Consciousness: According To Indian Philosophy-2

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Abstract

This paper continues the small reviews on consciousness, the focus still remaining on Hindu philosophy. It starts with the initiation of the enquiry in Vedic period, then consolidation of the same during Upanishadic period. Finally, a discussion is given on how various natures of consciousness like ontological, epistemological, psychological, and transcendental developed. The contributions of different Indian traditional thought systems, such as Nyaya, Vaisesika, Sankhys, Yoga, Purva-Mimansa, and Uttara-Mimansa (Advaita Vedanta) into these developments is highlighted.

Keywords: *Hindu Philosophy, Vedic Period, Upanishadic Period, Atman, Self-luminosity, Nature of Consciousness, Indian Traditional Thought Systems, Brahman.*

Introduction

In continuation of the series of short reviews on consciousness to be published in this journal by this author, this paper follows the last article on the cosmology and evolution aspects related to consciousness according to Indian philosophy [Paramguru 2026]. The ancient Indian traditional philosophy still continues, as the present paper reports a discussion on how the Indian thoughts initiated the quest for the fundamental and universal reality, first during the Vedic period; then the Upanishads took up the thread of enquiry to consolidate what this ultimate reality is, during the Upanishadic period; and finally, a glimpse of build-up is provided showing how the six traditional schools of thought, namely, (i) The Nyaya, (ii) The Vaisesika, (iii) The Samkhya, (iv) The Yoga, (v) The Purva-Mimamsa, and (vi) The Uttara-Mimamsa or Vedanta have shaped the nature of consciousness.

Initiation of the Enquiry During Vedic Period

Saksena, in his book *Nature of Consciousness in Hindu Philosophy* truly makes the statement: 'Man, in his intellectual search for the nature of Reality starts with the conquest of the external world first, for as declared in the *Katha-Upanisad*, man, to begin with, looks outward because his senses are outgoing.*' [1944, 13]. The reference under * leads to the first line of *Katha-Upanisad* 4.1., which reads in Sanskrit 'पराञ्चि खानि व्यतृणत्स्वयम्भूस्तस्मात्पराङ् पश्यति नान्तरात्मन् ।', meaning – 'The self-born has set the doors of the

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body to face outwards, therefore the soul of a man gazes outward and not at the Self within.' Obviously, the author infers that the early thoughts of man were cosmic, rich with observations of the surrounding vastness and mystery of planets, seasons and everything those were more powerful than him, yet influenced him and his life very much. By that time, let us say, by *Rgvedic* period, besides man, the entire atmosphere with plants, animals, minerals etc., were no less real than man himself, and hence, he must have engaged discovering the essence of all of them. Saksena reports that this cosmic attitude is best described by the first line of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Shantipatha*. 5.1.1., which reads in Sanskrit: '*ॐपूर्णमदः पूर्णमिदं पूर्णात्पूर्णमुदच्यते।*'and its meaning in English is: 'That is complete, this is complete, from the complete comes out the complete.' [14] After all, man is also a part and parcel of this whole cosmos. There is another characteristic of Indian thought that the macrocosmic and the microcosmic are built with the same plan, therefore, each single microcosmic picture must have presented to man the same complete essence of the whole cosmos.

As human thought developed, reflection and emphasis replaced the initial bewilderment; man started looking into the inner forces, specifically to the principles underlying these forces. The questions of wherefrom such regulative forces surface and how they operate occupied the human thought, though it still remained cosmic. Here, mention may also be made about another characteristic of Indian thought that man is inherently no more important than any other animate being, and also, within man, no particular function is more fundamental than the others; therefore, neither man himself, nor any of his special features took the central stage of the enquiry. Further, the enquiry, even in this second stage, was nowhere near consciousness or mind; was solely directed at the specific functions of phenomena, specifically the moving power behind them, in case of both animate and inanimate. However, during this second stage of enquiry, besides the observations of various facts and happenings in nature, man looked into a concept, in Saksena's own language: 'a concept of a unitary principle or law, which is specially glorified in the Vedas by the name of "Rta".' [15]. "Rta" actually means a fundamental principle of cosmic, physical and moral order which regulates the universe. To clarify it in a better way, he cites Radhakrishnan [1923, 79] – 'Everything that is ordered in the universe has Rta for its principle.' [Saksena 1944, 15]. He continues further – ''Rta' compels every animate and inanimate being to follow the law of its own existence. It commands winds to blow, waters to flow, and men to know.' [16]. Here, the author connects this knowing in all its relatedness by man to the term 'sam-bid' which literally means 'consciousness'.

While discussing what contributions have been made by Vedas towards understanding the nature of consciousness, Saksena makes it clear that no real metaphysical speculation emerged from Vedas. However, he states that Vedas have

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provided some basic unitary principles which have subsequently emerged as potential philosophy of consciousness [17]. He cites the famous Rg Vedic *hymn of creation*, also known as *Nasadiya Sukta* [Rig Veda, X. 129.], he picks up particularly the stanza 4 which reads in Sanskrit: 'काम॒स्तद॑ग्रे॒ सम॑वर्त॒ताधि॒ मन॑सो॒ रेत॑: प्र॒थमं॑ यदासी॑त्। स॒तो बन्धु॒मस॑ति॒ निर॑विन्दन्हृ॒दि प्र॒तीष्या॑ क॒वयो॑ मनी॒षा॥', meaning: 'In the beginning desire descended on it - that was the primal seed, born of the mind. The sages who have searched their hearts with wisdom know that which is, is kin to that which is not.' This, in his own language reads: 'then for the first time there arose *Kamas* which had the primeval germ of *manasa* within it. It adds significantly that the sagas searching in their hearts discovered in *non-being*, the connecting bond of *being*.' [17]. His interpretation is – 'we can find here an embryonic suggestion for a future philosophy of consciousness' [18]. Finally, he states:

'To conclude, we have in Vedas an elastic frame of the development of the later idealistic tendencies of the gradual discovery of a universal and an inner principle as the basic and the fundamental reality which finally culminates in the Upanisadic doctrine of the Absolute 'Atman.'' [Saksena 1944, 21].

Consolidation of the Enquiry During Upanishadic Period

The Upanishadic seers took up the issue from where Vedas left and developed it systematically into a complete philosophy. The starting point was perhaps the hymn of Rg Veda 1.164.37 which raised the vital questions on the nature of the self – 'Ko'ham' – 'Who am I'? And 'which is the Atman'? The Upanishadic seers pursued these questions through serious and strenuous meditations, and what came out became history [22]. The first Indian thought carrying a glimpse of the earliest metaphysics of consciousness is probably conveyed by *Aitareya Aranyaka* 2.3.2., the English translation of the entire text is provided:

'There are herbs and trees and all that is animal, and he knows the Atman gradually developing in them. For in herbs and trees, sap only is seen but 'citta' is seen in animated beings. Among animated beings, again, the Atman develops gradually; and in man, again, the Atman develops gradually, for he is most endowed with 'prjna'. He says what he has known, he sees what he has known, he knows what is to happen to-morrow, he knows the visible and invisible world, by means of the mortal he desires the immortal. Thus, is he endowed. With regard to other animals, hunger and thirst are a kind of understanding, but they do not say what they have known, they do not know what is to happen to-morrow, etc. They go so far and no further.' [Saksena 1944, 23].

Clearly, we can find here a gradation of reality based on degrees of intelligence in plants, animals, and men. At this point, another vital question arises – what is the true

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nature of this Atman that gradually develops in plants, animals and men, and how does it develop gradually? Apparently, Chandogya Upanisad, hymn. 8.7.1 and Taittiriya Upanisad, hymns. 3.2-6 provide successive unfolding of the essence of Atman by following a physico-psychological methodology [24]. Let us have a look at the successive reflection of the nature of Atman according to Upanisadic observations in the following lines.

In Rg Veda, *Atman* was believed to be a predominating form (*rupa*) of anything in general, whereas, in Upanisads it was given the exclusive status of the essential in man. Its own development follows a particular path (*marga*) through stages, which is deduced by using a physico-psychological methodology, instead of the ontological approach used earlier [24]. The first stage of progression of *Atman* in man was his *body*. Then the body, the person as a whole, was the essence of man. Details can be seen in Taittiriya Upanisad, hymn. 2.1., and Chandogya Upanisad, hymn. 8.7.4. However, very soon, it was realized that *body* was perishable and cannot take the absolute highest position in man [25]. Next, *prana*, which is more subtle, less divisible, vitalizes the whole-body including sense-organs and hence termed life-giving, was declared as *Atman*. The cosmic parallel to this new truth of *prana* as *Atman* is *vayu*, and the concept called *prana-vayu* ever-affirmed the identity of the microcosm with the macrocosm. Details are available in Brihadaranyaka Upanisad, hymns. 2.3.6. and 6.1.7., and Chandogya Upanisad, hymn. 5.1.6. [25]. The next stage of progression of *Atman* in man was declared to be *prajna*, which is conceived as the meeting place of all functions including sense-organs, and is also something like mind, intellect and identical to *prana*. Details are available in Kaushitaki Upanisad, hymns. 3.2.3.7., 3.4.4.19., and Brihadaranyaka Upanisad, hymn. 2.1.16f.[26].

In the next stage of progression *Atman* reaches the level of an active *subject* of perception, where it is so independent and free that it can move from world to world, it assumes the level of an absolute and universal subject. Details are available in Brihadaranyaka Upanisad, hymns. 3.4.1f., 3.7.3ff., and 4.3.11ff., Kaushitaki Upanisad, hymns. 3.8f., Mundak Upanisad, hymns. 3.2.9., and Chandogya Upanisad, hymn. 2.21.4. [26]. The *Atman* concept after developing from gross to subtle, then from subtle to still more subtle, as found in these lines above, it finally ends with the concept of pure *cit*, supposed to be the last member of the psychological series. This *Atman* as the pure *cit*, or, pure consciousness is the fundamental and basic reality, exists independently by its own right and signs unconditionally as the *svayam-jyotih*. It is eternal and unconditional, never loses consciousness in reality even if it appears to lose as in case of deep sleep. Details are available in Aitareya Upanisad, hymn. 3.1.f. and Brhadaranyaka Upanisad, hymns. 3.4.2., 3.7.23., 3.8.11., 4.3.1.ff., 4.5.13., 4.8.23., and 4.8.11-15. [27-28]. This ultimate reality, or, absolute consciousness is beyond time, space, and causation, and

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reaches the stage of *sat+cit+ananda*. Aurobindo's evolutionary vision published in the earlier issue is actually taken from this Upanisadic philosophy [Paramguru 2026, 166]. He describes that the being is like 'sheets of consciousness', called 'koshas' that covers the soul layer by layer like an onion, and the 'koshas' are – *annamaya kosha* (physical), *prnamaya kosha* (vital), *manomaya kosha* (mental), *vijnanamaya kosha* (super-mind), and *anandamaya kosha* (*satcitananda*). This is the gradual development of consciousness as *Atman* in man.

Now, we will proceed to examine the nature of consciousness. Here, we may cite a statement of Saksena: 'We shall see how later on this ultimate and transcendental consciousness is either retained or entirely thrown over-board in the orthodox systems' [1944, 29]. The orthodox systems refer to the traditional Indian philosophical thought systems, and therefore, let us discuss a bit about these systems before proceeding to narrate the nature of consciousness. Dasji indicates that the Indian philosophical thought systems are divided into two categories, astik, or, theist, or believers (mostly of Vedas) and nastik, or, atheist, or non-believers. There are six thought systems in each category, namely, Nyaya, Vaisheshik, Sankhya, Yoga, Purbamimansa, and Uttaramimansa in the first category; and Charvak, (four Buddhist) – Madhyamik, Yogachar, Sautrantik, Vaibhashik, and finally Jain in the second category [2010, 13-14]. According to Bhatt the former six schools are indicative of different paths of contemplation of reality, for example, when Nyaya is the school of logic dealing with theories of knowledge and justification, Vaisheshik analyzes reality in terms of atoms, properties and categories. When Sankhya follows a dualistic approach between *Purusha* (*Self*, or, *Atman*) and *prakriti* (matter), the Yogic school, though founded on the metaphysics of Sankhya, is the amalgamation of physical and mental practices, mostly to control the mind. When Purbamimansa concerns mostly with the ritualistic aspects, Uttaramimansa focuses on pure intellectual knowledge (*jnana*) [2020, 207-208]. These six schools enrich their knowledge base through dialogue-driven-debates amongst the scholars within or outside the school. The later six schools of thought are not based on Vedas. When the first one Charvac is mostly seen as an opposing system, the next four follow Buddhist views and the last one is based on Jaina thoughts.

The Ontological Nature of Consciousness

From amongst the usual ontological questions related to consciousness, the Indian philosophy discusses, practically all possibilities, of consciousness being held as a substance, a quality, a movement; it may be unchanging and eternal, or, changing and momentary; may be pure, distinction-less, and isolated; may be eternally differentiated into distinctions of subject and object. When the Nihilists' do not accept the existence of consciousness, the Carvacs accept its existence, but they say that consciousness is

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produced mechanically only through the conjunction of material substances. The Nyaya – Vaisheshika (N-V) view agrees with that of Carvacs as regards the existence of consciousness that it exists only when a suitable collocation of substances exist, otherwise it does not exist, and it is only an adventitious property (*Agantuka dharma*) of a substance. However, the N-V believes that it is a quality of a spiritual substance such as the *soul*, or, *Atman*, and inheres in it by the relation of *Samavaya*, which means an eternal and inseparable relationship. Further, it is produced and is destroyed. It should be mentioned that the substances involved in the manifestation of cognition or awareness are the external objects *visayas*, our external sense organs *indriyas*, the connecting link between the external senses and the cogniser, and finally, the agent, or, the cogniser the *Atman*.

According to other authors similar observations have also been made. Raghunath Ghosh, Professor of Philosophy, while evaluating the 'nature of consciousness in Nyaya-Vaisesika' states that 'Self, or Atman, is one of the nine substances accepted by the Vaisesika system of philosophy. Normally Self is admitted as the locus of cognition or consciousness (*jnanadhikaranamatma*)' [2018, 36]. He continues further – '--- that body is not the Self.' [37], '--- that sense organs are not Self.' [40], 'Mind cannot be compared with Self, ---'[40], commenting on Self being the locus of cognition, he says '--- that such qualities are to be taken as incidental properties (*agantuka dharma*) of consciousness, but not the permanent one' [41]. Though he says the Self is eternal, yet, since it exists in human body, it is not clear whether it exists after the human body is destroyed [42]. College teacher of Sanskrit, Kakoli Chandra Mishra states that '(N)yaya initially disciplines the intellect through rational inquiry and valid cognition. Nyaya-Vaisesika subsequently integrates logic and ontology into a comprehensive philosophical synthesis. Vaisesika then advances toward increasingly subtle metaphysical principles that reduce visible multiplicity into hidden structures and unseen causal order' [2026, 77].

Though Mimansa is not generally concerned with metaphysics, and hence may not be quite interested in consciousness, yet, has put its entry into the study of nature of consciousness through a significant statement on the self-revealing nature of consciousness. Saksena states that 'Acording to Prabhakara Mimansa, every cognition is a 'triputi sambit', it involves (1) 'Visaya sambit', (2) 'Aham sambit', (3) 'swa-sambit' [1944, 61]. It means, like a lamp illumines simultaneously an object, itself, and its substrate – the wick; consciousness illumines simultaneously an external object – *visaya*, itself – *swa*, and its substrate – the *Atman*, or, *Aham*. The Mimansa view consciousness as an action of the *soul*, *jnana karma*, which produces *jnatata*, or, 'cognisedness' in the objects. Further, consciousness is not recognized synonymous with the self as done by the Vedantists, a distinction is always maintained between consciousness and self, their

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relationship being that of an *agent* and *act*. That way, the position of Mimansa is somewhere in-between the N-V and the Vedantist.

According to the view of the *Vedantist* Sankara consciousness is 'an eternal, pure, and un-objectified and distinction-less infinite-reality, or a theory of a transcendental and a foundational consciousness with no distinction of ego and non-ego' [45]. The Sankhya-Yoga also holds a similar view that consciousness is eternal and inseparable from the *Purusa*. The first and the foremost point about consciousness is that the essence of reality must be its absoluteness and it should ever remain the same, unconditioned by time, space, and causality. Thus writes Saksena – '(T)his self-existing and pure consciousness has a double aspect of transcendental and empirical reality. Under the former, it is to be understood as one, universal, unchanging, inactive and distinction-less; while under the latter, as particular, changing, active, and full of distinctions'[68]. Other authors discussing on nature of consciousness according to Vedanta philosophy such as Bhatt [2020] and Francis [2023] have also presented similar views.

The Epistemological Nature of Consciousness

Self-luminosity of consciousness, or, *svatah prakasatva*, which has a strong epistemological dimension, is one of the most important natures of consciousness in Hindu philosophy. Vedantists' view is taken as the final one, which states that 'consciousness, or, cognition, whenever it arises, is directly and immediately cognized along with the object cognized' [Saksena 1944, 69]. It is unique in this sense that, at once, it becomes both the source as well as the principle of all revelations in the universe, both light and knowledge. So, to say, it is *svayamsiddha*, *svayamjyotih* and *svaprakasa*, and while manifesting, it illumines all objects and itself. While standing as eternal witness, the source, and the essence of all manifestation, it is unmodified, ever shining in its own light, and grasped in a unitary and direct intuition [103]. Besides the Vedantists of the Sankara school, the Yogacara Vijnanavadins, the Prabhakara school of Purva Mimansa, and the Sankhya-Yoga scholars follow similar views, with slight alternations here and there.

However, the Nyayayikas hold the view that the cognition is cognized by a subsequent, or a later mental perception. In fact, in *I perceive this*, they see two cognitions, the original one is *this*, which they call *vyavasaya*, and it brings the contact between the cogniser and the object; whereas, the other one is *I perceive*, which they call secondary (subsequent) cognition *anuvyavasaya*, which brings the contact between him and the mind. Their viewpoint is that the first cognition apprehends the things; it does not apprehend the self. Further, they do not deny the latter cognition; they only hold that it appears subsequently. They strongly feel that consciousness is not self-cognised as believed by the Vedantists and Yogacaras, but is perceived by another cognition. Also, it

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is not known by inference as believed by Purva-Mimansas belonging to the school of Cumarila Bhatta.

At the end, after lots of arguments and counter arguments, apparently the Vedanists view holds that a unitary and undifferentiated consciousness exists, illumines itself and is the principle of illumination in all experience and knowledge. The verse number 34 of Chapter 13 of Bhagavat Gita probably gives an exact description of it. It reads in Sanskrit: यथा प्रकाशयत्येकः कृत्स्नं लोकमिमं रविः । **क्षेत्रं** क्षेत्री तथा कृत्स्नं **प्रकाशयति** भारत ॥ (In English: yathā prakāśayaty ekaḥ kṛtsnaṁ lokam imaṁ raviḥ. **kṣetraṁ** kṣetrī tathā kṛtsnaṁ **prakāśayati** bharata.) Its meaning: O son of Bharata, just as a single sun illuminates this entire universe, so does the soul (the knower of the field) illuminate the entire body (the field) with consciousness. The Upanisads such as: Brihadaranyaka. 4.3.7, and 4.3.14, Katha. 5.15., and Chandogya. 3.14.2. also provide similar views [71].

The Psychological Nature of Consciousness

Human psychology is a vital field of study since the man is borne in this universe. On one hand, we study through science/social science, how humans behave, think and feel; on the other, we study human perception, knowledge and consciousness through philosophy. The former, the contemporary psychology, is a well-developed field with western psychology dominating the scene. However, people find a lot of interest in the ancient Indian thought systems which may compliment and supplement the contemporary psychology. Interestingly, this has relevance to the study of consciousness. Romanian-born American philosopher Christian Coseru mentions - 'Indian philosophy is host to a rich tradition of reflection about the nature of consciousness, that incorporates both causal theories of mental content and detailed phenomenological analyses of the structure and operations of consciousness and cognition' [2016, 102-103]. The German psychologist Peter Sedimeier and the Indian philosopher Kunchapudi Srinivas, while looking at how do theories of cognition and consciousness in ancient Indian thought systems (specifically Sankhya and Yoga) relate to current Western theorizing and research, conclude that '(I)n this article we claim that ancient Indian theories of cognition have indeed something to offer mainstream Western psychology' [2016, 13]. Two Indian ladies Vanshika Dobriyal and Laxmi Rawat Chauhan, while studying the difference between the human mind and consciousness in terms of Indian psychological theories, have observed 'According to Indian psychology, the mind is characterized by constant modifications, including thoughts, emotions, and sensations, whereas in the Samkhya-Yoga school of thought, consciousness (Purusa) is perceived to be static. With such an approach, people are able to consider their mental processes as objects of observation rather than components of their identities' [2026, 168].

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The actual problem of psychological nature of consciousness lies in the self-consciousness, and Saksena shows how various Indian 'theories of self-consciousness lead to the conclusion of a unitary and a distinction-less consciousness' [1944, 104]. First, considering the opinions of all the seers in all the traditional Indian thought systems, it is shown that various theories of consciousness of self-merge which may be termed as: (i) self is perceived by ordinary mental perception like any other ordinary object, (ii) self is known by not perception but by inference (Nyaya), (iii) self is known by a higher and super-normal perception, and (iv) self is neither perceived as an object nor inferred, but we have an immediate intuition of it by the reason of its self-luminosity (by Vedanta and Sankhya-Yoga) [115]. The final solution comes from Vedanta and Sankhya-Yoga by recognizing two aspects of consciousness, one transcendental and the other empirical. On this recognition is based the *Advaita* distinction of the *Atman*, which is the eternal light, and the *Jiva*, which is the eternal consciousness limited by the organism (the sense-organs, *Manasa* and *Antahkaran*). The *Jiva* can be both the subject and the object, whereas the *Atman* is never the object of consciousness. However, it is significant to note that, in case of the monist *Advaita*, *Atman* stands as the static consciousness, or the supreme reality, and *Jiva* (or, *Avidya*) is relegated as a lower principle of reality with the role of change and dynamism. In case of the dualist, *Purusa* takes the role of *Atman*, whereas, *Prakriti* assumes the role of *Jiva*.

The Transcendental Nature of Consciousness

The final solution given in the last paragraph, in reality, is not the final solution. As Coseru puts it – '(D)rawing their inspiration from the Upanisads, Advaitins take the principle of self-luminosity to its logical conclusion' [2016, 100]. He continues further – '(C)onsciousness is no longer just an attribute of the self ---. The Advaita theory of consciousness rests on the claim that, ultimately, mind and world are an irreducibly singular reality, in which the ultimate principle of things (*brahman*) and the principle of individuation (*atman*) are one and same ---'[101]. Thus, the duality of the last paragraph is brought to a singularity and this singularity is the transcendental nature of consciousness.

Saksena provides the details about transcendental nature of consciousness [1944, 130-161]. After distinguishing between mind and consciousness based on *Yoga Bhasya*, he goes on describing how consciousness is transcendental. The first feature of transcendental consciousness is, of course, self-luminosity, *svatahprakasatvo*. The rest of the features are: it is pure, eternal and all pervading, it is uncaused, it is an un-differentiated and distinction-less unity, it is unaffected (*asanga* and *kevala*), its intellectual knowledge is beyond grasp, its existence is ascertained by the method of *Adhyaropa*, it is intelligible but not definable, its proof is that it is *svayamsiddha*, it is

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saccidananda, it is non-active *Akarta*, and its activity is in the form of inactivity of *Lila*. Thus, consciousness has a transcendental aspect which alone is its basic nature. Of course, there are many critics of this theory, yet, it stands straight as *Brahmann* for the *Advatins* and *Purusa* for the *Sankhya-Yogis*.

Conclusions

This paper continued to describe consciousness according to Hindu philosophy from where it left in the earlier part. It touched upon the initiation of the enquiry in Vedic period and its consolidation in Upanishadic period. Then, it presented various natures of consciousness starting from ontological to epistemological to psychological and ending in transcendental nature of consciousness. Here, an attempt is also made to show how various Indian traditional thought schools contributed for its build-up.

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