

The Self and Freedom in Relation to Indian Knowledge System (IKS): An Epistemological and Metaphysical Inquiry of G. R. Malkani's Philosophy

¹Deepamoni Sarma, ²Dr. Sabitri Devi

¹Assistant professor, Department of Philosophy, Bihpuria College, Lakhimpur, Assam, India

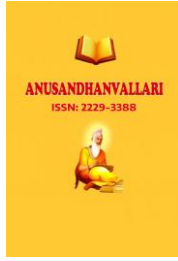
²Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, Cotton University, Guwahati, Assam, India

Abstract: The question of the Self (*ātman*) and its relation to freedom and knowledge have been central to Indian philosophy from the earliest Upaniṣadic speculations to the sophisticated metaphysical systems of classical Vedānta. Malkani, a prominent twentieth-century Indian philosopher, reinterprets classical Advaita Vedānta in the light of modern epistemological and metaphysical concerns, emphasizing the identity of Self and knowledge, and the realization of freedom as the *summum bonum* of human existence. Freedom holds a significant position in both traditional and modern Indian Philosophy. The idea of freedom is primarily ethical and spiritual for traditional Indian philosophers, but for modern Indian philosophers it is not completely ethical it is metaphysical and existential. They hold that men possess both metaphysical and existential freedom. This paper critically examines G.R. Malkani's epistemological framework, focusing on his conception of the self and its relationship to knowledge and freedom as articulated in his seminal works such as *Metaphysics of Advaita Vedānta* and *Philosophy of the Self*. Malkani posits that the self is a substantial, self-aware entity, distinct from the empirical self-known through knowledge of objects. Central to his thought is the notion of unitive knowledge, which transcends the subject-object dichotomy and affirms the Self as self-luminous and identical with Brahman. He argues that knowledge is not merely a quality of the self but constitutes its essential intelligence. This analysis explores Malkani's arguments, situating them within the broader context of Advaita Vedānta philosophy and comparing them with contemporary epistemological and metaphysical perspectives.

Keywords: Self, Unitive knowledge, *Advaita Vedānta*, Substance, Self-realization.

Introduction

The philosophical problem of knowledge and its connection to the Self constitutes a perennial concern in Indian intellectual traditions, tracing a continuous trajectory from the Vedic hymns to the modern Indian Philosophy. The Upaniṣads, often considered the philosophical foundation of Indian thought, emphasize the knowledge of unity as the highest wisdom. Their declarations such as *tat tvam asi* ("That thou art") and *aham brahmāsmi* ("I am Brahman") point toward the identity of the individual self (*ātman*) with the absolute (*Brahman*). This insight became the central teaching of Advaita Vedānta, most systematically developed by Śaṅkara, who argued that ultimate reality is non-dual (*advaita*) and that multiplicity is an illusion (*māyā*). Knowledge in this framework is not merely empirical or conceptual but transformative, leading to the realization of the Self as identical with Brahman. In the modern period, with the encounter between Indian and Western intellectual traditions, this ancient concern was reinterpreted through new philosophical categories. Thinkers such as Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, and S. Radhakrishnan developed the movement of Neo-Vedānta, which sought to restate Advaitic insights in terms accessible to modern



thought. Among these figures, G. R. Malkani occupies a distinctive position as a modern thinker who synthesizes classical Advaitic metaphysics with contemporary epistemological inquiry, emphasizing that freedom and bondage coexist as competing forces that shape ethical deliberation and human existence. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Malkani's epistemology, focusing on the nature of the self, the inseparability of knowledge from the self, and the philosophical implications of his approach. At the heart of Malkani's thought is the notion of *unitive knowledge*. Unlike empirical knowledge, which depends upon the subject-object dichotomy, unitive knowledge transcends duality and reveals the Self as self-effulgent, non-objective, and self-identical. In his view, true knowledge is not a quality or attribute of the Self but the very essence of the Self itself. This idea has profound implications for both epistemology and metaphysics. The significance of Malkani's philosophy lies not only in his restatement of Advaita but also in his critical engagement with modern issues. He raises questions about the nature of consciousness, the possibility of knowledge beyond empirical verification, and the relationship between freedom and knowledge

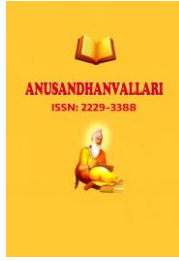
Objectives Of The Study

1. To examine G.R. Malkani's conception of the Self and evaluate whether it is a substantial, self-luminous reality or merely a formal unity of consciousness.
2. To analyze the relationship between the Self and knowledge, focusing on Malkani's argument that knowledge is inseparable from the Self and constitutes its essential nature.
3. To explore the role of intuition in self-realization, demonstrating how Malkani links experiential awareness, deep sleep, and introspective knowledge to the realization of the Self.
4. To investigate Malkani's conception of freedom (*Moṣka*) as the summum bonum, showing how knowledge of the Self leads to liberation from ignorance and bondage.

The Self In Relation To Knowledge

Knowledge, in the Indian Knowledge System is not merely understood as a cognitive operation but as a deeper realization of truth that leads to liberation (*mokṣa*). G.R. Malkani's reflections on knowledge occupy a distinctive position within the broader framework of the Indian Knowledge System. Rooted in the Advaitic tradition, yet critically engaging with modern epistemological debates, Malkani insists that knowledge cannot be reduced to a mere psychological function or a relation between objects. Instead, he conceives it as an essential manifestation of the self, inseparable from consciousness and integral to the very possibility of knowing. Malkani's epistemology resonates with this vision by asserting the substantiality of the self as the ultimate knower and by emphasizing the identity of knowledge and consciousness, thereby aligning his philosophy with the core principles of the Indian Knowledge System while offering a refined neo-Vedantic interpretation.

The relation between the Self (*ātman*) and knowledge has been one of the central problems of Indian epistemology and metaphysics. Is the Self merely a formal unity, required only to account for the coherence of knowledge, or is it a substantive reality, existing independently of its relation to objects. G. R. Malkani's philosophy provides a systematic exploration of these problems, seeking to demonstrate that the Self is not only real but also essentially identical with knowledge. His reflections engage with classical Advaita Vedānta while also addressing the epistemological challenges posed by modern philosophy. Malkani begins with the observation that the form of all

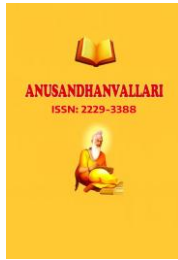


knowledge is personal. Every act of cognition is expressed in the structure “*I know this*” or “*I know that*.” The “I” that appears in such expressions is the empirical self, which is always relative to some object. This empirical self is conditioned by object-awareness, and without the presence of objects, there is no direct awareness of the self. This suggests that the empirical self may be nothing more than a formal unity of knowledge, a functional principle, rather than a substantive reality. G.R. Malkani says, “It is agreed that the form of all knowledge is personal, I know this, that etc. The ‘I’ that is thus known is called our empirical self. This self is strictly relative to some objective content that is known. If nothing is known objectively, we have no evidence of the empirical self. It is only known in relation to a concrete act of the mind involving reference to an objective situation. When therefore we do not know anything, we cannot be aware of the empirical self. Does the self then exist in some way proper to its own essential being? We appear to have no data on the basis of which a decision can be arrived at. We are aware of the self as long as we know objects. When we have ceased to know objects, we have also ceased to become aware of the self. How can we prove the self to exist apart from any relation to objects? And if we cannot prove that, the self is indeed real in so far as it is implied in all knowledge, but it cannot be proved to have any substantial being. It is merely a formal unity of knowledge.” (Deshpandey, 1997, p. 9)

The Substantiality Of The Self And The Reality Of Knowledge

Malkani turns to human experience in the state of deep sleep (*susupti*) to refute this reductionist view. In dreamless sleep, we affirm upon waking: “*I slept and knew nothing*.” This recollection is certain and uncontradicted, which means that some form of awareness persists even in the absence of objects. If awareness were completely interrupted during sleep, there could be no memory of that state. Therefore, the self does not cease to exist when it is not related to objects. Instead, it exists as pure awareness of “no-object.” G.R. Malkani states that, “The awareness of the self is never interrupted in sleep. If it were interrupted, there would be no consciousness on waking up that we slept or that there was a state of our own being in which we did not know anything. While therefore we can, by the very nature of the case, have no direct empirical evidence of the existence of the self when there is no awareness of any object, we cannot really deny its existence during any such interval. The self can thus be shown to be more than a formal unity of knowledge that involves subject-object relation. It exists when there is no knowledge of any object.” (Deshpandey, 1997, p. 10) This insight demonstrates that the self transcends the empirical self-tied to object-knowledge. It is not merely formal or relational but a real and continuous spiritual substance. This reasoning aligns with the Advaitic tradition, where the continuity of consciousness across waking, dream, and deep sleep states is invoked to affirm the permanence and reality of the self (*Ātman*).

Another strand of Malkani’s argument is based on the nature of knowledge itself. He argues, the reality of knowledge itself proves the substantiality of the self, it is not reducible to the physical world. It is not an object, nor a quality of objects, nor a relation between objects. Objects do not know; knowledge is not a property of matter. If knowledge is real, it cannot rest on physical or material foundations. Instead, it requires a spiritual ground, which is the self. The self is essentially intelligent. To conceive of a self-devoid of intelligence would be self-contradictory. An unintelligent self would be indistinguishable from matter. Therefore, the self must be substantial, and its substance must be spiritual consciousness. In this way, the reality of knowledge guarantees the substantiality of the self. According to G.R. Malkani, “the reality of knowledge implies in some sense the reality and the substantiality of the self. If the self were no more than a formal and evanescent unity of knowledge without any character of its own, knowledge would itself be reduced to an unreal appearance resting on physical things. We conclude that the self is a real entity that exists



even when there is no knowledge of objects as such, and that it is in this sense a substance.” (Deshpandey, 1997, p. 10) Having established that the Self is real, Malkani turns to the question of its relation to knowledge. He insists that knowledge cannot be reduced to an object or a physical phenomenon. Objects do not “know” anything, nor can knowledge be regarded as a relation between objects. If knowledge were merely a by-product of physical processes, it would lack the self-evident certainty that characterizes it. For Malkani, knowledge is distinct from objects and irreducible to physical explanations; it must therefore be grounded in a spiritual substance; the Self. The Self alone knows, and in this sense, the reality of knowledge implies the reality of the Self. If the Self were nothing more than a formal appearance, knowledge itself would collapse into illusion. By contrast, if knowledge is real, then the Self, as its basis, must also be real.

Malkani then turns to the relationship between the self and knowledge. If we treat them as distinct, several possibilities arise. First, knowledge might be considered a quality of the self. But this raises problems: if knowledge were occasional and separable, then the self would sometimes lack intelligence, which is a contradiction. An unintelligent self cannot be conceived. Therefore, if knowledge is a quality, it must be inseparable from the self. But in that case, why distinguish them at all? If the self is always knowing, knowledge appears to be its very essence.

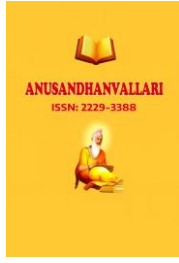
Self And Knowledge Are Identical

Malkani carefully considers whether self and knowledge are distinct. Several possibilities arise:

- **Knowledge as a quality of the self:** If separable, then the self would sometimes lack intelligence; but this is impossible. If inseparable, knowledge is essential to the self, making any distinction redundant.
- **Both self and knowledge self-known:** This creates a contradiction, since two absolutes cannot coexist.
- **Knowledge alone self-known:** This reduces the self to an unintelligent substratum illuminated from outside, which is incoherent.
- **Self alone self-known:** This seems plausible, but knowledge cannot then be reduced to an object known by the self; instead, it must be understood as the self’s own intrinsic nature.

From this reasoning, Malkani concludes that the self and knowledge are identical in essence. To clarify, Malkani critiques analogies that liken knowledge to light or to sense-organs. Light may reveal objects, but it is itself dependent and non-intelligent. Sense-organs connect us to objects but cannot generate knowledge on their own. Knowledge differs fundamentally from both: it is self-revealing and intelligent. Unlike physical phenomena, it does not require another medium to be revealed. Thus, knowledge is not external to the self but is identical with its very nature. G.R. Malkani states that, “We conclude that the relation in essence is one of identity. Knowledge may be said to constitute the essential intelligence of the self. The apparent distinctness of knowledge from the self that knows is false, and is only relative to objects known.” (Deshpandey, 1997, p. 13) Thus, the true self (Ātman) is not an object, nor merely a formal unity, but a substantial and self-luminous reality identical with knowledge. Malkani’s argument is that the distinction between self and knowledge is illusory and empirical. At the level of ultimate reality, self and knowledge are one. The self is not a passive substratum that possesses the quality of knowledge; rather, the self is pure intelligence itself. The distinction between self and knowledge arises only in relation to objects, but in truth, they are identical.

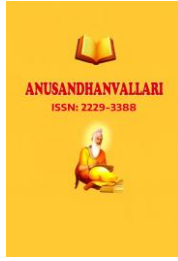
The Limits Of Empirical And Scientific Knowledge



The pursuit of knowledge has often been associated with the progress of science. Modern philosophy and intellectual culture frequently assume that science represents the highest and most reliable form of knowing. Science is empirical, methodical, and cumulative, and its results are generally verifiable and practical. However, G. R. Malkani argues that while science has value in organizing the phenomena of the external world, it cannot access the ultimate truth of reality. In his *Metaphysics of Advaita Vedanta*, Malkani offers a systematic critique of scientific knowledge, highlighting its inherent limitations, and contrasting it with the higher, intuitive knowledge of the Self. G.R. Malkani claimed that Science is unable to accomplished the unitive knowledge due to the flaws and limitations in its methodology. G.R. Malkani states that “science also pursues truth. But its approach to the problem is unreflective. It does not consciously seek truth. It consciously seeks to know the object. It takes the object for granted. It does not doubt the object as such. All its questions are about the object. This knowledge can have no end or limit. What we come to know becomes only the basis for a new question. The goal can be nothing less than objective omni-science, which is ruled out by the very method of science, which is the method of trial and error. Scientific truth is factual truth only.” (Deshpandey, 1997, p. 30) Science begins with the differences that must remain within them and all of its issues have to do with the behaviour of things Scientific knowledge, Malkani argues, is essentially external. It tells us about the relations between objects but does not disclose their intrinsic essence. True knowledge, however, must be internal—it must reveal what something is rather than merely how it behaves. This is particularly true of the Self. The Self cannot be known externally, as an object among objects. It can only be realized internally, through direct intuition. Scientific knowledge is always indirect, mediated by observation and inference, while Self-knowledge is immediate and intuitive.

Intuition, Self-Realization, And Freedom As The Culmination Of Knowledge

Malkani’s philosophy ultimately culminates in the inseparability of self, knowledge, and freedom. For him, intuition is the key to self-realization, for the Self (*ātman*) is not an external object of knowledge but is self-revealing and self-luminous (*svayam-prakāśa*). To realize the Self through intuition is not to acquire something new but to awaken to what is always already present in consciousness. Malkani argues that while empirical and rational knowledge can help in navigating the external world, only intuition can grasp the inherent reality of the self and the ultimate nature of existence. According to G. R. Malkani, “intuition is an instrument of knowledge superior to the intellect involves a fundamental misunderstanding as to the proper function of the intellect. The intellect by itself cannot know any kind of reality, sensible or super-sensible. All knowledge of reality must originally come by some form of direct experience or intuition” (Deshpandey, 1997, p. 5) This realization is not the attainment of fresh content but the removal of ignorance (*avidyā*), which conceals the ever-present truth. Malkani repeatedly emphasizes the significance of deep sleep (*susupti*), where though objects are absent, the Self remains self-aware. Upon awakening, the recollection “I slept and knew nothing” confirms that consciousness never ceases. Such continuity reveals that the Self is never absent but persists as the ground of all states of awareness. Intuition, therefore, makes explicit what is already implicit, showing that the Self is always self-present and luminous. Self-realization in this sense is not epistemic in the empirical sense but ontological, an unveiling of reality as it is. This realization naturally opens into freedom, which Malkani regards as the *summum bonum* of life and the culmination of philosophy. In Indian thought, freedom (*mokṣa*) is not merely political autonomy or moral independence but liberation from bondage, ignorance, and suffering. It stands as the highest of the *puruṣārthas*, surpassing *dharma* (duty), *artha* (wealth), and *kāma* (pleasure). Within Advaita Vedānta, freedom is attained when the Self is realized as non-different from Brahman, the absolute reality. Malkani reiterates this classical vision with a modern emphasis: knowledge is inseparable from freedom, for “truth alone can make us free” (Malkani, 1961, p. 214).



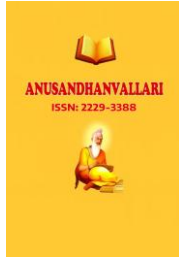
Knowledge of reality dissolves bondage and unveils the perfection of freedom, demonstrating that epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics are not isolated but deeply integrated. Freedom thus acquires an existential significance: human life, caught between ignorance and liberation, finds its resolution only in the realization of the Self as pure knowledge. In this vision, Malkani not only restates the Advaitic synthesis but also offers a response to modern concerns, affirming that freedom is not escapism from the world but the transformation of existence itself. To know the Self is to be free, and to be free is to live in truth—this is the highest philosophical and spiritual insight that crowns Malkani's Advaitic inquiry into the unity of self and knowledge.

Conclusion

Malkani's account of self and knowledge stands as a significant philosophical attempt to reinterpret Advaita Vedānta in dialogue with modern epistemology. By addressing the Kantian concern of whether the self is merely a formal unity of apperception, Malkani insists upon the substantiality and permanence of the self. His use of the deep sleep (*suṣupti*) experience as evidence is a distinctly Advaitic strategy, yet articulated in critical and phenomenological terms accessible to modern philosophy. The culmination of his reasoning is that self and knowledge are ultimately identical; the self is not a substance that merely possesses knowledge as a quality, but is itself pure intelligence, self-luminous and self-revealing. Knowledge is inseparable from the self, and together they constitute the very ground of reality. In affirming this, Malkani critiques the reductionism of empirical science and defends intuition as the only valid mode of realizing ultimate truth. For him, freedom (*mokṣa*), the *summum bonum* of life, is not external or acquired but intrinsic to the very nature of the Self, revealed when ignorance is dissolved and the Self is realized in its fullness. Thus, epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics converge in his system, for knowledge is liberation, and liberation is the realization of the Self as Brahman. Malkani's thought bridges classical Advaitic insights with contemporary concerns, engaging both Indian traditions and Western philosophical discourse. In today's context, his insistence on the irreducibility of consciousness and the universality of freedom remains deeply relevant, offering a response not only to epistemological skepticism but also to existential anxieties of the modern world. His vision of unitive knowledge affirms non-duality while addressing the perennial human quest for truth, selfhood, and freedom. To realize the Self as knowledge is to awaken to liberation, and in this realization lies the enduring philosophical and spiritual contribution of G.R. Malkani.

References

- [1] Deshpandey, Shared. (Ed). (1997) *The Philosophy of G.R. Malkani*, Indian Council of Philosophical Research, New Delhi.
- [2] Malkani, G. R. (1961). *Metaphysics of Advaita Vedānta*. Indian Institute of Philosophy.
- [3] Malkani, G. R. (1963). *Philosophy of value*. Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan.
- [4] Malkani, G. R. (1997). *The Philosophy of G.R. Malkani* (R. Prasad, Ed.). Indian Council of Philosophical Research.
- [5] Malkani, G.R. (1918) *The Problem of Nothing*, Indian Institute of Philosophy, Amalner.
- [6] Malkani, G.R. (1924) *Sin and Bondage*, Indian Institute of Philosophy, Amalner.



-
- [7] Malkani, G.R. (1927) *A Study of Reality*, Indian Institute of Philosophy, Amalner.
- [8] Malkani, G.R. (1939) *The Philosophy of the Self*, Indian Institute of Philosophy, Amalner.
- [9] Malkani, G.R. (1953) *Vedantic Epistemology*, Indian Institute of Philosophy, Amalner.
- [10] Malkani, G.R. (1961) *Metaphysics of Advaita Vedanta*, Indian Institute of Philosophy, Amalner.
- [11] Malkani, G.R. (1973) *A Discussion on the Law of Karma*, Indian Institute of Philosophy, Amalner.
- [12] Radhakrishnan, S. (1940) *Indian Philosophy*. vol. I. Allen and Unwin Ltd. London.
- [13] Radhakrishnan, S. (1953). *The Principal Upanishads*. Harper & Brothers.
- [14] Radhakrishnan, S. (2015). *The Hindu view of life*. HarperCollins Publishers India. (Original work published 1926)
- [15] Radhakrishnan, S. and Murhead, J.H. (ed.), *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, Allen and Unwin Publication, New Delhi