

## THE PATH OF LIBERATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY IN NYĀYA- VAIŚEṢIKA AND ADVAITAVEDĀNTA

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### Abstract:

The concept of *mokṣa* (liberation) occupies a central position in Indian philosophical thought, signifying the ultimate telos of human existence. While various schools share a common soteriological concern, they offer markedly different interpretations of bondage, selfhood, and the path to liberation. This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of the Nyāya and Advaita Vedānta traditions—two prominent āstika systems that present distinct philosophical frameworks for understanding liberation. Nyāya, grounded in epistemological realism and rigorous logical analysis, conceives liberation (*apavarga*) as the complete cessation of suffering and all experiential attributes. In contrast, Advaita Vedānta, rooted in metaphysical non-dualism, interprets liberation as the realization of the essential identity of Ātman and Brahman, characterized by pure consciousness and intrinsic bliss. The purpose of this paper is to analyse a comparative study between the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika system and the Advaita Vedānta, regarding the nature and means of liberation. According to the Nyāya - Vaiśeṣika, liberation is the state of absolute cessation of all kind of suffering; whereas the Advaita Vedāntins hold that liberation is the state of infinite bliss. Regarding the means of liberation there are also different views among the Nyāya -Vaiśeṣika system and Advaita Vedānta. The Naiyāyikas and the Advaitins both are admitted that *tattvajñāna* leads to the liberation; but Maharṣi Kaṇāda also gives importance to yoga and some later Vaiśeṣikas support *jñānakarmasamuccayavāda*. On the other hand, although the Advaita Vedāntins give importance on the *niṣkāma* karma for purification of mind but it is not the direct cause of liberation, *tattvajñāna* only leads to the state of infinite bliss i.e. *mokṣa*.

**Keywords:** Mokṣa, Nyāya, AdvaitaVedānta, Apavarga, Ātman, Brahman, Liberation, Indian Philosophy, Consciousness

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## 1. Introduction

Indian philosophy is fundamentally soteriological: it seeks not merely to understand reality but to transform the human condition by overcoming suffering (*duḥkha*) and attaining liberation (*mokṣa*). Across diverse philosophical traditions, the problem of human bondage and the possibility of liberation are central concerns. However, the nature of this bondage and the path to liberation are interpreted in radically different ways.

Among the orthodox systems, Nyāya and Advaita Vedānta present two sophisticated yet contrasting approaches. Nyāya, associated with thinkers such as Gautama and later commentators like Vātsyāyana and Udayana, emphasizes logical rigor and epistemological clarity. Advaita Vedānta, systematized by Śaṅkarācārya, offers a non-dual metaphysics in which ultimate reality is pure consciousness.

This paper undertakes a comparative study of these two traditions, focusing on four key dimensions: (1) the nature of bondage, (2) the conception of the self, (3) the means to liberation, and (4) the nature of the liberated state. Through this analysis, the paper aims to demonstrate how metaphysical commitments shape

soteriological doctrines and to critically evaluate their philosophical implications.

## 2. Mokṣa in nyāya-vaiśeṣika philosophy

According to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika philosopher, liberation is the state of absolute cessation of all kinds of suffering. To denote this ultimate goal Maharṣi Kaṇāda, the founder of Vaiśeṣika school, used the term '*nīḥśreyasa* (निःश्रेयस)' in his *Vaiśeṣikasūtra*—“.... “*पदार्थानां साधर्म्यवैधर्म्याभ्यां तत्त्वज्ञानं निःश्रेयसम्*।” [1] . But, significantly when he has defined this ultimate goal as liberation of self from conjunction with all its attributes and there being no scope for further bondage, he has used the term '*mokṣa*'—“तदभावे संयोगाभावः प्रादुर्भावश्च मोक्षः” [2] .

Paśastapādācārya also says that supreme good or *nīḥśreyasa* is obtained from the accurate knowledge (*tattvajñāna*) of the similar characteristics (*sādharmyas*) and dissimilar characteristics (*vaidharmyas*) of the six categories: *dravya*, *guṇa*, *karma*, *sāmānya*, *viśeṣa* and *samavāya*. The true nature of a thing is called *tattva*. The knowledge of the true nature of similar as well as dissimilar characteristics of the six categories leads to the supreme good [4]

According to the Vaiśeṣikas, *mokṣa* is absolute negation of pain. In this state the self exists in its essential

nature indicated by destruction of all its specific qualities; although these specific qualities are destroyed there is no destruction of the self. The self becomes free from the bondage of body and sense organs etc. due to the cessation of merit and demerit (dharma-adharma). And because of the absence of *adr̥ṣṭa* (the locus of dharma-adharma), there is no possibility of new conjunction of the self with the body. The Vaiśeṣika does not accept that there is any kind of eternal bliss in the state of liberation. Because, in the state of liberation the self becomes free from all the attributes including knowledge, pleasure, pain, desire, aversion, volition etc.

Therefore, the state of liberation is a state of unconsciousness or absolute cessation of all experience in the self. Like the Vaiśeṣika philosophers the Naiyāyikas also admit that liberation is the state of absolute cessation of suffering. But they differ on some points. If there is no existence of pleasure as well as knowledge to the liberated self then how can this liberated state be explained? The opponents of Vaiśeṣikas and its sister school Nyāya, have argued that this kind of liberated self can be compared with a stone. Because, if all the attributes including knowledge, also demolished during the state of liberation then how could be the knowledge of the

true nature of objects in the world is directed towards attainment of an ultimate goal. For this reason, the Naiyāyikas are more consistent than the Vaiśeṣikas in the rejection of the transcendental happiness in the self as distinguished from empirical pleasure.

According to the Naiyāyikas absolute cessation of suffering is regarded as the state of liberation. It means the highest state is not freedom from knowledge or experience only, but total and absolute freedom from suffering. In this connection, Maṇḍiśa Goutama says in his Nyāyasūtra- "तदत्यन्तविमोक्षोऽपवर्गः" [5] i.e. liberation is the complete annihilation of all suffering, the cessation of the stream of births and deaths also. Maṇḍiśa Vātsyāyana, the commentator of Nyāyasūtra here points out a close similarity to the state of liberation with Brahman; because Brahman is characterized by the scripture as fearless and Maṇḍiśa also defines the state of liberation as the state of fearlessness, without decay and death [6]. But they do not accept the eternal bliss of self in the state of liberation.

So, for this reason, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika view of liberation is regarded as *abhāvamokṣavāda*. Regarding the means of liberation, the Naiyāyikas hold that the knowledge of the self, which is regarded as the *tattavjñāna* in their

system ultimately leads to liberation. Though they also give importance to the performance of duties but liberation cannot be achieved by the performance of duties. Duties can lead to heaven which is non-eternal. The practice of yoga, austerities, the performance of duties and abstention from sin are subsidiary to the acquisition of true knowledge. Release can be achieved by true knowledge or intuition of the self [7].

On the other hand, both Maharṣi Kaṇāda and Praśastapādācārya stated that the essential knowledge of reality through the similarities (*sādharmya*) and dissimilarities (*vaidharmya*) among the categories is the valid means to attain the ultimate end. Though Praśastapādācārya also added that such type of essential knowledge is possible only when it is accompanied with a special sort of merit (dharma) that is ordained by the will of god—*तच्चेश्वरचोदनाभिव्यक्ताद् धर्मदेव*” [8].

Maharṣi Kaṇāda also gives importance on yoga i.e. the quietened state of mind, which is also regarded as the means of the ultimate goal. In this connection, he says that “तदानारम्भ आत्मस्थे मनसि शरीरस्य दुःखाभावः स योगः” [9] i.e. by its very nature the mind is always focus on the external objects and usually it helps the individual self in seeking worldly

pleasure of life which is always mixed with pain. When this mind is trained to be deactivated and is concentrated on the self itself, then such a mental state has been defined as yoga. In this regard Maharṣi Kaṇāda also says that, “आत्मकर्मसु मोक्षो व्याख्यातः” [10]—here the term *ātmakarmasu* means that, through *śravana*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana* the self-realization is possible. According to Maharṣi Kaṇāda knowledge cannot alone leads to the liberation, but to the combination of knowledge with action (*jñānakarmasamuccaya*) is the cause of liberation. Later Vaiśeṣika, Udayana states in his *Kiraṇāvalī* that only right knowledge can remove the incorrect knowledge, which is the root cause of bondage. But Śrīdhara differs from Udayana on this point. Śrīdhara states that, the mind is cleansed with the constant performance of action, so that the true nature of self is realized through knowledge. So, liberation is achieved by the practice of action as well as knowledge of the true nature of self. Therefore, according to some later Vaiśeṣika liberation is attained through a combination of knowledge and action (*jñāna-karmasamuccaya*).

### 3. Mokṣa in advaita vedānta

All the branches of Vedānta philosophy admit that liberation is the state of infinite bliss. In Advaita Vedānta

the absolute oneness with Brahman is the ultimate end; the individual self is identical with Brahman but due to the ignorance (*avidyā*) the self does not realize its true nature and when this ignorance is removed by true knowledge then the self-realises its own nature. *Mokṣa* is not a new attainment, rather the self is eternally liberated but, due to *avidyā* it becomes bounded. In this regard, Dharmarājādhvarīndra says in his Vedānta Paribhāṣā- “प्राप्तस्याप्यानन्दस्य प्राप्तिः परिहृतस्याप्यनर्थस्य निवृत्तिः मोक्षः प्रयोजनम् ।” [11].

The Ātman is eternally liberated; it is its essential nature but it hidden by *avidyā* and this ignorance is also not permanent. It is like the rope- snake illusion. So, Individuality is due to ignorance and liberation is extinction of the individual self and the realisation of absolute self or Paramātmā. By the true knowledge of the self this ignorance is removed. In this context, Dharmarājādhvarīndra also says in his Vedānta Paribhāṣā “आनन्दात्मकब्रह्मप्राप्तिश्च मोक्षः शोकनिवृत्तिश्च ।” [12] i.e. ‘*mokṣa*’ means ‘attainment of Brahman, which is bliss’ and as also ‘the cessation of suffering’. In this verse Dharmarājā also clarify that the state of *mokṣa* is a positive state and not negative. Because, as Śruti says, “ब्रह्म वेद ब्रह्मैव भवति ।” i.e. he who knows that Brahman becomes Brahman itself” [13].

According to the Advaitins, Knowledge of *nirguṇa* Brahman, the principle of spiritual unity is the pre-eminent means to the attainment of liberation. Knowledge is considered to be the chief means of liberation because the intuitive knowledge of identity of the *jīva* and Brahman (अपरोक्षब्रह्मात्मैक्यज्ञानम्) is its cause. Śāstras only generates this right knowledge. The knowledge of Brahman which leads to eternal bliss does not depend on the performance of any act, because action, whether secular or Vedic, can be done, misdome or left undone. But knowledge leaves no option to us for its being this or that or for its existence or non-existence. It is not in our hands to make, unmake, or change the knowledge. But due to the abstraction (*vikṣepa*) of mind the knowledge from *śabdapramāṇa* is indirectly generated. If the mind is purified by the practice of *niṣkāma* karma and through the śravaṇa, manana, *nididhyāsana* the false ideas (*viparīta bhāvanā* and *asambhāvanā*) about the Brahman is removed.

After that, the man who acquired the four the four necessary pre-requisites (*sādhana-catuṣṭaya*) i.e.-(a) discrimination between things permanent and transient (*nityānityavastuviveka*), (b) renunciation of the enjoyment of the fruits of action in this world and hereafter



(*ihāmutraphalabhogavirūga*), (c) six treasures, such as control of the mind (*śama*), control of senses and organs (*dama*), the withdrawing of the self (*uparati*), forbearance (*titikṣa*), self-settledness (*samādhāna*) and faith (*śraddhā*), (d) the desire for spiritual freedom (*mumukṣutva*), then he realize the unity of the *jīva* and Brahman directly though the Śrutipramāṇa like “*tattvamasī*”. This kind of direct knowledge (*aparokṣānubhūti*) removed the false earthly knowledge and leads to the ultimate end.

#### 4. Comparative Analysis

In this context, some arguments have been raised by the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika against the Advaitins. The Naiyāyika may ask: what is the cause of the manifestation of eternal bliss in the self in the state of liberation? In the state of liberation there would not remain any kind of attachment of bliss, because absolute detachment is the pre-condition of liberation.

In response to the above objection the Advaitins says that *mokṣa* is identical with Brahman and the individual self who realised his own nature which Brahman itself, has attain the culmination of bliss; because Brahman is *ānandasvarūpa* and Brahman is the only absolute bliss (*niratīśayasukha*); in this stage there is

no distinction between the knower and the bliss. So, in Advaita philosophy *mokṣa* is not a new attainment or *aprāptasya prāpti*, rather it is the realization of one's own nature i.e. *prāptasya prāpti*. Here Dharmarāja also mention the Śruti pramāṇa-“*tarati śokaṁ ātmavid*” [14] .

This means the state of *mokṣa* is purely positive; there has no sorrow, no negativity. On the contrary, the Advaitins says that the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika view of liberation is not acceptable. Because the notion of the self which discussed by them is defective. According to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, in the state of liberation the self becomes devoid of bliss as well as consciousness and it is reduced to a material object like a stone-slab. But ‘cessation of suffering’ is *abhāva padārtha*, so it should be clear that which kind of ‘*abhāva*’ is it? If it is regarded as *dhvaṁsābhāva* then it cannot be regarded as the highest goal. Because, there is a possibility to arise this pain again due to the nature of *dhvaṁsābhāva*.

When one pain is demolished then another will be generated. If this ‘cessation of sufferings’ regarded as *prāgabhāva* then after the destruction of the *prāgabhāva* of *duḥkha*, again the *duḥkha* is generate like the *prāgabhāva* of a pot. This is not regarded as a state

of *mokṣa*. Or if it would be said that all the *prāgabhāva* of *duḥkha* is destroyed then it should be accepted that all pains are generated and this kind of *mokṣa* does not desirable to anybody. Lastly, if this *duḥkhabhāva* regarded as *atyantābhāva* then, this kind of *abhāva* is eternal so liberation is always be present and then the question of bondage and liberation is meaningless. Besides, if it is admitted that in the state of liberation the absence of pain and as well as happiness is occurred then nobody can desire for this kind of state. So, according to the Advaitins liberation does not regard as the state of 'cessation of suffering'.

### 5. Critical Reflections

The Nyāya conception of liberation raises important philosophical questions. Can a state devoid of consciousness be meaningfully described as liberation? Critics argue that such a state lacks intrinsic value. However, Nyāya's emphasis on the elimination of suffering anticipates modern negative utilitarian perspectives.

Advaita Vedānta, while offering a richer experiential account, faces challenges regarding the status of the empirical world and the coherence of *māyā*. If the world is ultimately unreal, how can ignorance itself be explained?

From a contemporary perspective, these debates resonate with discussions in philosophy of mind—particularly concerning the nature of consciousness and selfhood. Nyāya's view aligns with functionalist or reductionist models, while Advaita anticipates non-dual and pan-consciousness theories.

### 6. Conclusion

The comparative study of Nyāya and Advaita Vedānta reveals the diversity and depth of Indian philosophical thought on liberation. While both traditions aim at overcoming suffering, they offer radically different visions of the self and ultimate reality.

Nyāya presents a rigorous, analytical path culminating in the cessation of all experiential states, while Advaita offers a transformative realization of non-dual consciousness. These perspectives, though divergent, enrich our understanding of liberation and continue to inspire philosophical inquiry.

Ultimately, the dialogue between Nyāya and Advaita underscores a fundamental insight: the path to liberation is shaped not only by ethical and practical considerations but also by deep metaphysical and epistemological commitments.

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