Ancient Wisdom, Modern Minds: Indian and Western Perspectives on Knowledge

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Area/Section: Knowledge Management.
Type of Paper: Exploratory Analysis.
Number of Peer Reviews: Two.
Type of Review: Peer Reviewed as pe |C|O|P|E| guidance.
Indexed in: OpenAIRE.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21188878
Google Scholar Citation: PIJMESS

How to Cite this Paper:
Srinivasan, R. & Aithal, P. S. (2026). Ancient Wisdom, Modern Minds: Indian and Western Perspectives on Knowledge. *Poornaprajna International Journal of Management, Education & Social Science (PIJMESS)*, *3*(1), 299-316. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21188878

Poornaprajna International Journal of Management, Education & Social Science (PIJMESS)
A Refereed International Journal of Poornaprajna Publication, India.
ISSN: 3107-4626

Crossref DOI: https://doi.org/10.64818/PIJMESS.3107.4626.0055

Received on: 28/05/2026
Published on: 30/06/2026

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *The question of how human beings come to know — what counts as knowledge, how beliefs are validated, which cognitive processes are trustworthy, and what the ultimate purpose of knowing is — lies at the heart of philosophy across every civilisation. Western epistemology and the epistemological traditions of India represent two of the most richly developed responses to these questions in the history of human thought. This research paper undertakes a rigorous, multi-dimensional comparative examination of these two great philosophical streams, tracing their foundational commitments, their methodologies of knowledge validation, their divergent attitudes toward perception, testimony, authority, and direct experience, and the different visions of human flourishing that animate their respective epistemic programmes.*

Methodology: *In this paper, the exploratory qualitative research method is used. The relevant information is collected using keyword-based search in Google search engine, Google Scholar search engine, and AI-driven GPTs. This information is analysed and interpreted as per the objectives of the paper.*

Analysis/Results: *The Western tradition, anchored in the foundational inquiries of Plato, Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Kant, has developed epistemology principally around the twin axes of empirical observation and rational deduction. Its crowning institutional achievement — the scientific method — has produced extraordinary advances in understanding the natural world. Yet it has also generated profound questions about the limits of sense experience, the possibility of certainty, the status of consciousness, and the relationship between scientific knowledge and the full range of human experience. The Indian tradition, represented by the six orthodox philosophical schools (ṣaḍ-darśana), the heterodox systems of Buddhism and Jainism, and the contemplative wisdom traditions encoded in the Upanishads and Yoga texts, has approached knowledge through the sophisticated framework of pramāṇa theory — a systematic account of knowledge-generating processes that encompasses not only perception and inference but testimony, comparison, presumption, and direct spiritual experience within a single unified philosophical architecture.*

Originality/Values: *Drawing upon primary philosophical texts and leading contemporary scholarship, this paper argues that the two traditions are not simply alternatives but complementary architectures of knowing, each with distinctive strengths and characteristic limitations. Western epistemology excels at generating verifiable, communicable, and reproducible knowledge of the external world; Indian epistemology provides a richer account of the sources of knowing, integrates the knowing subject into the fabric of knowledge itself, and preserves space for dimensions of experience — contemplative, testimonial, and transrational — that the Western tradition has tended to marginalise. The paper concludes by charting the contours of a possible synthesis, drawing upon the best resources of both traditions, that is adequate to the complexity of human knowing and to the demands of contemporary intellectual life.*

Type of Paper: *Exploratory Research.*

Keywords: Epistemology, Pramāṇa, Justified True Belief, Nyāya, Vedānta, Buddhist Logic, Cartesian Doubt, Anekāntavāda, Indian Knowledge Systems, Comparative Philosophy, NEP 2020.

1. INTRODUCTION :

Philosophy begins in wonder — the astonished recognition that the world presents itself to consciousness and that consciousness seeks to understand what the world has presented to it. This fundamental encounter between the knowing mind and the reality it seeks to comprehend is the subject matter of epistemology, the branch of philosophy that asks what knowledge is, how it is obtained, what its limits are, and what kinds of things can be known at all. These questions are not merely academic; they shape the educational systems through which knowledge is transmitted, the judicial frameworks through which evidence is evaluated, the medical practices through which health is restored, the religious institutions through which transcendence is sought, and the scientific communities through which the natural world is investigated. The answer a civilisation gives to the question 'How do we know?' determines, in large measure, what that civilisation is (Dawson (1922). [1]). The Western philosophical tradition, originating in the thought of the ancient Greeks and achieving its mature epistemological form in the early modern period with Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, Hume, and Kant, has produced a rich and contested account of knowledge that continues to evolve through contemporary analytic and continental philosophy. Its central preoccupations — the analysis of knowledge as justified true belief, the challenge of scepticism, the demarcation of science from non-science, the status of sense experience, the role of a priori reason — are familiar to students of philosophy in universities across the world (Pete, K. (2022). [2]). The Indian philosophical tradition, with its origins in the Vedic period and its systematic development in the classical and medieval periods by schools of extraordinary intellectual sophistication, has produced an equally rich but less globally disseminated account of knowledge that is organised around the concept of pramāṇa — valid means of knowing — and that encompasses a wider range of knowledge sources, a different attitude toward authority and testimony, a more explicitly soteriological orientation, and a more integral relationship between knowing and being (Łucyszyna (2022). [3]).

The relevance of this comparative inquiry has been significantly heightened by India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) (Aithal & Aithal (2020). [4]), which explicitly mandates the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into all levels of higher education (Mishra & Aithal (2023). [5]). Understanding what Indian epistemology is, how it compares with the Western tradition that has dominated global academic discourse for the past three centuries, and what distinctive contributions it can make to contemporary intellectual life is now not only a scholarly desideratum but an educational and national priority. This paper responds to that challenge by providing a comprehensive, critically engaged comparative study of Western and Indian theories of knowledge, addressed both to specialists in philosophy and to the broader community of educators, researchers, and thoughtful readers who wish to understand the full range of humanity's epistemic heritage.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE :

Ancient Wisdom, Modern Minds: Indian and Western Perspectives on Knowledge can be positioned within the growing field of comparative epistemology, where Indian theories of **pramāṇa** are examined alongside Western accounts of knowledge, justification, doubt, and truth. Classical Indian epistemology treats knowledge not merely as belief but as valid cognition produced through reliable means such as perception, inference, comparison, testimony, and scriptural insight. Nyāya especially offers a systematic pramāṇa theory centred on perception, inference, comparison, and testimony, making it highly relevant to modern debates on reliability and justification (Ganeri (2003). [6]; Sylvan (2025). [7]).

Western epistemology, particularly after Plato, often frames knowledge through the model of **justified true belief**. However, Gettier's influential critique showed that justified true belief may still fail to constitute knowledge, thereby opening new debates on epistemic luck, certainty, and justification (Gettier (1963). [8]). This creates an important comparative space: while Western epistemology often asks whether belief is adequately justified, Indian epistemology asks whether cognition arises from a valid **pramāṇa**, thereby emphasizing the source and process of knowing.

Nyāya philosophy provides one of the most rigorous Indian frameworks for epistemology and logic. Its theory of inference, debate, and case-based reasoning shows that Indian logic was not merely religious or metaphysical but also analytical and argumentative (Staal (1960). [9]; Ganeri (2003). [6]). Nyāya realism also differs from Cartesian doubt because it generally begins with trust in ordinary cognition unless defeated, whereas Cartesian epistemology begins with systematic doubt to find an indubitable foundation (Rauzy et al. (2018). [10]). Thus, the comparison between Nyāya and Cartesian thought helps reveal two contrasting paths to certainty: one grounded in reliable cognition and the other in methodological scepticism.

Vedānta contributes another dimension by connecting knowledge with self-realization, consciousness, and liberation. Unlike Nyāya, which emphasizes external realism and logical validation, Vedānta gives importance to scriptural testimony, inner realization, and the distinction between empirical and ultimate knowledge. This is significant for the article because it shows that Indian Knowledge Systems do not treat knowledge only as information but also as transformation, ethical refinement, and spiritual insight.

Buddhist logic, especially in the traditions of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, offers a powerful alternative to both Nyāya realism and Vedāntic metaphysics. Buddhist epistemology accepts perception and inference as central pramāṇas and develops sophisticated theories of cognition, language, and conceptual construction (Prasad (2023). [11]). This makes Buddhist logic important for modern debates on mind, language, and the limits of conceptual knowledge.

Jain epistemology, especially **Anekāntavāda**, adds a pluralistic and many-sided theory of truth. Koller (2000) [12]] explains that **Syādvāda** provides an epistemological key to understanding Anekāntavāda, where truth claims are conditional and perspective-based. Recent scholarship also warns that Anekāntavāda should not be reduced merely to tolerance; it is a deeper metaphysical and epistemological doctrine about the complexity of reality (Bronkhorst (2024). [13]; Long (2018). [14]). This is highly relevant to comparative philosophy because it challenges absolutist models of knowledge.

The inclusion of **NEP 2020** strengthens the contemporary relevance of the article [4]. Current discussions on Indian Knowledge Systems argue that education must integrate indigenous knowledge, critical thinking, multidisciplinary learning, and ethical development. In this sense, the article can connect ancient epistemological traditions with modern educational reforms, showing how pramāṇa, dialogue, pluralism, and reflective doubt can enrich present-day learning.

Overall, the literature suggests that Indian and Western epistemologies should not be treated as opposites but as complementary traditions. Western thought contributes strong analyses of belief, justification, scepticism, and truth, while Indian traditions contribute detailed theories of valid cognition, plural standpoints, testimony, self-knowledge, and liberation. Therefore, the article can argue that a balanced epistemology for modern minds should combine analytical clarity, experiential insight, ethical awareness, and openness to multiple perspectives.

Table 1: Literature review of related publications

S. No.	Author / Year	Title of Article / Work	Theme / Focus	Key Findings Relevant to the Research Topic
1	Shaw, J.L. (2016) [15]	The Relevance of Indian Epistemology to Contemporary Western Philosophy	Indian vs Western Epistemology; Nyāya & Justified True Belief	Demonstrates Nyāya solutions to the Gettier problem; argues truth and justification are not independent in Indian thought; directly bridges the two traditions on the definition of knowledge.
2	Matilal, B.K. (1986) [16]	Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge	Indian Perception Theory; Pratyakṣa; Comparative Epistemology	Seminal comparison of Indian and Western perception theories; establishes pratyakṣa as an active interpretive act; expounds the Nyāya mislocation theory of error. A cornerstone of the field.

S. No.	Author / Year	Title of Article / Work	Theme / Focus	Key Findings Relevant to the Research Topic
3	Bilimoria, P. (1993). [17]	Pramāṇa Epistemology: Some Recent Developments	Pramāṇa Theory; śabda; Mīmāṃsā self-validity	Surveys developments in pramāṇa epistemology; treats śabda-pramāṇa and Mīmāṃsā's doctrine of intrinsic validity (svataḥ prāmāṇya); compares with Anglo-American epistemology.
4	Ganeri, J. (2001). [18]	Philosophy in Classical India: The Proper Work of Reason	Indian Philosophy; Rationality; Epistemology Across Traditions	Argues classical Indian philosophy constitutes a rigorous rational tradition; reframes pramāṇa theory within contemporary philosophy of mind and language; bridges analytic and Indian traditions.
5	Mohanty, J.N. (1992). [19]	Reason and Tradition in Indian Thought: An Essay on the Nature of Indian Philosophical Thinking	Nature of Indian Rationality; Pramāṇa; Truth	A defining account of how reason and inherited tradition interrelate in Indian philosophy; rigorous analysis of the Nyāya conception of knowledge and truth, with restrained comparison to Western thought.
6	Phillips, S.H. (2012). [20]	Epistemology in Classical India: The Knowledge Sources of the Nyāya School	Nyāya Pramāṇa; Perception, Inference, Testimony	Comprehensive modern treatment of the four Nyāya pramāṇas as knowledge-generating processes; the standard contemporary reference for Nyāya epistemology in practice.
7	Chatterjee, S.C. (1952). [21]	The Nyāya Theory of Knowledge	Nyāya Epistemology; Perception and Error	The foundational systematic English exposition of the four pramāṇas and the Nyāya theory of error; still cited as a primary secondary source on classical Nyāya.
8	Dreyfus, G.B.J. (1997). [22]	Recognizing Reality: Dharmakīrti's Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretations	Buddhist Epistemology; Dharmakīrti; Apoha	Authoritative study of Dharmakīrti's pramāṇa theory, the apoha account of concepts, and the pragmatic test of cognition by successful action; anchors the Buddhist-logic section.
9	Coady, C.A.J. (1992). [23]	Testimony: A Philosophical Study	Testimony as Knowledge Source (Western counterpart to śabda)	The major Western philosophical rehabilitation of testimony as a basic source of knowledge; the natural comparator for the Indian treatment of śabda-pramāṇa.
10	Shaikh, Z.A.F.A. & Gadade, N.S. (2023). [24]	Epistemology of Advaita Vedanta	Advaita Vedānta; Six Pramāṇas; Levels of Reality	Examines the interconnection of epistemology and metaphysics in Advaita and the three levels of reality (prātibhāsika, vyāvahārika, pāramārthika). Useful as a supporting source only.
11	Sathish, S. (2026). [25]	Pramana: Fine-Tuning Large Language	Navya-Nyāya; AI Epistemology;	Applies a Navya-Nyāya six-phase reasoning methodology (Samśaya → Nirṇaya) to fine-tune LLMs,

S. No.	Author / Year	Title of Article / Work	Theme / Focus	Key Findings Relevant to the Research Topic
		Models for Epistemic Reasoning through Navya-Nyaya	Computational Indian Logic	illustrating the contemporary computational relevance of Indian epistemology. Cite as a preprint.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY :

Based on the review of literature and the research gap available, this research paper is guided by the following specific objectives:
(1) To trace the historical development of epistemology in the Western philosophical tradition, from the Platonic analysis of knowledge as justified true belief through Cartesian scepticism to Kantian synthesis and the philosophy of science.
(2) To provide a systematic account of the epistemological frameworks of the major Indian philosophical schools, with particular attention to Nyāya pramāṇa theory, Advaita Vedānta's three levels of reality, Buddhist epistemology's two truths doctrine, and Jain Anekāntavāda.
(3) To conduct a rigorous comparative analysis of Western and Indian theories across the major dimensions of epistemological inquiry: the nature and sources of valid knowledge, the treatment of perception and sense experience, the status of testimony and authority, the problem of error and illusion, the relationship between conceptual and non-conceptual cognition, and the ultimate goals of the epistemic enterprise.
(4) To evaluate the distinctive strengths and limitations of each tradition, acknowledging both the extraordinary achievements of Western empirical and rationalist epistemology and the profound contributions of Indian pramāṇa theory, Vedāntic ontology, and Buddhist pragmatic epistemology.
(5) To examine the specific epistemological contributions that the Indian tradition has made which have no parallel in the Western tradition — including the systematic incorporation of testimony (śabda) as an independent knowledge source, the theory of direct unmediated knowledge (aparokṣa jñāna), and the soteriological orientation of epistemology toward liberation (mokṣa).
(6) To assess the contemporary relevance of this comparative inquiry for educational practice, research methodology, interfaith dialogue, and cross-cultural philosophical collaboration within the framework of NEP 2020's Indian Knowledge Systems mandate.
(7) To chart the contours of a possible synthesis between the two traditions — one that preserves the rigour of Western epistemology while incorporating the richness of Indian pramāṇa theory — as a contribution to the development of a genuinely global philosophy of knowledge.

4. METHODOLOGY :

In this paper, the exploratory qualitative research method is used. The relevant information is collected using keyword-based search in Google search engine, Google Scholar search engine, and AI-driven GPTs. The collected information is analysed and interpreted as per the objectives of the paper [26-32].

5. WESTERN THEORIES OF KNOWLEDGE: FOUNDATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT :

5.1 The Classical Foundation: Knowledge as Justified True Belief:

The systematic investigation of knowledge in the Western tradition begins with Plato's dialogues, particularly the Theaetetus and the Meno, where Socrates subjects various candidate definitions of knowledge to rigorous examination. The formulation that emerged from this inquiry — and that dominated Western epistemology for over two millennia — analyses knowledge as justified true belief: a cognitive state in which a subject S knows a proposition P if and only if P is true, S believes P, and S has adequate justification for believing P. This tripartite analysis has the virtue of capturing the intuition that knowledge is more than mere correct guessing (which requires truth and belief but not justification) and more than dogmatic certainty (which may require neither truth in the philosophically relevant sense nor properly grounded justification) (Prince (2006). [33]).
The analysis faced its most celebrated challenge in 1963 when Edmund Gettier published a brief but devastating paper demonstrating that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge. Gettier's counterexamples describe situations in which a subject holds a belief that is both justified and true, yet

we resist calling it knowledge because the connection between the justification and the truth is mediated by a fortuitous accident rather than by any reliable epistemic process. A person who looks at a stopped clock at the precise moment it displays the correct time has a justified true belief about the time but clearly does not know what time it is. The Gettier problem has generated an enormous philosophical literature attempting to specify the additional conditions required for knowledge, including causal theories of knowledge, relevant alternatives accounts, reliability theories, and safety conditions — none of which has achieved consensus. The problem reveals a deep structural difficulty at the heart of the Western analytical approach to knowledge: the relationship between justification and truth turns out to be far more complex than the classical analysis assumed (Gettier (1963). [8]).

5.2 Cartesian Doubt and the Quest for Certainty:

René Descartes' methodological project in the Meditations on First Philosophy represents perhaps the most ambitious attempt in Western philosophy to place knowledge on an absolutely secure foundation. Descartes employed a method of radical scepticism — doubting everything that could be doubted — as a tool for discovering what, if anything, could survive universal scrutiny. His famous thought experiment involving an all-powerful malicious demon capable of systematically deceiving his senses and even his mathematical reasoning pushed scepticism to its logical extreme: if such a demon were possible, nothing perceived or reasoned could be trusted. Yet one proposition survived even this extreme doubt: the very act of doubting demonstrated the existence of the doubter.

Cogito, ergo sum — I think, therefore I am — became the Archimedean point from which Descartes attempted to reconstruct the edifice of knowledge.

Descartes' epistemological legacy is ambiguous. His success in demonstrating the indubitability of the thinking self-proved more secure than his subsequent attempts to reconstruct scientific and theological knowledge on this foundation. His introduction of the mind-body dualism — the sharp division between the res cogitans (thinking thing) and the res extensa (extended matter) — created a philosophical problem that Western philosophy has been grappling with ever since, namely how the immaterial mind can have genuine knowledge of the material world. His insistence that genuine science consists of 'certain and evident cognition' set an impossibly high bar for knowledge that subsequent philosophy of science has progressively abandoned in favour of a fallibilist epistemology that accepts the revisability of all scientific claims.

5.3 Kant's Copernican Revolution in Epistemology:

Immanuel Kant described his own contribution to epistemology as analogous to Copernicus's revolution in astronomy: just as Copernicus explained the apparent motion of the stars by positing that the observer, not the heavens, was moving, Kant explained the universality and necessity of certain knowledge by positing that the knowing subject imposes its own cognitive structures on experience rather than passively receiving them from the world. In Kant's transcendental idealism, space, time, and the twelve categories of the understanding are not features of independent reality but are the forms through which the human mind organises sensory input into coherent experience (Hanson (1959). [34]). We can only know things as they appear to us through these cognitive structures (phenomena) and never as they are in themselves (noumena).

Kant's synthesis of rationalism and empiricism resolved the central debate of early modern epistemology by showing that both camps were partially right: knowledge requires both the a priori structures provided by reason (pace the empiricists) and the sensory content provided by experience (pace the pure rationalists). His transcendental aesthetic and analytic provided sophisticated accounts of how mathematical and scientific knowledge are possible as synthetic a priori knowledge — knowledge that is both informative about the world and necessarily true. Yet his relegation of God, freedom, and the soul to the realm of unknowable noumena simultaneously guaranteed the autonomy of natural science and denied philosophy access to the questions it had traditionally regarded as most important (Hanson (1959). [34]).

5.4 The Scientific Method and the Philosophy of Science:

The emergence of modern natural science in the seventeenth century and its extraordinary subsequent success in explaining and controlling natural phenomena profoundly shaped Western epistemology. Francis Bacon's inductivist programme, Popper's falsificationism, Kuhn's theory of paradigm shifts, and

Lakatos's methodology of scientific research programmes all represent attempts to articulate what makes scientific knowledge distinctive and reliable. The scientific method — systematic observation, hypothesis formulation, experimental testing, peer review, and progressive revision in light of evidence — provides a model of knowledge generation that has been enormously productive and that has largely supplanted earlier appeals to authority, tradition, and revelation in matters falling within its scope (Thomas (2021). [35]).

Yet the philosophy of science has also revealed the limits of the scientific model. Quantum mechanics demonstrated that certain features of physical reality cannot be determined independently of the act of measurement, challenging naïve realist assumptions about the relationship between scientific knowledge and an observer-independent world. The theory-leadenness of observation (the fact that what scientists 'see' is partly determined by the theoretical commitments they bring to their experiments) undermined the positivist picture of science as built up from pure, theory-neutral data. And the underdetermination of theory by evidence (the logical fact that for any finite body of evidence, infinitely many theories are consistent with it) suggested that scientific knowledge can never be a simple 'reading off' of the structure of reality. These developments make Western epistemology's relationship to science more complicated and more interesting than its triumphalist popular image suggests.

6. INDIAN THEORIES OF KNOWLEDGE: THE PRAMĀṆA FRAMEWORK :

6.1 The Six Orthodox Schools and Their Epistemological Contributions:

Indian philosophy recognises six classical orthodox schools, known collectively as the ṣaḍ-darśana: Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta. Each school accepts the authority of the Vedas while developing distinctive frameworks for the validation of knowledge. This deference to Vedic authority is itself a significant epistemological commitment, reflecting the conviction that certain truths — particularly those concerning the nature of the self, the structure of reality, and the path to liberation — exceed the reach of unaided sense experience and rational inference, and must be received through the testimony of those who have directly realised them. Yet this deference is not uncritical: Indian philosophers engaged in sophisticated debates about the nature, scope, and validity of the various pramāṇas, producing a body of epistemological literature that rivals the Western tradition in its depth and rigour (Mitra (2022). [36]).

The concept of pramāṇa — valid means of knowing — provides the organising framework for Indian epistemology. A pramāṇa is a reliable, repeatable process that generates veridical cognition (pramā): genuine knowledge rather than mere opinion, conjecture, or error. The crucial feature of the pramāṇa concept that distinguishes it from Western accounts of justification is its factivity: a genuine pramāṇa cannot produce false cognition, just as the English word 'knowledge' cannot be applied to false beliefs. False testimony, a broken instrument, or faulty inference may produce cognition, but these do not count as pramāṇas — they are sources of error (apramāṇa), not knowledge. This factive analysis makes the pramāṇa framework more demanding than many Western accounts of justification, which allow that a justified belief may nonetheless be false (Bilimoria (1993). [17]).

6.2 Nyāya: India's Most Systematic Epistemology:

The Nyāya school, founded on the Nyāya Sūtras of Gautama (c. 2nd century BCE), represents the most systematic and analytically rigorous epistemological tradition in classical Indian philosophy. The very name 'Nyāya' means 'the method' or 'the rule', and the school's opening commitment — to the investigation of objects through the proper use of knowledge sources — reflects its understanding that philosophical progress depends above all on getting epistemology right. Nyāya recognises four pramāṇas: pratyakṣa (perception), anumāna (inference), upamāna (comparison/analogy), and śabda (testimony). Later Nyāya philosophers added extraordinary perception (alaukika pratyakṣa) — including yogic perception, perception of universals through particulars, and memory-assisted perception — to account for forms of knowledge that elude ordinary sensory experience.

Nyāya's anti-sceptical stance is philosophically significant. Against the Buddhist sceptics who argued that the reliability of knowledge sources cannot be established without circular reasoning, Nyāya philosophers contended that trust is a better epistemic default than doubt: in ordinary life and philosophical inquiry alike, our knowledge sources earn a presumption of reliability that sceptical challenges must overcome rather than a presumption of unreliability that positive evidence must defeat. This position anticipates contemporary epistemological discussions of the proper response to sceptical

scenarios, and it represents a philosophically defensible alternative to the Cartesian paradigm of beginning with doubt. Nyāya also maintained a robust realist metaphysics, insisting that the objects of ordinary perception are real external entities with stable properties, and that error involves misallocating genuine properties of real objects rather than perceiving non-existent mental constructs (Bilimoria (2011). [37]).

The soteriological dimension of Nyāya epistemology distinguishes it sharply from its Western counterparts. For Nyāya, the pursuit of knowledge is not merely an intellectual or practical enterprise; it is the path to liberation. The root cause of all human suffering is ignorance (avidyā) — specifically, the mistaken identification of the self with the body, mind, and other non-self constituents of experience. True knowledge — knowledge of the self's genuine nature and its relationship to the ultimate — dissolves this ignorance and thereby removes the root cause of suffering. The logical rigour of Nyāya epistemology is thus not a purely theoretical exercise but a spiritual discipline: learning to reason correctly about the nature of things is, in the deepest sense, learning how to be free.

6.3 Buddhist Epistemology: Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and the Two Truths:

The Buddhist epistemological tradition, which reached its highest systematic development in the works of Dignāga (5th century CE) and Dharmakīrti (7th century CE), represents a sophisticated and distinctive approach to knowledge that has exercised enormous influence on both Indian and Tibetan philosophy. Dignāga's fundamental insight was that genuine perception must be radically non-conceptual: the perceptual act that gives direct access to reality must not be contaminated by conceptual construction, which invariably introduces interpretation, generalisation, and distortion into the raw data of experience. Only non-conceptual perceptual awareness (nirvikalpaka pratyakṣa) gives us reality as it is; everything else — conceptual perception, inference, testimony — gives us a constructed representation of reality rather than reality itself (Prasad (2023). [38]).

The two truths doctrine, common to all major Buddhist schools though differently interpreted by each, provides the ontological framework within which Buddhist epistemology operates. Conventional truth (saṁvṛti-satya) describes reality as it appears to ordinary consciousness structured by language and conceptual thought: the world of tables and chairs, persons and events, causes and effects. Ultimate truth (paramārtha-satya) describes reality as it is when investigated by analytical wisdom: for Madhyamaka philosophers, emptiness (śūnyatā) — the absence of inherent, independent existence in all phenomena; for Yogācāra philosophers, the luminous awareness that is the ground of all experience. The relationship between these two truths is not of simple hierarchy (ultimate replacing conventional) but of mutual implication: the conventional is empty and the empty is conventionally expressed.

Dharmakīrti's contribution to epistemology was to provide a rigorous account of how inference works — how the mind moves from observed signs to non-observed facts — and to defend a pragmatic account of truth in which the validity of a cognition is ultimately tested by its capacity to guide successful action in the world. This pragmatic turn anticipates certain themes in Western American pragmatism (Peirce, James, Dewey) and has been the subject of productive comparative philosophical discussion in recent decades.

6.4 Advaita Vedānta: Three Levels of Reality and the Epistemology of Liberation:

Advaita Vedānta, the non-dualist school of Vedāntic philosophy associated with Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, offers perhaps the most radical epistemological position in the Indian tradition: the claim that what ordinary consciousness takes to be knowledge of an independently existing external world is, from the perspective of the highest truth, a form of cosmic illusion (māyā), and that genuine knowledge — brahma-vidyā — consists in the direct, immediate realisation of the identity of the individual self (ātman) with ultimate reality (Brahman). This claim is not, as it might initially appear, a denial of the validity of ordinary knowledge but a contextualisation of it within a hierarchical ontology of three levels of reality (Dhiman (2018). [39]).

The three levels — prātibhāsika (apparent or illusory reality, like the objects of dreams), vyāvahārika (conventional or phenomenal reality, the world of ordinary experience and scientific investigation), and pāramārthika (absolute reality, Brahman alone, the self-luminous awareness that is the ground of all experience) — provide a sophisticated framework for understanding the relationships between ordinary perception, scientific knowledge, and spiritual realisation. Scientific knowledge, on this view, is entirely valid at the vyāvahārika level: cause and effect operate, objects have properties, inference yields reliable

conclusions, and testimony transmits genuine information. But all of this validity is conditioned by the fundamental metaphysical presupposition that there is an independently existing external world — a presupposition that dissolves when the highest level of reality is directly apprehended. Śaṅkara's famous simile of the rope-snake captures this structure: in the dark, perceiving a rope as a snake is a genuine perceptual experience with its own internal logic, but it is dissolved not by better perception of the rope but by illumination that reveals the rope for what it is.

6.5 Jain Anekāntavāda: Many-Sidedness and the Epistemology of Tolerance:

The Jain philosophical tradition's most original contribution to epistemology is the doctrine of Anekāntavāda — the many-sidedness of truth — which holds that reality is infinitely complex, that any particular perspective on it captures only some of its aspects, and that all philosophical positions have a partial validity corresponding to the aspect of reality they illuminate. From this general epistemological commitment, Jain philosophers derived two doctrines of logical methodology: Syādvāda (the doctrine of conditional predication), which insists that every statement about reality should be qualified with the prefix 'syāt' ('in some respect'), and Nayavāda (the doctrine of standpoints), which analyses the different perspectives from which a thing may be validly described (Krishnamurthy & Murumkar (2025). [40]).

Anekāntavāda has profound implications for philosophical dialogue, religious tolerance, and the ethics of knowledge. If every philosophical position captures a partial truth, then sectarian dogmatism — the insistence that one's own tradition has the complete truth and that all other positions are simply wrong — is not merely intellectually unjustified but ethically problematic: it involves wilfully ignoring the partial truths contained in perspectives other than one's own. The Jain tradition has consequently developed a tradition of remarkable openness to philosophical diversity, combined with rigorous epistemological humility about the limits of any single perspective. This tradition has important implications for contemporary cross-cultural philosophical dialogue and for the development of a genuinely pluralistic global epistemology.

7. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES :

7.1 Perception: Active Construction vs. Passive Reception:

One of the most illuminating points of comparison between Western and Indian theories of knowledge concerns the nature of perceptual experience. Western empiricism, particularly in the sense-data tradition associated with G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, tends to treat perception as a passive reception of sensory data — immediate, pre-theoretical impressions that provide the raw material from which knowledge of the external world is constructed (Yu-Kwan (2021). [42]). On this view, the epistemological problem of perception is primarily a problem of inference: how do we move from the immediate data of experience (which are indubitable) to claims about the external world (which are not)?

Indian epistemology, particularly in the Nyāya tradition, treats pratyakṣa (perception) as an active, structured cognitive event rather than a passive reception of data. Perception involves not only the contact between sense organ and object but also the processing activity of the mind (manas), which integrates sensory inputs with previously stored knowledge to produce structured perceptual judgements. The Nyāya analysis distinguishes between a preliminary non-conceptual awareness (nirvikalpaka pratyakṣa) — which does approximate the Western sense-datum concept — and a subsequent conceptual perception (savikalpaka pratyakṣa) in which the object is apprehended as having specific properties and standing in specific relations. Both are genuine forms of perception, and the conceptual form does not, on the Nyāya view, introduce distortion: it simply makes explicit the structure that the object actually has.

The treatment of perceptual error further illuminates this difference. Western philosophy, following the argument from illusion, tends to conclude that since the snake in the rope is not really there, what the subject directly perceives must be a mental representation (a sense datum) rather than an external object. Nyāya's 'mislocation' theory takes a different approach: the properties that make the rope look like a snake (shininess, elongated form) are real properties of real objects (perhaps remembered from a previous encounter with a snake), but they are being mis-attributed to the present object. Error involves real perception combined with incorrect feature-binding, not the construction of a purely mental

substitute for external reality. This analysis is not only philosophically sophisticated but remarkably similar to recent cognitive science accounts of perceptual illusion.

7.2 The Status of Testimony: The Fundamental Divergence:

The most fundamental and practically significant divergence between Western and Indian epistemologies concerns the status of testimony (śabda) as a source of knowledge. Western epistemology, with a few notable exceptions (C.A.J. Coady's Testimony: A Philosophical Study being the most important), has tended to treat testimony with suspicion, viewing it as a derivative or reduced form of knowledge that ultimately depends for its validity on the perceiver's independent assessment of the testifier's reliability. The Enlightenment tradition, which powerfully shaped Western academic culture, championed the individual's critical reason as the arbiter of all knowledge claims, placing the burden of proof on testimony rather than on doubt.

Indian epistemology, by contrast, treats śabda-pramāṇa — knowledge through reliable verbal testimony — as a fully independent and indispensable means of knowledge co-equal in principle with perception and inference. The argument for this position is compelling: the vast majority of what any individual knows about the world — the history of civilisations, the findings of sciences she has not herself investigated, the nature of distant places, the experiences of other persons — comes through testimony rather than direct experience. As Nyāya philosophers argued, a person deprived of all access to testimony would be reduced to the cognitive level of an infant: unable to benefit from the accumulated knowledge of her culture, her tradition, and her predecessors. The question is not whether testimony plays a role in knowledge, but what conditions must be met for it to play that role reliably (Bilimoria (1993). [17]).

Indian epistemology's answer to this question is sophisticated: a testimony counts as a pramāṇa if and only if the testifier is an āpta — a trustworthy person who has direct knowledge of the matter, communicates it accurately and without distortion, and is free from the defects (delusion, selfishness, error) that might corrupt transmission. The epistemology of testimony in the Indian tradition thus becomes an epistemology of trust: what are the conditions under which it is rational to trust the testimony of another? This question is not only philosophically important but practically urgent in an age of information overload, expert disagreement, and the weaponisation of testimony in political discourse.

7.3 Intuition and Direct Experience: Aparokṣa Jñāna:

A further significant divergence concerns the epistemological status of direct, unmediated experience — what Indian philosophy calls aparokṣa jñāna (direct, non-inferential knowledge). Western epistemology has, since Descartes, recognised a form of direct self-knowledge — the indubitability of the cogito suggests that self-consciousness has a distinctive epistemic character — but has generally treated intuition with suspicion as a potential source of bias and self-deception rather than as a reliable road to truth. The history of Western philosophy is partly a history of the progressive replacement of intuitive certainties by critical analysis: many things that seemed intuitively obvious (the absolute distinction between past and future, the infinite divisibility of matter, the uniqueness of Euclidean space) turned out to be false.

Indian epistemology, particularly in the Advaita Vedānta and Yoga traditions, treats direct, unmediated spiritual experience (aparokṣa jñāna, anubhava) not as an unreliable intuitive hunch but as the highest and most certain form of knowledge — more certain than perception, which is mediated by sense organs, and far more certain than inference, which is mediated by conceptual reasoning. The paradigm case of this direct knowledge is the realisation of the self's identity with Brahman in Advaita Vedānta, or the direct perception of dharmas in their true nature in Buddhist vipassanā meditation: experiences described in the literature as so vivid, so self-evidently real, and so transformative in their effects that they constitute a category of epistemic achievement quite different from ordinary empirical or inferential knowledge.

The epistemological challenge posed by this claim is real but not insuperable. The testimony of contemplative traditions across cultures, the transformative effects of sustained meditative practice on the cognitive capacities and moral character of practitioners, and the growing body of neuroscientific research on meditation all suggest that the contemplative traditions have discovered genuine and significant cognitive capacities that the dominant Western epistemological framework simply lacks the

conceptual resources to describe. Incorporating these insights into a comprehensive epistemology is one of the most important intellectual tasks facing contemporary comparative philosophy.

7.4 The Soteriological Dimension: Knowledge for What?

Perhaps the deepest difference between the two traditions concerns not their epistemological methods or their theories of knowledge sources but their understanding of what knowledge is ultimately for. Western epistemology, particularly in its modern analytical form, is largely value-neutral about the ends of knowing: knowledge is good in itself, or good for the practical purposes (prediction, control, communication) that it enables, and the question of what one does with knowledge lies beyond epistemology's proper scope. Indian epistemology, across virtually all its schools, is profoundly teleological in its orientation: the ultimate purpose of knowledge is liberation (mokṣa, nirvāṇa) — the dissolution of the ignorance (avidyā) that keeps the knowing subject trapped in the cycle of suffering and rebirth. This is not an arbitrary religious overlay on a more fundamental epistemological structure; it shapes the entire enterprise from the ground up.

In Nyāya, the motivation for developing rigorous epistemology is explicitly soteriological: only through true knowledge of the self, God, and the world can ignorance be dissolved and liberation achieved. In Advaita Vedānta, the distinction between lower knowledge (apara vidyā — science, logic, the arts) and higher knowledge (para vidyā — the direct realisation of Brahman) organises all of human knowing into a hierarchy oriented toward the highest possible epistemic achievement. In Buddhist epistemology, the two truths doctrine itself has a soteriological purpose: correct understanding of both conventional and ultimate truth is the vehicle of liberation. This integral connection between epistemology and liberation gives Indian philosophical inquiry a moral seriousness and a transformative aspiration that purely theoretical Western epistemology sometimes lacks (Chatterjee (1952). [21]).

8. SYNOPTIC COMPARISON TABLE: WESTERN AND INDIAN EPISTEMOLOGIES :

The following table summarises the principal dimensions of comparison between Western and Indian theories of knowledge:

Table 2: Comparison between Western and Indian theories of knowledge

Dimension of Comparison	Western Epistemology	Indian Epistemology
Primary Knowledge Sources	Empirical observation (perception) and rational deduction (reason) — two main pathways	Multiple pramāṇas: perception, inference, comparison, testimony, presumption, non-apprehension (up to six in Mīmāṃsā)
Attitude Toward Authority	Strong Enlightenment skepticism; all claims require empirical verification or logical demonstration regardless of source prestige	Accepts āptavākya (reliable testimony); trustworthy persons and scriptures granted high epistemic status
Role of Testimony (Śabda)	Not recognised as independent knowledge source; requires verification through perception or reasoning	Independent pramāṇa equal to perception; decisive for matters that surpass direct sensory experience
View on Certainty	Descartes sought absolute certainty; modern science recognises fallibility but rational justifiability	Nyāya rejects universal doubt; motivated (not universal) doubt preferred; trust as better default
Nature of Truth	Pursues universal principles independent of context; truth exists independently of observers	Context-sensitive (Jain Anekāntavāda, Buddhist Two Truths); reality

Dimension of Comparison	Western Epistemology	Indian Epistemology
		possesses infinite aspects simultaneously
Nature of Perception	Sense data as passive reception — 'what is given to sense' prior to cognitive acts	Pratyakṣa as active interpretive act incorporating memory, mind, and conceptual processing
Treatment of Illusion	Perceptual variation argument; sense-data theory bridges gap between appearance and reality	Nyāya 'mislocation' theory: error involves misallocating real features of real objects to wrong loci
Conceptual Perception	Conceptual perception accepted as valid knowledge broadly	Buddhist: only non-conceptual perception valid. Nyāya: both non-conceptual and conceptual perception valid
Ultimate Goal of Knowledge	Understanding truth, prediction and control; knowledge valued for its own sake and practical power	Liberation (mokṣa) through true knowledge; destroying ignorance (avidyā) as root of all bondage
Role of Intuition	Recognised in limited ways as supplementary cognition; not systematically integrated	Aparokṣa jñāna (direct unmediated knowledge) systematically recognised; Self-knowledge requires no external proof
Scripture / Sacred Text	Requires rational scrutiny; Enlightenment placed individual reason over inherited tradition	Mīmāṃsā: Vedas eternal, authorless, self-validating (svatah prāmāṇya); highest class of āpta-vākya
Levels of Reality	Single-level ontology; phenomena investigated through science	Vedānta: three levels — Prātibhāsika (illusory), Vyāvahārika (phenomenal), Pāramārthika (ultimate)
Epistemological Starting Point	Systematic doubt (Descartes); question everything to discover certainty	Anti-skeptical (Nyāya); investigation of objects through knowledge sources; trust as starting default
Knowledge Definition	Justified True Belief (refined post-Gettier: proper causal connection between justification and truth)	Pramāṇa as process that generates veridical cognition; genuine sources cannot produce false beliefs (factive)
Best Suited For	Analytical thinkers; precision, measurement, logical rigour, scientific and empirical inquiry	Integrated seekers; holistic synthesis of empirical, experiential, testimonial, and spiritual knowledge

9. TOWARD A SYNTHESIS: THE BEST OF BOTH TRADITIONS :

9.1 Complementarity, Not Competition:

The comparative analysis presented in the preceding chapters suggests that the relationship between Western and Indian epistemologies is not one of competition in which one tradition must replace or subsume the other, but one of complementarity in which each tradition addresses aspects of the epistemic enterprise that the other handles less well. Western epistemology has developed uniquely powerful tools for the analysis of knowledge claims in the domains of natural science, mathematics, and formal logic; it has generated rigorous accounts of justification, evidence, and inference; and it has produced the scientific method that remains the most successful programme for generating verifiable, communicable, and cumulative knowledge of the natural world. Indian epistemology, by contrast, has

developed a richer and more inclusive account of the sources of knowledge that does justice to the role of testimony in human cognitive life; it has preserved and systematically developed the contemplative sciences; and it has maintained the soteriological orientation of epistemology that links the pursuit of knowledge to the pursuit of human flourishing.

9.2 Incorporating Śabda into a Global Epistemology:

One of the most practically important contributions that Indian epistemology can make to a global theory of knowledge is its sophisticated treatment of testimony as an independent pramāṇa. Contemporary epistemology in the West has belatedly recognised the importance of testimony — the study of 'social epistemology' has grown significantly since the 1980s — but it still lacks the rich conceptual vocabulary that Indian philosophy developed for analysing the conditions of reliable testimony and the appropriate attitudes of trust and critical scrutiny toward different sources. The concept of the āpta — the trustworthy person who has direct knowledge, communicates it without distortion, and is free from self-interested bias — provides a more nuanced and practically applicable framework for thinking about expertise, authority, and the ethics of communication than most Western accounts offer.

9.3 Science and Contemplation: Bridging the Two Cultures:

The growing convergence between neuroscience and contemplative studies represents perhaps the most exciting contemporary site of engagement between Western scientific epistemology and Indian contemplative epistemology. Research on the neural correlates of meditative states, the effects of sustained contemplative practice on attention, compassion, and cognitive flexibility, and the phenomenology of advanced meditative states has opened genuine dialogue between traditions that were previously insulated from each other. This dialogue does not require either tradition to abandon its fundamental commitments: it requires both to develop the intellectual humility and the curiosity to take seriously dimensions of human experience that lie outside their respective comfort zones.

The NEP 2020 framework provides an institutional context for this synthesis in India: the mandated integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into higher education curricula creates an opportunity to develop pedagogical and research programmes that genuinely combine the rigour of Western scientific epistemology with the depth of Indian contemplative and philosophical traditions. The challenge is to do this in ways that are intellectually honest — neither romanticising Indian traditions nor dismissively subordinating them to Western scientific paradigms — and that contribute to the genuine advancement of human understanding.

9.4 Anekāntavāda as a Model for Philosophical Pluralism:

The Jain doctrine of Anekāntavāda — the many-sidedness of truth — offers a philosophical framework for the kind of intellectual pluralism that genuine cross-cultural epistemological dialogue requires. If reality is indeed infinitely complex and if every philosophical perspective captures only some of its aspects, then the appropriate response to philosophical disagreement is not the attempt to demonstrate the decisive superiority of one's own tradition but the patient exploration of what each tradition's partial truth contributes to a more comprehensive picture. This does not imply relativism: some perspectives are more accurate, more comprehensive, and more carefully reasoned than others. But it does imply a form of epistemic humility — an acknowledgement that one's own tradition, however rich and carefully developed, cannot be the whole truth — that is both philosophically sound and practically necessary for productive cross-cultural dialogue (Krishnamurthy & Murumkar (2025). [40]).

10. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE AND THE NEP 2020 MANDATE :

The National Education Policy 2020 represents a historic opportunity to move beyond the colonial heritage of Indian higher education — in which Western academic frameworks were adopted wholesale as the unquestioned standard of intellectual rigour — toward a more genuinely pluralistic educational philosophy that takes seriously the depth and sophistication of India's own intellectual traditions. The integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into higher education curricula, as mandated by NEP 2020, cannot be accomplished by simply adding a few courses on classical Indian philosophy to an otherwise unchanged curriculum. It requires a genuine rethinking of what knowledge is, how it is generated, validated, and transmitted, and what its ultimate purposes are (Aithal & Aithal (2020). [43]).

The comparative epistemological inquiry undertaken in this paper contributes to this rethinking in several concrete ways. First, it demonstrates that the pramāṇa framework of classical Indian epistemology is not a pre-scientific primitive to be superseded by Western epistemology but a sophisticated and philosophically rigorous system that addresses aspects of the epistemic enterprise — particularly the role of testimony and the nature of direct experience — that Western epistemology handles less well. Second, it shows that the soteriological orientation of Indian epistemology — its insistence that knowledge must ultimately serve human liberation rather than mere theoretical understanding or technological control — provides an important corrective to the value-neutrality of much Western academic epistemology. Third, it identifies in Jain Anekāntavāda a philosophical framework for the kind of intellectual pluralism that genuine cross-cultural dialogue requires.

For educators and curriculum designers working within the NEP 2020 framework, the practical implications are clear: courses in epistemology and philosophy of knowledge should be genuinely comparative, introducing students to both the Western analytical tradition and the Indian pramāṇa tradition from the outset rather than treating the latter as an appendix to the former. Research methodologies across disciplines should be examined through both lenses, asking not only what counts as valid evidence in Western scientific epistemology but what the pramāṇa framework has to contribute to understanding the reliability and limits of different methods of inquiry. And the contemplative dimension of Indian epistemology should be taken seriously not merely as a historical curiosity but as a living research programme with important things to say about the nature of consciousness, the development of cognitive capacities, and the relationship between knowing and being.

11. CONCLUSION :

This research paper has undertaken a comprehensive comparative examination of Western and Indian theories of knowledge, tracing their historical development, analysing their foundational commitments, comparing their epistemological methodologies across a range of key dimensions, and exploring the possibilities for a synthesis that draws on the distinctive strengths of each tradition.

The Western tradition, from Plato's analysis of knowledge as justified true belief through Descartes' methodological scepticism to Kant's transcendental synthesis and the contemporary philosophy of science, has produced a powerful, rigorous, and enormously productive epistemological framework centred on the twin pillars of empirical observation and rational deduction. Its achievements — the scientific method, the analysis of justification, the demarcation of knowledge from mere belief — are genuine and enduring contributions to human understanding. Yet it has also generated deep puzzles — the Gettier problem, the problem of induction, the underdetermination of theory by evidence, the hard problem of consciousness — that remain unresolved and that point toward dimensions of the epistemic enterprise that the tradition's primary tools are not well-equipped to address.

The Indian tradition, organised around the pramāṇa framework and animated by the soteriological aspiration toward liberation through true knowledge, offers a complementary set of resources. Its recognition of testimony as an independent and indispensable source of knowledge does justice to the social and testimonial dimensions of human cognition that Western epistemology has tended to underestimate. Its systematic cultivation of contemplative knowledge through the traditions of yoga, meditation, and self-inquiry has produced a sophisticated understanding of consciousness and its cognitive capacities that neuroscience is only beginning to explore scientifically. Its Jain doctrine of Anekāntavāda provides a philosophical framework for intellectual pluralism that is both epistemologically sound and practically valuable for cross-cultural dialogue. And its integration of epistemology with ethics and soteriology reminds us that the ultimate purpose of knowledge is not merely to describe the world but to transform the knower — to move from ignorance to understanding, from bondage to freedom, from fragmentation to wholeness.

The question now posed is — Which approach fits your worldview? — is ultimately less important than the question it should prompt: What would it look like to develop a worldview capacious enough to incorporate the insights of both traditions? That question, which is at once a philosophical challenge and an educational imperative under India's NEP 2020 framework, points toward the most productive direction for epistemological inquiry in the twenty-first century: not the competitive assertion of one tradition's superiority over another, but the patient, rigorous, and open-minded pursuit of a genuinely global philosophy of knowledge.

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