

# Philosophy and Civilisation: A Comparative Analysis of India with the West

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**Area/Section:** Philosophy.

**Type of the Paper:** Exploratory Research.

**Number of Peer Reviews:** Two.

**Type of Review:** Peer Reviewed as per [C|O|P|E](#) guidance.

**Indexed in:** OpenAIRE.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21188938>

**Google Scholar Citation:** [PIJPL](#)

## How to Cite this Paper:

Aithal, P. S. & Srinivasan, R. (2026). Philosophy and Civilisation: A Comparative Analysis of India with the West. *Poornaprajna International Journal of Philosophy & Languages (PIJPL)*, 3(1), 654-669. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21188938>

**Poornaprajna International Journal of Philosophy & Languages (PIJPL)**

A Refereed International Journal of Poornaprajna Publication, India.

**ISSN: 3107-4634**

Crossref DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64818/PIJPL.3107.4634.0052>

Received on: 02/06/2026

Published on: 30/06/2026

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## Philosophy and Civilisation: A Comparative Analysis of India with the West

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** *This paper gives a comparative study of philosophy and civilization of both the Indian and Western traditions and claims that every civilization manifests a unique philosophy. In Karl Jaspers' description of the Axial Age, it places the almost simultaneous blooming of Greek and Indian thought as a parallel yet contrasting answer to the human condition. Using the classification of "inwardness" and "outwardness" by P. T. Raju, it places Indian metaphysics and epistemology, centered on consciousness, Brahman and liberation, against the Western focus on substance, reason and the external world.*

**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:** *Indian meta philosophy and dharma, along with Greek eudaimonism, are placed against the backdrop of contemporary deontological and utilitarian ethics. The paper traces the history of the meeting of India and Europe, from Schopenhauer to contemporary comparative philosophy, and postulates the nature and the results of a real dialogue between civilizations.*

**Originality/ Values:** *The Paper concludes that complementarity, as opposed to hierarchy, best describes the relationship of the two philosophical traditions.*

**Type of Paper:** *Exploratory Research.*

**Keywords:** comparative philosophy; Indian philosophy; Western philosophy; civilisation; dharma; Axial Age

### 1. INTRODUCTION :

Philosophy and civilization have remained inseparable dimensions of human history, shaping the intellectual, moral, cultural, and institutional evolution of societies across time. Few questions are as enduring as the relationship between philosophical thought and civilization itself (Dewey (1927). [1]). Civilization is far more than the accumulation of monuments, political institutions, technological achievements, or economic systems; rather, it embodies a society's collective understanding of reality, knowledge, morality, and the purpose of human existence. Every civilization is founded upon an implicit or explicit philosophical worldview that determines how individuals perceive themselves, society, nature, and the cosmos. Consequently, philosophy serves as the intellectual foundation upon which civilizations formulate their systems of governance, education, ethics, law, religion, and social organization (McKeon (1981). [2]). Comparative philosophy has increasingly emphasized that civilizations cannot be adequately understood without examining the philosophical assumptions that guide their historical development, cultural continuity, and institutional structures (Kaipayil (2022). [3]; Ganeri (2011). [4]). Contemporary scholarship further argues that comparative philosophical inquiry has become essential for understanding intercultural dialogue in an increasingly interconnected world, where civilizational encounters require mutual intellectual appreciation rather than ideological competition.

Among the world's great civilizations, India and the West represent the two longest continuous, highly developed, and philosophically self-conscious traditions, each possessing an uninterrupted intellectual history extending over more than two and a half millennia. Although both traditions sought answers to

universal questions concerning reality, knowledge, justice, ethics, and human flourishing, they evolved along markedly different philosophical trajectories. The Western philosophical tradition, beginning with the pre-Socratic thinkers and later refined through the works of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and subsequent Greco-Roman and European philosophers, primarily emphasized rational inquiry, logical analysis, political organization, scientific observation, and the systematic investigation of nature (Keller (2019). [5]). Rationality became the principal instrument for understanding both the physical universe and social order, laying the intellectual foundations for modern science, democracy, jurisprudence, and technological advancement (Stallknecht (2015). [6]). In contrast, Indian philosophy emerged from the Vedas, Upanishads, and the diverse schools of Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and later philosophical traditions, placing greater emphasis on consciousness, self-realization, liberation (*mokṣa*), moral discipline (*dharma*), and the transformative nature of spiritual knowledge (Phillips (2011). [7]). Rather than treating philosophy solely as theoretical speculation, Indian thinkers generally regarded it as a practical path toward overcoming ignorance and attaining existential freedom. These contrasting orientations—external rational investigation in the West and inward experiential realization in India—constitute one of the most significant distinctions in global intellectual history.

Despite these philosophical differences, the Indian and Western traditions share remarkable commonalities in addressing fundamental questions concerning metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and human existence. Both civilizations developed sophisticated theories explaining the nature of reality, the means of acquiring valid knowledge, the foundations of moral conduct, and the relationship between the individual and society. Western epistemology traditionally emphasized reason, empirical observation, and logical demonstration, whereas Indian epistemology developed elaborate theories of *pramāṇas* (means of valid knowledge), including perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), testimony (*śabda*), comparison (*upamāna*), postulation (*arthāpatti*), and non-apprehension (*anupalabdhi*) (Phillips (2011). [7]). Similarly, Western ethical systems frequently explored justice, virtue, rights, and civic responsibility, while Indian traditions integrated ethics with karma, dharma, compassion, self-discipline, and spiritual liberation. Modern comparative philosophy increasingly recognizes that these traditions should not be viewed as mutually exclusive or hierarchically arranged but as complementary intellectual systems offering diverse yet profound responses to universal human concerns. Their dialogue contributes significantly to contemporary debates in ethics, environmental philosophy, consciousness studies, intercultural understanding, and global philosophy (Raju (1963). [8]).

The objective of comparing Indian and Western philosophy is therefore not to establish the superiority of one civilization over another but to illuminate their distinctive contributions to humanity's shared intellectual heritage. Comparative analysis enables scholars to appreciate how differing metaphysical assumptions give rise to distinct civilizational institutions, ethical systems, educational traditions, political philosophies, and cultural identities (Raju (1963). [8]). In an era characterized by globalization, technological transformation, environmental uncertainty, and intercultural interaction, understanding these philosophical foundations has become increasingly relevant for promoting cross-cultural dialogue, global citizenship, and sustainable human development. Accordingly, this exploratory research article examines the philosophical and civilizational foundations of India and the West through a comparative analysis of their metaphysical assumptions, epistemological frameworks, ethical principles, concepts of self and society, and long historical evolution (Aditya & Mohammed (2024). [9]). By exploring both convergences and divergences, the study seeks to demonstrate that Indian and Western philosophies are not competing worldviews but complementary civilizational traditions whose continued engagement enriches contemporary philosophical discourse and contributes to a more inclusive understanding of global civilization.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE :

The relationship between philosophy and civilisation has been a central concern in comparative intellectual history because philosophical systems provide the deeper metaphysical, ethical, epistemological, and social frameworks through which civilisations understand reality and organise collective life. Comparative philosophy is therefore not merely a comparison of doctrines but an inquiry into how different civilisations generate, preserve, and transform ways of knowing and living. Daya Krishna (1986) [10] argues that comparative philosophy must move beyond superficial East–West contrasts and examine the internal complexity of traditions, since every civilisation contains multiple

voices, debates, and alternative standpoints. Similarly, Goto-Jones (2013) [11] observes that comparative philosophy becomes meaningful only when it questions what counts as “philosophy” itself, especially when Western categories are treated as universal standards. These studies are important for the present topic because they show that a comparison of Indian and Western civilisations must avoid reducing India to spirituality and the West to rationality, even though these broad tendencies have historically shaped their civilisational orientations.

A major stream of literature examines the historical encounter between Indian and Western philosophical traditions. Kaipayil (2022) [3] explains that Indian engagement with Western philosophy became especially significant in modern academia, where Indian philosophers attempted both to preserve the identity of Indian thought and to enter into dialogue with Western philosophical methods. Shevchenko (2021) [12] highlights Wilhelm Halbfass’s contribution to cross-cultural dialogue, especially his attempt to understand India and Europe not as isolated civilisations but as traditions shaped through interpretation, translation, and historical encounter. Bilimoria (2021) [13] extends this discussion by arguing that post-Halbfass comparative philosophy must focus not only on historical comparison but also on the purpose of intercultural dialogue itself. These studies collectively suggest that Indian and Western civilisations should be studied as living intellectual traditions rather than as closed and static cultural blocks.

The literature also identifies important methodological challenges in comparing India with the West. Wang (2018) [14] discusses the problem of incommensurability in comparative philosophy, noting that concepts from different traditions may not always correspond directly because they arise from different linguistic, metaphysical, and cultural assumptions. This is especially relevant when comparing Western ideas such as reason, being, soul, and ethics with Indian concepts such as *pramāṇa*, *ātman*, *dharma*, *karma*, and *mokṣa*. Moeller (2022) [15] further argues that comparative philosophy has entered a “post-comparative” stage, where the simple binary of Western and non-Western philosophy is no longer sufficient. Instead, philosophy must be understood as a global field of interaction. Such methodological reflections support the view that an India–West comparison should not be based on ranking civilisations but on revealing how each tradition answers fundamental questions about reality, knowledge, human purpose, and social order.

Several scholars emphasise the epistemological dimension of Indian and Western civilisational thought. Mohanty (1995) [16] argues that Indian philosophy cannot be understood as mere religious speculation because it contains rigorous theories of knowledge, rational debate, and philosophical analysis. This view challenges older Western assumptions that Indian civilisation was primarily mystical while Western civilisation alone represented critical reason. Aditya & Mohammed (2024) [9] similarly compare Indian and Western philosophical human values and note that both traditions address existence, knowledge, and ethics, though through different conceptual vocabularies. Indian epistemology developed through *pramāṇa* theory, while Western epistemology developed through traditions of rationalism, empiricism, scepticism, and later critical philosophy. The literature therefore suggests that both India and the West possess strong rational traditions, although Indian philosophy often integrates knowledge with liberation, while Western philosophy often connects knowledge with explanation, science, and public reason.

Metaphysics and the concept of the self form another important area of comparison. Indian civilisation has often treated the question of the self as central to both philosophical inquiry and practical life, especially through Vedānta, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Buddhist, and Jain traditions. Groves (2005) [17] discusses comparative philosophy of mind and shows how traditions differ in their treatment of consciousness, embodiment, and mental experience. In the Indian context, consciousness is often examined not only as a psychological function but also as a metaphysical and spiritual principle. In contrast, much Western philosophy, especially from Greek thought to modern philosophy, developed sustained inquiries into substance, form, mind, body, and personal identity. The comparative literature shows that India’s inward focus on self-realisation and liberation and the West’s outward focus on being, nature, and rational structure are not absolute opposites but different civilisational emphases.

Ethics is another major area in which philosophical differences shape civilisational values. Indian ethical thought is closely related to *dharma*, *karma*, *ahiṃsā*, self-discipline, and liberation, while Western ethical traditions have often focused on virtue, law, justice, duty, rights, and the good life. Pandit and Krieger (2024) [18] compare Indian and Western accounts of emotion and argue that Indian philosophy does not maintain a strict separation between reason and emotion in the same way as many

Western traditions. This distinction is important because civilisations are shaped not only by abstract metaphysics but also by assumptions about human conduct, desire, discipline, and moral transformation. Indian civilisation often connects ethics with spiritual purification and social duty, while Western civilisation has strongly developed civic ethics, political justice, and rights-based moral discourse. Both traditions therefore contribute valuable ethical resources for contemporary global society.

The political and social dimensions of philosophy also reveal important civilisational differences. Western philosophy, from Greek political thought onward, gave significant attention to the polis, citizenship, law, democracy, and rational public debate. Indian philosophy, while also containing political thought in texts such as the Arthaśāstra and dharma traditions, generally placed greater emphasis on cosmic order, social duty, spiritual progress, and moral self-regulation. However, modern scholarship cautions against exaggerating this contrast. Krishna (1986) [10] and Kaipayil (2022) [3] both indicate that Indian philosophy contains critical, analytical, and dialogical traditions, while Western philosophy contains spiritual, theological, and existential dimensions. Therefore, the civilisational comparison must recognise both difference and overlap.

Recent literature increasingly argues for moving beyond traditional East–West binaries. Chakrabarti and Weber (2023) [19] propose the idea of global post-comparative philosophy, suggesting that philosophy should not remain divided into Western and non-Western compartments. Kahteran and Weber (2021) [20] similarly argue for post-comparative approaches that encourage philosophical engagement without reducing traditions to fixed identities. This is especially relevant in a globalised world where Indian and Western intellectual traditions interact in education, politics, science, ethics, spirituality, and technology. The comparative study of India and the West therefore has contemporary value because it can contribute to intercultural dialogue, global ethics, environmental responsibility, consciousness studies, and civilisational self-understanding.

Overall, the reviewed literature shows that Indian and Western civilisations developed distinctive philosophical orientations but also share deep concerns regarding truth, reality, knowledge, morality, and human flourishing. Indian philosophy is often marked by an inward movement toward consciousness, self-knowledge, liberation, and the integration of knowledge with life-practice. Western philosophy is often marked by systematic rational inquiry into nature, logic, politics, science, and institutional life. However, current scholarship rejects simplistic binaries and instead emphasises dialogue, mutual correction, and constructive engagement. Thus, the literature supports the need for an exploratory comparative study that examines India and the West not as competing civilisations but as complementary philosophical traditions that continue to shape global civilisation.

### **3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY :**

This study is guided by four principal objectives:

- (1) To establish the constitutive relationship between philosophical vision and civilisational form in the Indian and Western traditions, situating both within the framework of the Axial Age.
- (2) To compare the metaphysical and epistemological orientations of Indian and Western thought, examining the contrast between inwardness and outwardness as fundamental tendencies.
- (3) To analyse the ethical and social philosophies of the two civilisations, contrasting the architecture of dharma and the puruṣārthas with Greek eudaimonism and modern Western moral theory.
- (4) To trace the historical encounter between India and Europe and to assess the prospects for a genuine, mutually enriching dialogue of civilisations in the contemporary world.

### **4. METHODOLOGY :**

This study utilizes an exploratory qualitative research design. Secondary data and relevant literature were gathered through targeted, keyword-based searches across academic and digital platforms, including Google Scholar, the Google search engine, and AI-driven GPT models. The retrieved information was then systematically analyzed and interpreted to address the core research objectives and draw meaningful conclusions [21-27].

### **5. THE CIVILISATIONAL MATRIX: PHILOSOPHY AS THE LIVING CENTRE OF CULTURE :**

To speak of philosophy and civilisation in the same breath is to assert that ideas are not ornaments upon the surface of a culture but the very principle of its organisation. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan opened his classic survey by insisting that Indian philosophy is the soul of Indian civilisation, the spiritual thread upon which the whole fabric of social, religious and artistic life is strung (Nirban (2025). [28]). The same may be said, with appropriate adjustments, of the West: the architecture of European civilisation—its science, its law, its politics, its religion—rests upon foundations laid by Greek metaphysics, Roman jurisprudence and the Judaeo-Christian moral inheritance (Nelson (1973). [29]). A civilisation, on this view, is a philosophy made visible, an answer to ultimate questions translated into institutions and ways of life (Osiander, A. (2000). [30]).

The most illuminating frame for this comparison is Karl Jaspers's concept of the Axial Age. In the centuries around the middle of the first millennium before the common era, Jaspers observed, a remarkable transformation of consciousness occurred independently and almost simultaneously in China, India, Persia, Israel and Greece (Smith (2015). [31]). In each region thinkers stepped back from the immediacy of myth and ritual and began to reflect critically upon existence itself, asking after the nature of being, the good, and the destiny of the soul. In Greece, this appeared in pre-Socratic inquiry and Socratic self-knowledge; in India, in the Upaniṣadic search for unity and the heterodox teachings of the Buddha and Mahāvīra (Vassiliades (2005). [32]). Jaspers regarded this as the spiritual foundation upon which humanity still stands—the moment at which the fundamental categories of our thinking were forged.

(एकं सत् विप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति)

*ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti*

Truth is one; the wise speak of it in many ways. (Rgveda 1.164.46)

or “That which exists is One, sages call it by various names,” emphasizing that the ultimate reality (God/Truth) is singular or one, though people describe or approach it differently through various paths, deities, or philosophies. It promotes pluralism and respect for diverse perspectives, acknowledging that each viewpoint adds a dimension to understanding the whole.

Yet the parallel conceals a profound divergence of orientation. The Greek achievement was, in essence, a discovery of the world as an intelligible order open to rational scrutiny. Will Durant, surveying the whole panorama of human culture in his account of our oriental and occidental heritage, noted that the genius of Greece lay in its confidence that the cosmos could be grasped by the unaided intellect, a confidence that gave birth to mathematics, natural science and formal logic. The Indian achievement, by contrast, was a discovery of the inner world—of consciousness as the one indubitable reality and of liberation as the supreme human possibility. Where the Greek asked what the world is made of and how it may be known, the Indian sage asked who the knower is and how he may be freed.

This difference of starting point produced two distinct civilisational temperaments. The Western tradition, building upon its outward orientation, developed a civilisation of mastery: of nature through science and technology, of society through law and the state, of argument through dialectic and demonstration. The progressive, accumulative character of Western knowledge, its restless drive to extend control over the external environment, flows from this original turn. The Indian tradition, building upon its inward orientation, developed a civilisation of realisation: one in which the highest cultural energies were directed not to the conquest of nature but to the transformation of consciousness, and in which philosophy was never a merely theoretical exercise, but a discipline of life aimed at spiritual emancipation.

It would be a serious error, however, to caricature these tendencies as mutually exclusive. India produced sophisticated logicians, grammarians, mathematicians and political theorists; the Nyāya school refined the canons of inference with a rigour comparable to Aristotle's, and the materialist Cārvāka denied transcendence altogether. The West, for its part, sustained powerful currents of mysticism and inwardness, from Plotinus to the Christian contemplatives. What distinguishes the two is not the presence or absence of these elements but the centre of gravity—the dominant emphasis that gives each civilisation its characteristic form. In India the spiritual quest occupied the centre and the empirical sciences the periphery; in the West the relationship was reversed. Recognising this asymmetry is the first step towards a comparison that neither flattens the traditions into false equivalence nor ranks them on a single scale of value but understands each as a coherent and complete response to the predicament of being human.

The institutional expression of these orientations is itself revealing. The characteristic Western institution of higher learning was the academy and, later, the university, conceived as a community devoted to the disputation and accumulation of knowledge about the world; from Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum to the mediaeval and modern university, the West built enduring structures for the corporate pursuit of objective truth (Izak et al. (2017). [33]). India's characteristic institution was the gurukula and the great monastic universities of Nālandā and Takṣaśilā, where learning was transmitted within a relationship of discipleship and ordered towards the formation and ultimate liberation of the student. The Western teacher imparted a body of knowledge; the Indian guru transmitted a way of being. In both cases the institution mirrored the civilisation's deepest sense of what knowledge is for, and the contrast between the seminar and the āśrama encapsulates in miniature the larger difference between a culture of explanation and a culture of realisation (Kumar (2025). [34]; Kadaba et al. (2023). [35]). Nor should the comparison obscure the long history of contact and mutual influence that complicates any tidy opposition. Greek and Indian thought met along the trade routes of the Hellenistic world; the encounter of Alexander's philosophers with the Indian "gymnosophists" entered Western legend, and Greek astronomy and sculpture left their mark upon the subcontinent. The point of the comparison is therefore not to seal the two traditions hermetically from one another but to identify the distinctive vision that organised each from within. Civilisation, in both cases, is best understood as the visible body of an invisible philosophy—the working out, in stone and statute, in science and sacrament, of an original intuition about the nature of the real and the destiny of the human being. It is to the content of those intuitions, in metaphysics and the theory of knowledge, that the analysis must now turn.

## 6. METAPHYSICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY: THE INWARD AND THE OUTWARD TURN :

The most profound division between Indian thought and Western philosophy lies in the domains of metaphysics and epistemology. In his classic survey of comparative philosophy, P. T. Raju suggested that the defining characteristic of the Western mentality is its "outwardness" and that of the Indian mentality its "inwardness." Western philosophers have tended to privilege the object, the empirical world, and the instruments of rational knowledge; Indian philosophers have tended to privilege the subject, consciousness, and the realization of the self. This one distinction, which must be nuanced in many ways, will structure much of our discussion.

Western metaphysics begins with the question of substance. From Thales' s water to Aristotle's ousia, from the Cartesian *res extensa* to the stuff of modern physics, philosophers have pondered what things ultimately are, the basic stuff or underlying structure of the physical universe. Bertrand Russell's classic history of the tradition can be read, in many ways, as the story of attempts to describe reality as an ordered system of objects understandable by human reason. When Western thinkers privilege the mind, as most idealists do, they still tend to think of mind according to the model of a knowing subject opposed to a world of objects. The relationship of subject and object, knower and known, is still primary.

Indian philosophy begins with the self. Turning away from the phenomenal world of names and forms, the Upanishadic sages sought to discover the innermost reality of the knower. They found it to be identified with brahman, the ground of all being. The famous phrase *tat tvam asi*—"you are that" — declares that the ultimate truth of the universe is discovered not by looking outward at objects but by looking inward at consciousness itself.

This Self (ātman) is Brahman. (Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad 2)

Surendranath Dasgupta showed in his monumental *History of Indian Philosophy* that this focus on consciousness shapes even the most analytic of Indian traditions. Whether it is the Samkhya description of nature in terms of its constituent qualities (*guṇas*), the Yoga cultivation of the mind, or the Buddha's analysis of consciousness itself, classical Indian philosophy takes the subjective life of consciousness as fundamental. Reality is approached from the standpoint of the experiencing subject, and knowledge aims not at the description of nature but at the liberation of the self.

Each tradition developed its own approach to epistemology, or the theory of knowledge. The classical Indian systems elaborated at great subtlety a theory of *pramāṇas*, or valid means of knowledge: perception, inference, comparison, verbal testimony, postulation, and non-apprehension. This and other topics in Indian epistemology are ably discussed by J. N. Mohanty in *Indian Philosophy: Classical Period*. But what stands out to the Western reader is the respect paid to *śabda* (Verbal testimony) and to the direct, intuitive experience (*anubhava*) that crowns the Indian path of knowledge. Western philosophy has tended to privilege sensory knowledge and rational proof, regarding testimony with

suspicion and intuition as philosophically suspect. Where the philosophical enterprise reaches its culmination in transformative, liberating knowledge that also has the character of a mode of being, Western philosophers have generally been content to describe knowledge as justified, true belief about the world.

But again, we should avoid overstating the contrast. Bina Gupta provides an excellent introduction to the diversity of Indian philosophical traditions that corrects many common misconceptions about “Indian philosophy.” Indian thinkers were often just as rigorous and argumentative as their Western contemporaries, keen to ensure the internal consistency of their views and the refutation of rival positions. The contrast is less one of method than of end or goal: the telos of knowledge. For mainstream Western philosophy, to know ultimately is to control; for classical Indian thought, to know ultimately is to be free. The outward turn toward objectivity produces a philosophy of explanation and manipulation; the inward turn produces a philosophy of realization and freedom. Each, taken by itself, distorts the richness of our relationship to the real.

Each tradition values the world of the senses differently as a result. Western metaphysics—even in its occasional moments of idealism—has generally taken the external world to be fully real. Nature is real, knowable, and worthy of study in its own right. The Western world’s long romance with natural science grows out of this conviction. Several major strands of Indian thought qualify that reality. The most influential tradition in classical India, Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta, taught that the world of name and form is ultimately a kind of illusion

(māyā). Not an outright illusion, to be sure, but a lesser kind of reality that hides the non-dual brahman behind it. Knowledge, therefore, does not aim at providing an ever-more accurate picture of the way things appear; it aims at piercing through appearance to the single reality beneath it. To be sure, this view was not universal in India: The Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika schools defended a robust realism about the external world, as did the Mīmāṃsā school with its commitment to the reality of ritual action.

The self is perhaps where we find the most significant difference. From Aristotle to Descartes to the modern philosopher David Lewis, the defining characteristic of self has been its substantiality: the self is the individual human soul or the Cartesian ego, a bounded subject opposed to the world. Against this view, Indian philosophy came to understand the self to be universal pure consciousness, free from the contents of mental life that passes in the empirical ego (ahankāra). Buddhism radicalized this insight to deny that there is any enduring self at all, proposing instead a radical ontology of momentary states of consciousness. The difference with the Western view could not be starker. Yet despite these differences, in neither tradition is the self simply the familiar individual human being. Both traditions emphasize, in different ways, that the task of philosophy is to see through the surface level of experience to what we most truly are. Philosophy in India takes up the question of identity—who am I?—with a seriousness that is largely lacking in the West.

## **7. ETHICS, SOCIETY, AND THE ENDS OF LIFE: DHARMA AND THE MORAL IMAGINATION :**

If metaphysics discloses the two civilisations’ opposed orientations, their moral philosophies tell us how those orientations play out in life. Hinduism structures the goals of life through the doctrine of the puruṣārthas: the four proper aims of humanity. These are dharma (righteousness), artha (wealth), kāma (pleasure), and finally mokṣa, liberation. Notice how they rise to their culmination in mokṣa: the pursuit of wealth and pleasure are not denounced but encouraged within the context provided by dharma, and all of life is ultimately organised towards the spiritual freedom of mokṣa. This isn’t to say Indian life focuses only on the spirit. Indian ethics provides dharma a framework that incorporates both the spiritual and material aspects of existence within its scope (Frazier (2021). [36]).

Dharma itself defies easy translation, incorporating as it does ideas of cosmic law, morality, and the duties determined by one’s position in life. Its guidelines change depending on who you are and when you are in your life. Where you are located on your life journey matters. What is appropriate and expected of a young person will differ significantly from that of an older person. In keeping with this, the dharma of a student will differ from that of householder. A king has different responsibilities than a farmer. The duty of a warrior will vary from that of a monk (Hallisey & Hansen (1996). [37]). Here is where the Bhagavadgita famously instructs its readers to engage in their dharmic duties without attachment to results (Aithal & Ramanathan (2025). [38]).

Buddhi-yukto jahātīha  
ubhe sukrta-duṣkrte  
tasmād yogāya yujyasva  
yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam (Bhagavad Gita 2:50)

A man engaged in devotional service rids himself of both good and bad reactions even in this life. Therefore, strive for yoga, which is the art of all work.

Western ethics has tended by contrast to emphasise universal laws that apply equally to all agents regardless of class or condition. Aristotle's ethics famously conceived human flourishing in terms of acting virtuously in accordance with reason. Flourishing here meant fulfilling the purpose of being human, to live a happy life that satisfies the rational nature we all share. Modern thinkers would shift the focus of moral inquiry towards actions rather than agents: Kant saw moral value as a matter of acting according to universal maxims willed by pure reason. Bentham and Mill took a different approach, judging the morality of an action by its effects, through whatever happiness or unhappiness it caused. Russell traces these emphases respectively to the Greek desire to live well in society and the Jewish search for a universal moral law.

Indian moral thinking can thus be seen as more teleological, in the sense that it frames human activity with reference to goals beyond mere societal wellbeing. Consider how the system of four ashramas or stages of life – student, householder, forest-dweller, and renunciate – orders the life of the yogin so that they might progressively turn away from involvement in worldly life to spiritual liberation. Your life begins with a focus on education and progressively expands to involve family and career before you might turn away from societal duty to pursue liberation from society itself. On a cosmic scale this separation of passion is made possible by the doctrines of karma and reincarnation. Because each individual soul is subjected to an ethical accounting over many lifetimes, Indian ethics enjoys a seriousness and coherence that the 80 or so years of a typical Western life cannot. To live ethically is to obey the laws of nature; to live unethically is to plant the seeds of your own suffering for your future lives (Bilimoria (2013). [39]; Dhand (2002). [40]).

Russell might reply that Kant and Mill got their law-mindedness from Judaism, which indeed supplies a Western parallel to this cosmic integration of ethics. Judaism does owe much to Greek rationalism, but it belongs properly to the West alongside Christianity and Islam. The ethical life is made righteous because the cosmos itself follows orderly, divine laws, known to us through Scripture. But Western philosophy is perfectly capable of disaggregating law and morality. Hobbes saw ethics as a matter of contract, not divine law, and even once secularised the importance of an authoritative, law-giving power behind the sovereign.

Yet once again this shouldn't be understood as opposition but as two different solutions to the same problem of harmonising ethics with metaphysics. As Amartya Sen has shown in his rich body of work on Indian thought, ancient India also had a strong tradition of public debate and reasoned discourse—indeed, one might call it argumentative. It stretches from the Upanishadic debates and Buddhist & Jain dialogues of ancient India to the councils of Ashoka and the debating grounds set up by Akbar to discuss Islam with scholars of other faiths. Although spiritualism and self-realisation are key elements of Indian metaphysics, public life and political life were never discouraged. Nor is there any reason Indian ethics should neglect public debate just because it takes dharma seriously. Hindus have always debated the nature of dharma and how it applies in different contexts. Just as Kant, Mill, and Hobbes represent different strains of Western moral philosophy, no strategy of moral reasoning exhausts the argumentative tradition of India.

We see a similar correspondence and contrast when we turn to politics. The West inherited from Greece the ideal of citizenship, the notion that political life is concerned primarily with creating a space where free and equal persons could dwell. This ideal would come to fruition in the modern liberal state, built upon principles of individual rights and dignity. The classical Indian world also had astute political philosophers, none better than Kautilya. The Arthashastra, attributed to him, is a thoroughly secular treatise about political power. It offers unflinching advice on everything from administration to espionage to economics. Yet while Western thinkers identified politics with rational activity among free citizens, Indian thinkers were more likely to see it as the administration of dharmic order (Aithal & Ramanathan (2025). [41]).

To say politics is dharmically ordained is to say politics, public life, and political authority are justified by the demands of dharma. The king, far from being sovereign, is the maintainer of cosmic order on Earth. He embodies authority, but his authority is limited by the demands of dharma just as much as his subjects. Society too was thought of more organically, as an integration of complementary parts. This was partly conveyed by the notion of the four varnas, or social classes. Each had its place and function in society. These classes were not entirely fixed, but nor were they fully egalitarian either (Srinivasan & Aithal (2026). [42]).

As with ethics, neither approach is without fault or merits. The stress on individual rights and dignity makes the modern, rights-bearing person possible. But a society built around rights without reference to higher goals can easily collapse into a market where everyone bargains for the moral high ground. By contrast, Indian social thought makes room for ethics and spirituality but at the cost of solidifying hierarchies into zones of inequality that have haunted India to the present day. Understanding these differences can help us think about how to balance rights with responsibilities, individual freedoms with spiritual needs. It can show us how societies and citizens can play complementary roles in freeing and ordering our lives (Aithal & Srinivasan (2024). [43]).

## 8. ENCOUNTER, CONVERGENCE, AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE :

The comparison of India and the West is not merely an academic exercise; it is the record of a real and consequential historical encounter. Wilhelm Halbfass, philosopher and Indologist, is a committed participant in the dialogue between India and Europe, whose reflections on the Indian tradition and its Western perception are accompanied by reflection on and critical examination of the Western tradition. Wilhelm Halbfass, in his authoritative study of the intellectual relations between the two civilisations (Halbfass (1985). [44]), traced this encounter from its faint beginnings in pre-Alexandrian antiquity through the colonial period to the present, showing how each tradition has served the other as a mirror in which to define itself. The encounter has been profoundly asymmetrical and often distorted by relations of power, yet it has also been genuinely creative on both sides (Shevchenko (2021). [45]). The modern phase opened in the late eighteenth century, when European scholars first gained direct access to Sanskrit texts. The effect upon Western thought was electric. Arthur Schopenhauer found in the Upaniṣads the consolation of his life and built his metaphysics of will around a vision he believed the ancient Indians had anticipated. The German Romantics and Idealists, and later thinkers from Paul Deussen to the American Transcendentalists, drew deeply upon Indian sources. Halbfass shows that the European “discovery” of India was at the same time a chapter in Europe’s discovery of itself, as India came to figure as the great philosophical Other against which the Western tradition measured its own identity and limits (Halbfass (1980). [46]).

The traffic ran in both directions. Confronted by Western philosophy, science and political thought, Indian thinkers of the modern period—Rammohan Roy, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan—undertook a creative reinterpretation of their own inheritance, articulating Vedānta in a global idiom and asserting its relevance to the modern world. Radhakrishnan in particular built his entire scholarly enterprise upon the conviction that Indian and Western philosophy were partners in a single human quest, and that the parallels between them, regularly drawn throughout his work, pointed towards an eventual synthesis. Out of this two-way encounter the discipline of comparative philosophy itself was born, given systematic form by Raju and by the conferences and collaborations that produced the great anthologies, among them the sourcebook compiled by Radhakrishnan and Charles Moore (Hatcher (2004). [47]).

What, then, is the contemporary relevance of this comparison? Several lines of convergence suggest themselves. In the philosophy of mind, the Western scientific study of consciousness has begun to engage seriously with the Indian contemplative traditions, whose first-person analyses of awareness and meditative experience constitute a vast and largely untapped resource. In ethics, the Indian integration of the spiritual and the worldly offers a counterweight to the fragmentation of modern moral life, while the Western insistence on universal human rights and rational justification supplies a corrective to the dangers of an exclusively station-bound morality. In ecology, the Indian vision of the continuity of life and the sacredness of nature speaks directly to a civilisation confronting the consequences of its own outward mastery (Singh & Kumar (2025). [48]).

The deeper lesson of the comparison is that the two traditions are complementary rather than competitive. The outward turn of the West has given humanity the power to understand and transform

the external world; the inward turn of India has preserved the knowledge of how to understand and transform the self. A civilisation that possessed only the first would be powerful but spiritually impoverished; one that possessed only the second would be wise but worldly ineffectual. The hope embodied in the project of comparative philosophy, as Mohanty and others have envisioned it, is that of a genuine dialogue in which each tradition learns from the other without surrendering its own integrity—a dialogue in which, as the Indian sages put it, the one truth is acknowledged in its many forms. In an age of globalisation, when the civilisations of the world are drawn into ever closer and more consequential contact, such a dialogue is no longer a luxury of the seminar room but a necessity of the human future (Mohanty (1995). [49]).

Such a dialogue must, however, be conducted with critical care if it is to escape the distortions that have dogged the encounter from the start. Halbfass cautioned against two opposite errors that have repeatedly disfigured comparative work. The first is a romantic Orientalism that idealises India as the timeless home of spirituality, a projection that flatters even as it patronises and that obscures the rational, analytical and worldly dimensions of Indian thought that Sen and others have recovered. The second is a dismissive Eurocentrism that measures Indian philosophy against Western standards and finds it wanting in rigour or system, failing to grasp that it pursued different questions by different means towards different ends. A mature comparative philosophy must hold both traditions in view without subordinating either, attending as much to their internal diversity—the materialists and realists of India, the mystics and contemplatives of the West—as to their broad contrasting tendencies (Alcoff (2017). [50]).

The convergences now emerging give grounds for cautious optimism. In the sciences of mind, the rigorous phenomenology of consciousness developed within the Yoga and Buddhist traditions is being studied seriously by cognitive scientists and philosophers of mind seeking a first-person complement to their third-person methods. In moral and political philosophy, scholars draw upon both the universalism of the Western rights tradition and the relational, duty-centred ethics of dharma to address questions of global justice that neither tradition alone fully anticipated. In the environmental humanities, the Indic sense of the kinship of all life and the sacredness of the natural order offers conceptual resources to a planetary civilisation reckoning with the costs of unrestrained mastery. These are not syncretic confusions but genuine encounters, in which each tradition is enlarged by contact with the other. The comparative study of philosophy and civilisation thus ceases to be a backward-looking inventory of differences and becomes a forward-looking contribution to the shared philosophical task of humanity as a whole (Alvares (2011). [51]).

To consolidate, this paper examined Indian and Western philosophies and civilizations, comparing them as responses to the human condition during the Axial Age. It presented the idea that civilization presents the external form of a dominant philosophical idea. It also presented the idea that the Western and Indian philosophical ideas diverge along their form and content. Specifically, the Indian idea is internally oriented toward the self and consciousness, and the Western idea is externally oriented toward nature and the objects of experience and reason. This divergence reflects the Western and Indian traditions of civilization's metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. However, the long and rich history of mutual engagement and encounter between Western and Indian civilizations has shown that it is ultimately a relationship of complementarity devoid of a hierarchical relationship. Each of the civilizations has captured a particular, significant aspect of reality which the other has not.

## 9. COMPARISON OF PHILOSOPHY AND CIVILIZATION BETWEEN INDIA AND THE WEST :

**Table 1:** Comparative Analysis of Philosophy and Civilization between India and the West

S. No.	Key Issue	Indian Civilisation	Western Civilisation	Comparative Observation
1	Ultimate Purpose of Philosophy	Philosophy is primarily a practical discipline aimed at self-realization (Ātman), liberation (Mokṣa), and	Philosophy primarily seeks rational understanding of nature, society, knowledge, and reality through logical inquiry.	Indian philosophy emphasizes transformation of the self, whereas Western philosophy emphasizes explanation of the external world.

S. No.	Key Issue	Indian Civilisation	Western Civilisation	Comparative Observation
		spiritual enlightenment.		
2	Civilisational Foundation	Civilization is rooted in Dharma, spirituality, and harmony between individual, society, and cosmos.	Civilization is founded on reason, law, political institutions, scientific inquiry, and civic organization.	Both civilizations derive their institutions from philosophical principles but prioritize different civilizational ideals.
3	Metaphysical Orientation	Reality is centered on Brahman, Ātman, consciousness, karma, and rebirth.	Reality is centered on substance, matter, causality, existence, and objective reality.	Indian metaphysics is inward-looking, whereas Western metaphysics largely investigates external existence.
4	Epistemological Approach	Knowledge is obtained through Pramāṇas such as perception, inference, testimony, comparison, postulation, and intuition.	Knowledge is primarily derived through reason, empirical observation, logic, experimentation, and scientific verification.	Indian epistemology integrates rationality with intuition, while Western epistemology prioritizes empirical rationalism.
5	Concept of Self	The self is viewed as Ātman, identical with ultimate reality (Advaita), or as a process without permanent identity (Buddhism).	The self is generally understood as an individual rational person possessing identity, agency, and autonomy.	Indian philosophy seeks transcendence of ego, whereas Western philosophy largely investigates personal identity and individuality.
6	Ethics and Moral Philosophy	Ethical life is guided by Dharma, Karma, Ahimsa, Purusharthas, and Mokṣa, integrating morality with spiritual growth.	Ethics focuses on virtue (Aristotle), duty (Kant), rights, justice, and utilitarian welfare (Bentham & Mill).	Indian ethics is duty-centered and spiritually oriented; Western ethics emphasizes universal moral principles and civic responsibility.
7	Society and Political Philosophy	Society is viewed as an organic moral order where governance upholds Dharma and collective harmony.	Society is viewed as a political community based on citizenship, democracy, constitutional law, and individual rights.	Indian political thought emphasizes responsibilities, while Western political thought emphasizes rights and institutional governance.
8	Educational Philosophy	Education aims at character formation, wisdom, self-discipline, and liberation through the Guru-Śiṣya tradition and holistic learning.	Education emphasizes critical thinking, scientific inquiry, professional specialization, and knowledge production through universities.	Indian education develops the whole person; Western education primarily develops analytical and professional competencies.

S. No.	Key Issue	Indian Civilisation	Western Civilisation	Comparative Observation
9	Human–Nature Relationship	Nature is regarded as sacred, interconnected, and spiritually significant, encouraging ecological harmony.	Nature is often viewed as an object of investigation, utilization, and technological mastery through science.	Indian philosophy promotes coexistence with nature, while Western philosophy historically emphasizes mastery over nature, though contemporary environmental philosophy seeks greater balance.
10	Contemporary Relevance and Global Contribution	Offers insights into consciousness studies, sustainable living, ethical responsibility, mindfulness, and holistic well-being.	Contributes scientific rationality, democracy, human rights, technological innovation, and institutional governance.	The future of global civilization lies in integrating Indian inward wisdom with Western scientific and institutional strengths, creating a complementary rather than competitive civilizational framework.

## 10. CONCLUSION :

Comparing Indian and Western philosophies shows that a hierarchy of superiority is untenable for these traditions. What we see instead is a picture of two civilizations that, from a shared Axial-Age. origin, followed divergent, yet equally profound paths. One followed a path along the structures of the external world with unmatched precision. The other followed a path along the structures of the internal world with unmatched subtlety. The emphasis in the West on substance, reason, and universal law, generated science, the modern rule of law, and the modern conception of the sovereign individual. The emphasis in the Indian civilizations on the self, dharma, and moksha generated a civilization devoted to the highest cultural energies to the inner transformation of the individual. Neither civilization is self-sufficient. The power, relative to the advanced civilization of the West, without the wisdom of the inner turn, threatens to destroy the very humanity that the civilization was meant to serve. The wisdom of India is, without the civilization of the outer turn, is destined to be futile. Our task, therefore, is not to choose between these traditions, but to bring them together. In this effort, where the distortions of power are absent, and there is mutual respect, is to bring about a more balanced and richer civilization, and the self-understanding of humanity that is commensurate to the fullness of what we are.

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