



The notion of ‘ownership of knowledge’ in Indian epistemological traditions: A comparative study of Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya, and Buddhist thought

Dr. Putta V V Satyanarayana

Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Government Degree College, RUSA Model Degree College, Jaggampeta, Andhra Pradesh, India

Abstract

The study analyses the modern concept of Intellectual Property (IP) through the perspective of Indian epistemological traditions, with a focus on the Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya, and Buddhist schools of thought. It argues that the dominant Euro-American model of IP—centered on individual authorship, originality, and proprietary control—rests on ontological and epistemic assumptions that are not universal. Drawing on classical Indian texts, this study explores how these three philosophical systems conceptualize jñāna (knowledge), pramāṇa (valid cognition), and the ethical conditions for knowledge transmission. The Mīmāṃsā tradition’s notion of apauruṣeya (non-human authorship) of the Vedas positions knowledge as eternal and authorless, foregrounding a model of intellectual commons. Nyāya philosophy, with its emphasis on śabda-pramāṇa (testimony as a valid means of knowledge), constructs a relational view of epistemic authority grounded in reliability rather than originality. In contrast, Buddhist epistemology—rooted in the doctrine of anātman (non-self)—problematizes the very idea of a fixed knowing subject, thereby challenging the conceptual coherence of ownership in relation to knowledge. Through comparative analysis, the study highlights how these systems collectively offer a non-proprietary, ethically mediated understanding of knowledge that stands in critical contrast to the commodification logic of contemporary IP regimes. The study contributes to decolonial knowledge discourse by suggesting that Indian philosophical traditions provide robust alternatives for reimagining global frameworks of intellectual ownership.

Keywords: Intellectual property, Indian knowledge system, ownership of knowledge, epistemology, ethics of knowledge

Introduction

The modern legal framework of Intellectual Property (IP) is fundamentally premised upon the idea that knowledge, once created, can be owned, protected, and exclusively exploited by individuals or institutions for profit. Deeply rooted in Enlightenment values of originality, individual authorship (ownership), and economic incentive, contemporary IP regimes are grounded in philosophical justifications advanced by philosophers such as Locke, Hegel, and Bentham (Hesse, 1990) [9]. These frameworks emphasize notions of labour, personhood, and utilitarian maximization to legitimize the control over intangible cultural and intellectual goods (ideas) (Peter Jaszi, Martha Woodmansee, 2014) [18]. However, the universal applicability of such legal and philosophical constructs is increasingly being called into question—especially in the context of non-Western knowledge systems, where the categories of authorship, innovation, and ownership may be conceptualized in strikingly different manner (Peter Jaszi, Martha Woodmansee, 2014) [18].

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) offers a deep and intricate philosophical engagement with the nature of knowledge (jñāna), valid means of acquiring knowledge (pramāṇa), sources of knowledge (pramātr), and its ethical and metaphysical implications. Within classical Indian philosophy (darśana), the question whether knowledge is to be considered a personal possession, a communal inheritance, or a transcendental revelation is taken up with considerable rigor. Each of the philosophical traditions of Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya, and Bauddha epistemology present distinct yet systematically developed perspectives on the ontology and epistemology of knowledge, raising questions that resonate overwhelmingly with, and often contest, the

assumptions sustaining modern conception of intellectual property.

In Mīmāṃsā, the concept of apauruṣeya (non-human authorship) attributed to the Veda challenges the idea that knowledge can or should be owned by an individual (Pollock, 1989) [20]. Here, knowledge is eternal, impersonal, and accessible through ritual and hermeneutic practice rather than invention or innovation. The Nyāya school, by contrast, places strong emphasis on śabda-pramāṇa (verbal testimony) as a valid means of knowledge, while also insisting on the reliability and moral integrity (āptatva) of the speaker. This introduces a relational model of epistemic legitimacy, where knowledge is not simply created and owned, but communicated within a moral community. In Bauddha epistemology, particularly within the Yogācāra and Pramāṇa traditions, the foundational concept of anātman (non-self) fundamentally destabilizes the very notion of a possessive, stable subject who might claim ownership over knowledge. Thus, knowledge is seen as impermanent, conditioned, and interdependent; a perspective that overthrows proprietary logics.

This study seeks to explore the notion of ownership of knowledge within these three schools of classical Indian thought, exploring how they conceptualize the generation, transmission, and ethical status of knowledge in ways that either align with or diverge from the frameworks underpinning modern IP law. Rather than attempting to directly transplant these philosophical systems into the legal domain, the aim of this study is to extract from them a set of normative and ontological insights that can enrich, critique, and possibly decolonize the contemporary understanding of the notion of intellectual property.

In doing so, this study contributes to the growing field of comparative epistemology and postcolonial legal theory, while also addressing the urgent need to recognize and engage with plural knowledge traditions in the construction of global intellectual property regimes. By foregrounding the internal logics of Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya, and Bauddha epistemologies, the study resists both the exoticization and the assimilation of IKS into Western paradigms. Instead, it affirms these traditions as philosophically rigorous and normatively significant contributors to the global discourse on the nature, value, and ownership of knowledge.

Conceptual Groundwork: Ownership, Authorship, and the Western Episteme

The modern notion of IP is structured upon foundational assumptions regarding authorship, individual creativity, and ownership of intangible ideas (Ginsburg, 2003) [8]. These assumptions emerged in close conjunction with Enlightenment epistemology, capitalist modes of production, and liberal legal theory. Central to this framework is the notion that knowledge, or its concretized form in texts, inventions, or artistic works, originates in the mind of an identifiable subject who, by virtue of creation, acquires legal and moral rights of ownership (Chatterjee, 2022) [4]. This subject is conceived as autonomous, rational, and proprietorial—mirroring the metaphysical construct of the possessive individual that undergirds Western political and legal theory (Moore, 2012) [15].

From John Locke’s labour theory of property to Hegel’s articulation of property as the externalization of the self, the Western legal imagination has consistently privileged individual origination and exclusive control over ideas as natural and just (Hughes, 1988) [10]. The Berne Convention (1886) and the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement have internationalized these assumptions, establishing originality, fixation, and authorial intention as necessary grounds for legal recognition.

However, these categories—ownership, authorship, and proprietorship of knowledge—are not epistemically neutral nor culturally universal (Dagmar Schäfer, Annapurna Mamidipudi, Marius (ed), 2023) [6]. Rather, they are deeply rooted in a particular metaphysical worldview that equates cognition with control, and knowledge with commodifiable output (Rotta, 2018) [21]. Within this epistemic framework, knowledge (as idea) is often reified as an object, capable of being alienated, owned, or transferred (Boyle, Winter 2003) [3] — thereby transforming jñāna (knowledge as lived insight or realization) into intellectual property (knowledge as legal commodity).

In contrast, Indian epistemological traditions—across varied darśanas—operate with radically different ontologies of the knower, the known, and the process of knowing. The Sanskrit term jñāna encompasses not merely representational content but also transformative realization (aparokṣānubhūti), often embedded within ethical and soteriological frameworks (Murty, 1959) [16]. Moreover, the classical Indian theories of knowledge (pramāṇa-śāstra) do not premise knowledge on originality or ownership but on pramā (valid cognition), pramāṇa (means of knowing), and the āpta (conditions of epistemic trust) (Phillips, 2025) [19].

Notably, in these traditions:

- The authorship of knowledge is often rendered irrelevant or subordinated to the validity of the knowledge itself.

- Knowledge is approached as non-proprietary, relational, and ethically mediated, rather than individually owned.
- The process of knowledge transmission is embedded within guru-śiṣya paramparā (teacher-disciple lineages), where the emphasis lies not on intellectual originality but on śraddhā (faith), adhikāra (eligibility), and anubhava (direct experience).

The absence of a rigid concept of intellectual proprietorship in these traditions does not imply a lack of structure or ethical normativity. Instead, knowledge was regulated through ethical paradigms of obligation (dharma), reverence (bhakti), and right conduct (āchāra), rather than through codified legal rights (Sooklal, 1990) [22]. Consequently, what modern law interprets as “intellectual property” was more accurately seen as a shared, sacred trust in Indic traditions—invoking collective memory, scriptural authority, and metaphysical accountability.

Thus, before examining the three specific schools—Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya, and Buddhism—it is essential to underscore that the very idea of “knowledge as property” is not axiomatic across cultures. The categories of svatva (ownership), adhikāra (entitlement), and utapathi (origination) were understood in fundamentally different ways within the IKS.

Mīmāṃsā: Eternal Knowledge and Authorlessness

The Mīmāṃsā school, especially the Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā as elaborated by sages like Jaimini and commentators such as Śabara and Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, presents a profound and systematic articulation of knowledge (jñāna) as inherently impersonal, eternal, and self-subsisting (Pollock, 1989) [20]. In this tradition, the question of “ownership of knowledge” is rendered inapplicable within the framework of apauruṣeya—the principle that the Vedas are not the product of any human agency. This metaphysical premise forms the backbone of Mīmāṃsā hermeneutics and carries deep implications for contemporary debates surrounding intellectual property, particularly with regard to the notions of authorship, originality, and proprietary rights.

1. The Doctrine of Apauruṣeya and the Authorless Veda

The Mīmāṃsa school assert that the Veda is apauruṣeya—not authored by any puruṣa (person), whether human or divine. According to Jaimini’s Mīmāṃsā Sūtra (1.1.1), “athāto dharma-jijñāsā” (Now, therefore, the inquiry into dharma), the legitimacy of dharma arises from the Vedic injunctions (vidhi), which are themselves authoritative because they are unauthored (Major B. D. Basu (ed.), 1923) [13]. Śabara’s bhāṣya on this sūtra underscores that the Vedic sentences are not contingent upon the intentions or volitions of an individual subject but are nitya (eternal) and svataḥ-prāmāṇya (self-validating) (Jha, 1933) [11]. Kumārila, in his Śloka-vārttika, elaborates this claim by arguing that the eternality of Vedic words (śabda) and their meanings preclude the possibility of origination in time, and hence, the need for an author (Arnold, 2001) [1].

The epistemological implication is that śabda-pramāṇa (verbal testimony as a means of valid knowledge) gains its authority not from the speaker’s credibility (āptatva) but from the intrinsic and timeless nature of the Vedic utterance itself. In Mīmāṃsā, the Veda is not a composition but a

revelation—an eternal linguistic reality (śabda-tattva), perceived by ṛiṣhis (sages) in states of elevated consciousness.

2. Implications for Ownership and Transmission of Knowledge

In the view of Mīmāṃsā, knowledge (jñāna) is not “owned” but rather interpreted, preserved, and transmitted through disciplined hermeneutic practices (adhyayanam and adhyāpana). The role of the āchārya (teacher) and śiṣya (student) is not simply to receive and pass the knowledge, but to faithfully interpret it which is eternal and uncreated. The integrity of Vedas is maintained through precise oral transmission (śruti), which further reifies the non-proprietary character of sacred knowledge. The paramparā (lineage) becomes the medium through which jñāna flows, not a chain of possessive agents (Sooklal, 1990)^[22].

Thus, any attempt to ascribe authorship or originality to Vedic knowledge would be seen by the Mīmāṃsā tradition as epistemologically erroneous and ethically inappropriate. The concept of intellectual property—predicated on personal authorship, innovation, and exclusivity—has no analog in this tradition. Instead, knowledge is a shared dhārmic (ethical) responsibility, and its custodianship is regulated by ritual, ethical, and pedagogical norms rather than proprietary claims.

3. Hermeneutics as Epistemic Discipline

A critical corollary of the apauruṣeya doctrine is the development of a robust hermeneutical methodology (mīmāṃsā-nyāya) aimed at interpreting the Vedic injunctions. Commentators such as Kumārila emphasize the necessity of syntactic and contextual analysis (vākya-yoga and anvaya) to uncover the prescriptive meaning of Vedic sentences (Arnold, 2001)^[1]. The goal is not creative authorship but exegetical clarity. In this context, the interpreter is not an author (karta) but a mediator (vyākhyātr) of eternal truths.

This hermeneutic ethos reflects the ethics of knowledge where fidelity to tradition is paramount, and innovation is circumscribed by the obligation to preserve and transmit. Therefore, the absence of a notion of “individual intellectual property” is not a limitation but a philosophical stance: that knowledge, when tied to dharma, cannot be commodified or monopolized (Elisa Freschi, Andrew Ollett & Matteo Pascucci, 2019)^[7].

Thus, the Mīmāṃsā school offers a distinctive model of epistemic authority that fundamentally undermines the assumptions of modern intellectual property regimes. By positing jñāna (knowledge) as nitya (eternal), apauruṣeya (impersonal), and dhārmika (ethically embedded), it resists the logic of proprietorship and affirms a relational and duty-based epistemology. This school calls for a serious rethinking of the global knowledge economy, especially in the context of traditional knowledge systems, where communal custodianship and intergenerational transmission remain central.

Nyāya: Authority, Testimony, and Legitimate Transmission

The Nyāya school of philosophy presents a deeply analytical framework for understanding jñāna, emphasizing not the possession of knowledge but its epistemic justification and social accountability. As one of the most

sophisticated systems of pramāṇa-śāstra (the science of valid knowledge) Nyāya articulates a distinct epistemology wherein pramā (valid cognition) is the product of pramāṇa (valid means of cognition), among which śabda (verbal testimony) plays a central role in the transmission of knowledge across persons, generations, and communities (Bilimoria, 1988)^[2].

While Nyāya school of philosophy do not explicitly formulate a doctrine of intellectual “ownership” in the modern juridical sense, their rigorous concern with the legitimacy of sources, the authority of speakers, and the conditions under which testimony is to be accepted as valid indirectly addresses issues that are foundational to any discourse on intellectual property. The Nyāya perspective thus opens a path for rethinking knowledge not as a commodified possession but as a justified belief governed by normative constraints.

1. Śabda as Pramāṇa: Verbal Testimony and Epistemic Trust

According to the Nyāya tradition, śabda is one of the four principal pramāṇas, alongside pratyakṣa (perception), anumāna (inference), and upamāna (analogy). In the Nyāya Sūtra (1.1.7), śabda is defined as “āptopadeśaḥ śabdah”—verbal testimony of a reliable speaker (āpta) (Jha, Gautama's Nyāya-sūtras (with Vātsyāyana Bhāṣya), 1939)^[12]. This definition is critical, for it ties the validity of knowledge not to originality, authorship, or ownership, but to the epistemic reliability and moral competence of the speaker.

The āpta is not merely one who possesses information, but one who is truthful (ṛiju) and has accurate knowledge (yathārtha-jñāna), and who communicates that knowledge without distortion or deception (Jha, Gautama's Nyāya-sūtras (with Vātsyāyana Bhāṣya), 1939)^[12]. In this framework, knowledge does not belong to the speaker as proprietary content but emerges through an ethically conditioned relation between speaker and listener, situated in a context of trust, intention, and communicative clarity.

2. Rejection of Proprietorship: Knowledge as Public and Ethical

Unlike modern conception of intellectual property that center on kartur̥tva (authorship or proprietorship), Nyāya philosophy is largely silent on the notion of exclusive rights over ideas or expressions. What matters is not who first formulated an idea, but whether the idea corresponds to reality and can be justified by valid means (Phillips, 2025)^[19].

Even when a ṛiṣhi (scholar) is cited, it is not out of deference to proprietary claim, but because they are deemed an āpta. The stress is on transparency in transmission, criteria for evaluating trustworthiness, and the contextual relevance of testimony. As such, the Nyāya tradition emphasizes the ethical ecology of knowledge transmission, not its commodification or privatization.

This orientation resonates with the idea of jñāna-dāna (bestowing of knowledge) as a duty (dharma) rather than a transaction governed by exclusivity. The valorisation of pedagogical transmission (guru-śiṣya-paramparā) further reinforces this communitarian model, wherein knowledge circulates under conditions of mutual obligation, rather than contractual rights (Sooklal, 1990)^[22].

3. Intellectual Authority vs. Intellectual Ownership

Nyāya's distinction between pramātṛ (knower) and pramāṇa (means of knowledge) further complicates any

straightforward attribution of knowledge as property. The *pramāṭr* is the epistemic subject, but does not “own” the knowledge acquired; rather, *pramā* arises from the proper operation of *pramāṇas* under favourable conditions (Jha, Gautama's Nyāya-sūtras (with Vātsyāyana Bhāṣya), 1939)^[12]. In this model, intellectual authority is earned through epistemic responsibility and discursive accountability, not through the origination of knowledge *ex nihilo*.

Indeed, Nyāya philosophers such as Vātsyāyana and Uddyotakara engaged in polemical debates not to assert their intellectual possession, but to demonstrate the logical coherence and communicative utility of their positions. This discursive ethos, grounded in the pursuit of *tattva-jñāna* (knowledge of reality), leaves little conceptual room for proprietary knowledge claims.

4. Implications for Rethinking IP from a Nyāya Perspective

Nyāya's insights hold significant implications for the philosophical foundations of intellectual property law. First, they challenge the individualist metaphysics underlying the idea of knowledge as private property. Second, they foreground a model in which knowledge is validated relationally, through ethical testimony and dialogical testing, rather than authorial declaration. Third, the emphasis on veracity over originality, and communal transmission over monopolistic control, aligns with contemporary calls for open access, knowledge commons, and the democratization of epistemic resources.

Thus, the Nyāya school, while pre-modern, offers a normative counterpoint to modern IP regimes, suggesting that truth-oriented, ethically transmitted knowledge is incompatible with exclusivist control. It encourages us to conceptualize intellectual authority not as *svatva* (ownership), but as a form of epistemic stewardship embedded in dharmic responsibility.

Buddhist Epistemology: Anātman and the Non-Possessive Mind

Buddhist epistemology, particularly in the tradition of Yogācāra and Pramāṇa philosophy developed by thinkers such as Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, offers a radical departure from essentialist and proprietary conceptions of knowledge. At the heart of this divergence lies the doctrine of *anātman* (non-self), a foundational principle in Buddhist metaphysics and soteriology (Nadav Amir & John Dunne, 2025)^[17]. This ontological commitment to the absence of a permanent, autonomous self (*ātman*) has profound implications for how knowledge (*jñāna*) is generated, validated, and transmitted—ultimately challenging the very notion of intellectual ownership.

1. Epistemological Foundations: Pramāṇa, Pratyakṣa, and Anumāna

Buddhist thinkers like Dignāga and Dharmakīrti systematized a twofold theory of valid cognition (*pramāṇa*): direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*) (Nadav Amir & John Dunne, 2025)^[17]. While *pratyakṣa* is understood as non-conceptual awareness (*nirvikalpa-jñāna*), *anumāna* involves conceptual construction (*kalpanā*), mediated by linguistic and logical structures. Importantly, both modes of cognition are directed toward dispelling ignorance (*avidyā*) and are evaluated not merely on formal validity, but on their pragmatic and soteriological efficacy—whether they lead to liberation from *duḥkha* (suffering).

Unlike the Nyāya tradition, which emphasizes the reliability of an epistemic subject and the authority of testimony (*śabda-pramāṇa*), Buddhist epistemology refrains from positing a stable knowing self (Coseru, 2014)^[5]. Instead, cognition is analysed as a dynamic stream (*viññāna-santāna*), constituted by momentary mental events (*kṣaṇika-vāda*), each devoid of intrinsic identity (*svabhāva*) (Coseru, 2014)^[5]. This view undermines the ontological precondition for proprietorship: a unitary subject who can claim to “own” an idea or a thought.

2. Deconstructing Authorship: Anātman and Śūnyatā

The implications of *anātman* are amplified when considered alongside the doctrine of *śūnyatā* (emptiness), particularly in the Madhyamaka school, though also implicitly present in Yogācāra. All phenomena, including mental constructs and conceptual knowledge, are understood to lack inherent existence. As Dharmakīrti elaborates in the *Pramāṇavārttika*, even linguistic expressions (*nāma-rūpa*) are conventionally designated and have no ultimate reality (Nadav Amir & John Dunne, 2025)^[17].

This philosophical orientation displaces the epistemic centrality of an individual agent and refutes the metaphysical basis of authorship as a proprietary claim. If the self is a mere aggregation (*skandha*) and all concepts are *pratītya-samutpanna* (dependently originated), then knowledge too is a product of interdependent conditions, not individual invention or possession. The idea of “owning” knowledge is thus incompatible with the foundational Buddhist view of cognition and existence.

3. Transmission and Non-Attachment: Upāya and Ethical Cognition

The ethical ramifications of this epistemology further distance it from modern intellectual property paradigms. Knowledge, in the Buddhist view, is not something to be commodified or withheld, but something to be compassionately shared for the alleviation of suffering. The doctrine of *upāya-kausālya* (skillful means) exemplifies this—teaching is adapted contextually, not for prestige or control, but to suit the needs of sentient beings (McGarrity, 2009)^[14]. The authority of a teacher (*ācārya*) derives not from ownership of content, but from ethical intention (*cetanā*) and skill in communication.

Furthermore, the *Bodhisattva* ideal prescribes *dāna* (generosity) as a core virtue, which extends to the sharing of *dharma-jñāna*. In this sense, knowledge is seen as a form of *dāna-puṇya* (meritorious giving), rather than a tradable asset. This contrasts sharply with the utilitarian or Lockean justifications for intellectual property, which posit knowledge as the fruit of individual labour and subject to exclusionary rights.

4. Contemporary Resonances: Decentralizing Knowledge Authority

The Buddhist epistemic model offers significant resources for rethinking contemporary intellectual property regimes. First, its denial of a self-originating knower challenges the foundational subject-object dualism upon which Western epistemologies and IP frameworks rest. Second, the emphasis on impermanence and interdependence problematizes the fixation on originality and fixity in IP doctrines. Third, its ethics of non-attachment and compassionate sharing resonate with the logic of open-

access movements, creative commons, and the advocacy for knowledge as a global commons.

Rather than viewing knowledge as a rivalrous good protected by scarcity-based regimes, Buddhist thought affirms its inherent non-excludability and non-rivalrousness—qualities that align with a dharma-based vision of epistemic justice.

Comparative Analysis and Contemporary Implications

The epistemological positions articulated by the Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya, and Buddhist traditions do not merely represent isolated doctrinal positions within Indian philosophical discourse; rather, they embody fundamentally divergent ontological and ethical assumptions about jñāna (knowledge), its origin, transmission, and authority. When viewed together, these systems challenge the foundational premises of modern intellectual property regimes, which are grounded in the metaphysical assumptions of selfhood, authorship, and proprietorship.

A comparative reading of these traditions reveals three interlinked themes that stand in critical contrast to the post-Enlightenment Euro-American construction of Intellectual Property: (1) the non-individuation of knowledge production, (2) the moralization of epistemic transmission, and (3) the ontology of knowledge as relational rather than possessive.

1. Non-Individualization of Intellectual Production

In the Mīmāṃsā tradition, knowledge as encoded in the śruti is apauruṣeya—not authored by any individual puruṣa. This radical claim eliminates the possibility of proprietary authorship at its root. Even exegetical interventions, as seen in the works of śāstra-kāras like Śabara or Kumāriḥa Bhaṭṭa, are framed within a hermeneutic tradition that privileges fidelity to the eternal word rather than originality. Here, knowledge is anādi (beginningless) and eternal, embedded in the ṛita (cosmic order), awaiting discovery or correct apprehension (yathārtha-praṭīti), not creation.

In Nyāya, while the puruṣa is central as a knower and as a source of valid testimony (śabda-pramāṇa), the emphasis is not on innovation or originality but on epistemic credibility (āpta) and veridicality (prāmāṇya). The ṛiṣi (sage) is not the “owner” of the truth but its trustworthy conveyor. Thus, even where individuality is acknowledged, it is normatively bounded by truth-claims and ethical responsibility.

Buddhist epistemology introduces a more radical critique through its doctrine of anātman. If the self is a composite and impermanent phenomenon (skandha), lacking enduring essence (svabhāva), then the very idea of personal ownership over jñāna becomes incoherent. Knowledge, in this view, arises from dependent origination (pratītya-samutpāda), conditioned by causes and devoid of intrinsic proprietorship. The Buddhist epistemologists, especially Dharmakīrti, replace the notion of ownership with one of causal efficacy and pragmatic validation (arthakriyā-kāritva).

2. Ethical Transmission and the Moral Economy of Knowledge

Across these traditions, the legitimacy of knowledge is intimately tied to its mode of transmission. In Mīmāṃsā, the transmission of śāstra-jñāna is embedded in ritual authority and āchāra (custom), requiring a chain of competent interpreters (guru-śiṣya-paramparā) who transmit without

distortion. Nyāya's āpta-vākya theory demands that the speaker be both jñānī (knower) and satya-vādī (truthful), underscoring a moral accountability in the dissemination of knowledge. The Buddhist framework, particularly in the Yogācāra and Sautrāntika schools, reconfigures this in terms of intentional compassion (karuṇā)—knowledge is to be shared for the liberation of sentient beings, not hoarded or commodified.

This moral dimension is largely absent in contemporary intellectual property frameworks, where legitimacy is conferred through mechanisms of legal codification, exclusivity, and market-driven utility. The contrast is thus not merely epistemic but ethical: Indian traditions presume that the possession of knowledge entails a duty to transmit, whereas modern IP often enshrines a right to withhold.

3. Relational Ontology and the Challenge to Proprietary Logics

At a metaphysical level, the Indian systems examined herein articulate a relational ontology of knowledge. Knowledge arises through pramāṇa (means of cognition), which are intersubjectively accessible and culturally embedded. There is no concept akin to “creation” ex nihilo, and consequently, no framework that supports absolute proprietary claims over ideas or expressions. Instead, the emphasis is on situated intelligibility, collective continuity, and epistemic trust.

This stands in sharp contrast to the Lockean-Hegelian justification for intellectual property, wherein the mixing of labour with ideas or the externalization of self in creative work legitimizes exclusive rights. The Indian philosophical systems, by contrast, undermine this narrative by rejecting the very ontological individualism upon which such arguments depend.

4. Implications for Contemporary IP Debates

This comparative analysis of Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya, and Buddhist epistemologies offers two major interventions in the discourse on intellectual property: the philosophical decentring of IP norms and the advancement of an ethics of epistemic stewardship. These epistemologies successfully destabilize the presumed universality of IP principles—such as individual authorship, originality, and exclusive rights—by demonstrating that these concepts are fundamentally culturally contingent constructs, rather than universal epistemic necessities. By foregrounding the internal logics of Bharatiya jñāna-paramparā, these epistemologies contribute to decolonial scholarship that seeks to provincialize Western modernity in law and knowledge production. These Indian philosophical traditions collectively establish that knowledge, far from being a commodity, is instead a relational, ethical, and non-proprietary phenomenon.

By drawing insights from these Indian traditions, we can envision an ethic of epistemic stewardship. This framework posits knowledge as a shared inheritance (sāmānya-dharma) that should be ethically preserved, interpreted, and transmitted, rather than being subject to exclusive proprietary control. This concept challenges the utilitarian and Lockean justifications underpinning modern IP regimes, and it aligns with contemporary policy debates concerning the protection of traditional knowledge systems, the principles of open access, and the reconceptualization of knowledge commons. Thus, the analysis, rooted in the Bharatiya jñāna-paramparā, offers a vital philosophical resource for crafting more equitable and culturally plural knowledge systems in the modern era.

Conclusion

From the above analysis it can be inferred that these traditions offer collective resistance to the idea of intellectual property by addressing the origin and nature of the knower and the known. Mīmāṃsā challenges the very basis of proprietorship by defining knowledge—especially the Veda—as eternal and unauthored (apauruṣeya), thereby removing the possibility of ownership at its foundation. In this view, ethical duty (dharma), fidelity in transmission, and the preservation of authoritative knowledge take precedence over individual possession, creating a framework that resembles an intellectual commons.

Nyāya contributes to this resistance by grounding epistemic authority in a relational and moral structure. For Nyāya thinkers, valid testimony (śabda) depends on the integrity and trustworthiness of the competent person (āpta puruṣa), whose authority arises from moral responsibility and a commitment to truth-bearing cognition (satya-bodha). Knowledge, therefore, becomes a matter of public epistemic stewardship rather than private entitlement (svatva).

Buddhist epistemology extends this challenge further through the doctrine of non-self (anātman), which undermines any ontological basis for ownership. Since the self is impermanent and knowledge emerges through dependent origination (pratītya-samutpāda), claims to possess or monopolize knowledge lose coherence. This framework situates the circulation of knowledge within an ethical imperative of compassion, where dissemination (dāna) is seen not as a loss of property but as a moral act that benefits others. Together, these philosophical systems articulate alternative models of knowledge that privilege duty, relational accountability, and ethical generosity over notions of exclusive rights or proprietary control.

Thus, these traditions conceptualize knowledge not as vastu (object) subject to exclusive control, but as a sādhanā (means) toward ethical, rational, or soteriological ends. Hence, the Indian epistemological traditions—across Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya, and Buddhist thought—do not treat knowledge as a form of property tied to individual ownership. Instead, they root knowledge in pramāṇa, ethical intention, competency, and the welfare of the community. These frameworks challenge the metaphysical assumptions that support Lockean–Hegelian justifications for modern intellectual property, which depend on individualism, labour-mixing, and exclusive rights. By foregrounding relationality, eligibility, and truth over entitlement, these traditions offer alternative ways of thinking about how knowledge circulates and how it is ethically sustained.

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