

## EXPLORING THERAPEUTIC NATURE OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITIONS THROUGH THE DIALOGICAL METHOD

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of the paper is an attempt to showcase the therapeutic feature of Indian philosophical thought as evident from the role Indian philosophical dialogues play in alleviating suffering by bringing about psychological and spiritual transformation. The present age is an age of science that relies on a set procedure of empirical verification to determine either meaningfulness or meaninglessness of worldly facts. However, man is a rational animal. His desire for knowledge is not merely limited to asserting meaningfulness via verification with worldly facts. Rather his desire is an urge to understand in a holistic manner his own self and the world in which he lives, thinks, acts and have his being. The Greek philosopher Aristotle in his monumental work *Metaphysics* states, "it is owing to wonder that men both now begin, and at first began, to philosophize...."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the events of life and death mystify mankind. He begins to reflect over the events. Thus, in order to escape from ignorance, he begins to philosophize culminating into the inception of discipline of Philosophy. The word 'Philosophy' is formed from two Greek words- *Philo* meaning love and *Sophia* meaning knowledge. Unlike sciences of various kinds that give a sectional view of world, Philosophy endeavors to reach a conception of the entire universe with all its elements and aspects and their interrelations to one another. Indian Philosophy, in particular, goes beyond fulfilling intellectual curiosity by delving deep into manifold dilemmas and sufferings one encounters in life. The various strands of philosophical thought found in Upanishads, Bhagwad Gita, Jain and Buddhist canons are not merely textual knowledge but also serve as a therapy for overcoming various problems in life. This is because unlike any literary text unilaterally directing knowledge to its readers, these texts embedded with the dialogical structure enables active engagement of its reader. The emphasis laid by Indian philosophical thought on dialogue as a mode of communication is an effective therapeutic tool that benefits society as it fosters healing, mediation in conflicts, shared knowledge and co-existence of diverse cultures.*

**Keywords:** Indian Philosophy, Suffering, Dialogues, Therapeutic feature, Psychological-Spiritual transformation

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The present age is an age of science that relies on a set procedure of empirical verification to determine either meaningfulness or meaninglessness of worldly facts. However, man is a rational animal. His desire for knowledge is not merely limited to asserting meaningfulness via verification with worldly facts. Rather his desire is an urge to understand in a holistic manner his own self and the world in which he lives, moves, works and have his Being. The Greek philosopher Aristotle in his monumental work *Metaphysics* states, "it is owing to wonder that men both now begin, and at first began, to philosophize...."<sup>2</sup> In other words, the events of life and death mystify man. He begins to reflect over the events. Thus, in order to escape from ignorance, he began to philosophize culminating into the birth of Philosophy. Without philosophizing, a man cannot exist. The alternative thus is not 'between the metaphysics and no metaphysics' but between the 'good metaphysics and the bad metaphysics'. The word 'Philosophy'<sup>3</sup> is formed from two Greek words- *Philo* meaning love and *Sophia* meaning knowledge. Unlike sciences of various kinds that give a sectional view of world, Philosophy endeavors to reach a conception of the entire universe with all its elements and aspects and their interrelations to one another. The study of philosophy in academics is broadly categorized as Indian philosophy and Western philosophy. While the quest of both aims for intellectual refinement, Indian philosophical thought stands out in terms of richness by imparting meaning and value to human life.

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<sup>1</sup>Aristotle., & Apostle, H. G. (1966). *Metaphysics*. Book 1, 982b, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

<sup>2</sup>Aristotle., & Apostle, H. G. (1966). *Metaphysics*. Book 1, 982b. Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

<sup>3</sup>Mark, J. J. (2020, October 16). Philosophy, Retrieved from <https://www.worldhistory.org/philosophy/>

## 2. UNDERSTANDING INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT

Indian philosophy is the system of thought and reflection that was developed by the civilizations of the Indian subcontinent. Schools of Indian philosophical thought has been classified by the Brahmanical tradition as either orthodox or unorthodox – *āstika* or *nāstika* – depending on whether they regard the Vedas as an infallible source of knowledge or not. There are six schools of orthodox Hindu philosophy—Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta—and three heterodox schools—Jain, Buddhist and Cārvāka. To thoroughly understand what characterizes Indian philosophical thought, it is essential to understand it in relation to western philosophy. Once Renowned Advaita Scholar, Professor T.M.P. Mahadevan was asked to spell out the distinction between Western and Indian Philosophy. He is reported to have said:

“Western philosophy philosophizes from only one state of consciousness, namely, the waking: Indian philosophy takes into account all the three states of consciousness – waking, dreaming, and deep sleep.”<sup>4</sup>

This above-mentioned description highlighting Indian philosophies’ investigating all states of consciousness is what makes Indian philosophical thought unique from western thought. It is its quest for depth which makes Indian philosophy an intriguing domain. The central aim of philosophical thoughts, be it Western or Indian, is to uncover the solutions of the problems/issues of life, the problems of being/becoming, the origin and nature of matter, of mind, of goodness, of truth, of reality, of ultimate reality. Both agree that philosophy is the outcome of curiosity, as evident from Aristotle stating that it is wonder which is precursor to the inception of philosophy or to which Vedānta refers as *Jijñāsā* or the questioning spirit, and what the Gita calls *pariprasna*. But both differ in their approach. Indian Philosophical thought starts investigation from existential problems by placing humans as just another species and Western Philosophy starts investigation by placing man at the center of everything (Anthropomorphism). In other words, for the former it is rather a disinterested pursuit of knowledge i.e. the philosopher wants to know for the sake of knowing, knowledge in this case being an end-in-itself. But for the latter, the pursuit of knowledge is driven by a utilitarian end. While the Western philosophers limit their investigation to the external world (the sensory world), the Indian philosophers go beyond the sensory world in their search. The western philosophy’s limitation to only investigating phenomena and not noumena has also been well expressed by the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in the Preface of his *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (1921). After claiming that he has discovered “definitive and unassailable” truths and “finally solved” the problems, he says, “how little has been done when these problems have been solved”<sup>5</sup>. Whereas Indian philosophical thought’s aim of philosophical enterprise is not merely satisfaction of intellectual curiosity, but to live an enlightened life. This practical motive of serving human ends dominates the entire history of Indian philosophy. The Indian philosophers do not limit themselves to the study of the sensory world. For, according to them, the sensate world is ridden with finitude, change and death. They regard the knowledge of the sensory or the external world as nothing more than an empty shell. Sensory knowledge is the knowledge of – *nāma* and *rūpa* – names and external forms and not knowledge of essence which is the *ātman* or *Brahman*. They, after the sustained investigations, declare that the solution of the problems of life, death, being and becoming are not to be found by studying the external world merely but most importantly by studying the ‘within’ of man also.

## 3. SUFFERING AS A PERVASIVE THEME IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

Despite various strands of thought adopted by various Indian philosophical systems of thought, all recognize suffering as an inherent feature of life. Suffering or *duhka* is held as a pervasive theme in understanding of human condition and the nature of existence in Indian thought. Except the Charvaka materialists, almost all classical Indian philosophers accept that every human is trapped in the cycle of birth and rebirth (*saṃsāra*) which is characterized by pain and suffering. Highlighting suffering as the predominant aspect in the life of humans has made many characterize Indian

<sup>4</sup>Sharma, Arvind. Comparing Western and Indian Philosophy, Retrieved from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/comparing-western-indian-philosophy-arvind-sharma/>

<sup>5</sup>Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (1922). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul

philosophical traditions as pessimistic.

### 3.1 Vedanta's Perspective on Suffering

Just like other schools, Vedantins recognize Suffering as an inherent aspect of human lives which surpass geographical, cultural, spatial and temporal boundaries. According to Vedanta, suffering is caused due to ignorance or *Avidya*. In other words, it is being ignorant of knowledge of the individual self (*atman*) being identical to *Brahman* and the world being nothing more than a creation of *Maya* that causes suffering. On account of this ignorance, individual self misidentifies itself with the illusory aspects of *Maya* such as body, mind, ego and so on leading to desires, aversions, attachments and endless cycle of birth and re-births that perpetuate suffering.

### 3.2 Buddhist's Perspective on Suffering

The inception of Buddhist philosophy lies not in any premise or pre-supposed belief but in an experience of pain and suffering as witnessed by Buddha (or Prince Siddhartha) in his pre-enlightened period where in moved by tragic episodes of disease, old age and death, he propounded the philosophy of Four Noble truths of suffering. Buddha described suffering in the following way:

*"And what is the noble truth of suffering? Birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; to be associated with the unpleasant is suffering; to be dissociated from the pleasant is suffering, not to obtain what one wants is suffering, in short, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering."*<sup>6</sup>

### 3.3 Jain's Perspective on Suffering

Jain philosophy focusing primarily on ethical principles provides a holistic understanding on suffering that encompasses within it physical, mental and spiritual angles. Suffering which is an inherent aspect of worldly life arises due to accumulation of karma in the soul. "It is the four passions namely anger (*krodha*), greed (*lobha*), pride (*mana*) and delusion (*maya*) that attract the karmic matter towards the soul."<sup>7</sup> As long as karmic particles bind to the soul, the soul continues to suffer in the *samsara*.

### 3.4 Samkhya's Perspective on Suffering

The Samkhya school of philosophy, attributed to the sage Kapila, delineates suffering as a result of the interplay between the *purusha* and *prakriti*.<sup>8</sup> According to Samkhya, the misidentification of the eternal, immutable *purusha* with the ever-changing material world leads to bondage and suffering. Liberation entails discerning the transcendental nature of *purusha* from the fluctuations of *prakriti*, thereby attaining liberation (*kaivalya*).

## 4. THERAPEUTIC NATURE OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUES

Philosophical dialogues illustrated in the Indian thought system play an important role in alleviating suffering and bringing about inner peace and detachment to worldly desires. However, before it is essential to understand the concept of Dialogue.

Dialogue as a subset of communication is ordinarily described as 'conversation', 'discussion', 'exchange' or interchange of ideas. That is to say, while communication could be thought of as exchange of ideas and information using non-verbal signals, behaviors, Dialogic form necessarily implies the use of language. Dialogue means the practice by means of oral communication and the written reports of such conversations. A dialogue is distinguished from other communication methods such as discussions and debates. While debates are considered confrontational, dialogues emphasize listening and understanding. This aspect of constructive engagement involved in dialogic mode is well illustrated by the Cambridge International Dictionary of English in the following way: "The two sides involved in the conflict have at last begun to engage in a fruitful dialogue (formal talks) i.e. the rebel leaders have stated that they are now willing to enter into dialogue

<sup>6</sup>Bodhi, Bhikkhu. (2002) *Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, vol.I-II. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

<sup>7</sup>Sharma, Chandradhar. (2000). *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. Motilal Banarsidass Publications.

<sup>8</sup>Dasgupta, Surendranath (1975). *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, ISBN 81-208-0412-8.

(formal talks).”<sup>9</sup> The functions of dialogues are manifold i.e. it could serve as instruction, as a tool to decide between confronting opinions, for exchanging different views on an issue, persuading others to reach a consensus and so on. In its literary form dialogue usually takes place between two persons, but this is no principle: dialogues between more than two people can easily be found, e.g. in Plato’s works.

However, the philosophical dialogues differ from dialogues in general with respect to their purpose. In other words, their function is cognitive as it lies in reaching a common insight. Though this cognitive aspect of philosophical dialogue may initially seem alien to the participants, in which case the dialogical endeavor becomes a pursuit of search for true knowledge.

Writing down philosophical opinions in dialogue represents argument and counter argument in a lively manner and it shows something of the characters involved. It is precisely due to which Plato, the iconic Greek philosopher, utilized the method of dialogue to establish his theories rather than the method of writing reasoned treatises for the exposition of his thesis. In his monumental dialogue *Phaedrus*, the character of Thamus criticizes writing by stating “If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks.”<sup>10</sup> Supporting Thamus’ criticism of writing, Socrates equates writing with “dead discourse”. The written words, according to him, “seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever” In addition, “Once a thing is put in writing”, according to him, it “drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it does not know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong. And when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend to help itself.”<sup>11</sup> In a nutshell, the living speech i.e. the active dialogue goes together with knowledge and is written in the soul of the learner and thus is more of value than passive written composition or treatise, however reasoned it may be.

For Plato, philosophy is a process of constant questioning, and questioning necessarily takes the form of dialogue. Besides Plato, this tradition of dialogue as a vehicle of philosophical thinking is also predominant in the Indian philosophical thought

Dialogue is the very germ of inception of Indian philosophical thinking.<sup>12</sup> Since the times of Upanishads, Indian philosophical systems have developed as well as expressed themselves in a dialogical structure. From the earliest days of Indian thought, dialogue between teacher and disciple has been the very locus of knowledge transmission, be it in the Upanishads, or again in the Jain and Buddhist canons. From the early days of the Upanishads onwards, Indian thought systems have expressed themselves and developed in a dialogical manner. Language, articulated through dialogue, dialectic, and disputation is the heartbeat of Indian philosophy, the essence of its methodology. In other words, Indian philosophical thoughts never had the luxury of dwelling alone. Dialogue, just as suffering, to which it is not alien, is an inherent feature of life.

These dialogical encounters prevalent in Indian philosophies were not crucial for their formation but also are of therapeutic importance for psychological and spiritual transformation. This philosophical dialogue (*vāda*) dedicated itself to what it considered the most meaningful of human pursuits, the quest for the best means to ease one’s suffering and to be free from sorrow, either in this life, in the hereafter, or, ultimately, by transcending the cycle of life and death (*samsāra*) altogether. Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical systems alike generally agreed on at least one thing, the unflattering diagnosis of life as a painful experience (*sarvaṃ duḥkham*).<sup>13</sup> Hence, as an answer to this predicament, the pursuit of philosophy in India was framed from the beginning as a therapeutic journey.

<sup>9</sup>Bouthillette, K-S. (2023). The Dialogical and Therapeutic Paradigms in Indian Philosophy. Indian and Western Philosophical Concepts in Religion.

<sup>10</sup>Plato. (1952). *Phaedrus*. Cambridge: University Press.

<sup>11</sup>Plato. (1952). *Phaedrus*. Cambridge: University Press.

<sup>12</sup>Zimmer, Heinrich (1951). *Philosophies of India*. New York City: Princeton University Press. ISBN 0-691-01758-1. Bollingen Series XXVI; Edited by Joseph Campbell.

<sup>13</sup>Dasgupta, Surendranath (1975). *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, ISBN 81-208-0412-8.

## 5. THERAPEUTIC IMPLICATIONS OF DIALOGIC ENQUIRY IN UPANISHADS

The Upanishads<sup>14</sup> constitute the concluding portions of Vedas. Hence, they are called Vedanta (end of Veda). They are ancient Indian philosophical texts which encompass within themselves an ocean of wisdom concerning the nature of the self, consciousness, and ultimate reality. Embedded within these rich philosophical texts are dialogues between enlightened sages and earnest seekers, exploring the mysteries concerning world, life, transcendental reality, the nature of the self (*Atman*), the relationship between the individual soul and the universal consciousness (*Brahman*), and the means of self-realization (*Atma-jnana*). Upanishads like Katha Upanishad, Brihadaharanyka Upanishad, Taittiriyo Upanishad, Isavasaya Upanishad are some of the dialogues or discussions between sages or enlightened souls and the kings or students who wanted to learn more about inner self.<sup>15</sup> These discussions help one understand life's more significant meaning and how to connect oneself to a higher existence. The conversation between Ajathasathru and Gargi, Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi, King Janaka and Yajnavalkya and Gargi, Yama and Nachiketha, and Svethakethu and his father Aruni are a few examples that are scattered in various Mukhya Upanishads.

For instance, dialogic exchange between Sage Yajnavalkya and his wife Maitreyi in the revered Brihadaranyaka Upanishad serves as a catalyst of spiritual growth for the latter. Through her engagement with Yajnavalkya's teachings on true nature of self, Maitreyi undergoes a profound transformation, transcending the limitations of worldly attachments and gaining insight into the eternal nature of the self. She experiences a shift in consciousness, realizing the impermanence of worldly pleasures and the eternal nature of the self.

Likewise, through the dialogue with Sage Gaudapada as depicted in Mandukya Upanishad, his disciple Ashtavakra realizes the non-dual nature of reality, wherein the individual self (*Jiva*) and the universal consciousness (*Brahman*) are one and the same. His receptivity to Gaudapada's guidance leads to a shift in consciousness, wherein he transcends the limitations of the egoic mind and realizes his identity with the universal consciousness (*Brahman*). Ashtavakra's realization of ultimate truth culminates in liberation (*Moksha*), wherein he experiences profound peace, bliss, and freedom from the cycle of birth and death.

## 6. THERAPEUTIC IMPLICATIONS OF DIALOGUE IN BHAGWAD GITA

BhagwadGita, also known as “Song of the Divine” is a spiritual and philosophical text famous for its dialogical structure. These dialogues between Lord Krishna and Prince Arjuna have therapeutic implications<sup>16</sup>:

- a) It helps to resolve the existential crisis faced by Arjuna in battlefield as to whether he should remain faithful as a brother or be bound by the duty of a warrior.
- b) These dialogues help Arjuna to deal with Emotional Turmoil faced by Arjuna as he faces the prospect of battle against his own relatives and loved ones. This aspect of the dialogue offers therapeutic insights into emotional regulation, resilience, and coping mechanisms, which are valuable for individuals navigating turbulent times or facing emotional upheaval.
- c) Lord Krishna's dialogues expound the principles of Karma Yoga, emphasizing selfless action and detachment from the fruits of one's actions. This dialogue offers a therapeutic perspective on overcoming attachment, reducing anxiety about outcomes, and finding fulfillment in the present moment through dedicated action.

In a nutshell the dialogues in the Bhagavad Gita hold significant therapeutic value, offering profound insights into existential dilemmas, emotional regulation, self-awareness, detachment, and righteous living. Through the timeless wisdom imparted in these dialogues, individuals can find guidance, solace, and inspiration on their journey of personal growth, psychological well-being, and spiritual evolution.

<sup>14</sup>The Upanisads. Retrieved from <https://iep.utm.edu/upanisad/>

<sup>15</sup>Tubaly, S. [orcid.org/0000-0003-4648-9342](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4648-9342) (2022) A Dialogue of Life and Death: Transformative Dialogue in the Katha Upanishad and Plato's Phaedo. *Journal of Indian Philosophy and Religion*, 27. pp. 54-87. ISSN 0971-944X

<sup>16</sup>BhagwadGita. Retrieved from <https://iep.utm.edu/bhagavad-gita/>

## 7. THERAPEUTIC IMPACTS OF DIALOGUES IN BUDDHISM

The dialogues and interactions between teachers (such as the Buddha) and disciples serve therapeutic purposes by addressing suffering and providing guidance towards liberation from it. The Buddha, known for his skillful means (*upaya*), employed dialogues as a means of guiding disciples towards realization and liberation from suffering (*dukkha*). Through compassionate and insightful interactions, the Buddha addressed the psychological and emotional struggles of his disciples, offering teachings that directly addressed their concerns and challenges. Dialogues in Buddhism often involve questioning and inquiry with disciples seeking clarification on the nature of suffering, the self, and the path to liberation. The Buddha's responses to these inquiries served as catalysts for deeper understanding and realization. For example, in the famous dialogue between the Buddha and Ananda, the Buddha addresses Ananda's concerns about mindfulness and meditation, providing practical guidance for overcoming obstacles on the spiritual path.<sup>17</sup> Through these practices, disciples are encouraged to observe their thoughts, emotions, and experiences with awareness and equanimity. Dialogues serve as opportunities for deepening contemplative insight and integrating the teachings into daily life, fostering psychological well-being and spiritual growth. Ultimately, the goal of dialogues in Buddhism is to facilitate transformation and liberation from suffering. Through skillful means, compassionate guidance, and insightful teachings, disciples are empowered to overcome ignorance, attachment, and aversion, leading to the realization of true nature (Buddha nature) and the attainment of liberation (*nirvana*). Dialogues in Buddhism often take place within the context of spiritual communities (*sangha*), where disciples come together to learn from each other and support one another on the path.

## 8. CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, Indian philosophical dialogues serve as a form of therapy by addressing suffering, providing guidance and support, and facilitating transformation and liberation. Through skillful means, compassionate guidance, and contemplative practices, dialogues empower one to overcome obstacles on the spiritual path and realize the ultimate goal of liberation from suffering. In addition, prevalence of dialogical structure in Indian philosophical traditions depicts the prime importance given to the social over one self. This is well depicted by Russian philosopher Michael Bakhtin in the following way: “A dialogic world is one in which I can never have my own way completely, and therefore I find myself plunged into constant interaction with others—and with myself. In sum, dialogism is based on the primacy of the social, and the assumption that all meaning is achieved by struggle.”<sup>18</sup> This aspect of dialogue in Indian thought with its therapeutic characteristic is also potential enough to foster inter-faith dialogue and transmission of knowledge thus strengthening the fabric of society in the long run.

<sup>17</sup>Buddha and his disciples. Retrieved from <https://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/disciples09.htm>

<sup>18</sup>Hamilton, J. D., & Wills-Toker, C. (2006). Reconceptualizing dialogue in environmental public participation. *Policy Studies Journal*, 34(4), 755+ <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A158307151/AONE?u=anon~7006079b&sid=googleScholar&xid=36662d06>