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## BETWEEN SILENCE AND SHADOW: THE ONTOLOGICAL POETICS OF *SAT*, *ASAT*, AND *MITHYĀ*

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### Abstract

In the ancient crucible of Indian thought, where silence births syllables of the eternal, three ontological streams, *sat*, *asat*, and *mithyā*, flow in dialectical rhythm, weaving the fabric of reality and its negation. *Sat*, the immutable essence, stands as the substratum of all that is unborn, undying, and beyond decay. *Asat*, the shadow of non-being, marks the threshold of cognitive negation, the vanishing point of discourse. Between them arises *mithyā*, the shimmering veil of appearance, deceptively real, conditionally valid, and pedagogically profound.

This paper traverses these threefold dimensions through a rigorous exegesis of Vedāntic and Sāṅkhya metaphysics, invoking the authority of the *Upaniṣads*, the logic of the *Brahma Sūtras*, and the insights of Śaṅkara and Gauḍapāda. It repositions illusion not as negation but as transitional knowing experience with ontological contingency. Engaging comparative threads from Platonic forms to Kantian noumena, it unearths a transcivilizational resonance where appearance, awareness, and actuality interlace.

*Mithyā* is shown to be not error but epistemic necessity; *sat*, not substance but silence underlying all change; *asat*, not absence but the boundary of conceptual possibility. In an era of virtuality, simulation, and mediated perception, these categories invite a rethinking of presence and participation, of what it means to be, to know, and to transcend. Thus, Indian metaphysics, born in contemplation, speaks with renewed urgency to the ontological crises of the digital age.

### Introduction

The quest to discern what is *real*, *unreal*, and *illusory* has occupied a central position in philosophical inquiry across civilizations. Indian philosophy, with its diverse schools of thought (darśanas), offers a distinctive ontological framework through the concepts of *sat* (*being or real*), *asat* (*non-being or non-real*), and *mithyā* (*illusion or apparent reality*). These three categories are not mere metaphysical abstractions; rather, they are deeply embedded in the epistemological and soteriological fabric of Indian thought, particularly within the Advaita Vedānta and Sāṅkhya systems.

The earliest conceptualizations of *sat* and *asat* appear in the Ṛigveda and find more structured development in the Upaniṣads, especially the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.2.1), which declares: "*sat eva somya idam agra āsīt*" "In the beginning, my dear, there was Being alone" (Radhakrishnan, 1953). Here, *sat* is identified with the undivided, changeless essence that is the substratum of all manifest existence. On the other hand, *asat* is portrayed as non-being what neither existed in the past nor exists now nor will exist in the future implying a total negation of reality (Chattopadhyaya, 2006). Yet Indian metaphysics does not operate within the rigid binaries of existence and non-existence. The intermediate category of *mithyā* provides a sophisticated model to account for empirical phenomena that appear real but are ultimately illusory a hallmark of Advaita Vedānta ontology (Deutsch, 1973).

Unlike Western binary ontologies, where something is either *being* or *non-being*, Indian darśanas offer a tripartite metaphysical model that accommodates the complexity of human experience. For instance, Śaṅkara, the most prominent expositor of Advaita Vedānta, introduces *mithyā* as that which is anirvachanīya indescribable, indefinable, neither fully real nor fully unreal (Sharma, 1996). This metaphysical ingenuity is exemplified by classical analogies such as the rope-snake illusion and dream states, where perception and reality diverge. The world (*jagat*) is said to be *mithyā* not *asat*, for it is experienced, and not *sat*, for it is transient (Puligandla, 1975). *Mithyā*, then, offers a nuanced ontological category that challenges dichotomous thinking.

Meanwhile, Sāṅkhya, though dualistic, affirms the real existence of both *Puruṣha* (pure consciousness) and *Prakṛti* (primordial matter), rejecting the Advaitic notion of māyā or illusion. In Sāṅkhya, the empirical world is *sat*, albeit distinct



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from the eternal, passive *Puruṣha*. Yet even here, the idea of *asat* features as non-manifest matter (*avyakta*), and the transformation of one form into another shows the dynamism inherent in the notion of reality (Hiriyanna, 1995).

These Indian categories invite productive comparisons with Western philosophical paradigms. Plato's notion of *Forms* as eternal realities beyond the perceptual world resonates with the Indian idea of *sat* as an unchanging substratum. Likewise, Kant's distinction between the *noumenal* and *phenomenal* realms mirrors the Advaitic dichotomy between *Brahman* and *mithyā-jagat* (Mohanty, 2000). Both traditions recognize that the empirical world does not represent ultimate reality, though they articulate this divergence differently.

The significance of this ontological triad (*sat*, *asat*, *mithyā*) extends beyond classical philosophy into contemporary fields such as consciousness studies, phenomenology, and cognitive science. With increasing philosophical interest in constructivism, virtuality, and illusion, the Indian metaphysical model offers a powerful lens to rethink questions of perception, subjectivity, and reality in the modern age (King, 1999). In an era dominated by simulation and digital avatars, *mithyā* is no longer a distant metaphysical idea, it speaks directly to how we construct and experience our worlds.

This article, therefore, seeks to undertake a systematic philosophical inquiry into *sat*, *asat*, and *mithyā*, drawing from primary scriptures, traditional commentaries, and modern academic interpretations. It aims not only to elucidate their meanings and interrelations within Indian systems like Advaita Vedānta and Sāṅkhya but also to position them within a broader, comparative philosophical discourse. By doing so, it hopes to highlight the continuing relevance of these ancient insights in confronting today's ontological uncertainties.

### Sat: The Notion of Absolute Reality

The concept of *sat* (*being*, *reality*, *truth*) holds a place of foundational importance in Indian metaphysical thought. It is both an ontological category and a soteriological goal, what truly *is*, and what must be *realized*. Unlike empirical phenomena, which are subject to change, decay, and death, *sat* is unchanging, eternal, and independent. In its most elevated articulation within Advaita Vedānta, *sat* is equated with Brahman, the non-dual, infinite reality that underlies all existence.

The Chāndogya Upaniṣad is among the earliest texts to explicitly present the doctrine of *sat* as the origin and essence of the cosmos. In 6.2.1, it states: "*sat eva soṃya idam agra āsīt ekam eva advitīyam*" "In the beginning, my dear, this was Being alone, one without a second" (Radhakrishnan, 1953, p. 448). This profound declaration marks a significant shift from the mythological cosmologies of the Vedas to a more philosophical inquiry into the nature of existence. *Sat*, in this context, is not simply a state of being, but the uncaused cause, the metaphysical ground of all that appears.

In Advaita Vedānta, Śaṅkara (8th century CE) interprets *sat* as synonymous with Brahman, the absolute reality that is without attributes (*nirguṇa*), without form, and beyond all empirical distinctions. According to Śaṅkara, Brahman is *satyam jñānam anantaṃ*, existence, consciousness, and infinitude (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.1.1; Sharma, 1996). All other entities that we perceive in the world—names, forms, actions, are superimpositions (*adhyāsa*) on this one indivisible reality. This non-dualistic understanding rests on the principle that what is ultimately real must be unchanging and independent of cognition (Deutsch, 1973). The world of multiplicity is thus *mithyā*, it has empirical validity but lacks ultimate reality.

The Brahma Sūtras, traditionally attributed to Bādarāyaṇa, further codify the philosophical underpinnings of *sat* in aphoristic form. The opening sutra, *athāto brahma-jijñāsā*, "Now, therefore, the inquiry into Brahman"—is followed by *janmādyasya yataḥ* (1.1.2), which defines Brahman as "that from which the origination, sustenance, and dissolution of the world proceed" (Radhakrishnan, 1953). This reinforces the idea that Brahman, or *sat*, is not merely the ontological core but also the efficient and material cause (*abhinna-nimitta-upādāna-kāraṇa*) of the universe. Unlike in theistic systems where God is often separate from creation, Advaita sees no ontological dualism between creator and created.

In contrast, the Sāṅkhya school acknowledges *sat* in a different sense, through the reality of *Prakṛti*, the primordial, unconscious matter. According to Īśvarakṛṣṇa's Sāṅkhyakārikā, all evolution is a transformation (*pariṇāma*) of *Prakṛti*,



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which is considered real because it possesses three invariable constituents (*guṇas*): *sattva* (purity/light), *rajas* (activity), and *tamas* (inertia) (Hiriyanna, 1995). *Prakṛti* is eternal, beginningless, and real in itself. Unlike Advaita Vedānta, which privileges the unchanging over the changing, Sāṅkhya admits a duality between *Puruṣha* (pure consciousness) and *Prakṛti*, both of which are real (*sat*). While *Puruṣha* is passive, unchanging, and a witness, *Prakṛti* is active and dynamic, both eternal but distinct.

However, where Advaita identifies *sat* with an undifferentiated absolute, Sāṅkhya conceives of multiple *sat* entities each *Puruṣha* and *Prakṛti* being real in their own right (Puligandla, 1975). This plurality contrasts sharply with the monism of Advaita, but both systems agree in rejecting *asat* as the origin of the world. The famous *nāśadiya sūkta* of the R̥gveda (10.129.1) begins with the enigma: “There was neither *sat* nor *asat* in the beginning”, indicating that the origin of existence lies beyond binary categories. This ambiguity is resolved differently in different schools. In Vedānta, Brahman is the necessary reality from which all arises and into which all dissolves. In Sāṅkhya, the eternal interplay of the *guṇas* in *Prakṛti* generates the manifest cosmos without recourse to an absolute creator.

Beyond scriptural exegesis, modern scholars have expanded the implications of *sat* for ontology and consciousness studies. Radhakrishnan (1953) asserts that the Indian idea of reality does not rest solely on material permanence or logical consistency, but on spiritual immediacy and experiential certitude. That which is *sat* is that which persists through all transformations and cannot be negated even in thought. Similarly, Mohanty (2000) highlights that *sat* functions not just as an ontological term but as a phenomenological marker of what is given to consciousness as non-transcendable.

Interestingly, the Buddhist rejection of *ātman* introduces a radical departure from the *sat*-based metaphysics of Vedānta. While early Buddhist texts refer to the doctrine of *anattā* (non-self) and *śūnyatā* (emptiness), which seemingly align with *asat*, scholars such as Nagarjuna reinterpret *śūnyatā* not as nihilism but as dependently arisen reality (*pratītyasamutpāda*). In this sense, the Middle Way avoids both extremes of *satkāya-dṛṣṭi* (eternalism) and *uccheda-vāda* (annihilationism) (Chattopadhyaya, 2006). This further complicates the Indian ontology and suggests that the definition of *sat* must always be approached within a school-specific context.

From a comparative perspective, the concept of *sat* aligns with Plato’s theory of Forms, unchanging, eternal realities that underlie the mutable world of appearances. In *Republic* (Book VII), Plato’s allegory of the cave depicts the journey from the shadow world (illusion) to the world of truth (Being), a movement strikingly similar to the Vedāntic *viveka* (discrimination) between *sat* and *mithyā*. Similarly, Kant’s *noumenon* (thing-in-itself) and *phenomenon* (appearance) dichotomy resonate with the Advaitic assertion that the empirical world is not ultimately real, even though it is phenomenally experienced (Mohanty, 2000).

In summary, the concept of *sat* in Indian philosophy represents the eternal, immutable, and non-negatable essence of reality. In Advaita, it is the singular, formless Brahman, while in Sāṅkhya it exists in the form of *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣha*, both real but separate. Through scriptural texts, philosophical systems, and comparative insights, *sat* emerges as the cornerstone of Indian ontological thought, against which both *asat* and *mithyā* are defined and evaluated.

### Asat: The Concept of Non-Existence

The term *asat* (*non-being, non-existence*) appears frequently in Indian philosophical literature and serves as the ontological counterpoint to *sat*. While *sat* represents the enduring, unchanging real, *asat* is used to denote what is completely unreal, what neither exists now, nor existed in the past, nor will ever exist in the future. In classical metaphysics, this category functions as a crucial philosophical tool to distinguish between what is ontologically valid and what is entirely void. Unlike *mithyā*, which occupies a liminal zone between reality and illusion, *asat* is an absolute negation. It is the utter non-existence or sheer absence that defies perception, cognition, and logical possibility.

The earliest Vedic references to *asat* are enigmatic. The R̥gveda’s famous *Nāśadiya Sūkta* (10.129.1) begins with the line: “*nāśad āsīn no sad āsīt tadānīm*”, “There was neither non-being nor being then.” This apparent paradox suggests a pre-



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cosmic state that transcends our binary categories of *sat* and *asat* (Radhakrishnan, 1953). The hymn does not resolve whether creation arose from being or non-being but instead places the source of reality beyond conceptual comprehension. Later philosophical developments, however, firmly reject the notion that true being could emerge from *asat*.

In the Advaita Vedānta tradition, *asat* is considered the polar opposite of Brahman. Śāṅkara, commenting on *Brahma Sūtra* 1.1.1, asserts that nothing can emerge from absolute non-being. He invokes the logical principle *ex nihilo nihil fit*, nothing comes from nothing (Sharma, 1996). For Advaita, *asat* is a non-category; it lacks even empirical validity and is not an object of cognition or experience. Therefore, the world cannot be classified as *asat*, even though it is ultimately unreal (*mithyā*), because it is empirically experienced. Śāṅkara draws a clear line between *asat* (which is never perceived and thus logically non-existent) and *mithyā* (which is perceived but ultimately illusory).

The Bhagavad Gītā further affirms this principle. In 2.16, it proclaims: "*nābhāvo vidyate satām, nāsato vidyate bhāvaḥ*", "The unreal never is; the real never ceases to be" (Radhakrishnan, 1948, p. 130). Here, *asat* is directly negated as something that can never possess true being. This ontological disqualification makes *asat* not merely the opposite of existence but an epistemic void—a conceptual impossibility. It is neither objectifiable nor inferable.

The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika schools of Indian logic also grapple with the idea of *asat*, though in a more systematic epistemological fashion. According to Gautama's Nyāya Sūtras, *abhāva* (non-existence) is considered a valid category of cognition but only in terms of relational absence (*prāgabhāva*, *pradhvaṁsābhāva*, etc.). These are types of absence with reference to presence, not pure *asat*. For example, the absence of a pot on a table (*prāgabhāva*) is cognizable because it relates to the prior non-existence of an identifiable object (Chattopadhyaya, 2006). However, total *asat*—something that never existed, never can exist, and is logically incoherent (like a square circle or the horn of a rabbit) is not treated as a valid object of knowledge. It is dismissed from ontological and epistemological relevance.

Within Sāṅkhya, *asat* refers to a state of unmanifestation, rather than a strict non-existence. The notion of *avyakta*, the unmanifest, pre-evolutionary condition of *Prakṛti*, sometimes borders on what could be called *asat*, though it is not truly non-existent. The transformation theory (*pariṇāma-vāda*) posits that *Prakṛti*, while unmanifest, retains the capacity to become manifest through the evolution of the *guṇas* (Hiriyanna, 1995). This underscores an important metaphysical principle: *asat* as absolute void is untenable in Indian systems that maintain a continuum of transformation between states of being.

In the Buddhist philosophical landscape, particularly in Mādhyamika thought, *asat* appears in a more radical form, often misunderstood as nihilism. Nāgārjuna's doctrine of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) is sometimes interpreted as affirming *asat*, but this is a mischaracterization. Nāgārjuna carefully avoids both *satkāyavāda* (eternalism) and *ucchedavāda* (annihilationism). Emptiness, in his view, is not the negation of existence but the lack of inherent self-nature (*svabhāva*) in all phenomena (Puligandla, 1975). Therefore, *śūnyatā* is not *asat* in the Vedāntic sense; it is a relational void, a critique of ontological essentialism, not a denial of reality per se.

Comparative philosophy reveals resonances with Western metaphysical ideas of non-being. For instance, Parmenides in the pre-Socratic tradition denied the reality of non-being altogether: "What is, is; and what is not, is not." Similarly, Aristotle treats non-being as a linguistic abstraction without ontological reality. In Kantian metaphysics, the concept of nothingness (*das Nichtige*) appears not as a metaphysical category but as a limit of understanding, a necessary foil to demarcate the bounds of possible knowledge (Mohanty, 2000). Indian thought shares this epistemic caution: *asat* is not merely falsehood; it is epistemologically irrelevant because it lacks even illusory presentation.

Importantly, the category of *asat* helps delineate the boundaries of meaningful discourse in Indian philosophy. It acts as a conceptual negative space that sharpens the distinctions between the empirical (*mithyā*) and the transcendent (*sat*). In epistemological terms, it ensures that the domain of valid cognition (*pramāṇa-viśaya*) is not flooded with incoherent or logically impossible objects. Thus, *asat* plays a definitional role in maintaining the coherence of Indian metaphysical systems, it is the shadow that makes the light of *sat* discernible.



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## Mithyā: The Middle Path Between *Sat* and *Asat*

The concept of *mithyā* (*illusion, falsity, or apparent reality*) represents one of the most nuanced and philosophically rich categories in Indian metaphysics. Occupying the ambiguous space between *sat* (absolute reality) and *asat* (absolute non-reality), *mithyā* is neither entirely real nor entirely unreal. While *sat* is eternal, unchanging, and self-evident, and *asat* is non-existent in all periods of time, *mithyā* denotes that which appears real at the empirical level (*vyāvahārika-sattā*) but is ultimately sublated upon the realization of truth (*pāramārthika-sattā*). This unique ontological status is essential for Advaita Vedānta, where it serves as the explanatory framework for the phenomenal world, often described through the doctrine of *māyā*.

According to Śaṅkara, *mithyā* is defined as "*anirvachanīyā*", indescribable in terms of either absolute existence or absolute non-existence (Deutsch, 1973). It is the ontological category applied to the world (*jagat*) that we perceive through the senses and intellect but which is sublated upon the realization of Brahman, the ultimate reality. In his *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, Śaṅkara argues that the world is not *asat*, for it is experienced, nor *sat*, for it is constantly changing and dependent. It is *mithyā*, a superimposition (*adhyāsa*) born of ignorance (*avidyā*) (Sharma, 1996).

This position is classically illustrated through analogies such as the rope-snake illusion and the dream state. In a dimly lit room, one may mistake a rope for a snake. The perception of the snake is not entirely false—it generates real fear and responses, but upon closer examination, the truth is revealed, and the illusion is sublated. Similarly, the dream world appears real to the dreamer until awakening occurs. These analogies serve not just as metaphors but as epistemological models that show how cognition can be mistaken at the empirical level, even while the foundational consciousness remains unaffected (Puligandla, 1975).

Mithyā, therefore, is not an ontological category in isolation; it is deeply tied to epistemology and soteriology. The world appears real only so long as ignorance persists. Once self-knowledge (*ātma-jñāna*) arises, the distinction between seer and seen dissolves, revealing the non-dual Brahman. As Śaṅkara famously puts it, "*brahma satyaṃ jagan mithyā, jīvo brahmaiva nāparaḥ*", "Brahman is real, the world is *mithyā*, the individual soul is not different from Brahman" (Sharma, 1996, p. 320).

Gauḍapāda, Śaṅkara's grand-teacher and author of the *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā*, pushes the idea of *mithyā* even further through the doctrine of *ajātivāda*, the view that the world is unborn and non-originating. From this perspective, all creation is an appearance, much like the projection of images in a dream. Reality, being non-dual consciousness (*advaya-jñāna*), does not undergo creation or transformation. Gauḍapāda's radical idealism foreshadows aspects of phenomenology and constructivism, in which the mind is seen as constitutive of the experienced world (Mohanty, 2000).

The role of *māyā*, often used synonymously with *mithyā*, is pivotal here. *Māyā* is not illusion in the sense of total falsehood but is the principle of misapprehension (*avidyā*) that gives rise to multiplicity in a non-dual reality. *Māyā* has empirical reality, not absolute reality. As Sureshvara notes in his *Naishkarmya Siddhi*, *māyā* has no existence independent of Brahman but appears due to ignorance, much like the silver seen in nacre (Chattopadhyaya, 2006). Importantly, the concept of *mithyā* safeguards Advaita from accusations of nihilism while explaining the apparent solidity of the empirical world.

Other schools, such as Sāṅkhya and Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, reject the notion of *mithyā*. For Sāṅkhya, the world is real, being a transformation of *Prakṛti*. There is no illusion involved; rather, ignorance consists in misidentifying *Puruṣa* (consciousness) with *Prakṛti* (matter). The world exists independently of perception and continues to function whether one attains liberation or not (Hirianna, 1995). Similarly, Nyāya philosophy maintains a realist epistemology where cognition (*pramāṇa*) corresponds to external reality. Illusion is explained not through a deficient reality but through defective sense-contact or incomplete conditions for valid cognition.

Nonetheless, the phenomenological character of *mithyā* makes it relevant beyond classical Indian thought. In Western philosophy, Immanuel Kant's distinction between *noumenon* (thing-in-itself) and *phenomenon* (appearance) echoes the *mithyā-sat* divide. The world of phenomena is knowable only through the forms of human intuition, space, time, and



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causality and thus cannot be taken as real in itself (Mohanty, 2000). Similarly, Plato's allegory of the cave, where prisoners mistake shadows for reality, resonates with the Advaitic understanding of *mithyā* as the misapprehension of empirical reality in the absence of higher knowledge.

Modern philosophical schools such as phenomenology, constructivism, and post-structuralism also bear affinities to *mithyā*. The idea that reality is constituted through language, perception, or social constructs finds parallels in the Vedāntic claim that the world is shaped by *avidyā* and *nāma-rūpa* (name and form). In the age of virtual reality, augmented experience, and simulated worlds, *mithyā* is no longer a purely metaphysical postulate; it is an apt descriptor of how reality is mediated and manufactured (King, 1999). Thus, the ancient category of *mithyā* can serve as a critical tool in contemporary ontological debates.

In epistemological terms, *mithyā* also serves as a crucial category to understand levels of reality in Indian philosophy. Advaita distinguishes between three levels:

1. Pāramārthika (*absolute reality*) – Brahman alone.
2. Vyāvahārika (*empirical reality*) – the transactional world.
3. Prātibhāsika (*illusory reality*) – hallucinations, dreams, etc.

*Mithyā* includes both *vyāvahārika* and *prātibhāsika* in that they are real only conditionally and are ultimately sublated in Brahman (Deutsch, 1973). This tiered ontology enables Vedānta to account for everyday experience without compromising the non-dual nature of reality.

Ultimately, *mithyā* functions not only as a metaphysical category but also as a pedagogical strategy. By acknowledging the empirical world as *mithyā*, Advaita Vedānta allows for a provisional acceptance of worldly duties, rituals, and ethics (*dharma*) until the aspirant is ready to transcend them. The world is a training ground, a projection upon which spiritual progress is made, but it must be renounced once the truth of non-duality is realized. The recognition of *mithyā* is thus a turning point in liberation (*mokṣa*), shifting the aspirant from empirical bondage to ontological freedom.

### Philosophical and Comparative Analysis

The ontological framework provided by the Indian triad of *sat*, *asat*, and *mithyā* reveals a metaphysical spectrum that is both internally coherent and externally extensible. Rather than viewing existence and non-existence as binary opposites, Indian philosophy allows for a gradient of reality, where empirical appearances (*mithyā*) mediate between absolute being (*sat*) and absolute non-being (*asat*). This ontological elasticity is one of Indian metaphysics' most unique contributions to global philosophy, challenging reductive Western dichotomies and fostering cross-cultural dialogue in metaphysics and epistemology.

At the core of this analysis lies the recognition that these three categories are contextually situated. In *Advaita Vedānta*, *sat* is Brahma, changeless, indivisible, and self-luminous. *Asat* is that which cannot be objectified, conceptualized, or experienced, and hence has no place in ontological discourse. *Mithyā*, on the other hand, is that which appears to be *sat* but is ultimately *asat* upon closer scrutiny. This three-tiered structure creates a dynamic ontological model: the empirical world is *mithyā*, the illusion of multiplicity, which veils *sat* through the influence of *avidyā* (ignorance) and *māyā* (illusion) (Deutsch, 1973).

A parallel can be drawn with Plato's metaphysics, particularly his Theory of Forms. According to Plato, all empirical objects are imperfect manifestations of eternal, immutable Forms, which alone constitute true reality (Republic, Book X). Just as *mithyā* objects imitate *sat* but fail to match its permanence, so too do Platonic particulars imitate Forms but lack their perfection and constancy. Plato's allegory of the cave is especially reminiscent of Advaita: prisoners mistake shadows for



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reality, much like individuals who perceive the phenomenal world without recognizing Brahman. Liberation, in both systems, involves anamnesis, a recollection of true reality hidden behind appearances (King, 1999).

Likewise, Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy shares deep structural affinities with the *mithyā-sat* divide. In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant distinguishes between the noumenal world (*thing-in-itself*) and the phenomenal world (that which appears to us through the forms of space and time). The noumenal realm is unknowable through ordinary cognition, much like Brahman, which cannot be grasped by the senses or mind but must be realized through direct, non-dual awareness (Mohanty, 2000). The phenomenal world, for Kant, is constructed through the conditions of experience, much like *mithyā*, which arises through *avidyā*. Both systems acknowledge the cognitive imposition of structure on reality, thus rendering empirical experience only conditionally valid.

However, the Indian conception of *mithyā* adds a soteriological dimension largely absent in Kant's framework. For Advaita Vedānta, the realization of *sat* (Brahman) is not only epistemic but transformative, it leads to *mokṣa*, the liberation from the cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*). Kantian epistemology, by contrast, retains a sharp separation between metaphysics and ethics. While both posit an unseen reality, Indian thought integrates this with a path of realization, aligning ontology, ethics, and psychology (Sharma, 1996).

The Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) also finds resonance with *mithyā*. According to Nāgārjuna, all phenomena are empty of intrinsic existence (*śūnyatā*) not because they do not exist, but because they exist only dependently. This middle path between essentialism and nihilism parallels the Advaitic position that the world is neither fully real nor completely unreal. Nāgārjuna writes in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*: "Whatever is dependently co-arisen / That is explained to be emptiness / That being a dependent designation / Is itself the middle way" (Puligandla, 1975, p. 89). Here too, empirical phenomena are neither *sat* (permanent) nor *asat* (non-existent), but possess a relational reality akin to *mithyā*.

Where the Indian tradition perhaps most strikingly diverges from Western ontological commitments is in its integration of metaphysics with spiritual praxis. The Upaniṣadic declarations such as "*tat tvam asi*" ("That thou art") are not abstract postulates but pedagogical revelations meant to awaken one to the identity of the self (*ātman*) with Brahman. The goal is realization, not merely knowledge. In this light, the categorization of *mithyā* is not merely about the nature of the world, but about shifting one's identity from the limited ego to the limitless Self (Radhakrishnan, 1953). Western metaphysics, even when nuanced as in Heidegger's distinction between *Sein* (being) and *Seiendes* (beings) rarely makes this existential leap toward liberation through knowledge (*jñāna-mukti*).

Nevertheless, Western traditions are not devoid of such insights. The Neoplatonism of Plotinus, for example, conceives the material world as an emanation from the One, much like how Advaita considers the world an illusory manifestation of Brahman. Similarly, Schopenhauer, deeply influenced by the Upaniṣads, sees the will as the underlying force behind appearances, and advocates asceticism and renunciation as a path to transcend the delusion of individuality, an echo of the Vedāntic emphasis on disidentification with *nāma-rūpa* (name and form) (Chattopadhyaya, 2006).

What emerges from this comparative exploration is the flexibility and sophistication of Indian ontology. The inclusion of *mithyā* as a category allows for a world that is experientially valid yet ultimately non-binding, enabling a graduated understanding of reality. It avoids the rigidity of strict realism and the void of absolute nihilism. By recognizing degrees of reality, Indian metaphysics constructs a framework that is epistemologically sensitive, existentially rich, and spiritually liberating.

### Contemporary Relevance and Interpretations

The conceptual triad of *sat*, *asat*, and *mithyā* continues to offer profound insights not only in the realm of classical metaphysics but also within contemporary philosophy, psychology, and cognitive science. In an era marked by the proliferation of virtual reality, simulation theory, and digital mediation of experience, Indian ontological categories,



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particularly *mithyā*, have become increasingly relevant for analyzing the constructed nature of perception, identity, and reality.

The rise of postmodernist and constructivist paradigms has drawn attention to the fluid and often deceptive nature of empirical truths. Philosophers such as Jean Baudrillard have argued that contemporary society is governed by *simulacra*, where representations no longer refer to an external reality but are self-referential and hyperreal (Baudrillard, 1994). This mirrors the Advaitic concept of *mithyā*, where the world, though perceived as real, is ultimately without substance when examined through the lens of higher knowledge (*jñāna*). In this regard, *mithyā* becomes an early philosophical articulation of the simulation hypothesis, a topic that has gained traction in technological and epistemological debates (Deutsch, 1973; King, 1999).

Furthermore, *mithyā* offers a unique lens for interpreting cognitive illusions and neurological constructions of reality. Cognitive scientists increasingly acknowledge that perception is inferential, shaped not by direct access to reality but by mental models filtered through past experiences, expectations, and evolutionary adaptations (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). This aligns with the Indian epistemological stance that the mind does not passively receive reality but actively constructs it through *avidyā*, leading to the misidentification of the self with transient forms. Such misapprehensions constitute *mithyā*, not because they are hallucinatory, but because they veil a deeper, unchanging awareness (*cit*) that underlies all cognition (Mohanty, 2000).

In the field of philosophy of mind, the debate between physicalism and idealism has revived interest in non-dual consciousness theories. Thinkers such as David Chalmers have argued that subjective experience (*qualia*) cannot be reduced to physical processes, advocating instead for a form of property dualism or panpsychism (Chalmers, 1996). Advaita Vedānta's articulation of consciousness (*cit*) as the sole reality (*sat*), with the body, mind, and world appearing as *mithyā*, offers a coherent metaphysical system where consciousness is not an emergent property but the ontological foundation of all being.

From a psychological and ethical standpoint, the triad has practical implications for identity, suffering, and liberation. The modern individual, trapped in cycles of consumption and digital overstimulation, may resonate with the Advaitic diagnosis that suffering arises from attachment to the unreal that which is *asat* or *mithyā*. The shift in perspective from the ephemeral to the eternal has parallels in contemporary therapeutic frameworks such as mindfulness, cognitive defusion, and existential therapy, which aim to dissolve rigid identifications and foster awareness of deeper values (Puligandla, 1975).

In environmental and sustainability discourse, the triadic ontology encourages a rethinking of materialism and possessiveness. By classifying the world as *mithyā*, empirically valid but ultimately non-essential, Advaita fosters a non-consumerist ethic. This aligns with modern ecophilosophical perspectives that advocate for a detachment from anthropocentric domination and a return to interconnected, non-dual awareness of the natural world (King, 1999).

Finally, in the realm of interfaith and comparative religious studies, the categories of *sat*, *asat*, and *mithyā* offer a robust framework for dialogue between traditions. Christian notions of "being in God," Buddhist concepts of "emptiness," and Islamic ideas of "tawḥīd" (unity) all find resonances and distinctions with Vedāntic ideas of reality. Such comparative ontology helps transcend doctrinal boundaries and fosters universal philosophical inquiry grounded in shared human concerns about truth, illusion, and liberation (Mohanty, 2000; Chattopadhyaya, 2006).

In sum, the triadic model of *sat*, *asat*, and *mithyā* is far from being a relic of ancient metaphysical speculation. Rather, it provides a timeless framework for understanding the shifting terrains of reality, identity, and consciousness. Its continued relevance across diverse disciplines underscores the integrative power of Indian philosophy, which links epistemology with ontology, and metaphysics with lived experience.



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## Conclusion

The metaphysical triad of *sat*, *asat*, and *mithyā* offers a deeply layered and philosophically rich account of reality as conceived in classical Indian thought. Each concept, rooted in the scriptural and interpretative traditions of Vedānta and Sāṅkhya, represents not merely ontological categories, but ways of being, knowing, and realizing. *Sat*, as absolute and unchanging reality, becomes the foundation upon which all truth rests. *Asat*, as pure non-being, helps delimit the bounds of intelligible discourse and *mithyā*, as the empirical yet ultimately illusory experience, mediates between the two, offering a pathway to discernment, transformation, and liberation.

Unlike rigid binaries that dominate many Western ontological models, Indian philosophy presents a graded structure of reality, one that accommodates empirical experience while pointing beyond it. In this framework, illusion is not dismissed but recontextualized as part of the human condition arising from ignorance, sustained by misperception, and dissolved through wisdom. The concepts of *mithyā* and *sat* thus serve both diagnostic and therapeutic purposes, guiding the aspirant from delusion to realization, from bondage to freedom.

Moreover, the enduring relevance of this triad becomes evident when placed in dialogue with contemporary disciplines philosophy of mind, cognitive science, digital media theory, and environmental ethics. As our world increasingly blurs the lines between virtual and real, self and other, knowledge and belief, these ancient categories invite us to reconsider what it means to exist, to know, and to awaken.

In the final analysis, *sat*, *asat*, and *mithyā* are not just metaphysical abstractions. They are living categories, echoing across centuries, resonating within cultures, and speaking to the deepest layers of human experience. They remind us that between illusion and truth lies the journey of discernment and in that journey, philosophy finds its highest calling.

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