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The Ultimate Goal of Human Life: Insights from Indian Orthodox Philosophical Schools

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Abstract

Humans always desire liberation in their lives, which is the ultimate goal of human existence. This paper explores the concept of the ultimate goal of human life insights from the six Indian orthodox philosophical systems: Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta. It examines how each school defines bondage and liberation, the role of knowledge, bhakti, karma and yoga in achieving Mokṣa and the nature of liberated state. While all schools, except Cārvāka, agree that Mokṣa is the complete cessation of suffering and the ultimate goal, they differ in their methods and interpretations. The discussion highlights the Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika emphasis on knowledge, Sāṅkhya's focus on discriminative knowledge between self and non-self, Yoga's practical approach, Mīmāṃsā's evolution from ritualistic attainment of heaven to liberation and Vedānta's Brahmajñāna and Devotion to God for attaining liberation. Ultimately, this paper provides a complete overview of the diverse pathways to Mokṣa as intended by the orthodox schools of Indian Philosophy.

Key words: Mokṣa, Brahmajñāna, Bondage, Ignorance.

Introduction:

Our life on earth is a mixture of joys and sorrows. There are indeed many pleasures of life, and also many creatures that have a good share of them. But many more are the pains and sorrows of life and all living beings are more or less subject to them. All human beings earnestly desire to avoid every kind of pain. All the arts and crafts of the modern man and all the blessing of modern science give us but temporary relief from pain. But these do not ensure a total and final release from all the ills to which our mind and body are subject. So, the Indian philosophers try to develop a structure by which human beings can completely overcome all kinds of pains and sufferings.

According to them ignorance of reality is the cause of our bondage and suffering, and liberation from these cannot be achieved without knowledge of reality, i.e. the real nature of the world and the self. By bondage is commonly meant the process of birth and rebirth along with the consequent miseries to which an individual is subject. 'Liberation' or 'Mokṣa' means, therefore, the stoppage of this process. All Indian schools, except the Cārvāka School, accepted the concept of liberation. Those schools hold that Mokṣa is the complete absence of suffering and it is the highest goal of human life. There is no difference of opinion on this matter. But in Indian philosophy, liberation is not due to knowledge alone; in addition to knowledge, karma, bhakti and yoga are also important means of attaining liberation. According to Sri Ramakrishna, among knowledge, karma and bhakti, bhakti is considered foremost path to liberation for those leading a household life.

Mokṣa is the ultimate attainment of human life, the final outcome of all virtuous deeds. The term 'Mokṣa' is derived from the root 'muc,' which means 'freeness.' It is the state of perfection and also a state of positive bliss. In Indian philosophy, Mokṣa is given the highest place. Although Mokṣa, Mukti, Apavarga, Nirvāṇa and Niśreyas are almost universally recognized as the ultimate goals of human life and all agree that Mokṣa is the complete absence of suffering, there are differences in opinion among the various Indian philosophical schools regarding its exact nature. There are also differences in views on how to achieve Mokṣa.

The Indian Philosophical system can be broadly categorized into two groups: the heterodox and the orthodox schools. The heterodox systems, also known as Nāstika are those that do not accept the validity and authority of Veda. The three major heterodox schools are Cārvāka, Jainism and Buddhism. On the other hand, the orthodox systems, also known as āstika are those that acknowledge the validity of Veda. The six major orthodox schools are Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta. In this discussion, I will explore the highest goal of human life according to Indian orthodox schools.

The first orthodox school is Nyāya. According to Nyāya philosophy, false knowledge or ignorance is the cause of the soul's birth or embodiment, and it is the cause of the bondage of the soul. Maharshi Gautama, in the first sutra of the Nyāya Sūtras, states that liberation is achieved only through the knowledge of reality. He says that liberation is absolute freedom from all pain and suffering. It is a state in which the soul is released from all the bonds of its connection with the body and the senses. However, the soul has been born and assuming bodies due to false knowledge since time immemorial. Under the influence of ego, it mistakenly identifies the body as the soul. This ego is the root cause of the worldly existence. Therefore, to attain liberation, the ego must be dispelled, and one must acquire true knowledge of the self and all other objects of experience. One must know the self as distinct from the body, the mind, the senses and other associated aspects. To achieve this, one should first listen to the scriptural instructions about the self. Then, one should firmly establish the knowledge of the self through reasoning. Finally, one must meditate on the self in accordance with the principles of yoga. These practices help one realize the true

nature of the self as distinct from the body and all other objects. With this realization, the false knowledge that "I am the body and the mind" is destroyed, and one ceases to be moved to action by passions and impulses. When a person becomes free from desires and impulses, he is no longer affected by the consequences of his present actions, which are performed without desire for the fruits. As his past karmas or deeds are exhausted by producing their effects, the individual will undergo no further births in this world. The cessation of birth means the end of his connection with the body and consequently the end of all pain and suffering. This is liberation, or the attainment of eternal bliss.

The Vaiśeṣika also regards bondage as due to ignorance and liberation as due to knowledge. Due to ignorance, the soul performs actions. These actions lead to either merits or demerits. They are due to attachment or aversion and aim at obtaining pleasure or avoiding pain. If actions are in conformity with the Veda's injunctions, they lead to merit; if they are prohibited by the Veda, they lead demerit. The merits and demerits of the individual souls make up the unseen moral power, the *adr̥ṣṭa*. According to the law of Karma, one must reap the fruits of actions performed, whether they are good or bad. The *adr̥ṣṭa*, guided by God, imparts motion to the atoms, leading to creation for the purpose of the individual souls' enjoyment or suffering. As long as the soul will go on performing actions, it will be bound. To get freed from bondage, the soul ceases all actions. Liberation comes through knowledge. When action stop, new merits and demerits do not get accumulated and old merits and demerits also are gradually worn out. The soul is separated from the fetters of the mind and the body and realizes its own pure nature. That is liberation, which is absolute cessation of all pain. The individual soul is treated as a substance, knowledge, bliss and other qualities are regarded as its accidental traits, which it may acquire when embodied. Hence, in liberation, these qualities cannot exist, because the soul is no longer connected with the mind and the body. Liberation is the cessation of all life, consciousness, bliss, pain and qualities. It is the quality-less, indeterminate, pure nature of the individual soul as pure substance, devoid of all qualities. The liberated soul retains its own peculiar individuality and particularity and remains as it is - knowing nothing, feeling nothing, doing nothing.

According to Sāṅkhya philosophy, *puruṣa* or soul is free and pure consciousness. It is inactive, different and possesses no attributes and above time and space, merit and demerit, bondage and liberation. Sāṅkhya believes that bondage and liberation alike are only phenomenal. The bondage of the soul is a fiction. It is only the ego, the product of *prakṛti* that is bound. And consequently it is only ego which is liberated. *Puruṣa*, in its complete isolation, is untouched by bondage and liberation. It is only when it mistakes its reflection in the *buddhi* for itself and identifies itself wrongly with the internal organ- the intellect, the ego and the mind, that it is said to be bound. When the *puruṣa* realizes its own pure nature, it gets liberated, which in fact it always was. Liberation or freedom of *puruṣa* does not mean the development from a less perfect to a more perfect condition. The attainment liberation means just the clear recognition of the self as a reality which is

beyond time and space, and above the mind and the body, and, therefore, essentially free, eternal and immortal.

According to Sāṅkhya, bondage is due to ignorance or non-discrimination between the self and the non-self. Liberation cannot be obtained by means of actions. Karma, good or bad or indifferent, is the function of guṇas and leads to bondage and not to liberation. Good actions may lead to heaven and bad actions to hell, but both heaven and hell, like this worldly life, are subject to pain. Only knowledge leads to liberation because bondage is due to ignorance and ignorance can be removed only by knowledge. The knowledge that 'I am not (the not-self),' 'nothing is mine,' and 'ego is unreal,' when constantly meditated upon, becomes pure, incontrovertible and absolute, ultimately resulting in liberation.

According to Sāṅkhya, the earthly life is full of three kinds of suffering. The first kind, called ādhyātmika, is due to intra-organic psychophysical causes and includes all mental and bodily sufferings. The second, ādhibhoutika, is due to extra-organic natural causes like men, birds, beasts etc. The third, ādhidaivika, is due to super mental causes like the planets, elemental agencies, ghosts, demons etc. The goal of man is to rid himself of these three kinds of pain and suffering.

In Sāṅkhya philosophy, for attaining liberation the necessary means is the realization of discriminative knowledge of the distinction between self and non-self. This knowledge leads to the liberation of the soul. It is possible even while the body remains. This is called jīvanmukti or liberation during life. In this state, the threefold suffering disappears. When the accumulated actions are exhausted and the body perishes, complete liberation is achieved. Then there is no more connection between the puruṣa and prakṛti. This is called videha-mukti or liberation after the death of the body.

The Yoga philosophy is closely allied to the Sāṅkhya system. It is the application of the theory of the Sāṅkhya in practical life. This system makes a special study of the nature and forms of yoga. In Yoga philosophy, Yoga is primarily a discipline of practice and application. Patañjali has discussed this in detail in the Sādhanapāda and Vibhūtipāda of the Yoga-sūtra. The Sāṅkhya and some other Indian systems hold that liberation is to be attained through the direct knowledge of the self's distinction from the physical world including our body, mind and the ego (vivekajñāna). On the other hand, the Yoga philosophy, emphasises the importance of the practical methods of purification and concentration for realising the self's distinction from the body and the mind, and thereby attaining liberation. Liberation cannot be attained without purification of the mind. For the purification and enlightenment of the mind, the Yoga outlines the Eightfold Path of Discipline (Aṣṭāṅga Yoga): yama or restraint, niyama or culture, āsana or posture, prāṇāyāma or breath control, pratyāhāra or withdrawal of the senses, dhāraṇā or attention, dhyāna or meditation, and samādhi or concentration. When practiced regularly with devotion and dispassion, they lead to the attainment of yoga, both saṃprajñāta and asaṃprajñāta.

The highest good in the early Mīmāṃsā conception appears to have been the attainment of Heaven. Heaven is regarded as the usual end of rituals. But the later Mīmāṃsā scholars accepted that liberation or Mokṣa is the ultimate goal of human life. They realized that the performance of actions, good or bad, if directed by any desire for enjoyment of objects, causes repeated birth. When one understands that worldly pleasures are all mingled with pain and becomes disgusted with life in the world, one tries to control one's passions, desists from forbidden actions, and refrains from actions with motives of future enjoyment. Thus, the chance of future birth and bondage is removed. Through the disinterested performance of obligatory duties and the knowledge of the self, the karmas accumulated in the past are gradually worn out. After this life such a person, being free from all karmas, is never born again. He is thus liberated. According to Prabhākara, as bondage is the fettering of the soul to the world through the body including the sense and the mind, liberation is the total destruction of such bondage through the stoppage of rebirth. Liberation is the total cessation of painful experience. It is a state where the soul remains in its own intrinsic nature, beyond pleasure and pain. The soul in its intrinsic state can be defined only as substance having existence and potential for consciousness, through no actual consciousness.

Later Bhāṭṭa holds, however, like the Advaitins, that liberation is an experience of joy. He says that if a person abandons forbidden and desirable actions, performs daily causal actions, and whose sins are destroyed through the experience of happiness and sorrow, observes the practices of Samadhi, practices yoga and examines himself in the way shown in the Vedānta scriptures, then he attains liberation. Liberation is not only a state of absence of suffering; it is an expression of eternal bliss. Since liberation causes the destruction of the body, there is no possibility of rebirth for the liberated entity.

According to Advaita Vedānta, the soul is a form of Brahman. Brahman is eternally free. Since the soul is Brahman, it is also eternally free. There is no bondage in the nature of soul. Due to ignorance, the soul forgets its own nature and identifies itself one with the soulless body. In this state, it forgets that it is really Brahman. It behaves like a finite, limited, miserable being that runs after transitory worldly objects and is pleased to get them, sorrowful when miss them. It identifies itself with a finite body and mind and thinks 'I am stout,' 'I am lame,' 'I am ignorant.' Thus, the conception of the self as the 'Ego' or 'I' arises. This limited ego opposes itself to the rest of existence which is thought to be different from it.

However, the soul is always free in nature. It is the same as Brahman. It is pure consciousness and eternal. Due to ignorance, the soul deviates from the knowledge of its own nature. Brahmajñāna is needed to remove ignorance. Brahmajñāna is the realization of the nature of Brahman within the soul itself. When the soul attains such knowledge, its ignorance is removed. This knowledge leads to eternal bliss. This is the state of liberation. Liberation is not the creation of anything new, nor is it the purification of any old state; it is the realization of what has always been present, even in the stage of bondage, though it was unknown then. For liberation is nothing but the identity of the self

and Brahman, which is always real, though not always recognised. The attainment of liberation is, therefore, compared by the Advaitins to finding a necklace on one's neck after forgetting its existence there and searching for it far and wide. As bondage is due to illusion, liberation is only the removal of this illusion.

Even after the attainment of liberation, the body may continue because it is the product of karmas that have already borne their effects. However, the liberated soul never again identifies itself with the body. He no longer feels any desire for the world's objects. This state of the liberated soul is called *jīvanmukti*. Then, after death, when the body is destroyed and the Essence of Brahman is realized, it is called *videha-mukti*.

Viśiṣṭādvaita / Rāmānuja Philosophy: According to Viśiṣṭādvaita, the souls are bound on account of their ignorance and karma. Due to karmas, the soul becomes associated with particular body, senses, mind and life. For obtaining release from *saṁsāra*, the soul has to remove its karmic obstacles and it has to purify itself from the dross. And this can be done by a harmonious combination of action and knowledge (*jñānakarmasamuchchaya*). According to the Vedas, if the Vedic duties are performed correctly, the karmic impurities of the soul are removed. But Rāmānuja insists that the karmas should be performed in an absolutely disinterested manner simply to please God. He says that real knowledge is the immediate cause of liberation. The real knowledge is identified by Rāmānuja with the highest *bhaktis* which is obtained by *prapatti* or self-surrender. Liberation is not the merging of the individual soul into the Absolute, but only the direct intuitive realization by the individual of its own essential nature as a mode of God. According to him, the liberated soul does become identical with Brahman, but only similar to Brahman. It realizes itself as the body of Brahman and ever dwells in direct communion with God, enjoying like God, infinite consciousness and infinite bliss.

Rāmānuja says that it is not possible for a living being or individual soul to attain liberation through its efforts alone. The grace of God is necessary for liberation. When God is pleased by the devotion of the living being, He destroys the ignorance in the form of karma and frees the being from both bondage and sorrow. Rāmānuja understands liberation to mean *Videhamukti*. He does not acknowledge *Jīvan-mukti*. He says that since the body itself is bondage, liberation is not possible while the body exists.

Conclusion:

The ultimate goal of human life is to attain liberation from suffering and this discussion holds a central place in Indian Philosophy. All Indian philosophical orthodox schools agree that liberation means cessation of suffering and end of cycle of birth and rebirth, although they differ in their understanding of its nature and the means to attain it. In the above discussion, we have found that in Advaita Vedānta, liberation means removing ignorance and realizing Brahman within oneself. It is attained through only the knowledge of Brahman. On the other hand, Viśiṣṭādvaita and the other schools like Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika hold that liberation is attained through the true knowledge of self and other objects of experience, righteous action and devotion of God. Sāṅkhya and Yoga philosophy stress the

important of knowledge. Although a practical aspect is emphasized in Yoga philosophy. The Early Mimāṃsā initially focused on attaining heaven through rituals but later embraced Mokṣa as the ultimate goal. They all recognize ignorance as the root cause of bondage and emphasize the necessity of realizing the true nature of the self and reality, albeit through varied means like knowledge, action, devotion and yoga practices.

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