



A Study on the Concept of Reality (Sat) in Indian Philosophy

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Abstract

In Indian philosophy, the idea of Sat (Reality or Being) is fundamental to comprehending existence, knowledge, and emancipation. Diverse but related viewpoints have resulted from various schools of Indian philosophy interpreting the nature of reality in accordance with their metaphysical and epistemological frameworks. The orthodox (Āstika) schools, which include Vedānta, Sāṅkhya, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Yoga, and Mīmāṃsā, present several conceptions of ultimate reality, ranging from the non-dual Brahman of Advaita Vedānta to the dualistic principles of Puruṣa and Prakṛti in Sāṅkhya and the pluralistic realism of Nyāya–Vaiśeṣika. Similarly, heterodox (Nāstika) traditions like Buddhism and Jainism offer distinctive viewpoints on reality through ideas like momentariness, emptiness (Sūnyatā), and multiplicity (Anekāntavāda).

This study highlights the parallels and discrepancies between the main schools of Indian philosophy's conception of Sat. In addition to analyzing the philosophical techniques used to determine the nature of ultimate truth, it investigates the relationships between reality, appearance, knowledge, self, and emancipation. The study uses a comparative and analytical methodology that draws from both primary and secondary scholarly sources. The study attempts to provide a thorough grasp of the philosophical meaning of Sat and its ongoing relevance in current debates on metaphysics, ontology, and spirituality by combining these various points of view. The results show that while Indian philosophical traditions vary in how they define the ultimate nature of reality, they all aim to explain the essence of existence and lead people toward self-realization and emancipation.

Keywords: Consciousness, Existence, Ultimate Reality, Knowledge (*Jñāna*), Liberation (*Mokṣa*), Truth, Self, Philosophical Inquiry.

Introduction

One of the most important and enduring ideas in Indian philosophy is Sat (Reality or Being). The word Sat, which comes from the Sanskrit root "to be," refers to that which actually exists, is timeless, and

doesn't change despite changes in the phenomenal world. For centuries, the question of what reality is has been at the center of Indian philosophy, influencing debates on metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and spirituality. Indian philosophers have viewed the realisation of the ultimate reality as crucial for achieving freedom (mokṣa) and conquering ignorance (avidyā), rather than treating reality as solely a theoretical issue.

Indian philosophy offers a wide range of viewpoints regarding the nature of reality. While acknowledging the authority of the Vedas, the orthodox (Āstika) schools—including Vedānta, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, and Mīmāṃsā—develop different metaphysical systems. Advaita Vedānta views the phenomenal world as Māyā, or an apparent reality, and identifies reality with the non-dual Brahman, the absolute and infinite existence that alone is ultimately true. According to Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, Brahman is the ultimate reality with countless beneficial attributes, and the universe and individual souls are actual manifestations of Brahman. Dvaita Vedānta affirms the timeless separation between God, individual souls, and the material universe while upholding a realistic pluralism. While Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika maintain a pluralistic realism in which substances, qualities, acts, universals, and individual selves create objective reality, Sāṅkhya explains reality through the twin principles of Puruṣa (pure consciousness) and Prakṛti (primordial matter). Yoga emphasises rigorous spiritual practice as a means of realising the true nature of existence, while acknowledging the theoretical framework of Sāṅkhya. The reality of Vedic injunctions, ritual obligations, and moral order are the main topics of Mīmāṃsā.

Additionally, the heterodox (Nāstika) schools offer insightful perspectives on reality. By emphasising impermanence (Anitya), non-self (Anātman), and, in the Madhyamaka tradition, the teaching of Śūnyatā (emptiness), which holds that all phenomena lack an independent and permanent essence, Buddhism undermines the idea of permanent existence. Through the concept of Anekāntavāda¹ (non-one-sidedness), Jainism contends that reality is multifaceted and complicated, requiring a variety of viewpoints to fully comprehend. These various philosophical traditions show that the pursuit of reality in Indian philosophy spans a wide range of metaphysical investigation rather than being limited to a particular theory.

Studying the idea of Sat is important because it serves as the foundation for comprehending how existence, awareness, knowledge, the self, and the cosmos are related. Indian thinkers have long

¹ Anekāntavāda is a core Jain philosophy meaning the **doctrine of non-absolutism, many-sidedness, and multiple viewpoints**. Derived from *aneka* (many), *anta* (end or side), and *vāda* (doctrine), it asserts that truth and reality are complex and cannot be fully grasped by any single perspective

maintained that human suffering stems from ignorance of reality, and that wisdom, moral behaviour, and spiritual freedom result from realising the truth. As a result, the study of reality is not only theoretical but also extremely useful, impacting moral principles, religious beliefs, and self-discipline techniques.

The philosophical investigation of reality is still pertinent today in debates about ontology, consciousness, comparative philosophy, and cross-cultural communication. The insights provided by Indian philosophical traditions frequently connect with contemporary discussions about the essence of life, the relationship between mind and matter, and the boundaries of human understanding. As a result, the idea of Sat continues to be a significant topic for scholarly investigation, offering insightful viewpoints on both traditional and modern philosophical issues.

By comparing and analysing the main schools of Indian philosophy, this study aims to investigate the idea of Sat. It examines how various religions define reality, defend their philosophical stances, and connect real-world knowledge to achieving emancipation. The study intends to provide a thorough grasp of the concept of reality in Indian philosophy and to highlight its conceptual depth, diversity, and ongoing significance by critically analysing main philosophical texts and pertinent scholarly literature.

Objectives of the study

- To examine the concept of **Sat** (Reality) in the major schools of Indian philosophy.
- To analyze the metaphysical foundations of reality as interpreted by the orthodox (*Āstika*) schools, including Vedānta, Sāṃkhya, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Yoga, and Mīmāṃsā.²
- To compare the similarities and differences in the understanding of **Sat** among the various schools of Indian philosophy.

Definition of the Concept of 'Sat'

Sat, which means "to be" in Sanskrit, is a symbol for existence, truth, or ultimate reality. Talk about its significance in Indian philosophy as the foundation for spiritual realisation and metaphysical investigation.

The Orthodox (Astika) Schools of Indian Philosophy

² an orthodox school of Hindu philosophy focused on ritual action, sacred language, and the definition of duty (*dharma*). Also known as Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā or Karma-Mīmāṃsā, it was founded by the sage Jaimini in the *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* around the 4th to 3rd century BCE.

The six traditional systems (Saddarśanas) that acknowledge the Vedas as a legitimate source of knowledge are known as the Orthodox (Āstika) Schools of Indian philosophy. These schools have different ontological, epistemological, and ethical beliefs, but they all aim to achieve liberation (mokṣa) by realising the truth. Every school presents a unique perspective on the world, reality (Sat), the self (Ātman), and the path to ultimate knowledge.

1. Vedānta

One of the most important schools of Indian philosophy is Vedānta. It explores the nature of Brahman, the ultimate reality, and is mostly based on the Upaniṣads³, the Brahma Sūtras, and the Bhagavad Gītā.

- According to Adi Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedānta, Brahman is the only ultimate reality (Sat). The phenomenal universe is Māyā (appearance or empirical reality), whereas the individual ego (Ātman) is the same as Brahman. Understanding this non-dual reality (Jñāna) leads to liberation.
- Ramanuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta holds that while individual souls and the universe are real and exist as inseparable modes of Brahman, Brahman is the sole autonomous reality.
- Madhvacharya founded Dvaita Vedānta, which maintains that the material universe, God, and each individual soul are eternally separate realities.

Vedānta thus offers dualistic, qualified monistic, and monistic perspectives on reality.

2. Sāṃkhya

Traditionally credited to Kapila, Sāṃkhya is one of India's oldest philosophical systems. It acknowledges two timeless principles and uses dualism to describe reality:

- **Puruṣa** – Pure consciousness or the self.
- **Prakṛti** – Primordial matter, the source of the material universe.

The phenomenal universe is the result of Puruṣa and Prakṛti interacting. While emancipation is attained via discriminative knowledge (Viveka) that separates consciousness from matter, ignorance leads the ego to connect with Prakṛti.

³ The Upanishads Sanskrit: उपनिषद्, are Sanskrit texts of the late Vedic and post-Vedic periods that "document the transition from the archaic ritualism of the Veda into new religious ideas and institutions"

3. Yoga

The Sāṅkhya philosophical foundation is accepted by the Patañjali-systematized Yoga school, which places more emphasis on practical discipline for realising truth. Yoga holds that mental changes (*Citta-vṛtti*) mask the true essence of the self. The practitioner can experience the difference between *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* and achieve liberation by controlling these alterations through ethical behaviour, meditation, focus, and self-discipline.

4. Nyāya

Gautama (Akṣapāda) created the Nyāya school, which focuses on logic and epistemology. It maintains realism by confirming that the outside world exists apart from human perspective. Individual substances, selves, and God—all of which are objectively real—make up reality. Nyāya acknowledges four legitimate ways of knowing (*Pramāṇas*): verbal testimony, comparison, inference, and perception. Accurate knowledge eliminates ignorance and eventually results in emancipation.

4. Vaiśeṣika

Kaṇāda developed the Vaiśeṣika⁴ school, which offers a pluralistic and atomistic conception of existence. It divides everything into basic groups (*Padārthas*), such as:

1. Substance (*Dravya*)
2. Quality (*Guṇa*)
3. Action (*Karma*)
4. Universal (*Sāmānya*)
5. Particularity (*Viśeṣa*)
6. Inherence (*Samavāya*)
7. Non-existence (*Abhāva*)

According to Vaiśeṣika, souls are unique, eternal realities, whereas the material universe is made up of eternal atoms. knowledge these categories facilitates the achievement of emancipation and allows for an accurate knowledge of the world.

6. Mīmāṃsā

⁴ Vaiśeṣika is an ancient school of Hindu philosophy known for its focus on naturalism, realism, and early atomism. It was founded by the sage Kaṇāda in ancient India between the 6th and 2nd century BCE through his foundational text, the *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra*.

Jaimini developed the Mīmāṃsā school, which emphasises the significance of ritual activity (Karma) and the authority of the Vedas. In contrast to Vedānta, Mīmāṃsā emphasises the pragmatic aspects of religion instead of Brahman's metaphysical character. It acknowledges moral law, human souls, and the reality of the outside world. The rigorous fulfilment of Vedic responsibilities maintains cosmic order and advances spirituality, according to Mīmāṃsā. Additionally, the school produced advanced theories of epistemology, language, and interpretation.

The main characteristics of the Orthodox Schools:

Although the six orthodox schools have different philosophical stances, they have a few things in common:

1. Emphasis are given on using knowledge, discipline, or moral behaviour to overcome ignorance.
2. Methodical investigation of the nature of the self, the world, and reality (Sat).
3. Recognition of valid means of knowledge (*Pramāṇas*).
4. Acceptance of the authority of the Vedas.
5. Acceptance of the law of karma and rebirth.
6. Belief in the possibility of liberation (*Mokṣa*⁵).

Ultimate Reality versus Empirical Reality

The contrast between empirical reality (Vyāvahārika Satya) and ultimate reality (Pāramārthika Satya) is one of the main issues in Indian philosophy. The world perceived through the senses is not always the ultimate or highest form of reality, despite the fact that various schools have varied interpretations of these ideas. To understand the nature of existence, knowledge, and liberation, one must grasp this distinction (Mokṣa).

Ultimate Reality (*Pāramārthika Satya*)

The absolute, timeless, and unalterable truth that exists apart from time, space, and causation is referred to as ultimate reality. It does not rely on anything else to exist; it is self-existent. Ultimate reality is seen as the ultimate goal of philosophical investigation and spiritual realisation in many Indian philosophical traditions.

Advaita Vedānta holds that Brahman alone is the ultimate reality (Sat). Brahman transcends all names and forms and is unlimited, indivisible, and eternal. Realising that the individual ego (Ātman) is the

⁵ Mokṣa means liberation, release, and freedom from the cycle of death and rebirth. It is the ultimate spiritual goal

same as Brahman leads to nirvana. This idea of ultimate reality is expressed in the well-known Upaniṣadic expression "Satyam Jñānam Anantam Brahma" ("Brahman is Truth, Knowledge, and Infinity").

According to Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, Brahman is the ultimate reality as well, yet the universe and individual souls are real and exist as inseparable aspects of Brahman. According to Dvaita Vedānta, the world, souls, and God are all eternally different but ultimately real. Puruṣa (pure consciousness) and Prakṛti (primordial matter) are Sāṅkhya's two ultimate realities. They are both real, everlasting, and independent. When Puruṣa recognises its difference from Prakṛti, it achieves liberation. According to Jainism, existence is made up of eternal substances with various facets. It makes the case that ultimate reality is complicated and cannot be fully comprehended from a single perspective through the philosophy of Anekāntavāda⁶.

Empirical Reality (*Vyāvahārika Satya*)

The realm of everyday experience, where people interact with things, people, and events through perception and action, is referred to as empirical reality. It is controlled by practical relationships, change, and causation. It might not be the ultimate or ultimate truth, even though it is objectively true for everyday life.

The phenomenal world is considered Māyā in Advaita Vedānta, meaning it is neither completely real nor completely unreal. For practical purposes, it has empirical validity, but once awareness of Brahman is reached, it vanishes as an independent entity. Empirical reality is therefore regarded as tentative rather than final.

The notion that the world is only apparent is rejected by the Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika schools. They contend that material objects, the outside world, and individual self all have independent, objective existence. As a result, what is objectively perceived is also truly real.

Empirical reality is seen by Buddhism as an ongoing process of transient events (Anitya). Nothing has a permanent or independent existence since everything originates through dependent origination

⁶ **Anekāntavāda** (Sanskrit: अनेकान्तवाद) is a foundational doctrine in Jainism that translates to "many-sidedness" or "non-absolutism". It asserts that ultimate truth and reality are infinitely complex, meaning no single human perspective can capture the absolute whole.

(Pratītyasamutpāda). According to the Madhyamaka tradition, empirical things are typically real but ultimately devoid of intrinsic essence.

Relationship between Ultimate and Empirical Reality

Different philosophical systems have different views on the connection between ultimate and empirical reality:

- **Buddhism** emphasises that while ordinary experience is meaningful for practical reasons, it does not disclose the ultimate nature of reality. It distinguishes between ultimate truth (Paramārtha Satya) and conventional truth (Saṃvṛti Satya).
- **Jainism** reconciles different viewpoints by asserting that reality possesses multiple dimensions and can be understood only through a synthesis of perspectives.
- **Nyāya–Vaiśeṣika** do not separate ultimate and empirical reality; the world perceived through valid means of knowledge is objectively real.
- **Sāṃkhya** accepts both consciousness and matter as ultimate realities but distinguishes the eternal self from the changing material world.
- **Advaita Vedānta** distinguishes three levels of reality: apparent (Prātibhāsika), empirical (Vyāvahārika), and ultimate (Pāramārthika). Ultimate reality alone is absolutely true, while empirical reality functions only within worldly experience.

Comparative Viewpoint

The diversity of Indian philosophical philosophy is demonstrated by the contrast between ultimate and empirical reality. Some schools uphold the objective reality of the world or use pluralistic or process-oriented frameworks to interpret reality, while others stress a transcendent and unchanging absolute. Despite these distinctions, all schools concur that the primary source of human suffering is ignorance of the true nature of reality and that achieving true knowledge and release requires focused practice and philosophical study.

Indian metaphysics is based on the ideas of ultimate reality and empirical reality. They describe the connection between knowledge and freedom, the world and the self, and appearance and truth. The study of reality (Sat) is one of the most significant contributions of Indian philosophical heritage, even though the many schools of Indian philosophy have different interpretations. Together, they promote the search for deeper understanding beyond everyday experience.

One of the most important topics in Indian philosophy is the difference between permanent and impermanent reality. It raises the question of whether reality is transient and ever-changing or everlasting and permanent. Based on their metaphysical tenets, epistemological approaches, and spiritual objectives, many schools of Indian philosophy provide unique solutions. To understand the nature of existence, the self, the cosmos, and the way to freedom, one must grasp this distinction (Mokṣa).

Permanent Reality

Anything that is timeless, unalterable, unbreakable, and unaffected by space and time is referred to as permanent reality. It is unaffected by birth, development, deterioration, or death and exists in the past, present, and future. Permanent reality is regarded by many Indian philosophical schools as the ultimate truth.

According to Advaita Vedānta, Brahman (Sat) is the sole absolute and eternal reality. Brahman is everlasting, limitless, and immutable. Because of Māyā, the phenomenal world seems to change constantly, whereas Brahman does not. Realising the eternal character of the individual self (Ātman), which is the same as Brahman, results in liberation.

Brahman is acknowledged by Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta as the ultimate, everlasting reality. However, as inseparable qualities of Brahman, both the universe and individual souls are equally real and exist forever. God, individual souls, and the material universe are all permanent realities in Dvaita Vedānta, yet they are eternally separate from each other.

Sāṅkhya acknowledges two eternal realities: Prakṛti (primordial matter) and Puruṣa (pure consciousness). Prakṛti transforms into the material world, yet its essence never changes. Puruṣa is eternal, unchanging, and passive.

According to the Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika schools, the self, atoms, time, space, and God are among the entities that have permanent existence. Composite items can be destroyed, but their basic components never die.

According to Jainism, substances (Dravyas) are always changing in their modalities (Paryāya) but remain constant in their essential character. As a result, change and permanence coexist in one reality.

Impermanent Reality

Phenomena that are transient, subject to change, and reliant on causes and circumstances are referred to as impermanent reality. These realities emerge, last for a brief period of time, and ultimately vanish.

The core of Buddhism's theory is impermanence, or *Anitya*. The Buddha asserts that because conditioned phenomena originate from dependent origination, they are all transient (*Pratītyasamutpāda*). Suffering results from attachment to fleeting objects since everything is ever-changing (*Duḥkha*). Buddhism similarly denies the concept of a permanent self (*Anātman*), claiming that a person is only a collection of constantly evolving mental and physical components.

The phenomenal world is likewise regarded as ephemeral in *Advaita Vedānta* since it is a part of empirical experience (*Vyāvahārika Satya*). Only Brahman is completely real and eternal; names and forms are always changing. Many worldly items are ephemeral because of their composition and alteration, according to other schools including *Sāṅkhya*, *Nyāya*, and *Vaiśeṣika*. They do, however, separate these dynamic entities from the underlying permanent reality.

Comparative Analysis

The concept of permanence and impermanence varies considerably among the schools of Indian philosophy.

- **Buddhism** emphasizes universal impermanence and rejects any permanent, independent essence underlying conditioned existence.
- **Jainism** harmonizes permanence and change by distinguishing between the enduring substance and its ever-changing modes.
- **Nyāya** and **Vaiśeṣika** affirm the permanence of fundamental substances while recognizing the impermanence of composite objects.
- **Sāṅkhya** accepts both consciousness (*Puruṣa*) and primordial matter (*Prakṛti*) as eternal, while recognizing continuous transformation within the material world.
- **Advaita Vedānta** distinguishes between the eternal Brahman and the transient phenomenal world.
- **Viśiṣṭādvaita** and **Dvaita Vedānta** accept both God and the world as real, though God alone is independent and supreme.

Philosophical Significance

The argument over permanence vs impermanence has significant ramifications for spirituality, ethics, and metaphysics. Permanent reality schools contend that realising the eternal self or ultimate reality is the path to emancipation. In contrast, Buddhism teaches that detachment, knowledge, and the end of suffering result from realising the transient nature of all conditioned events. Despite their differences, both strategies stress that the secret to achieving spiritual freedom is conquering ignorance.

The variety and complexity of Indian philosophical philosophy are reflected in the dichotomy between permanent and impermanent reality. Buddhism emphasises the universal principle of impermanence, whereas Vedānta, Sāṃkhya, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, and Jainism emphasise different types of enduring existence. When taken as a whole, these viewpoints offer a thorough comprehension of life and show that the pursuit of truth necessitates looking at both what changes and what, if anything, stays the same. Philosophical research on reality (Sat), consciousness, and the ultimate goal of human existence is still enhanced by this conversation.

Comparative Summary

School	Concept of <i>Sat</i>	Nature of Reality
Buddhism	Impermanence, dependent origination, emptiness	Phenomenal Process and Emptiness
Jainism	Multiplicity of real substances	Pluralism
Yoga	Same as Sāṃkhya with emphasis on practice	Dualism
Nyāya	Objective external reality	Realism
Vaiśeṣika	Multiple eternal substances and atoms	Pluralistic Realism
Sāṃkhya	Puruṣa and Prakṛti	Dualism
Mīmāṃsā	Reality of Vedas, soul, and world	Realism
Dvaita Vedānta	God, souls, and world are eternally distinct	Dualism
Advaita Vedānta	Brahman alone is absolute reality	Non-dualism
Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta	Brahman with real souls and world	Qualified Non-dualism

Conclusion

The concept of **Sat** (Reality) occupies a foundational position in Indian philosophy and forms the basis of its metaphysical, epistemological, and spiritual traditions. This study has demonstrated that although the various schools of Indian philosophy differ in their interpretations of reality, they are united in their quest to understand the ultimate nature of existence and its relationship to human life. The inquiry into *Sat* is not merely an abstract philosophical exercise; it is closely linked with the practical goal of overcoming ignorance (*Avidyā*), attaining true knowledge (*Jñāna*), and achieving liberation (*Mokṣa* or *Nirvāṇa*).

Different perspectives on reality are presented by the Orthodox (Āstika) schools. While Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita affirm the existence of God, the individual soul, and the cosmos in diverse ways, Advaita Vedānta recognises Brahman as the only absolute reality. While Yoga emphasises the practical realisation of this duality via focused spiritual practice, Sāṅkhya explains reality through the twin principles of Puruṣa and Prakṛti. While Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika maintain an objective and pluralistic realism, Mīmāṃsā emphasises ritual activity, moral obligation, and the actuality of the Vedic order. Together, these schools show that reality may be comprehended using several metaphysical frameworks without losing its fundamental significance in philosophical investigation.

The Heterodox (Nāstika) traditions offer equally insightful viewpoints. Buddhism challenges the idea of permanent substance by emphasising impermanence (*Anitya*), dependent origination (*Pratītyasamutpāda*), non-self (*Anātman*), and emptiness (*Śūnyatā*). Through the theories of Anekāntavāda and Syādvāda, Jainism offers a pluralistic interpretation of reality, contending that reality is complex and cannot be fully understood from a single perspective. By emphasising the intricacy and dynamic nature of existence, these traditions deepen our understanding of *Sat*.

The comparative analysis undertaken in this study reveals that the differences among the schools arise primarily from their distinct metaphysical assumptions and epistemological methods rather than from a disagreement about the importance of understanding reality. Whether reality is conceived as absolute, dual, plural, or process-oriented, every school regards the realization of truth as essential for freedom from suffering and the attainment of the highest human good. This shared commitment reflects the unity underlying the diversity of Indian philosophical thought. The study also demonstrates that the concept of *Sat* remains relevant beyond its historical and religious context. Contemporary discussions in metaphysics, ontology, consciousness studies, ethics, comparative philosophy, and cognitive science continue to engage with questions concerning the nature of reality, the self, and the relationship

between appearance and truth. Indian philosophical insights into these issues provide valuable intellectual resources for modern interdisciplinary research and global philosophical dialogue.

In conclusion, one of the most significant contributions of Indian philosophy to global thought is the idea of Sat. Its many interpretations demonstrate the depth of India's philosophical legacy while exposing a shared desire for liberty, wisdom, and truth. Studying Sat promotes ongoing contemplation of the timeless issues of existence, consciousness, and the ultimate meaning of reality in addition to deepening our understanding of traditional Indian philosophy.

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