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# IS INDIAN PHILOSOPHY PESSIMISTIC? AN OBSERVATION

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**Abstract:**

This paper seeks to explore and analyze the intricate relationship between Indian philosophy and pessimism. It is difficult to definitively characterize Indian philosophy as either pessimistic or optimistic. Therefore, with a particular focus on Buddhism and Jainism, the study uncovers the nuanced forms of pessimistic thought inherent in these traditions and critically examines how concepts like *duhkha, anatman and mithya* help construct a pessimistic worldview, while also investigating how these very systems provide pathways to transcendence, liberation and hope. Through an in-depth examination of foundational texts, including the Buddhist Pali Canon, select Upanishads and other Indian philosophical schools, the study highlights the complex interplay between a pessimistic assessment of human existence and an optimistic vision of spiritual transformation. By placing Indian philosophical thought within its wider cultural and historical context, it shows that pessimism is not an intrinsic or essential feature of Indian philosophy, but rather a multifaceted and contested notion. Ultimately, the paper deepens our understanding of the diversity of Indian philosophical thought by revealing the enduring tension between pessimism and optimism that shapes the human search for meaning and liberation.

**Key words**: Indian Philosophy, Pessimism, Liberation.

## Introduction:

Before entering into the central problem, it is essential to recognize the spiritual foundation of Indian philosophy, encapsulated in the term "*darsana*," which means "to see"[i] from the Sanskrit root "*drs*."[ii] As Radhakrishnan aptly observes, "A *'darsana'* is a spiritual perception, a whole view revealed to the soul's sense... possible only when philosophy is lived."[iii] This notion comprises three kinds of vision: sense-perception, conceptual knowledge, and intuitive knowledge, with intuition being the direct apprehension of truth. Historically, Indian philosophy commenced with intuitive inquiry and subsequently incorporated rational analysis to validate truth claims. Therefore, *darsana* signifies a system of thought rooted in intuitive experience as well as logical reasoning, applicable to all perspectives on reality and to scientific accounts. Radhakrishnan stresses that, "Indian philosophy is essentially spiritual,"[iv] thereby distinguishing it from Western philosophy by going beyond mere theoretical understanding and emphasizing the practical realization of truth. The core of Indian philosophy lies in its stress on direct experience as a means of discovering truth, embodied in the concept of 'vision of truth' or 'practical realization of truth.' This experiential orientation impels philosophical speculation to confront the miseries of life, arising from a profound disquiet and spiritual dissatisfaction with the existing order. Every system of Indian philosophy, except the Carvakas, attempts to understand the source of evils, the nature of the universe, and the meaning of human life in order to overcome suffering. Although this pervasive sense of discomfort and disquiet may appear pessimistic, it actually motivates Indian thinkers toward philosophical inquiry, highlighting the central concern of Indian philosophy with practical spiritual realization. As Radhakrishnan states, "To those who realise the true kinship between life and theory, philosophy becomes a way of life, an approach to spiritual realisation."[v]

Nevertheless, this very emphasis on confronting and remedying the miseries of life has led some Western critics to mistakenly brand Indian philosophy as pessimistic, whereas in reality Indian philosophy transcends such pessimism by offering a profoundly transformative and redemptive approach to existence; for instead of persistently dwelling on the darker, sorrowful aspects of life, it provides a clear, systematic, and practical path to overcome suffering, and its various systems propose a holistic and disciplined way of life which, when diligently and sincerely followed, promises complete liberation from sorrow, pain, and suffering, and this inherent optimistic undertone, far from being incidental, actually underscores the core objective of Indian philosophy, which is to empower individuals to rise above existential challenges, overcome the limitations of worldly existence, and ultimately attain spiritual fulfillment and lasting liberation.

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**Objectives of the paper**: The present study is guided by the following objectives:

*i.* To critically examine the relationship between Indian philosophy and pessimism and to question the widely held assumption that Indian thought is essentially pessimistic in nature.

*ii.* To explore the manifestations of pessimistic ideas in selected schools of Indian philosophy — namely Buddhism, Jainism, Samkhya and Yoga — and to analyze how notions such as duhkha, anatman and mithya contribute to the formation of a pessimistic outlook while also paving the way for transcendence and liberation.

*iii.* To situate Indian philosophical thought within its broader cultural and historical framework, thereby bringing out its complex and diverse character and shedding light on the continuous interaction between pessimistic and optimistic viewpoints in the quest for a meaningful life and ultimate liberation.

**Methodology**:

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the intricate relationship between Indian philosophy and pessimism through a comprehensive analytical framework. Through a detailed examination of primary texts, major philosophical schools, and central concepts such as duhkha, anatman and mithya, a comparative understanding of pessimistic and optimistic viewpoints is developed, leading to deeper insights. Based on primary sources, secondary scholarly literature and insights from the field of Indian philosophy, the research employs hermeneutical, conceptual and critical methods for interpreting the material. The use of conceptual analysis and critical synthesis helps to identify directions for further inquiry, while recognizing the limitations of the present study highlights possible areas for future research.

**Discussion and Findings**:

Indian philosophy has often been characterized as pessimistic, with critics arguing that its supposedly gloomy worldview negatively affects practical life. As the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer aptly remarks, "The attitude of mind which looks at the dark side of things is known as pessimism."[vi] This characterization arises from Indian philosophy's deep inquiry into human suffering, impermanence, and the transient nature of pleasure. Indian thinkers maintain that life, driven by blind impulses and trivial desires, inevitably ends in misery. As the Buddha poignantly states, "Birth is painful, decay is painful; disease is painful; union with the unpleasant is painful; separation from pleasant is painful."[vii] This viewpoint reflects the idea that life is essentially sorrowful and that pain is an inseparable aspect of embodied existence. The concept of samsara, the beginningless cycle of birth and death, highlights the all-pervasive nature of suffering. Samkhya philosophers identify three kinds of suffering: *adhyatmika* (inner suffering), *adhibhautika* (external, interpersonal suffering), and *adhidaivika* (cosmic, environmental suffering). Similarly, Yoga philosophy recognizes three forms of pain — consequential pain (*parinamadukha*), painful aversion (*tapadukha*), and painful attachment (*samskaradukha*) — which arise from the impermanence of sensual pleasures, attachment, and impediments to the fulfillment of desires. The fleeting character of sensual pleasures intensifies desires and leads to harmful consequences, while attachment gives rise to aversion toward obstacles, causing further suffering. Experiences of pleasure and pain leave enduring impressions (*samskara*), producing memories, actions, merits, demerits, and further pleasure and pain, thereby perpetuating the inherent difficulties of life due to latent dispositions. This nuanced perspective underscores Yoga philosophy's recognition of the complexities of life and the intricate interplay of pleasure, pain, and attachment. Despite being criticized as pessimistic and as viewing life as a vale of tears, Indian philosophy's exploration of suffering presents a multifaceted framework for comprehending human experience, ultimately aiming at spiritual liberation and self-realization through a profound examination of human existence.

Furthermore, this viewpoint is strengthened by the understanding that Indian philosophy's inquiry into suffering is not essentially pessimistic. The claim that Indian philosophy is pessimistic is without foundation, as the eminent philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan observes, "Indian philosophy is pessimistic if by pessimism is meant a sense of dissatisfaction with what is or exists."[viii] In fact, this very dissatisfaction becomes a driving force for philosophical and religious inquiry, since the universal experience of suffering stimulates the search for solutions, which makes all philosophy pessimistic to some extent. Indian philosophy does not consider life as originating and culminating in suffering; rather, it treats suffering as a stimulus for spiritual development and self-realization. Contrary to pessimistic readings, Indian thought does not regard pain and evil as ultimate realities, but instead provides a transformative way to

transcend sorrow and suffering. Radhakrishnan emphasizes that Indian thinkers view life's struggles as opportunities for growth rather than as ultimate truths, which highlights the reflective and comprehensive approach of Indian philosophy in understanding and overcoming human suffering.

In fact, Indian philosophers have consistently recognized the miseries that are inherent to human existence, without ever denying the reality of suffering. Instead of merely presenting life as a tragedy, they have offered a message of hope by emphasizing the transformative potential of suffering. This optimistic outlook is best illustrated in the Buddha's Four Noble Truths, which encapsulate the framework of Indian philosophy: acknowledging suffering, identifying its cause, recognizing its cessation, and outlining the path to its attainment. This approach resonates across various schools of Indian thought, where suffering acts as a stimulus for inquiry. For instance, Nyaya attributes suffering to ignorance, which can be removed through right knowledge; Vedanta identifies avidya (ignorance) as the root cause, which can be dissolved through liberation and bliss; and Samkhya and Yoga consider liberation as the ultimate goal, leading to the negation of pain. Through these diverse perspectives, Indian philosophy consistently presents suffering as an opportunity for growth that culminates in a state of freedom and well-being. The character of Indian philosophy is often misunderstood, but a closer examination reveals its profoundly optimistic nature. As Professor Bosanquet aptly observes, "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."[ix] Indian philosophy embodies this very spirit, as it acknowledges the imperfections of the world while offering a transformative path ahead. Indeed, "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."[x] It is significant to note that this optimism is grounded in the concept of 'sat', which seamlessly unites reality and perfection, holding that the real is supremely valuable. Consequently, Indian philosophy presents a hopeful outlook, uniquely extending clear assurance to the downtrodden and the afflicted, and empowering individuals to think freely and reshape their lives.

Accordingly it follows that there can be no doubt that the optimistic essence of Indian philosophy is undeniable, as is evident in the fervent prayers for immortality expressed by the Indian seers. The revered *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* reflects this aspiration when it invokes, "Lead us from unreal to real, from darkness to light, from death to immortality"[xi] (*asato ma sadgamaya, tamaso ma jyotirgamaya, mrtyor ma amrtam gamaya)*. This profound yearning is further reinforced by the sublime declaration of 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."[xii] Ultimately, the realization of the Upanishadic seers centres on the nature of immortal bliss, where liberation is attained through the realization of this reality, transcending mortality and darkness to reach the supreme state of enlightenment and eternal joy. Moreover, the optimism of the Indian mindset is deeply rooted in its faith in an eternal and moral order governed by the universal principle of karma, which constitutes the backbone of Indian philosophy. Karma emphasizes the intrinsic link between actions and their consequences, motivating Indian thinkers to recognize that present suffering may arise from past actions and to strive for self-improvement in the present. This outlook encourages positive actions and thoughts that yield beneficial results in the future. More specifically, the essential aspects of karma include moral efficacy, which underscores the consequences of choices; personal responsibility, which enables individuals to take charge of their present and future; and spiritual growth, which fosters redemption and ultimate liberation, thereby instilling optimism even in adversity. By accepting the moral order of karma, individuals can break free from the cycle of suffering and shape a better destiny, with confidence in the possibility of spiritual growth, redemption, and liberation. Ultimately, the optimism of the Indian mindset arises from faith in the moral order of karma, providing deep hope and resilience and shaping the thoughts and actions of generations as a cornerstone of Indian philosophy.

**Conclusion**:

In light of the above, it can be affirmed that the inherent optimism of Indian philosophy refutes the charges of pessimism, even though it acknowledges the existence of evil and suffering in the world. Critics who level such accusations overlook the profound significance of Indian thought's nuanced approach, which recognizes the warning signs of pessimism while avoiding the complacency of uncritical optimism. As an eminent American teacher aptly observed, "Optimism seems to be more immoral than pessimism, for pessimism warns us of danger, while optimism lulls us into security."[xiii] Every system of Indian philosophy culminates on an optimistic note, promising supreme peace and happiness

of mind after the trials and sufferings of life. This reflects the Indian philosophers' disregard for mundane pursuits, motivated instead by spiritual discontent with temporal existence. Their quest was directed toward divine transformation, not pessimistic resignation. Even the Buddha, who emphasized the darker aspects of the world, offered the eightfold path as a remedy for worldly tribulations. Thus, Indian philosophy, though originating from pessimistic observations, transcends into optimism and happiness, showing that pessimism is merely an initial and not the final position. As S. N. Dasgupta stated, "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."[xiv] This transformative journey characterizes Indian thought, evolving from the recognition of suffering to the pursuit of liberation and ultimate bliss. By acknowledging the warnings of pessimism, Indian philosophy fosters resilience, encourages self-improvement, and ultimately affirms the intrinsic value of life, culminating in an optimistic worldview that has inspired generations.

**References:**

[i] Radhakrishnan, S. *Indian Philosophy,* Vol. I, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999, p. 43.
[ii] Ibid.
[iii] Ibid., p. 44.
[iv] Ibid., p. 24.
[v] Ibid., p. 26.
[vi] Chatterjee, S. C. and Datta, D. M., *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy,* University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1984, p. 13.
[vii] Sinha, J., *Indian Philosophy,* Vol. I, New Central Book Agency, Calcutta, 1987, pp. 251-252.
[viii] Radhakrishnan, S. *Indian Philosophy,* Vol. I, op. cit., p. 50.
[ix] Ibid.
[x] Ibid.
[xi] *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 1.3.28
[xii] *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, 3.8
[xiii] Chatterjee, S. C. and Datta, D. M., *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy,* op. cit., p. 14.
[xiv] Dasgupta, S. N., *A History of Indian Philosophy,* Vol. 1, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi, 2010, p. 77.