

KNOWLEDGE AS CONSCIOUSNESS:
TOWARDS AN INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR NEW
INDOLOGY

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Abstract

This paper seeks to contribute to the emerging discourse of “New Indology” by proposing an indigenous epistemological framework grounded in the identification of knowledge with consciousness. While classical Indology has often been critiqued for portraying Indian thought as mystical, other-worldly, and lacking epistemic rigor, such interpretations overlook a foundational insight present across several streams of Indian philosophy—namely, that knowledge is not merely representational or inferential, but intrinsically tied to consciousness itself.

By engaging critically with dominant models of epistemology, particularly those that privilege external validation and objectivity, this study re-examines the Indian approach to knowledge as fundamentally experiential, reflexive, and transformative. The paper explores how this consciousness-centric model reconfigures key epistemological concerns such as justification, validity, and the knower-known relationship. In doing so, it also opens a dialogue with contemporary debates in philosophy of mind and cognitive science, where questions concerning the nature of consciousness remain unresolved.

The study further argues that such an epistemological reorientation is not merely theoretical but carries significant implications for understanding liberation (*mukti*) as an epistemic culmination rather than a purely metaphysical goal. By situating knowledge within the structure of consciousness, the paper attempts to demonstrate that Indian philosophical traditions offer a coherent and systematic alternative to prevailing epistemological paradigms.

Ultimately, this work aims to contribute to the reconstruction of *Bhārat-Vidyā* by articulating a framework that is both rooted in indigenous thought and capable of engaging meaningfully with global philosophical discourse.

Keywords: Indian Epistemology, Consciousness, New Indology, *Bhārat-Vidyā*, Mukti (Liberation)

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Introduction

The academic discipline of Indology has traditionally been associated with the study of India's history, literature, philosophy, and culture. From its early institutionalization in Europe, shaped by scholars such as William Jones and Max Müller, it developed primarily as a philological enterprise concerned with recovering and interpreting Sanskrit texts. While these efforts were foundational, they also contributed to an image of Indian thought as predominantly mystical and insufficiently attentive to epistemological rigor.

In recent decades, this characterization has been increasingly challenged. The emergence of "New Indology" reflects a shift toward understanding Indian traditions as systematic and self-reflexive modes of inquiry, capable of addressing fundamental philosophical problems with conceptual precision.¹ Central to this re-evaluation is the question of epistemology. Classical Indological approaches often emphasized metaphysical and religious dimensions, overlooking sophisticated analyses of knowledge (*pramā*), means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), and error (*apramā*). At the same time, dominant Western epistemological models—from René Descartes to Immanuel

Kant—have largely operated within a subject-object framework that generates persistent problems concerning justification and certainty.

Against this background, this paper proposes that a significant strand of Indian philosophy offers an alternative orientation by identifying knowledge with consciousness. Rather than treating knowledge as a relation between independent entities, this perspective understands consciousness as the very condition of knowing. Certain modern interpretations of Vedāntic thought emphasize that knowledge is not external to consciousness but its expression.²

The aim of this paper is to explore how this conception can serve as the basis for an indigenous epistemological framework within New Indology. By re-examining key epistemological categories through a consciousness-centric lens, it seeks to demonstrate the philosophical depth and contemporary relevance of Indian thought.

The Epistemological Gap in Dominant Traditions

A critical examination of dominant epistemological traditions reveals a persistent structural tension concerning the possibility of reliable knowledge. From early modern philosophy onward, a central

¹ See Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vols. I-II.

² See *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*.

problem has been how a knowing subject can access an external world. While this inquiry has produced rigorous analyses, it has also entrenched a dualism between knower and known, giving rise to what may be termed an “epistemological gap.”

In the rationalist framework of René Descartes, knowledge begins with the certainty of the thinking self, yet the transition from self-awareness to knowledge of the external world remains problematic. Similarly, in the empiricist tradition of John Locke, knowledge is mediated through ideas derived from sensory experience, raising doubts about how such representations correspond to external objects.³

The critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant attempts to resolve this issue by emphasizing the active role of the mind in structuring experience. However, it introduces a new dualism between phenomena and noumena, limiting knowledge to appearances and leaving ultimate reality inaccessible.⁴

Despite their differences, these approaches share a common assumption: knowledge is a relation between distinct subject and object. This model requires mechanisms such as correspondence or coherence to justify knowledge claims, yet these often lead to circularity or regress.⁵

Consequently, knowledge appears as an external acquisition, and the unity of experience is fragmented.

This persistent gap raises a fundamental question: is the subject-object divide itself necessary? If it generates enduring philosophical difficulties, an alternative approach must rethink the nature of knowledge at a more basic level. Rather than attempting to bridge the divide, it may be more fruitful to question its primacy.

At this point, Indian philosophical traditions offer a significant alternative by reconfiguring the relation between knowledge and consciousness. Here, the separation between knower and known is not fundamental but derivative, opening the way for a more immediate and unified understanding of knowledge.

Indian Epistemological Orientation: From *Pramāṇa* to Experience

In contrast to dominant epistemological models, Indian philosophical traditions offer a distinctive approach to the nature of knowledge. While diverse in orientation, schools such as Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta share a sustained concern with valid knowledge (*pramā*) and its means (*pramāṇa*), including perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), and

³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*.

⁵ See Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*.

testimony (*śabda*).⁶ However, this analysis extends beyond classification toward a deeper inquiry into how knowledge becomes immediately evident.

Unlike representational models, many Indian systems emphasize that knowledge carries an intrinsic assurance. The debate between intrinsic validity (*svataḥ-prāmāṇya*) and extrinsic validation (*parataḥ-prāmāṇya*), particularly between Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya, highlights this shift. While Nyāya stresses external verification, Mīmāṃsā maintains that cognition is self-valid unless contradicted.⁷ This already suggests a movement away from purely mediated knowledge toward immediacy.

This trajectory culminates in Advaita Vedānta, where epistemology transitions from *pramāṇa* analysis to a more fundamental examination of consciousness. Here, consciousness is understood as self-luminous (*svayam-prakāśa*), revealing both itself and its objects without external validation.⁸ Consequently, the distinction between knowledge and its means becomes secondary, and awareness itself emerges as foundational.

Certain modern interpretations of Vedāntic thought extend this insight by arguing that knowledge is not produced but

uncovered. In this view, *pramāṇas* function not as generators of knowledge but as instruments for removing ignorance.⁹ Epistemology thus shifts from accumulation to clarification, where knowing involves recognizing the nature of consciousness rather than constructing representations.

This movement from *pramāṇa* to experience (*anubhava*) has significant implications. Knowledge is no longer an external relation between subject and object but an intrinsic feature of awareness. While empirical and logical methods retain their importance, they are situated within a broader framework in which consciousness is primary. This provides the basis for the conceptual analysis that follows, where knowledge is examined explicitly as consciousness.

Knowledge as Consciousness: A Conceptual Analysis

The preceding discussion indicates a shift within Indian epistemology—from an analysis of *pramāṇa* to a deeper inquiry into awareness itself. This shift finds its most significant expression in identifying knowledge with consciousness. To assess this claim, it is necessary to clarify what it means to understand knowledge in these terms.

⁶ See Bimal Krishna Matilal, *Perception*.

⁷ On this debate, see Kumārila Bhaṭṭa and Udayana.

⁸ See Adi Shankaracharya, *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*.

⁹ See *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*.

In much of modern philosophy, knowledge is conceived either as justified true belief or as a representational relation between subject and object. Such accounts treat knowledge as something constructed, possessed, or verified. In contrast, the present view challenges this assumption by proposing that knowledge is not fundamentally a property of beliefs, but an expression of consciousness.

To identify knowledge with consciousness is to assert that all knowing presupposes a self-revealing awareness. Consciousness is not an object or passive container but the illuminating principle through which all objects—internal and external—are disclosed. This is expressed in the notion of self-luminosity (*svayam-prakāśatva*), according to which consciousness reveals itself without requiring another act of cognition.¹⁰

A key implication of this view is reflexivity. Every act of knowing involves an implicit awareness of itself: one does not merely perceive an object but is simultaneously aware of perceiving. This reflexivity is intrinsic, not the result of secondary reflection. As a result, the distinction between knowing and being aware of knowing becomes secondary, grounded in a deeper unity.

From this standpoint, the subject-object distinction appears as derivative rather than fundamental. Both knower and known are understood as manifestations within a single field of awareness. This does not deny empirical distinctions but reinterprets them as relational structures within consciousness rather than indicators of an ontological divide.¹¹

This perspective also transforms the understanding of knowledge as an event. Instead of being something produced under specific conditions, knowledge is seen as an ever-present condition underlying all cognition. Consciousness does not arise through knowing; rather, all acts of knowing occur within it. Consequently, what is commonly described as “knowledge acquisition” is better understood as the removal of ignorance rather than the production of something new.¹² Ignorance (*avidyā*) thus signifies misapprehension rather than absence.

This reconceptualization shifts epistemology from external validation to intrinsic manifestation, from representation to immediacy. Knowledge is not an object to be attained but the very condition that makes both knower and known intelligible. In this way, the epistemological gap between subject and object is effectively dissolved, as

¹⁰ See Adi Shankaracharya, *Upadeśa Sāhasrī*.

¹¹ See Gaudapada, *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā*.

¹² See *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*.

both are situated within a unified field of awareness.

This analysis provides the foundation for reinterpreting key epistemological categories. The following section will examine these implications with respect to justification, truth, and error.

Revisiting Epistemological Categories

The identification of knowledge with consciousness necessitates a re-examination of key epistemological categories such as justification, truth, and error. Rather than being rejected, these concepts are reinterpreted in light of the self-revealing nature of awareness.

a. Justification: Intrinsic Certainty

In dominant traditions, justification involves validating beliefs through evidence or coherence, presupposing a subject-object distinction. However, within a consciousness-centric framework, knowledge derives its validity from its **self-evident character**. Awareness does not require external certification; it is immediately given. This aligns with the doctrine of intrinsic validity (*svataḥ-prāmāṇya*), where cognition is considered valid unless subsequently contradicted.¹³ Justification thus becomes an inherent feature of conscious experience rather than an external process.

¹³ See Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, Ślokavārttika.

¹⁴ See Adi Shankaracharya, Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya.

b. Truth: Immediacy over Correspondence

The correspondence theory defines truth as agreement between proposition and reality, relying on a separation between knower and known. By contrast, when knowledge is grounded in consciousness, truth is understood in terms of **immediacy and non-sublatability**. A cognition is true insofar as it is not negated by later experience, reflecting the principle of *abādhitatva*.¹⁴ Truth, therefore, is not correspondence but the stability of awareness. Empirical truths remain valid within their domains but are grounded in a more fundamental, non-revisable awareness.

c. Error: Misidentification

Error, traditionally seen as mismatch, is here understood as **misidentification within consciousness**. Classical examples, such as mistaking a rope for a snake, illustrate that error arises not from absence of knowledge but from incorrect attribution.¹⁵ Awareness itself remains unaffected; only interpretation is distorted. Correction, therefore, involves removing misapprehension rather than producing new knowledge.

Taken together, these reinterpretations transform epistemology: justification becomes intrinsic certainty,

¹⁵ See Gaudapada, Māṇḍūkya Kārikā.

truth becomes immediacy, and error becomes misidentification. This resolves tensions within representational models and prepares the ground for engagement with contemporary debates on consciousness.

Engagement with Contemporary Debates

The reconstruction of epistemology on the basis of consciousness bears directly on several unresolved debates in contemporary philosophy, particularly in philosophy of mind and cognitive science. A central issue is the Hard Problem of Consciousness, articulated by David Chalmers, which concerns the difficulty of explaining how subjective experience (*qualia*) arises from physical processes. Despite advances in identifying neural correlates, the gap between third-person explanations and first-person experience remains unresolved.

Related debates on intentionality and representation attempt to explain mental states through their referential content. However, such approaches often presuppose the very consciousness they seek to explain, failing to account for the qualitative and unified character of experience. Similarly, functionalist models in cognitive science, while effective in describing information processing, tend to bracket or reduce consciousness without adequately explaining its nature.

In this context, a consciousness-centric epistemology offers a significant alternative. By treating consciousness as foundational rather than derivative, it reverses the explanatory direction: instead of deriving awareness from matter, it examines how all experience arises within consciousness. This perspective reframes the explanatory gap as a result of presupposing a subject-object division.

Such an approach does not reject empirical science but situates it within a broader framework that integrates first-person and third-person perspectives. It thus enables a more comprehensive understanding of mind and cognition while fostering dialogue between Indian philosophical traditions and contemporary thought.

This demonstrates that the conception of knowledge as consciousness remains philosophically relevant, leading naturally to its culmination in the idea of liberation (*mukti*).

Knowledge and Liberation: An Epistemic Convergence

The preceding analysis leads to a convergence between epistemology and liberation (*mukti*). Within a consciousness-centric framework, liberation is not a post-mortem reward or an external moral outcome, but the culmination of knowledge itself—an epistemic fulfilment in which reality is directly realized.

In many philosophical systems, knowledge and liberation are treated separately: epistemology concerns true cognition, while liberation concerns spiritual transformation. However, in traditions such as Advaita Vedānta, this distinction is dissolved. Knowledge is not instrumental to liberation; it is constitutive of it. To know reality as it is is to be free from ignorance (*avidyā*).¹⁶

From this perspective, ignorance is not absence of knowledge but **misidentification within consciousness**—mistaking the transient for the permanent or the non-essential for the essential. This misapprehension produces limitation and existential fragmentation. Liberation, therefore, is not the production of a new state but the removal of this distortion, revealing the ever-present nature of consciousness.

If consciousness is self-luminous and foundational, then realization is not acquisition but clarification. Liberation thus becomes the highest form of epistemic certainty—immediate, non-revisable, and incapable of being sublated (*bādhā*) - fulfilling the criteria of valid knowledge.

This also leads to a collapse of the distinction between knowing and being. When knowledge is identified with consciousness, the subject-object structure

dissolves into a unified field of awareness. The realization of truth becomes an experiential transformation in which knower, known, and knowing are no longer distinct.¹⁷

Modern interpretations of non-dual thought similarly emphasize liberation as recognition of one's nature as consciousness itself.¹⁸ This does not reject reasoning but situates it within a process that culminates in direct realization.

For New Indology, this has significant implications: it reveals that Indian thought integrates epistemology and liberation rather than separating them into philosophy and religion. It also reframes epistemological inquiry itself, showing that issues of justification and certainty ultimately converge in realization.

In this sense, knowledge is not merely intellectual but transformative, culminating in the recognition of consciousness as the ground of all experience.

Towards an Indigenous Framework for New Indology

The identification of knowledge with consciousness provides not only a philosophical insight but also the foundation for an indigenous epistemological framework. Within the discourse of New Indology, this framework enables a

¹⁶ See Adi Shankaracharya, Vivekacūḍāmaṇi.

¹⁷ See Gaudapada, Māṇḍūkya Kārikā.

¹⁸ See The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda.

rearticulation of Indian thought that is both internally grounded and capable of engaging global philosophical debates.

A key challenge in Indological studies has been the dominance of interpretive models that privilege textual description over conceptual analysis. Early scholarship, despite its philological value, often imposed external categories on Indian traditions, thereby obscuring their epistemological depth.¹⁹ New Indology thus requires not only textual recovery but also conceptual reconstruction.

In this context, a consciousness-based epistemology offers a viable foundation. It is grounded in principles such as self-luminous awareness, intrinsic validity of knowledge, and the reinterpretation of epistemic categories. These collectively form a coherent system that avoids both uncritical traditionalism and reductive modernism while remaining open to contemporary dialogue.

A major strength of this framework lies in its integrative character. Epistemology, metaphysics, and soteriology are not separate domains but interconnected through consciousness as the unifying principle. This challenges modern disciplinary fragmentation and reorients Indian knowledge systems away from purely utilitarian interpretations.

Instead, knowledge is understood as transformative, revealing the nature of reality and the self. This allows ethical and social dimensions to be grounded in the unity of consciousness rather than external utility.

More broadly, this framework contributes to global philosophical discourse by offering a non-reductive model of knowledge that accommodates multiple traditions while preserving conceptual integrity. It also requires a balance between continuity and reinterpretation, building on modern expositions of Vedāntic thought while remaining responsive to contemporary concerns.²⁰

Thus, knowledge as consciousness becomes a guiding principle for reconstructing *Bhārat-Vidyā*, with implications extending beyond Indology to the philosophy of knowledge itself.

Conclusion

This study has reframed Indological discourse through the epistemological identification of knowledge with consciousness. It began by critiquing dominant epistemological models, which remain structured by a persistent subject-object dualism, generating an enduring epistemological gap. This gap necessitates complex theories of justification and

¹⁹ See Max Müller.

²⁰ See The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda.

validation, which often fail to resolve the underlying tension.

In contrast, Indian philosophical traditions present an alternative orientation in which knowledge is not a representational relation but is intrinsically linked to consciousness. By shifting from pramāṇa-based analysis to the nature of awareness itself, epistemology is reconfigured at its foundation. Knowledge, understood as self-luminous and reflexive, does not require external validation but carries intrinsic certainty. Accordingly, justification becomes inherent to cognition, truth is grounded in immediacy and non-sublatability, and error is reinterpreted as misidentification within consciousness.

The engagement with contemporary philosophy further demonstrates the relevance of this framework. In addressing the Hard Problem of Consciousness, the consciousness-centric model reverses the explanatory direction by treating awareness as foundational rather than derivative. This provides a productive basis for dialogue between Indian philosophy and contemporary cognitive science.

A central outcome of the analysis is the convergence of epistemology and liberation (*mukti*). Liberation is not an external goal but the realization of the nature of consciousness itself. Thus, knowledge becomes inherently

transformative, dissolving the distinction between cognition and existence.

Building on these insights, the paper proposes that knowledge as consciousness can serve as a foundational principle for New Indology, enabling a rearticulation of *Bhārat-Vidyā* that is both indigenous and philosophically rigorous while remaining globally relevant. It challenges reductive interpretations of Indian thought and affirms its conceptual depth.

At the same time, the study remains preliminary, with further research needed in integrating specific Indian schools and expanding interdisciplinary engagement with cognitive science and AI.

In conclusion, this framework shifts epistemology from representation to realization, offering a more unified and comprehensive understanding of knowledge.

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