

## PESSIMISM IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION

**Mr. Debajyoti Sharma**

*Assistant Professor,*

*Department of Philosophy*

*Ramkrishna Nagar College*

*Sribhumi, Assam*

*Email: debasharma77@gmail.com*

### **Abstract**

*The present paper attempts to demonstrate that the complex interface between Indian philosophy and pessimism challenges the widespread assumption that Indian thought inherently espouses pessimism. Focusing on Buddhism and Jainism, this paper excavates the subtle manifestations of pessimistic thought within these traditions. It scrutinizes how notions of dukha, anātman, and mithyā shape pessimistic perspectives, while also exploring how these philosophies provide avenues for transcendence, liberation, and hope.*

*Through a detailed analysis of foundational texts, including the Buddhist Pali Canon and select Upanicads as well as Indian philosophical systems, this inquiry exposes the intricate dialectic between pessimistic assessments of human existence and optimistic blueprints for spiritual renewal. Situating Indian philosophical thought within its cultural and historical context, this study reveals pessimism as a multifaceted, contested concept rather than an essential characteristic of Indian philosophy. Ultimately, this research paper enriches our understanding of Indian philosophical thought's diversity, illuminating the tensions between pessimism and optimism that underlie the quest for meaning and liberation.*

### **Key words**

*Liberation, optimism, pessimism*

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**Mr. Debajyoti Sharma**

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## Introduction

Before delving into the problem, it is essential to acknowledge Indian philosophy's spiritual roots, as encapsulated in the term "*darsana*," meaning "to see"<sup>1</sup> from Sanskrit "*drs*."<sup>2</sup> As Radhakrishnan aptly notes, "A '*darsana*' is a spiritual perception, a whole view revealed to the soul's sense... possible only when philosophy is lived."<sup>3</sup> This concept encompasses three types of vision: *sense-perception*, *conceptual knowledge*, and *intuitive knowledge*, with intuition being the direct apprehension of truth. Historically, Indian philosophy began with intuitive inquiry, later incorporating rational analysis to validate truth claims. Consequently, *darsana* denotes a system of thought grounded in intuitive experience and logical argument, applying to all views of reality and scientific accounts. Radhakrishnan emphasizes, "Indian philosophy is essentially spiritual,"<sup>4</sup> distinguishing it from Western philosophy by transcending theoretical understanding and focusing on practical realization of truth. The essence of Indian philosophy lies in its emphasis on direct experience as a means to uncover truth, encapsulated in the concept of 'vision of truth' or 'practical realization of truth.' This experiential approach drives speculation to address life's miseries, stemming from a deep-seated disquiet and spiritual dissatisfaction with the present order. Every Indian philosophical system, except Carvakas, seeks to comprehend the source of evils, the universe's nature, and human life's meaning to overcome suffering. Although this pervasive sense of discomfort and disquiet may seem pessimistic, it motivates Indian thinkers to philosophical speculation, underscoring Indian philosophy's core focus on practical spiritual realization. Radhakrishnan says, "To those who realise the true kinship between life and theory, philosophy becomes a way of life, an approach to spiritual realisation."<sup>5</sup> However, this emphasis on addressing life's miseries has led some Western critics to mistakenly label Indian philosophy as pessimistic. In reality, Indian philosophy transcends pessimism by offering a transformative and redemptive approach. Rather than persistently focusing on life's darker aspects, Indian philosophy provides a clear path to overcome suffering. Indian philosophical systems propose a holistic way of life that promises complete liberation from sorrow and suffering when diligently followed. This optimistic undertone underscores Indian philosophy's core objective: empowering individuals to transcend existential challenges and attain spiritual fulfilment.

**Objectives:** The primary objectives of this paper are:

- i. To conduct a critical examination of the intersection between Indian philosophy and pessimism, challenging the prevailing notion that Indian thought is inherently pessimistic.

- ii. To investigate expressions of pessimistic thought in select Indian philosophical traditions (Buddhism, Jainism, Samkhya, and Yoga), analyzing how concepts like *dukha*, *anâtman*, and *mithyâ* shape pessimistic worldviews and facilitate transcendence and liberation.
- iii. To contextualize Indian philosophical thought within its rich cultural and historical context, highlighting its multifaceted nature and illuminating the dynamic interplay between pessimistic and optimistic perspectives in the pursuit of meaningful existence and liberation.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative study probes the complex intersections between Indian philosophy and pessimism, employing a nuanced analytical framework. A thorough examination of foundational texts, philosophical systems, and key concepts (*dukha*, *anâtman*, and *mithyâ*) facilitates a comparative analysis of pessimistic and optimistic perspectives, yielding deeper insights. Drawing on primary sources, scholarly literature, and expertise from Indian philosophy, this inquiry integrates hermeneutical, conceptual, and critical analyses to inform data interpretation. Conceptual analysis and critical synthesis reveal avenues for further research, while acknowledging limitations underscores potential areas for future exploration.

### **Discussion and Findings**

Indian philosophy has long been branded as pessimistic, with critics arguing that its purportedly gloomy outlook exerts a detrimental influence on practical life. As philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer aptly notes, “The attitude of mind which looks at the dark side of things is known as pessimism.”<sup>6</sup> This characterization stems from Indian philosophy’s profound exploration of human suffering, impermanence, and the fleeting nature of pleasure. Indian philosophers contend that life, driven by blind impulses and petty desires, inevitably culminates in misery. As the Buddha poignantly observes, “Birth is painful, decay is painful; disease is painful; union with the unpleasant is painful; separation from pleasant is painful.”<sup>7</sup> This perspective resonates with the notion that life is inherently sorrowful, with pain being an invariable accompaniment of embodied existence. The concept of *samsara*, a beginning-less cycle of births and deaths, underscores suffering’s pervasive nature. Samkhya philosophers identify threefold evils: *adhyatmika* (inner suffering), *adhibhautika* (outer, interpersonal suffering), and *adhidaivika* (cosmic, environmental suffering). Similarly, Yoga philosophy identifies three forms of pain - consequential pain (*parinamadukha*), painful aversion (*tapadukha*), and painful attachment (*samaskaradukha*) - arising from the transience of sensual pleasures, attachment, and obstacles to desire fulfilment. The fleeting nature of sensual pleasures intensifies

desires, leading to harmful consequences, while attachment fuels aversion towards obstacles, causing further suffering. Experiences of pleasure and pain leave lasting impressions (*samaskara*), generating recollections, actions, merits, demerits, and further pleasure and pain, perpetuating life's inherent challenges due to dispositions. This nuanced perspective highlights Yoga philosophy's acknowledgment of life's complexities and the intricate pleasure-pain-attachment dynamic. Despite criticism of pessimism, viewing *life as a vale of tears*, Indian philosophy's exploration of suffering reveals a multifaceted framework for understanding human experience, ultimately seeking spiritual liberation and self-realization through nuanced human existence exploration.

Moreover, this perspective is reinforced by the understanding that Indian philosophy's exploration of suffering is not inherently pessimistic. The notion of Indian philosophy being pessimistic is unfounded, as renowned philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan notes, "Indian philosophy is pessimistic if by pessimism is meant a sense of dissatisfaction with what is or exists."<sup>8</sup> In reality, this dissatisfaction fuels philosophical and religious inquiry, as global suffering prompts exploration for solutions, making all philosophy somewhat pessimistic. Indian philosophy does not view life as beginning and ending in suffering, but rather recognizes suffering as a catalyst for spiritual growth and self-realization. Contrary to pessimistic interpretations, Indian thought does not regard pain and evil as ultimate realities, instead offering a transformative path to transcend sorrow and suffering. Radhakrishnan emphasizes that Indian thinkers see life's struggles as opportunities for growth, not ultimate truths, and underscoring Indian philosophy's thoughtful and comprehensive approach to understanding and overcoming human suffering. In fact, Indian philosophers have consistently acknowledged the miseries inherent in human existence, refusing to deny suffering's reality. Instead of stopping at portraying life as a tragedy, they offered a message of hope, emphasizing suffering's transformative potential. This optimistic perspective is exemplified in Buddha's Four Noble Truths, which encapsulate the Indian philosophical framework: acknowledging suffering, identifying its cause, recognizing its cessation, and providing a path to attainment. This resonates across various Indian schools of thought, where suffering serves as a catalyst for inquiry. For instance, Nyaya attributes suffering to ignorance, removable through right knowledge; Vedanta identifies *avidya* (ignorance) as the root cause, dissolvable through liberation and bliss; and Samkhya and Yoga view liberation as the ultimate goal, negating pain. Through these diverse perspectives, Indian philosophy consistently presents suffering as an opportunity for growth, culminating in a state of freedom and well-being.

Indian philosophy's character is often misunderstood, but upon closer examination, it reveals a profoundly optimistic nature. As Professor Bosanquet aptly notes, "I believe in optimism, but I add that no optimism is worth its salt that does not go all the way with pessimism and arrive at a point beyond it."<sup>9</sup> Indian philosophy embodies this spirit, acknowledging the world's imperfections while offering a transformative path forward. In fact, "Indian thinkers are pessimistic in so far as they look upon the world order as an evil and a lie; they are optimistic since they feel that there is a way out of it into the realm of truth, which is also goodness."<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that this optimism is rooted in the concept of '*sat*', which seamlessly integrates reality and perfection, positing that the real is supremely valuable. Consequently, Indian philosophy presents a hopeful outlook, uniquely extending unambiguous reassurance to the downtrodden and afflicted, and empowering individuals to speculate freely and remodel their lives.

Thus, there is no question of doubt that Indian philosophy's optimistic essence is undeniable, as exemplified in the fervent prayers for immortality voiced by Indian seers. The revered *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* echoes this sentiment, imploring, "Lead us from unreal to real, from darkness to light, from death to immortality"<sup>11</sup> (*asat ma sadgamaya, tamaso ma jyotirgamaya, mrtyorma amrtam gamaya*). This profound aspiration is further emphasized by the majestic declaration from the *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, "Hearken ye sons of the immortal, I have known the noblest and highest Person behind this world. By knowing Him only one can go beyond death. There is no other way."<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, the Upanishadic seers' realization revolves around the nature of immortal bliss, where liberation is achieved through the realization of this reality, transcending mortality and darkness to attain the supreme state of enlightenment and eternal joy.

Besides, the Indian mindset's optimism is deeply rooted in its faith in an eternal and moral order governed by the universal principle of karma, which forms the backbone of Indian philosophy. Karma emphasizes the intrinsic connection between actions and consequences, motivating Indian thinkers to acknowledge that present suffering may stem from past actions and strive for self-improvement in the present. This perspective cultivates positive actions and thoughts, yielding beneficial consequences in the future. Precisely speaking, key aspects of karma include moral efficacy, underscoring the consequences of choices; personal responsibility, enabling individuals to take ownership of their present and future; and spiritual growth, promoting redemption and ultimate liberation, thus instilling optimism in adversity. By embracing karma's moral order, individuals break free from suffering's cycle and forge a better destiny, confident in the potential for spiritual growth, redemption,

and liberation. Ultimately, the Indian mindset's optimism stems from faith in karma's moral order, providing profound hope and resilience, shaping generations' thoughts and actions as a cornerstone of Indian philosophy.

### **Concluding Observations**

In view of the above, it can be said that Indian philosophy's inherent optimism defies accusations of pessimism, despite acknowledging evil and suffering's presence in the world. Critics' levelling such charges overlook the profound impact of Indian thought's nuanced approach, which recognizes pessimism's warning signs while avoiding uncritical optimism's complacency. As an eminent American teacher aptly noted, "Optimism seems to be more immoral than pessimism, for pessimism warns us of danger, while optimism lulls us into security."<sup>13</sup> Every Indian philosophical system culminates in an optimistic note, promising supreme peace and happiness of mind following life's trials and sufferings. This underscores Indian philosophers' disdain for mundane pursuits, driven instead by spiritual discontent with temporal life. Their quest aimed at divine transformation, not pessimistic resignation. Even Buddha, who emphasized the world's darker aspects, offered the *eightfold path* as a solution to worldly tribulations. Thus, Indian philosophy, though born from pessimistic observations, transcends to optimism and happiness, demonstrating that pessimism is merely an initial, not final, stance. Here is what S. N. Dasgupta said, "The sorrow around us has no fear for us if we remember that we are naturally sorrow-less and blessed in ourselves. The pessimistic view loses all terror as it closes in absolute optimistic confidence in one's own self and the ultimate destiny and goal of emancipation."<sup>14</sup> This transformative journey characterizes Indian thought, evolving from acknowledging suffering to seeking liberation and ultimate bliss. By recognizing pessimism's warnings, Indian philosophy fosters resilience, encourages self-improvement, and ultimately affirms life's intrinsic value, culminating in an optimistic worldview that has inspired generations.

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