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## UNIT 4 INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS ON HUMAN PERSON

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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- The objective of this unit is to make the students familiar to the general Indian understanding of the human person.
- To enable the students to appreciate some of the profound notions of Indian philosophy, especially with respect to the human being.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this unit, we can attempt no more than a very schematic outline of Indian thought and comment here. After all, is there one monolithic Indian thought about human being and her/his make-up? Still, we can point out some general lines of thought and trust that the reader will be able to make a more detailed critical reflection for himself (or herself) in particular cases. In the first place, any understanding of reincarnation (and this doctrine is pretty widespread in India) implies a rather dualistic understanding of the human person and one where the body is seen as a replaceable, discardable appendage to the real “me”. The essential self remains unchanged through a variety of rebirths in different “bodies”. Platonism with a vengeance and the deck is stacked heavily in favour of the spirit. And if it is true that the doctrine of *maya* can be read in terms of not so much world-negating (the more traditional interpretation) but as world-relativising (with reference to the Absolute), this too is frequently vitiated by the popular understanding of *Moksa* wherein liberation is a process of finally severing all links of the authentic self from the world of matter. Once again, matter is very readily handled. A passing thought. Was Carvaka (leaving aside the discussion whether the school was actually founded by a person of that name – or was it a nick-name, a term of contempt, given to them by their critics?) really so rabidly materialistic and irreligious in intent? Or was it more of a reaction against the dominant other-worldly, pro-Spirit type of teachings so favoured by the Brahmins – and later on provoked or even maligned into statements of gross hedonism by

its powerful adversaries who, after all, have also dominated early critical remarks on the school. It would be refreshing (to be, at any rate) to recognise that early Indian thought didn't suffer gladly the anti-matter prejudices of the ancients.

Thus we first begin with the understanding of self in Indian philosophy, which leads us to appreciate the goal of human life. Finally we propose a materialistic critique of Indian philosophy.

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## 4.2 THE SELF IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

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The Brahminical or orthodox (*astika*) schools of Indian philosophy, especially the Vedantins and the Nyaya-Vaisesika argue that the self or *Atman* is a substantial but non-material entity. The *Katha* and *Chandogya* Upanishads, for example, define the Brahminical conception of the self as follows: The light of the *Atman*, the spirit is invisible, concealed in all beings. It is seen by the seers of the subtle, when their vision is keen and clear. The *Atman* is beyond sound and form, without touch and taste and perfume. It is eternal, unchangeable, and without beginning or end: indeed above reasoning. The Upanisads puts it succinctly: “An invisible and subtle essence is the Spirit of the whole universe. That is Reality. That is Truth. THOU ART THAT.”

As Peter Pravos (2010) indicates, the Brahminical view on the nature of the self as portrayed in the Upanishads can be summarised as four major theses:

- 1) The self exists;
- 2) The self is immortal and without beginning or end;
- 3) The self is essentially non-material and;
- 4) The self is identical with Brahman, the highest reality.

The heterodox (*nastika*) schools in Indian philosophy, such as the Carvaka materialists and the Buddhists, question the Brahminical arguments for a substantial, persistent and non-material self on metaphysical, moral and political grounds. The Buddhists and the Carvaka oppose the Hindu caste system and believe that the Vedas are full of falsehoods, self-contradictions and tautologies. The Carvaka accuse the Brahmins of being impostors who abuse the words of the Vedas and interpret them to suit their own egoistic needs. The Vedas are in their opinion nothing but a means of livelihood for the Brahmins who are lazy, lacking in intellect, energy, self respect and sense (Pravos 2010). The views on the self by the Carvaka and the Buddhists are illustrated by the following two quotes: “The soul is but the body characterised by the attributes signified in the expressions, ‘I am stout’, ‘I am youthful’, ‘I am grown up’, ‘I am old’, etc. It is not something other than that.” “A sentient being does exist, you think, O Mara? You are misled by a false conception. This bundle of elements is void of Self, in it there is no sentient being. Just as a set of wooden parts receives the name of carriage, so do we give to elements the name of fancied being.” (Parfit 1984)

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## 4.3 EXISTENCE OF THE SELF

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Advaita (non-duality) is the Vedanta school associated with the philosopher Sankara (c. 788–820 AD) who is acknowledged as the leader of the Hindu revival

after the Buddhist period in India. Sankara’s metaphysics are based on the criterion that the real is that whose negation is impossible. From this criterion it follows that the self is real, because no one will say ‘I am not’. Sankara writes clearly and succinctly: ‘Just because it is the Self, it is impossible for us to entertain the idea even of its being capable of refutation.’ (Prevos 2010) Further, the Nyaya-Vaisesika subscribe to the conception of the self put forward in the Vedas as a substantial, persistent and non-material entity. They agree with the Vedantins that the self cannot be perceived, but only inferred. The later Nyaya school however rejected the idea that the self can only be known by inference and asserted that the existence of the self can be directly perceived. The idea that the self can be directly perceived is put forward mostly in polemical works against the Buddhists. The Nyaya argument for the existence of the self through the notion of agency: ‘From the actions of the mind towards the contact of the sense-organ apprehending desirable objects, we infer the existence of the self’. An analogy offered by the Nyaya is that from the action of regular breathing we infer the existence of the agent who would act like a blower of the wind-pipe. The Nyaya are clearly referring to intelligent actions and not merely mechanical actions like that of a robot for example.

The Carvaka argue that the self is nothing but the body as characterised by consciousness. The Carvaka denial of a substantial self is based on the epistemological position that perception is the only valid source of knowledge. The Carvaka deny the validity of inference and other sources of knowledge (*darsanas*) usually accepted in classical Indian philosophy. From this position and the Brahminical assertion that the self can not be perceived they infer that the self can not exist because only that which can be perceived exists. This last premise is however not a fair representation of the Brahminical position because the Mimamsa and the later Naiyayikas insist that the self as the subject is directly cognised in every experience. In the available texts there is however no detailed discussion whether the Carvaka had any arguments to deal with the Mimamsaka and the later Naiyayikas.

The Buddhist reply to the Brahminical view of the self would be that there is no such entity. This view is illustrated by the debate between king Milinda and the Buddhist monk Nagasena. King Milinda is not convinced of the theory of the no-self for, “if there were no person, there could be no merit and no demerit . . . “ (Conze 1959). Nagasena affirms that the theory of the not-self to the king by comparing a human being with a chariot. None of the individual parts of the chariot (the pole, the axel, the wheels etc.), are the chariot. Nor the combination of the parts is the chariot. Nagasena continuous that he can not discover a chariot at all, only the word that denotes the idea of the chariot. The denomination chariot — or self — takes place in dependence of the individual parts. In ultimate reality, the person can not be apprehended. Sankara takes issue with this theory, on the grounds that it provides nothing to hold together the various ingredients either at any one time or through progression in time (Prevos 2010).

**Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answer

1) Give a brief Brahminical view on the nature of the self.

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2) What is the Buddhist reply to the Brahminical view of the self?

## 4.4 PROPERTIES OF THE SELF

In fact, the discussion on the existence of the self cannot be separated from a description of the nature of the self. The Scriptures mention three properties of the self. The self is eternal, non-material and is identical with *Brahman*: the ultimate reality. Here we shall concentrate on the first two properties since there is not much argument on the last property in classical Indian philosophy. The eternality of the self follows according to Sankara from the essential irrefutability of its nature. Sankara is claiming here that since the self is not an effect, it has no beginning or end and is therefore eternal. The Buddhist would dispute this argument because they believe that anything that is uncaused, does not exist. Sankara argues for the immateriality of the self by stating that the existence of an eternal, immaterial self, distinct from the body is a necessary presupposition for the achievement of liberation. The Scriptures would otherwise make no sense, which is an unacceptable conclusion for the Vedantins. This argument is of course not acceptable to the heterodox schools because they do not accept the Scriptures as a source of valid knowledge.

The Naiyayika uses an argument from language to ascertain that the self is distinct from the body. The Nyaya argument from language encompasses that since the word *I* is used in the Vedas and ordinary talk and since everything in the Vedas is true, the word *I* must refer to an existing entity. They hold that the word *I* must refer to a non-physical entity because: ‘If the notion *I* referred to the body, then just as another man’s body being as perceptible as our own body . . . the other man’s body would also be capable of being spoken of as *I*’. No perceptible property and thus no physical property of an individual can be used to identify a person uniquely and the referent *I* must therefore be something non-physical (Prevos 2010). The persistence of the self is induced by the Naiyayika through the argument from memory. We have desires for objects that have been experienced in the past as being pleasant. One cannot desire a thing one does not remember and one cannot remember someone else’s experiences. They argue that there must therefore be a continuously existing self who had the experience in the past and who is desiring it in the present.

The materialists only accept the four elements air, water, fire and earth as the basic building blocks of reality and ultimate facts of the universe. The body is to

the Carvaka a unique combination of these elements and the self emerges from these elements. They thus account for the higher principle of mind by the lower one of matter (Hiriyanna 1985). The views of the Carvaka have been fervently opposed by the other schools of thought (*darsana*) in classical Indian philosophy. It is clear from the materials at our disposal that Carvaka philosophy was viewed with far greater disrespect than any other *darsana*. Phil Hari Singh argues that there appears to be an underlying hostility towards the Carvaka that is not fully borne out by the analysis of their doctrines (Prevos 2010)

To the Buddhists a person is not a single substance existing continuously through time, but a series of physical and mental states also called 'person states'. The Buddhist term for an individual, a term which is intended to suggest the difference between the Buddhist view and other theories, is *santana*, which means stream (Parfit 1984). Each person state consists of various psychological and physiological factors, the *skandhas*. These *skandhas* are not persistent in time but last only for one infinitesimal short period. The person states fleet away and give rise to new person states in an endless cycle of cause and effect. Because every single person state only exist for an infinitesimal short period of time, there cannot be a persistent self. The instantaneous succession of *skandhas* gives the impression of continuity, like the succession of twenty four still images per second gives the illusion of a moving image. Sankara's criticism against the Buddhist theory of momentary person states is that in the absence of a permanent self throughout the successive *skandhas*, what sense can we make of memory and recognition? Sankara writes: 'Remembrance means recalling to mind something after its perception, and that can happen only when the agent of perception and memory is the same . . .' (Carr and Mahalingam, 1997).

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## 4.5 CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE ON THE SELF

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The contemporary discourse on the self is predominantly physicalist in character, as noted by Prevos (2010). Physicalism in philosophy of mind is the view that consciousness and the self can be described and explained by the laws of physics. In this section I will evaluate the above described Indian views on the self in light of the physicalist philosophy of mind. C. Ram-Prasad offered some suggestions on how classical Indian philosophical material may contribute to current discussions in consciousness studies. Ram-Prasad proposes to bracket out the transcendental elements of the philosophy through 'interpretative compromise'. The role he sees for Brahminical philosophy in contemporary consciousness studies is a deep critique of the dominant aims. The main critique that the Brahminical philosophy offers to the physicalist consciousness studies is the circularity of the physicalist studies: only when we know what it is that is to be studied can we study in it, but the purpose of the study is precisely to know what it is. The self of the Carvakas can be viewed an epiphenomenon, an incidental product of physical processes that has no effect of its own. The Carvaka theory of the self seems elegant but does not offer a satisfactory explanation of the self. The study of the Carvaka philosophy is however particularly difficult. We are left with only a few fragmentary survivals of the Carvaka, but all these are preserved in the writings of those who wanted only to refute and ridicule it. Carvaka philosophy thus remains to be saved from the essentially hostile atmosphere surrounding it.

Derek Parfit identifies two contemporary theories of the self: the Ego Theory and the Bundle Theory (Prevos 2010). On the *Ego Theory*, a person’s continued existence cannot be explained except as the continued existence of a particular ego or subject of experiences. The ego theory explains the self like the Brahminical theories as a spiritual enduring substance. The rival view is the *Bundle Theory* according to which we cannot explain the unity of consciousness at any time by referring to a person. Instead we must claim that there are long series of different mental states and events. In Bundle Theory the self is only a fact of our grammar. Therefore, Parfit rightly calls Buddha the first Bundle Theorist and he states that given the advances in psychology and neurophysiology, the Bundle Theory and thus the Buddhist theory of the self may now seem to be obviously true.

**Check Your Progress II**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answer

1) What is Sankara’s criticism against Buddhist theory of momentary person?

2) What is Carvaka’s theory of the self?

4.6 THE GOAL OF LIFE: *PURUSARTHAS*

The idea of *Purusartha*, or the goal of life, has played a very vital role in the history of Indian thought. The term ‘*Purusartha*’ literally signifies “what is sought by men”, so that it may be taken as equivalent to a human end or purpose. We know that a man, like other living beings, act instinctively; but he can also do so deliberately. This means he can consciously set before himself ends, and work for them. It is this conscious pursuit that transforms them into *Purusarthas*. Thus even the ends which man shares with other animal, like food and rest, may become *Purusartha* provided they are sought knowingly. We may thus define a *Purusartha* as an end which is consciously sought to be accomplished either for its own sake or for the sake of utilizing it as a means to the accomplishment of further end or goal. The word ‘*Purusartha*’ consists of two words, viz, ‘*purusa*’ meaning person and ‘*artha*’ meaning aim or end. Hence, as defined earlier, *Purusartha* means aim or goal of human life. The *Purusarthas* that have been recognized in India from very early times are four: *Dharma* (duty), *Artha* (wealth), *Kama* (pleasure), and *Moksa* (liberation). Of the four, dharma and moksa are the



one that man ought to seek but ordinarily does not; while *artha* and *kama* are the one that man is naturally inclined to seek (Sneha 2010).

The *Purusarthas* serve as pointers in the life of a human being. They are based on the vision of God which is evident in the creation He manifested and which can be followed by man to be part of that vision and in harmony with His aims. His worlds are established on the principles of *dharma*. They are filled with the abundance of material and spiritual beings and energies, who seek fulfillment by achieving their desires and liberation. Since man is God in his microcosmic aspect, he too should emulate God and manifest the same reality in his own little world. He should pursue the same aims, experience life in its fullness and be an instrument of God by serving the purpose for which he has been created.

**Artha:** In one of the old Sanskrit lexicons, '*artha*' is understood as meaning, money, a thing, and possessions. *Artha* also implies attainment of riches and worldly prosperity, advantage, profit and wealth. *Artha*, is a powerful urge in human nature. Acquisition of means for the material well-being, therefore, is a legitimate social and moral purpose. Today everyone is running after money. People need money to meet their basic necessities, for higher education, for luxuries of life, for name, fame, etc. However, if the urge to seek money or possessions is not restricted then it will lead to self-indulgence or greed and will bar the way to highest good i.e., *moksa*. It is given in one of the Pali texts, that "one who enjoys his wealth and does meritorious deeds with it, experiences pleasure and happiness". It has therefore to be coupled with charity, also to Kautilya "wealth and wealth alone is important in as much as charity and desire depend on wealth for their realization." *Artha* helps in the attainment of *Kama*. Further, Prof. Hiriyanna affirms that *artha* is ordinarily acquired for *kama* (Sneha 2010).

**Kama:** *Kama* is ordinarily termed as pleasure. The definition of pleasure in Kamasutra is the following: "*Kama* is the enjoyment of the appropriate objects by the five senses of hearing, feeling, seeing, tasting and smelling, assisted by the mind together with the soul." The urge to enjoy pleasures and satisfy desires, is the most powerful one serving as an incentive to individual progress, most effective. It is said, "All that man does is inspired by *kama*." As Manu regarded *kama* as desire, one can say, it is a desire for pleasure. It can be sensuous pleasure, mental pleasure getting through satisfaction of the work, urge for sexual pleasure, etc. Everyone is seeking that, which gives them pleasure and luxuries of life. Nobody wants to stay at the bottom level. People feel money is the important factor in the attainment of the pleasures of life by fulfilling our desires. So one may put *artha*, as a means to *kama*, as an goal. But now, is that all? Is the purpose of human life fulfilled? How is this *artha* acquired? How well it is utilized in our life? To answer these questions, what one need to do is, to follow his *dharma*, which is the next *Purusartha*.

**Dharma:** The Indian expression of right activities is *dharma*. In Mahabharata it is mentioned as an ethical concept, defined as that which is right and good. In Mimamsa, *dharma* is a means to the attainment of certain ends. This means that, ends like *artha* and *kama* should be acquired through righteousness, honesty and straightforwardness. One may, in fact, possess *artha* through stealing and can become rich and through it can get all pleasures of life. But is this the *dharma* of a person? In Mahabharata, *dharma* is stated as that which upholds the society.

*Dharma* is duty. It is the higher good to achieve the highest i.e., *moksa*. In all stages of a man’s life either as a student or as a householder, as a forest dweller or an ascetic, *dharma* has to be accepted as paramount. An IAS officer has got lots of riches, money and pleasures in his life, but these are to be acquired by doing his duty with sincerity and honesty, and not with bribery, corruption or other mal-practices; only then it will add meaning to his life, otherwise *artha* and *kama* without *dharma* would be meaningless. *Dharma* is the most important urge and should be developed to regulate both *artha* and *kama*. If *dharma* is the common regulator, *moksa* or liberation, is the common aim, though difficult to attain. Under the wise regulation of *dharma*, desire has to be satisfied and wealth has to be produced and well used. But all the three urges have to be so adjusted and regulated as to lead a man to self- fulfillment in his search for the highest good. *Dharma* also refers to *Varnashrama* Dharma i.e., choice of duty on the basis of one’s aptitudes and stage in life (Sneha 2010).

**Moksa:** Etymologically the meaning of *moksa* is to ‘rid off’ or ‘release’. Also it is commonly understood as liberation. In Bhagavad-Gita, *moksa* is mentioned as the supreme tranquility and the highest bliss. It is delight in the self, contentment with the self, self- satisfaction and self-fulfillment. It is the highest end of life, attainable only by the individual himself, with the help and guidance of *dharma*. *Moksa* as the last end of human life signifies that its attainment is impossible without first fulfilling the obligations of the other three. It is a state of non-action. It is not that on death *moksa* is attained. Being the ultimate value of man’s social existence, the *Purusartha* of *moksa* is an end in itself. Beyond that, human being has nothing to attain. It is the stage where human cravings cease and along with that ceases the need for attainment and fulfillment. *Moksa* is realization and living of the truth namely *Aham Brahma Asmi* and *Tat Tvam Asi*. In other words it is waking up of human consciousness at the highest level of reality i.e., *paramarthik satta*. The liberated person neither acts nor causes others to act. He may work for the good of humanity without moral obligation. But he has no duties to perform. It is total destruction of egoism. We can call *moksa* as a sublime goal. It can be known through mystical experience. Many saints like Tukaram and Kabir have talked about it and ultimately we all have to aim at it and only then we will be able to come out of the reincarnation (Senha 2010).

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## 4.7 A MATERIALISTIC CRITIQUE

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The above treatment of the self and the goals of life may be critiqued from an atheistic or materialistic point of view. The term ‘Materialism’ is a commonly used and loaded term. There is a misconception that materialism is a modern age phenomenon. In reality this phenomenon is as old as the human mankind irrespective of the place and time. It has been mentioned in ancient Indian literature also. Charvaka and the Hindu sage, Brahaspati, its founder and champion have been associated with philosophical school of materialism in Indian literature (‘Materialism’ 2020).

Metaphysically, the Charvaka admits the existence of four elements - earth, water, fire and air-only and he rejects the fifth, the ether, because it is not perceived but inferred. Similarly, soul and God and the Hereafter are rejected. Everything which exists, including the mind, is due to a particular combination of these four elements. The elements are eternal, but their combinations undergo production



and dissolution. Consciousness is regarded as a mere product of matter. It is produced when the elements combine in a certain proportion. It is found always associated with the body and vanishes when the body disintegrates. Just as the combination of betel, arecanut and lime produces red colour or just as fermented yeast produces the intoxicating quality in wine, though the ingredients separately do not possess either the red colour or the intoxicating quality, similarly a particular combination of the elements produces consciousness, though the elements separately do not possess it. Consciousness is the result of an emergent and dialectical evolution. It is an epi-phenomenon, a by-product of matter. Given the four elements and their particular combination, consciousness manifests itself in the living body. The so-called soul is simply the conscious living body.

**Check Your Progress III**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answer

1) What is the meaning of *Artha*?

2) Give a brief summary of the Carvaka position.

4.8 LET US SUM UP

By way of summing up we can assert that the views of the self in classical Indian philosophy span a wide spectrum of ideas. For the Brahmins, the self is a non-physical soul, a 'ghost in the machine'. For the Buddhists, the soul is a mere figment of the imagination. The Carvaka on the other hand, see the self as an epiphenomenon. The Brahminical theories of the self can be considered not true because the spiritual conception of the self does not correspond with empirical reality—if one concedes that religious experiences are not part of reality. The Carvaka theory could be true, but as is known to us it cannot provide any explanation, only a description of the self. The Buddhist or Carvaka theory of the self explains our natural beliefs about a self without any of the metaphysical complications of the Brahmanical theories. The *Purusarthas* briefly express Indian understanding of the goal of human life, which also may be differently understood by various schools in India.

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## 4.9 KEY WORDS

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- Lokayata** : Belief only in this world. Stemming from pre-Vedic times, Lokayata would broadly mean ‘prevalent among people’ or ‘prevalent in the world’ (*loka* and *ayata*)
- Purusarthas** : The goal of life, *Purusarthas* that have been recognized in India from very early times are four: Dharma (duty), *Artha* (wealth), *Kama* (pleasure), and Moksa (liberation).

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## 4.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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