates between the conscious self (Puruṣa) and material nature (Prakṛti). The theory of yoga focuses on the importance of self-realization achieved through practices. Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, and Mīmāṃsā conceive of the self as a permanent substance that is the source of perception and moral behavior, and the Vedānta school holds various approaches, from Advaita to Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita. Buddhist philosophy, in turn, upholds the teaching of Anātman (non-self), while Jain philosophy explains the self in terms of the eternal Jīva that is confined by karma.

This variety of approaches gives useful knowledge about the notions of consciousness, identity, morality, and emancipation. Their importance reaches far beyond philosophy as they can be applied to modern psychological, cognitive, neurological, and ethical science concerned with questions of consciousness and personal identity.

1.2 Research Problem and Objectives

While the notion of self has been extensively debated by various schools of thought of Indian philosophy, there has not been much research on comparative analysis of their metaphysical and ethical ideas. This kind of research usually tends to look at specific traditions but lacks comparative examination of their similarities, differences, and relevance for the modern world. Hence, there arises a necessity to conduct comparative research, which would unite the main philosophical traditions to comprehend their contribution to the notion of the self.

- The goals of this research are to investigate and compare the notion of self in the main schools of Indian philosophy. The goals of the research are as follows:
- To investigate the notion of self in the major schools of Indian philosophy.
- To compare the metaphysical aspects of the notion of the self in various philosophical schools.
- To analyze the ethical aspects connected with various philosophical notions of the self.
- To investigate the contemporary importance of Indian philosophies' views on consciousness and ethical life.

1.3 Scope, Significance, and Comparative Approach

This Research utilizes the qualitative and comparative methodology to analyze the concept of the self in the Upanishads, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Mīmāṃsā, Advaita Vedānta, Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, Dvaita Vedānta, Buddhism, and Jainism. The analysis is carried out using classical philosophical texts and current scholarly sources, with an emphasis on metaphysical characteristics and ethics of the self-concept.

This paper enriches the field of comparative Indian philosophy through the integration of both metaphysics and ethics into one conceptual framework. Through the comparison of major philosophical schools and identification of similarities and differences, this paper draws attention to the importance of Indian philosophical tradition in the modern debates about the issues of consciousness, ethics, identity, and human well-being.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The issue of the self has been studied in depth in the works of philosophers, psychologists, theologians, and comparative cultural studies. There have been several previous studies on the metaphysical, ethical, and psychological aspects of the self in the Indian philosophical tradition, as well as comparison with Western philosophical tradition and philosophy of other Asian countries. The following is a brief review of the most relevant literature for the current research.

Nikfarid et al. (2018) performed a comparative analysis of Jean Watson's Theory of Human Caring and Persian mysticism with a focus on nursing metaparadigm concepts, including such concepts as person,

health, environment, and nursing. The researchers found that both traditions stressed the spirituality of humans, holistic nature of well-being, and connection between body, mind, and soul. The findings of the researchers prove that the philosophical and spiritual concept of the self plays a crucial role in the development of ethical behavior and caring attitude. However, the research focuses mainly on healthcare ethics and does not offer a comparative analysis of the metaphysical concept of the self in the Indian philosophical tradition.

Roland (2021) studied the concept of the self in a cross-cultural psychological context through a comparison of the identity, personality, and consciousness concepts in India and Japan. The author claims that culture and tradition greatly impact an individual's self-identity, indicating substantial differences between Eastern and Western psychological models. Roland concludes that Indian philosophical tradition provides a multidimensional vision of the self that incorporates psychological, social, and spiritual aspects. Nevertheless, the research is mainly based on the psychological aspect and fails to compare the metaphysical and ethical aspects of the self in Indian philosophical tradition.

Seaford (2020) studied the historical evolution and emergence of philosophical theories in ancient Greece and India using a comparative-historical approach. The study considered the historical development of such concepts as reality, consciousness, rational investigation, and the self in both cultures. Seaford showed that despite the independent development of philosophies in Greece and India, they raised similar philosophical questions about existence and reality of humankind. Nevertheless, the research focused on the historical and intercultural development of philosophies rather than a comparative analysis of the concept of the self in Indian philosophical traditions.

Yin (2018) studied the identity concept from a non-Western philosophical point of view, criticizing the current post-modern ideas regarding the self. The author pointed out that identity was considered to be dynamic and relational in Oriental philosophical traditions as well as interconnected with culture, ethics, and spirituality. Yin argued that non-Western philosophical ideas enriched current discussions about identity with new philosophical approaches other than individualistic. Though being theoretically

valuable, the paper focused on the intercultural aspects of the concept of identity and ignored the metaphysical doctrines of the self in Indian philosophy.

Zimmer and Campbell (2020) described and interpreted the most important philosophical schools in India such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Vedānta, Buddhism, and Jainism. The authors discussed the philosophical ideas related to consciousness, liberation, karma, and the self, illustrating the diversity of Indian philosophical traditions. Zimmer and Campbell pointed out the importance of self-realization in achieving spiritual liberation and ethics. Nevertheless, being a detailed overview of Indian philosophical traditions, the book provided only a descriptive interpretation of them.

In general, the literature overviewed indicated the fact that much research attention has been paid to the idea of the self in philosophy, psychology, history, and cross-cultural studies. Nevertheless, most of the studies have studied either individual philosophical trends or analyzed the idea of the self within the confines of particular academic areas. The comparative analysis of different approaches to the metaphysical and ethical aspects of the self in Indian philosophy was not widespread. It was the lack of such comparison that formed the background of the current study.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for this research was philosophical, and it is characterized by being qualitative and comparative in nature. This means that while carrying out the research, the main emphasis was on conceptual analysis rather than on any kind of experimentation. Through comparison of the metaphysical and ethical viewpoints from various philosophical systems, it was attempted to find similarities, differences, and significance of these viewpoints in the present time.

3.1 Research Design

Qualitative comparative philosophy research methodology was used in this study. The methodology was deemed fit for the study because the study involved analyzing philosophical ideas, theories, and arguments and not gathering any kind of quantitative or experimental data. A comparative approach was helpful in examining systematically the idea of self from the point of view of various philosophical schools of thought in India such as the Upanishads, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Mīmāṃsā, Advaita Vedānta, Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, Dvaita Vedānta, Buddhism, and Jainism.

3.2 Sources of Data

The study was based entirely on documentary evidence obtained from both primary and secondary sources.

Primary Sources

Primary data consisted of classical philosophical texts that form the foundation of Indian philosophical thought. These included selected Upanishads, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Brahma Sūtras*, the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali, the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*, the *Nyāya Sūtras*, the *Vaiśeṣika Sūtras*, the *Mīmāṃsā Sūtras*, important Buddhist texts such as the *Dhammapada* and *Majjhima Nikāya*, and Jain scriptures including the *Tattvārtha Sūtra*. These texts provided the original philosophical foundations for analysing the concept of the self.

Secondary Sources

The secondary sources utilized consisted of peer-reviewed journal papers, academic books, book chapters, conference proceedings, and scholarly commentary published by established academic publishers. Current research on Indian philosophy, comparative philosophy, ethics, consciousness, and philosophy of mind were also considered for theoretical grounding.

3.3 Comparative Analytical Framework

In order to conduct a philosophical comparison of the concept of self, a comparative philosophical approach was adopted for analyzing the same in various schools of thought. For comparing the concept of self, the dimensions that were considered are as follows:

- Nature of the self
- The relationship between the self and ultimate reality
- Persistence or lack of persistence of the self
- The relationship between self, body and consciousness
- The significance of karma and liberation
- The ethical consequences of the concept of self.

3.4 Hermeneutic and Textual Analysis

The hermeneutic interpretation and textual analysis methods were primarily applied to conduct the study. Hermetical analysis made it possible to interpret philosophical concepts taking into account the historical

and intellectual contexts. Textual analysis made it possible to study some crucial ideas, concepts, and doctrines reflected in the primary sources.

Instead of using only literal translation of the sources, the study interpreted philosophical concepts on the basis of their meanings in the context and in connection with metaphysical and ethical theories. Comparison of the texts led to identifying some similarities and differences in philosophical concepts in the chosen traditions.

3.5 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The review included the major philosophical traditions of India that offered a systematic discussion of the concept of self and its moral aspects. Classical philosophical works considered to be authoritative within a particular philosophical tradition and contemporary peer-reviewed works dealing with the problem under discussion were taken into account in this review.

The philosophical traditions and texts that did not discuss the concept of the self and/or were not relevant to Indian philosophy were excluded from the analysis. So were popular texts, non-peer-reviewed works, opinion pieces, unreviewed manuscripts, and empirical studies irrelevant to philosophical investigation.

3.6 Limitations of the Study

There were some limitations in the research, which consisted only of a qualitative philosophical analysis through textual and documentary sources without any empirical data or experiments. It is possible that there can be a difference of interpretations between different scholars when it comes to classical philosophical literature, and it might result in the difference of philosophical ideas in some cases due to different translations. Also, the research was conducted mainly concerning the metaphysical and ethical aspects of the concept of the self without conducting an exhaustive historical review of all schools of Indian philosophy.

4. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In this part, we analyze the notion of the self in the leading philosophical schools in India. Despite different metaphysical presuppositions and ethical standpoints, all these schools try to describe the essence of human existence, awareness, freedom, and morality. This comparison helps us understand the peculiarities of these schools as well as the similarities between them from a philosophical point of view.

4.1 Concept of Self in the Upanishads

The earliest systematic treatment of the idea of Self is found in the Upanishads. These texts speak of the self as being timeless, changeless, luminous, and identical with Brahman, the Absolute. From the perspective of the Upanishads, the ignorance of Avidya makes people consider themselves to be their physical bodies and the world of matter. Moksha, which is liberation from rebirth, results from self-realization, which consists of discovering the basic identity between Ātman and Brahman.

4.2 Self in Sāṃkhya and Yoga

In the philosophical teachings of Sāṃkhya, Puruṣa (conscious self) and Prakṛti (material nature) have been recognized as distinct from each other. While the former has been considered eternal, inactive, and pure consciousness, suffering is due to the fact that people do not have the discriminative knowledge of their difference. Freedom from misery comes by Viveka (discriminative knowledge).

The Yoga philosophy accepts the metaphysics of Sāṃkhya and emphasizes the practical ways of achieving the goal of liberation from misery. According to Patañjali, self-realization comes about when there is a suppression of modifications of consciousness (Citta Vṛtti Nirodha).

4.3 Self in Nyāya–Vaiśeṣika and Mīmāṃsā

In Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika, the self is described as an eternal substance with qualities like cognition, desires, happiness, and suffering. Logical thought processes and the means of acquiring true knowledge (Pramāṇa) become the most essential aspects of this system.

However, while accepting the eternity of the self, the school of Mīmāṃsā gives more importance to ritual obligations and righteousness. In this school, a person earns karma through his/her actions, and freedom from it comes by fulfilling all the ritual obligations.

4.4 Self in Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita Vedānta

The theory of Vedānta provides three different views about the relation between individual self and absolute reality.

In Advaita Vedanta, which was formulated by Śaṅkara, it is said that individual self and Brahman are one in their essence. The difference is only because of the ignorance of Māyā, and liberation comes with the experience of non-duality.

In Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedanta, as suggested by Rāmānuja, both unity and diversity can be accepted at once. Individuals continue to remain distinct but exist as an integral part of Brahman. Liberation can be gained through devotion and divine grace.

In Dvaita Vedanta, introduced by Madhva, individual self and God are eternally distinct from each other. Liberation does not affect this difference but makes souls capable of experiencing eternal bliss of communion with God.

Table 1. Comparative View of the Self in Major Hindu Philosophical Traditions

Philosophical School	Nature of Self	Relation with Ultimate Reality	Path to Liberation
Upanishads	Eternal Ātman	Identical with Brahman	Self-realization
Sāṃkhya	Puruṣa	Independent from Prakṛti	Discriminative knowledge
Yoga	Pure consciousness	Realized through meditation	Eightfold Yoga
Advaita Vedānta	Non-dual Self	Ātman = Brahman	Knowledge (Jñāna)
Viśiṣṭādvaita	Individual soul	Part of Brahman	Devotion (Bhakti)
Dvaita	Independent soul	Eternally distinct from God	Devotion and grace

4.5 Buddhist Concept of Anātman

Buddhism offers an entirely different view through the concept of Anātman (no-self). This religion believes that the eternal soul does not exist; rather, a person's existence is based on the five aggregates (skandhas): form, sensations, perceptions, psychological formation, and consciousness. As everything is

impermanent, the clinging to the notion of eternal soul causes suffering. Freedom (Nirvāṇa) can be achieved by dispelling ignorance, desires, and clinging through ethics, meditation, and wisdom.

s4.6 Jain Concept of Jīva

The Jaina philosophy believes in the presence of an immortal soul or consciousness (Jīva) independent of non-conscious matter (Ajīva). All living organisms have a separate soul, which is intrinsically pure and contains infinite knowledge, understanding, bliss, and power. But karmic atoms are tied to the soul because of one's activities in this world. One can attain liberation through self-restraint, true belief, true knowledge, and righteous conduct.

4.7 Comparative Metaphysical Perspectives

While there may be disagreements among Indian philosophies concerning the existence of self and its nature, all of them are unanimous in stressing the need for comprehending the human existence apart from the physical body. While most Hindu schools believe in an eternal self, it is only the Buddhist philosophy that denies it.

Table 2. Comparative Metaphysical Perspectives

School	Eternal Self	Concept of Consciousness	Ultimate Goal
Upanishads	Yes	Ātman-Brahman	Mokṣa
Sāṃkhya	Yes	Puruṣa	Kaivalya
Yoga	Yes	Pure consciousness	Samādhi
Nyāya	Yes	Cognitive self	Liberation
Mīmāṃsā	Yes	Moral self	Freedom from karma
Advaita	Yes	Non-dual consciousness	Mokṣa
Buddhism	No	Five aggregates	Nirvāṇa
Jainism	Yes	Jīva	Kevala Jñāna

4.8 Comparative Ethical Perspectives

While the different philosophies vary significantly in terms of metaphysics, one thing they agree upon is that ethical behavior is absolutely necessary for spiritual progress. The philosophical doctrines of Hindus include truth, non-violence, self-restraint, and duty (dharma). In Buddhism, the emphasis is on the Noble Eight-fold path, compassion, and mindfulness, while Jainism gives a lot of significance to non-violence (ahimsa), truth, and renunciation.

Table 3. Comparative Ethical Perspectives

Tradition	Ethical Principle	Means of Spiritual Progress
Upanishads	Self-knowledge	Meditation and wisdom
Sāṃkhya	Detachment	Discriminative knowledge
Yoga	Self-discipline	Eightfold Yoga
Nyāya	Rational inquiry	Right knowledge
Mīmāṃsā	Duty (Dharma)	Ritual action
Advaita Vedānta	Knowledge	Self-realization
Buddhism	Compassion and mindfulness	Noble Eightfold Path
Jainism	Ahimsa and non-attachment	Three Jewels

4.9 Contemporary Relevance of the Concept of Self

The concept of self from the philosophical perspective has significant relevance in today's world. Modern researches conducted in the spheres of psychology, neuroscience, cognitive science, ethics and mental health involve more and more topics concerning consciousness, self-identity, happiness and morality. Philosophical teachings of India offer a holistic methodology through the synthesis of metaphysics with ethics and spirituality. Such teachings provide knowledge on self-knowledge, compassion, awareness, disinterest and ethical accountability that is still relevant for modern education, psychotherapy, leadership,

negotiation and personal development. Thus, comparative analysis of the self concept in Indian philosophy can be useful both for philosophy as an academic discipline and for solving current human and social problems.

5.CONCLUSION

The concept of the Self still remains the core subject matter of Indian philosophy that provides grounds for the comprehension of phenomena related to consciousness, personality identity, morality, and salvation. This paper considered the metaphysical and ethical concepts of the self in Indian philosophy. While the schools of Indian philosophy might differ in their approaches to the topic under consideration, they mostly agree upon the importance of knowledge of the nature of the self for fighting against ignorance, moral growth, and salvation. It turned out that the Upanishads and orthodox schools admit the existence of eternal self with different interpretations of the correlation between self and the highest reality. On the contrary, Buddhism does not accept any form of the self as it holds the doctrine of Anātman, and Jainism presents the self as an eternal Jīva bound with karma. Nevertheless, despite the dissimilarities in philosophy, all schools accept the necessity of the ethically correct way of life which presupposes such virtues as truthfulness, compassion, non-violence, discipline, and devotion that can help in understanding of self and attaining the release from samsara. One more result of the research is the practical importance of Indian philosophical views on self in the contemporary society. The holistic approach to the self, consciousness, and morality might be useful for the modern research in philosophy, psychology, ethics, and cognitive sciences.

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