

## THE INDIAN PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL INQUIRY

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### **Abstract:**

Indian epistemology is a rich and diverse field that studies knowledge, where *prama* refers to valid knowledge and *pramana* refers to the source of right knowledge. There are six sources of knowledge, such as *perception*, *inference*, *testimony*, *comparison*, *postulation*, and *non-perception*, which are accepted by six orthodox schools: *Samkhya*, *Yoga*, *Nyaya*, *Vaisheshika*, *Mimamsa*, and *Vedanta*. Each school has its own view on knowledge and accepts at least two of the six ways. This helps us understand knowledge better. The idea of *pramanas* (ways of knowledge) is central to Indian epistemology. Each school sees *pramanas* differently, showing the complexity and diversity of Indian thought on knowledge.

The concept of knowledge itself is also explored in depth, with discussions on its definition, types, and validity. Indian epistemologists investigate the relationship between knowledge and reality, questioning whether knowledge is a direct reflection of reality or a construction of the human mind. Additionally, the nature of objectivity and subjectivity is debated, with some schools arguing for the existence of an objective reality independent of human perception, while others propose that knowledge is inherently subjective and relative. This paper explores the debates and discussions between different schools of thought in Indian epistemology. By doing so, it provides a path to understanding the complexities and nuances of Indian thought, leading to a deeper appreciation of knowledge.

**Key words:** *Epistemology, pramana, wisdom.*

### **Introduction:**

In Indian philosophy, six distinct sources of knowledge are acknowledged, collectively referred to as *Pramanas*. These comprise Perception (*Pratyaksa*), Inference (*Anumana*),

Testimony (*Sabda*), Comparison (*Upamana*), Postulation (*Arthapatti*), and Non-Cognition Apprehension (*Anupalabdhi*). The Carvaka School, an ancient materialist tradition, solely accepts perception as a valid source of knowledge. In contrast, Buddhism and Jainism, two heterodox schools, recognize both perception and inference as legitimate sources. Among the orthodox schools, Vaisesika acknowledges the first two, Samkhya and Yoga accept the first three, Nyaya recognizes the first four, Mimamsa accepts the first five, and Vedanta accepts all six sources of knowledge. Radhakrishnan states, “The term ‘*pramana*’ in Indian philosophy signifies both the means of knowledge and the means of proof.”<sup>1</sup> This highlights the importance of *Pramanas* in Indian epistemology as the means or sources of acquiring valid knowledge.

**Objectives:** Following are the main objectives of this paper:

- i. To explore and comprehend the six recognized sources of knowledge (*pramanas*) in Indian philosophical thought.
- ii. To examine and compare the diverse acceptance and interpretation of *pramanas* across various Indian philosophical traditions.
- iii. To elucidate the importance and implications of *pramana* theory in Indian epistemology for obtaining reliable and authentic knowledge.

**Methodology:** This study employs a qualitative research approach, focusing on the concept of *Pramanas* in Indian epistemology. A thorough analysis of classical Indian philosophical texts, supplemented by scholarly articles and books, provides the foundation for this research.

### **Findings and Interpretation:**

An examination of the *Rgveda* reveals a dichotomy between objects that are directly perceivable through the senses and those that lie beyond sensory reach. This distinction implies that immediate objects are known through sensory experience, whereas remote objects necessitate alternative means of knowledge acquisition. The *Rgveda* proposes two methods for acquiring knowledge of remote objects: divine testimony, which surpasses spatial constraints, and reflective inquiry. Consequently, this ancient text establishes the foundation for the subsequent philosophical distinction between direct and indirect knowledge.

It is important to note that Indian epistemology, deeply rooted in Vedic thought, particularly the *Aranyakas* and *Upanisads*, posits that understanding “the self is crucial for complete knowledge, leaving no room for doubt.”<sup>2</sup> The *Aranyaka* succinctly states, “The self is more developed in man, for he is most endowed with knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> This philosophy asserts that all reality is mind-dependent and constitutes knowledge itself, encompassing the knower, intellect, cognition, and object. Notably, the *Aranyaka* explains the entire experience—subject, cognition, and object—“solely in terms of knowledge,”<sup>4</sup> thereby resolving the epistemological disparity between subject and object. Furthermore, human reason possesses the capacity to “recall the past, foresee the future, and penetrate beyond sensory limitations,”<sup>5</sup> recognizing perception, reasoning, and inference as means of knowledge acquisition.

Let’s explore the key epistemological ideas in different Indian philosophical schools, as outlined below.

### **The Carvaka epistemology:**

The Carvaka philosophy, also known as Lokayata, is an ancient Indian school of thought that “emphasizes the role of perception in acquiring knowledge.”<sup>6</sup> At its core, Carvaka philosophy is concerned with understanding the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and human existence. A distinctive feature of Carvaka epistemology, as noted by Prasad, is its “commitment to empiricism, rejection of inference, and emphasis on perception as the primary source of knowledge.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Bhattacharya highlights that Carvaka philosophy is distinguished by its “rejection of supernatural entities and focus on human well-being and happiness.”<sup>8</sup> Although the Carvaka school of thought is no longer a dominant philosophical tradition in India, its epistemological framework has had a profound and lasting impact on Indian intellectual discourse, particularly in the domains of philosophy, scientific inquiry, and politics.

### **The Jaina epistemology:**

Jaina philosophy offers a multifaceted approach to understanding knowledge, dividing it into five distinct categories: *Mati*, *Sruta*, *Avadhi*, *Manahpariyaya*, and *Kevala*. These categories serve as the building blocks for acquiring knowledge.

*Mati* knowledge arises from sensory experiences and personal reflections. *Sruta* knowledge, on the other hand, is derived from credible sources, including sacred texts and enlightened

teachers. *Avadhi* knowledge is unique, existing in either innate or acquired forms. *Manahparyaya* knowledge facilitates understanding of others' thoughts and intentions, comprising two sub-types: *Rju-mati* and *Vipula-mati*. *Vipula-mati* is regarded as a higher and more refined form, providing complete and perfect comprehension. *Kevala* knowledge represents the pinnacle of understanding, granting absolute insight into the world and beyond. While *Mati* and *Sruta* knowledge encompass all substances, the other three types offer more profound and nuanced insights into the nature of reality. However, *Mati*, *Sruta*, and *Avadhi* knowledge are susceptible to error, defined as the failure to distinguish between reality and unreality.

In Jaina epistemology, sensory perception is viewed as indirect knowledge, whereas non-sensory perception is considered direct. Consequently, *Mati* knowledge pertains to sensory objects, encompassing perceptual, reflective, and inferential knowledge, while *Sruta* knowledge is acquired through testimony. In contrast, *Avadhi*, *Manahparyaya*, and *Kevala* represent forms of direct knowledge, offering a deeper understanding of reality. Ultimately, according to later Jaina epistemology, direct knowledge and inference serve as sources of knowledge for both personal understanding and communication with others.

### **The Buddhist epistemology:**

According to Dinnaga, a prominent Buddhist logician, Buddhist epistemology marks a significant departure from conventional theories of logic and epistemology. Dinnaga's innovative approach treats the means of knowledge as a distinct subject, observing that "knowledge by similarity is not distinct from sense-cognition and testimony."<sup>9</sup> This assertion underscores the integral relationship between perception, inference, and testimony in the Buddhist epistemological framework.

Dinnaga defines direct knowledge as "that which is other than imagination and is unconnected with name, genus, etc."<sup>10</sup> Notably, this definition omits the conventional condition of sensory contact, thereby encompassing forms of direct presentation, such as mental cognition, self-consciousness, and mystic cognition. This expanded definition, as seen in Dharmakirti's *Nyaybindu*, recognizes these forms as legitimate modes of direct knowledge. Inference, a crucial aspect of Buddhist epistemology, is bifurcated into two categories: inference for oneself and inference for others. Dinnaga defines inference for oneself as "the

knowledge of an object obtained through a mark or sign.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast, inference for others involves demonstrating to others what has been cognized by oneself.

### **Direct Knowledge and Inference in Dharmakirti’s *Nyayabindu*:**

Dharmakirti’s *Nyayabindu* provides a comprehensive framework for understanding direct knowledge, defining it as “non-reflective and non-erroneous.”<sup>12</sup> This framework categorizes direct knowledge into four distinct types: *sense-cognition*, *mental cognition*, *self-consciousness*, and *mystic cognition*. Sense-cognition is characterized as “that which belongs to the senses,”<sup>13</sup> whereas mental cognition is described as “caused by an immediate and cognate donation... of a sense-cognition supported by an object.”<sup>14</sup> Self-consciousness encompasses all aspects that belong to *citta*, and mystic cognition is “produced by the extreme limit of mediation upon the nature of reality.”<sup>15</sup> The *Nyaya-bindu-tika* (NBT) further clarifies that “the extreme limit of mediation is that stage where reality just falls short of being revealed fully.”<sup>16</sup> Direct knowledge arises from *pramana*, which involves “apprehension of the object.”<sup>17</sup> According to Dharmakirti, direct knowledge reveals the individual nature of an entity, whereas inference pertains to the general nature of it. This distinction is rooted in the fact that, in inference, “the object is not presented, and whatever is known about it can be of a general nature.”<sup>18</sup>

### **The Epistemological Framework of Navya-Nyaya:**

Gangesa’s revolutionary work in the new School of Logic transformed the study of knowledge acquisition. As he aptly puts it, “direct knowledge is that which is not caused by another cognition.”<sup>19</sup> This definition underscores the essential nature of direct knowledge, emphasizing its independence from other forms of knowledge. Building upon the foundation laid by Bhasarvjna, who wrote the *Nyayasara*, Gangesa accepted the traditional four means of knowledge: *direct knowledge*, *inference*, *knowledge by similarity*, and *verbal testimony*.

Gangesa’s classification of cognition into right cognition (*prama*) and wrong cognition (*aprma*) adheres to conventional definitions. His critique of the *Nyayasutra*’s definition of perception highlights its limitations, arguing that it is both too broad and too narrow. This critique underscores the importance of refining our understanding of direct knowledge, which Gangesa’s redefinition accomplishes by emphasizing its unique character, unencumbered by prior knowledge or external influences.

Inference, according to Gangesa, is a cognitive process that yields inferential knowledge (*anumiti*), arising from the understanding of the middle term's invariable concomitance with the major term, as well as its presence in the minor term. Proponents of this view argue that inference constitutes a distinct means of knowledge, separate from sensory perception. Furthermore, inference is categorized into various types, including *kevalanvayi*, *kevalavyatireki*, and *anvaya-vyatireki*, with a distinction also made between *svārtha* and *parārtha*, paralleling the conceptual framework of *Arthapatti*.

In the realm of epistemology, knowledge by similarity (*upamana*) is conceptualized as a cognitive process that enables the identification of an object through its resemblance to another, thereby assigning a specific name (*nama*) to it. This definition aligns with the traditional *Nyaya* understanding of *upamana*. Furthermore, it is emphasized that knowledge by similarity operates independently of sense-cognition and inference.

Verbal testimony (*sabda*) is defined as a means of knowledge that arises from a genuine understanding of word meanings, as informed by conventional usage. Notably, Gangesa's formulation does not appear to draw a clear distinction between verbal testimony as a reliable authority and verbal knowledge as the meaning conveyed by words. Instead, his definition encompasses both aspects, highlighting the significance of linguistic understanding in the pursuit of knowledge.

### **The Epistemological Framework of the *Vaisesika Sūtras* (VS):**

The *Vaisesika Sūtra* (VS) posits that acquiring knowledge of the fundamental nature of categories, such as substance (*dravya*), attribute (*guna*), action (*karma*), generality (*samānya*), particularity (*viśeṣa*), and inherence (*samavāya*), is crucial for achieving the supreme good. According to the VS, "the knowledge of the essential nature of categories... brings about the supreme good."<sup>20</sup> This knowledge is attained through a special merit on the part of the knower, which is acquired by observing the similarities and differences between categories.

The VS identifies only two primary means of knowledge: perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*). Other forms of knowledge, including knowledge by similarity (*upamana*), verbal testimony (*sabda*), presumption (*arthapatti*), implication (*sambhava*), and non-existent (*abhava*), are regarded as modes of inference. Direct knowledge arises from the

contact between an object, the sense organs, and the soul. The mind plays a crucial role as a faculty of attention and volition. Ultimately, knowledge is considered a quality of the soul.

Inference, or ‘cognition by means of mark,’ is characterized by relationships such as ‘*this is its effect*,’ ‘*this is its cause*,’ ‘*this is its conjuncts*,’ ‘*this is its contradictory*,’ and ‘*this is its co-existence*.’ Inference is drawn through the premises of an argument.

Furthermore, the VS employs the terms ‘*vidya*’ and ‘*avidya*’ to denote knowledge and error, respectively, within the context of ordinary perceptual objects. *Vidya* is defined as “knowledge that is free from defects or errors,” whereas *avidya* is characterized as “knowledge that is defective.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, *avidya* is attributed to defects in the sense organs or past impressions.

### **The Samkhya means of Knowledge:**

The Samkhya philosophy is based on two main texts: the *Samkhya-karika* (SK) by Isvarakrsna and the *Samkhya-pravacana-sutra* attributed to Kapila.<sup>22</sup> The SK begins by stating that the desire for knowledge arises from the need to end suffering. It emphasizes the importance of gaining a scientific understanding of the unmanifested and manifested nature, as well as the knower (the spirit).

According to Samkhya philosophy, there are three ways to gain knowledge: *sense perception*, *inference*, and *reliable testimony*. Sense perception involves gaining knowledge through our senses. Inference involves making conclusions based on the relationship between a sign and the thing it signifies. Reliable testimony involves trusting the words of trustworthy people. Even things that are beyond our senses can be known through inference. However, some things are beyond human comprehension and can only be known through reliable testimony. The intellect, which is a product of nature, plays a crucial role in gaining knowledge. It is responsible for making decisions and can take on various forms, including virtue, knowledge, dispassion, and power.

Many commentators have interpreted and expanded on the Samkhya philosophy, including Gaudapada, Vijnana Bhiksu, and Vacaspati Misra. Their contributions have enriched our understanding of *Samkhya* epistemology.

### **Epistemology of the Yoga Sutras:**

The *Yoga Sutras* (YS) of Patanjali are rooted in the metaphysical framework of Samkhya philosophy, emphasizing the importance of understanding ‘*citta*’ and ‘*vrtti*’ to grasp their

epistemological foundations. The term ‘*citta*’ encompasses the cognitive faculty, incorporating both cognitive acts and the faculty itself. In contrast, ‘*vrtti*’ denotes the intellect’s activity, characterized by five distinct modes: *pramana* (means of knowledge), *viparyaya* (incorrect cognition), *vikalpa* (imagination), *nidra* (sleep), and *smrti* (memory).<sup>23</sup>

According to the YS, *pramana* encompasses three primary sources of knowledge: direct perception (*pratyaksa*), inference (*anumana*), and scriptural testimony (*agama*). *Viparyaya* arises from misperceiving an object’s form, whereas *vikalpa* emerges from knowledge of words lacking a corresponding object. *Nidra* is a state of consciousness resting upon non-existence, and *smrti* refers to retaining experienced objects.

It is important to note here that the process of knowing an object depends on its reflection in the intellect. However, the intellect’s self-awareness is complex, as it cannot cognize itself due to three primary reasons. *Firstly*, the intellect is not the primary means of knowing but rather an object that can be known. *Secondly*, it cannot simultaneously occupy itself with both the object of cognition and its own self-awareness. *Thirdly*, if one cognition were to cognize another, this would lead to an infinite regress.

Thus, in yoga, the intelligence of the self (*purusa*) gains self-awareness by assuming a specific form during cognition. The intellect can understand objects when connected to both the self and the object. Through *yoga*, the intellect gains the ability to understand truth, accessing a deeper level of knowledge. This true knowledge differs from what we gain through ordinary means.

### **The Mimamsa epistemology:**

The Mimamsa School, a pluralistic realist tradition, has been interpreted by prominent commentators such as Sabarasvamin, Kumarila, and Prabhakara. According to the *Sabarabhasya*, “direct knowledge arises from the interaction between human senses and existing entities.”<sup>24</sup> The *Mimamsa-Sutras* (MS) implicitly acknowledge inference, knowledge by similarity, and presumption as additional means of knowledge. Verbal testimony and non-existence are explicitly mentioned in the MS.<sup>25</sup> This reveals that, for Sabarasvamin and Kumarila, Jaimini’s *Mimamsa-sutra* recognizes six means of knowledge: direct perception (*pratyaksa*), inference (*anumana*), knowledge by similarity (*upamana*), verbal testimony (*Sabda*), presumption (*arthapatti*), and non-apprehension (*anupalabdhi*). However, Prabhakara diverges from this view, as he does not consider non-apprehension an

independent *pramana*, nor does he acknowledge the category of non-existence (*abhava*) that can be cognized through non-apprehension.

Kumarila Bhatta's concept of direct knowledge emphasizes the role of properly functioning sense organs in understanding objects, categorizing it into two distinct forms. Initial Awareness (*Nirvikalpaka Pratyaksha* or *Alocana-jnanam*) is characterized by instinctual, non-analytical apprehension of objects, similar to the experiential understanding of children or individuals with limited verbal abilities. In contrast, Detailed Understanding (*Savikalpaka Pratyaksha*) is marked by refined, analytical cognition that encompasses an object's attributes, classifications, and interrelations, as illustrated by recognizing a specific animal as a distinct entity, such as a "dog," defined by its unique characteristics. Kumarila acknowledges that non-reflective direct knowledge serves as a precursor to reflective knowledge, arguing that the reflective form should not be disqualified from being considered direct knowledge merely because it involves additional factors beyond sensory perception, such as memory. According to Kumarila, any cognition arising from the interaction between the sense organs and the object, whether occurring simultaneously or subsequent to recollection, constitutes a legitimate perceptual experience.

It is worth noting that Kumarila's explanation of inference is based on Sabara's ideas. Kumarila defines inference as the process of figuring out something not directly observable, but connected to something that is, based on a known relationship between two things. For example, seeing smoke allows us to infer the presence of fire, as we know smoke is often associated with fire. Kumarila emphasizes that such inferences rely on repeated observations of similar patterns, enabling us to form general conclusions, such as "where there is smoke, there is fire."

According to Sabara and Kumarila, testimony refers to knowledge gained through words, rather than direct sensory experience, and can be about things beyond sensory perception. Kumarila categorizes testimony into two types: human, which comes from trustworthy individuals, and superhuman, which comes from the ancient sacred texts of the Vedas; both are considered valid due to their reliable sources. Human testimony is trustworthy if it comes from someone with good character, while superhuman testimony, such as the Vedas, is trustworthy in itself. Testimony provides knowledge in two ways: it informs us about existing

things, such as “a jar exists,” or it guides us to take action, such as “make a jar,” with the Vedas specifically providing knowledge about our duties and responsibilities.

The Bhatta Mimamsaka and Prabhakara Mimamsaka schools define comparison (*upamana*) as the recognition of similarity between a remembered object and a newly perceived one, such as noticing the similarity between a cow seen in town and a wild cow seen in the forest. Both Kumarila and Prabhakara agree that comparison helps us understand the similarity between two things, clarifying that it is not just about remembering an object, perceiving a new one, or noticing a vague similarity, but rather recognizing how a remembered object shares similarities with a newly perceived one. Furthermore, they emphasize that similarity cannot be assumed as a basis for inference until the resemblance is actually noticed; highlighting that similarity must be observed firsthand to be considered valid.

Kumarila’s concept of presumption (*arthapatti*) involves drawing an informed conclusion about an unobservable aspect to resolve a logical inconsistency arising from reliable sources, such as sense perception, inference, or verbal testimony. Interestingly, this process parallels the *disjunctive-categorical syllogism* in Western logic. A case in point is the argument: “Devadatta, being alive, must be either at home or elsewhere; since he is not at home, he must be elsewhere.” This illustrates the *modus tollendo ponens principle*. Kumarila further elaborates on this concept through various examples, showcasing how presumption helps reconcile apparent discrepancies in knowledge gathered from diverse sources.

Kumarila, following Sabara, recognizes non-apprehension (*anupalabdhi*) as a distinct means of knowledge that enables us to grasp the non-existence of an object. Non-existence (*abhava*) is deemed real and is apprehended through non-apprehension, which Kumarila categorizes into four types: prior non-existence (*pragabhava*), posterior non-existence (*pradhvamsabhava*), mutual non-existence (*anyonyabhava*), and absolute non-existence (*atyantabhava*). Kumarila asserts that non-existence is a real entity cognized by non-apprehension, just as existence is cognized by other means of knowledge. Furthermore, he notes that non-apprehension, as a negative cognitive process, cannot apprehend positive existence, while positive means of knowledge cannot cognize non-existence. Ultimately, Kumarila contends that all means of knowledge, including non-apprehension, are inherently valid and self-evident, emphasizing their autonomous nature in facilitating understanding.

The Prabhakara school posits that knowledge is divided into two categories: valid and invalid. Valid knowledge, termed “cognition” (*anubhuti*), differs significantly from invalid knowledge, or “memory” (*smrti*), which is derived solely from residual impressions of prior cognitions. This philosophical framework also upholds the doctrine of self-validity of knowledge. However, Prabhakara diverges from his predecessors regarding the enumeration of valid means of knowledge, notably rejecting non-existence (*abhava*) as a distinct *pramana*. Prabhakara defines direct knowledge as an immediate apprehension that encompasses the cognition of three integral components: the perceived object, the perceiving subject, and the act of perception itself. This concept is encapsulated in the *triputi-pratyaksa-vada*, a hallmark of the Prabhakara School that distinguishes it from other philosophical traditions.

### **The Vedanta epistemology:**

Gaudapada, a 6th-7th century CE Vedantist philosopher, played a pivotal role in shaping Advaita Vedanta, a philosophy that views reality as a unified, non-dual entity. His teachings, which greatly influenced Adi Sankara, centered on the idea that our experiences are illusory, similar to dreams, and that the objects we perceive are mere mental constructs lacking inherent reality.

Sankara’s epistemology builds upon Gaudapada’s foundational ideas, further exploring the nature of reality and knowledge. He posits two distinct realms: the mundane world of everyday experience and the ultimate reality. Correspondingly, Sankara identifies two states of consciousness: ignorance (*avidya*) and knowledge (*vidya*). A unique aspect of Sankara’s philosophy is his concept of *maya*, which he characterizes as a positive yet inexplicable force that underlies the phenomenal world. Through spiritual enlightenment, *maya*’s dissolution reveals the true nature of reality, namely *Brahman*.

In Sankara’s view, ordinary human knowledge, derived from *pramanas* (means of knowledge), pertains to the mundane world, which exists in an illusory sense. Within this realm, distinctions between knowledge and error arise, as exemplified by the misperception of a rope as a snake. The mundane world’s existence is rooted in *avidya* or *adhyasa* (ignorance or superimposition), which can be dispelled by true knowledge. True knowledge, in turn, is the direct, intuitive understanding of the ultimate reality, *Brahman*.

Sankara critiques Buddhist notions of momentariness and subjective idealism, refuting the *vijnan-vada* doctrine that external objects are nonexistent and only ideas are real. In his

analysis of cognition, Sankara asserts that the self is the knowing entity, whereas the intellect acts. The functions of these two are often confused due to their mutual reflection. Ultimately, knowledge is possible only because of the self.

Ramanuja's interpretation of Vedanta, known as *Visistadvaita*, diverges significantly from Sankara's perspective. While Sankara views *Brahman* as an impersonal, attributeless absolute, with the world of experience being an illusion, Ramanuja conceives of *Brahman* as a personal entity encompassing the diverse world of experience. According to Ramanuja, this world is a real manifestation of *Brahman*, rather than an illusion. Furthermore, Ramanuja attributes perfection and various qualities to *Brahman*, which serves as both the cause and content of the world. He argues that a reality devoid of attributes is unimaginable and cannot be substantiated through any means of knowledge.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, it can be said that the examination of Indian epistemology uncovers a diverse and intricate philosophical landscape, encompassing various schools and traditions. The empiricist approach of the Carvaka school, the non-dualist perspective of Vedanta, and other traditions collectively offer a multifaceted understanding of knowledge, reality, and human cognition. Through their distinctive epistemological frameworks, these schools provide valuable insights into the complex interplay between knowledge, perception, and reality, ultimately enriching our comprehension of these fundamental concepts.

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