



# Mokṣa Across Aasthika Indian Systems: A Comparative-Analytical Study

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**Abstract:** This paper analyses the concept of mokṣa (liberation) across six Aasthika philosophical systems—Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Mīmāṃsā, and Advaita Vedānta and situates the Bhagavad Gītā's synthetic vision relative to them. It compares the concept of mokṣa using three key dimensions: metaphysical assumptions (views on the self, the world, and ultimate reality), philosophical goals (how each tradition defines liberation), and methodological approaches (the practices or insights believed to lead to liberation). The Bhagavad Gītā offers a synthetic approach, integrating karma (action), jñāna (knowledge), and bhakti (devotion) into a unified path. It reinterprets these disciplines not as separate alternatives, but as complementary means leading to unwavering union with the divine.

**Index Terms** - mokṣa, darśana, Bhagavad Gītā, philosophical methodology, self-realization.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Mokṣa is widely acknowledged as the parama-puruṣārtha (supreme human good) across Indian darśanas, with the notable exception of Cārvāka. Schools diverge, however, on the nature of the liberated state (e.g., blissful realization vs. mere cessation) and the operative means (e.g., knowledge alone vs. knowledge conjoined with action or devotion). The classical vocabulary reflects this plurality: mokṣa, mukti, nirvāṇa, kaivalya, apavarga, niḥśreyasa, and vimukti signify overlapping but not identical ideals, as interpreted within each system's epistemology<sup>1 2</sup>.

A comparative approach must avoid flattening differences under a generic "salvation" rubric. Instead, it must ask: What exactly is "undone" in liberation? What exactly abides? and which pramāṇas and disciplines secure this telos? The following sections pursue these questions system by system, then draw out their convergences and principled disagreements<sup>2</sup>.

## II. SĀMKNHYA

Sāṃkhya grounds liberation in discriminative insight (viveka-jñāna) that discerns the radical difference between Puruṣa (pure witness-consciousness) and Prakṛti (nature and its evolutes). Bondage arises through aviveka (non-discrimination), whereby the reflective proximity of sattva-rich buddhi yields misidentification with the guṇa-driven psycho-physical complex. Liberation (kaivalya) is the utter isolation of Puruṣa, its non-involvement once Prakṛti "ceases to dance" for the one who has seen, while continuing for others under ignorance<sup>3</sup>.

Classical sources thematize bondage as threefold (natural, evolutionary, personal), each a mode of mistaking Prakṛti or its evolutes for the Self. The remedy is right knowledge: when the distinction is seen, Prakṛti's activity becomes inoperative relative to that Puruṣa; suffering ends, and rebirth ceases<sup>3</sup>.

Analytically, Sāṃkhya's mokṣa is negative in structure (freedom-from) and ontologically minimal: no new property accrues to Puruṣa, which was always unentangled; rather, the error of superimposition (adhyāropa) ends. Yet this negativity yields a robust transformation at the level of Prakṛti's relation to that seer: the

cessation of its purposive relation to Puruṣa in that case. This preserves both the realism of a multi-Puruṣa ontology and the explanatory power of knowledge as a sufficient, direct cause of liberation<sup>4</sup>.

### III. YOGA

Pātañjala Yoga operationalizes liberation through a disciplined technology of mind culminating in samādhi and vivekakhyāti (discriminative knowledge). Its canonical definition- citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ specifies method as the calming of mental modifications such that puruṣa-prakṛti non-identity becomes apodictically evident. The end, kaivalya, mirrors Sāṃkhya's isolation of the seer, but the path uniquely integrates ethical, attentional, and contemplative practices (yama, niyama, āsana, prāṇāyāma, pratyāhāra, dhāraṇā, dhyāna, samādhi)<sup>5</sup>.

In this framework, liberating right knowledge is not merely propositional but is stabilized through samyama (the integrated triad of dhāraṇā–dhyāna–samādhi) upon appropriate tattvas, converting inferential judgment into direct, transformative insight.

As per yoga philosophy liberation requires both the removal of kleśas and the cessation (nirodha) of the very processes that sustain misidentification. This leads to a practical approach to salvation: true knowledge frees a person when it is lived through practice (yoga), with vivekakhyāti serving as both the final goal and a safeguard to prevent falling back into ignorance<sup>15</sup>.

### IV. NYĀYA

In Nyāya philosophy, the term for liberation or salvation is apavarga —release from duḥkha and the cycle of birth and death and is secured through tattvajñāna (knowledge of reality) and the removal of defects (doṣas) that perpetuate bondage. Classical Naiyāyikas analyze a “chain of consequences”: from ignorance (ajñāna) arise doṣas (rāga, dveṣa, moha), which motivate action generating puṇya/pāpa, leading to embodiment and suffering; breaking this chain at the level of right knowledge is therefore decisive<sup>6</sup>.

Apavarga, however, is not a state of positive bliss but of absolute cessation: the liberated self (ātman) persists devoid of pleasure, pain, cognition, desire, aversion, and volition. This sharply contrasts with Vedāntic conceptions of liberation as infinite bliss. Methodologically, Nyāya insists on pramāṇa-grounded inquiry (perception, inference, comparison, testimony) and extended debate to remove false cognitions and establish right judgment, treating philosophical therapy as a rigorously logical enterprise ordered to existential stakes<sup>6</sup>.

Nyāya's idea of liberation has two key benefits: First, it keeps the perfected Self, unchanged (which guarantees its permanence). Second, it emphasizes the importance of correcting knowledge over simply having experiences. Critics argue that this leads to a “stone-like” self after liberation, but Nyāya responds by saying that freedom from pain doesn't require positive emotions in the final state<sup>16</sup>.

### V. VAIŚEṢIKA

Vaiśeṣika shares similar ideas with Nyāya about liberation but has its own unique view of the categories of existence. Its ultimate goal is niḥśreyasa (the supreme good), which can be achieved through understanding the basic categories of reality: substance (dravya), quality (guṇa), action (karma), universality (sāmānya), particularity (viśeṣa), and inherence (samavāya), whose discriminative understanding dissolves the conditions of bondage<sup>7</sup>. In mokṣa (liberation), the self is free from all qualities, including knowledge. Once the forces of dharma (moral law) and adharma (immorality) stop, there is no rebirth or new body, so there's no experience of pleasure or pain. Although Vaiśeṣika shares a lot of similarities with Nyāya in its approach to liberation, it still has important differences in how it understands knowledge and reality<sup>17</sup>.

### VI. MĪMĀṂSĀ

Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā focuses mainly on dharma (Vedic duties) and ritual actions (karma), developing a detailed theory of interpreting the Vedas and understanding sources of knowledge (pramāṇas). Though liberation isn't a main theme, the school often acknowledges that apavarga (freedom) comes as a side effect of performing rituals correctly, which gradually reduces the causes of bondage<sup>8</sup>.

Mīmāṃsā sees “means” to liberation not as deep knowledge or mystical experience, but as following an impersonal dharma (the law of duty). Its view of salvation is down-to-earth: there's no need for divine grace or enlightenment. Instead, by performing the right actions in the context of language and rituals, a person aligns with the Veda's cosmic law, gradually eliminating karma and eventually reaching liberation.

### VII. ADVAITA VEDĀNTA

Advaita views mokṣa (liberation) as realizing the identity of the ātman (individual self) and brahman (universal reality). The key obstacle to this realization is avidyā (ignorance), which causes us to see many things where there is only one. The path to liberation is through jñāna (knowledge), especially through three steps: śravaṇa (hearing scriptures from a qualified teacher), manana (reflecting on that knowledge), and

nididhyāsana (deep contemplation), which leads to aparokṣa-anubhūti (immediate realization). While karma (action) and upāsana (devotion) purify the mind, they aren't the direct causes of liberation. The end result is realizing one's true nature as brahma-svarūpa (the nature of brahman), which is not created but revealed, with jīvanmukti (liberation while alive) being both possible and desirable.

Advaita's strength lies in its explanation of illusion and error, without losing sight of the non-dual truth. But critics question how ethical commitment fits into this, since if the world is an illusion (mithyā) and ignorance has no beginning, why act ethically? Advaita answers by suggesting that only a qualified aspirant is ready for this knowledge, and that karma-yoga (action as a form of self-purification) and the Vedas as a source of knowledge help remove ignorance without implying duality in the world.

## VIII. BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ

The Gītā presents a combined approach to liberation, where karma-yoga (path of action), jñāna-yoga (path of knowledge), and bhakti-yoga (path of devotion) are not separate or competing paths, but complementary practices, all centered on steadfastness (niṣṭhā). The Gītā redefines action as non-binding when done without attachment (niṣkāma-karma) and as a form of yoga when offered to the divine. It describes knowledge as seeing the eternal truth in all beings, and devotion as a focused dedication that leads to surrender (śaraṇāgati) to the divine. The promise of the Gītā is that liberation comes through harmonizing these three paths, ultimately realizing and living in Kṛṣṇa as the supreme reality<sup>9</sup>.

The Gītā does not completely align with Advaita nor does it reject the insights of Sāṃkhya and Yoga; instead, it integrates them. It teaches that when action, knowledge, and devotion are purified of ego and focused on the highest goal, they all lead to the same liberation. In essence, the Gītā's unique contribution is its methodology: it resolves apparent contradictions (such as action vs. renunciation or knowledge vs. devotion) by showing that all these paths are unified under the concept of yoga as a discipline of oneness. Liberation, therefore, isn't about escaping the world but transforming how we act and perceive within it, with devotion to the supreme person finalizing and stabilizing both knowledge and action.

## IX. COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS

### 9.1 On Ends (The Goal of Liberation):

- **Sāṃkhya–Yoga** aim for **kaivalya**, the isolation of the self (Puruṣa) from everything else.
- **Nyāya–Vaiśeṣika** focus on **apavarga/niḥśreyasa**, which is the end of suffering and cessation of mental states, but without adding any positive mental states.
- **Advaita** insists that **mokṣa** is the realization of non-duality, which results in **plenary bliss**.
- **Mīmāṃsā** doesn't prioritize liberation directly but sees it as a long-term effect of performing duties (rituals) according to dharma.
- The Gītā, on the other hand, presents a unified goal of abiding in the supreme (Kṛṣṇa), which can be reached through knowledge, action, and devotion

### 9.2 On Means (The Path to Liberation):

All systems agree that **ignorance** (of various kinds) is the root of bondage, but they differ on how to remove it:

- **Sāṃkhya–Yoga** focus on **discriminative insight**, with Yoga emphasizing **meditative stabilization**.
- **Nyāya–Vaiśeṣika** emphasize **logical inquiry** and the gradual removal of false beliefs using **pramāṇas** (valid sources of knowledge).
- **Mīmāṃsā** stresses performing **ritual duties** as the method to purify the mind and reduce karmic imprints.
- **Advaita** teaches that **brahma-jñāna** (knowledge of Brahman) is the direct cause of liberation, with **karma** and **upāsana** (devotion) as preparatory steps.
- The Gītā combines all these approaches into a triad: knowledge, action, and devotion, with devotion as the culmination that perfects both knowledge and action.

### 9.3 On Metaphysics (The Nature of Reality):

The views on the nature of reality behind these systems shape their approach to liberation:

- **Nyāya–Vaiśeṣika** follow **dualism** (reality consists of distinct substances), which suits their view of liberation as cessation.
- **Sāṃkhya–Yoga** are **dualists** as well, but with a focus on the **separation** of the self (Puruṣa) from the material world (Prakṛti).
- **Advaita** is **non-dualist**, seeing everything as one, and their liberation is realizing this **oneness**.



- **Mīmāṃsā** has a **ritual realist** view, focusing on **action** and the ethics of performing one's duties, with liberation as a byproduct of perfected action.
- The **Gītā** balances these views by having a personalistic theology where liberation is relational (through devotion to the divine), without denying the importance of discrimination (insight) and discipline (yoga).

## X. CONCLUSION

Across Hindu philosophical traditions, mokṣa is understood as a deep transformation of thought, emotion, and action, shaped by each school's underlying metaphysical views. Sāṃkhya–Yoga offer liberation through clear discrimination between self and matter, supported by meditative discipline. Nyāya–Vaiśeṣika aim for freedom through precise reasoning and the removal of suffering. Mīmāṃsā emphasizes the power of dharma and ritual action to bring about eventual liberation. Advaita Vedānta teaches that liberation comes through realizing the ever-present, non-dual nature of the Self. The Bhagavad Gītā presents a unified path that weaves together knowledge, action, and devotion through unwavering dedication to the divine. Rather than being a weakness, this diversity reflects a strength: it offers multiple, well-structured paths suited to different personalities and beliefs, guiding individuals from confusion to understanding, from bondage to freedom.

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