

Recontextualizing Indian Philosophy in the Empirics of *Ankhon Dekhi*

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Abstract:

This paper aims to explore how the ideas of *Vaiśeṣika* and *Sāṃkhya* philosophy have been recontextualised in the narrative of *Ankhon Dekhi* (2013, dir. Rajat Kapoor). Through insightful close textual analysis, this study depicts intertwining threads of Indian philosophy presented in a cinematic form to illustrate *Pratyakṣa* (direct perception) and *Anumāna* (inference) as the only reliable means of knowledge. This study aims to scrutinise several deep philosophical questions raised by the film, such as whether modern life has moved too far away from experiential wisdom. Should one conform to society even if it contradicts one's inner truth? Is spiritual awakening reserved for ascetics, or can a common man experience it? Can absolute reliance on experience lead to self-destruction? The study also deconstructs the film, excavating rich symbolism and exploring multilayered meanings that evolve from its narrative. The ideas that predominantly came from Indian philosophical traditions, such as Nyāya, *Sāṃkhya*, *Cārvāka*, Pramāṇa, *Nāstika*, etc., when interwoven in *Ankhon Dekhi*, have escalated the cinematic experience of the viewer to a new level of aestheticism (*rasānubhūti*).

Key Words: Film Studies, Indian Philosophy, Intertextuality, Recontextualization

Introduction:

Ankhon Dekhi (transl. *Through My Own Eyes*), a 2014 Indian drama film written and directed by the renowned theatre personality Rajat Kapoor, was the opening film at the 8th annual Mosaic International South Asian Film Festival (MISAFF 2014) in Toronto. Kapoor uses the story of an ageing Delhi patriarch set up to stage a philosophical experiment with everyday life, turning a simple joint-family drama into an existential search for the reliable means of knowledge. The film is a rare example of philosophical cinema in mainstream Hindi filmmaking, where the cinematic experience does not rely on spectacle but on introspection.

Ankhon Dekhi is explicitly framed as a cinematic thought-experiment on empiricism (the philosophy that all knowledge originates from sensory experience and observation): Bauji resolves to believe only what he has personally seen or experienced, rejecting hearsay, metaphysical presupposition, and inherited norms. This premise closely parallels Cārvāka's exclusive acceptance of *Pratyakṣa* (direct perception) and rejection of inference and scripture as valid means of knowledge. ("*Ankhon Dekhi*") This philosophical inquiry is intentionally set by Kapoor (dir.) within a minutely depicted lower-middle-class Delhi Mohalla, where gossip, reputation and "what people will say?" construct everyday behaviour.

The film opens with Bauji recounting a recurring dream in which he envisions himself flying freely across the sky like a bird. At the end of the reflective monologue, he gradually transfers the narration, calling it not merely a dream but an experienced reality. Then the story goes in flashback for one and a half years to depict how this journey started. Bauji's daughter, Rita, has been found red-handed with an allegedly ill-reputed guy named Ajju. Rita was scolded mercilessly by his mother and uncle, underscoring the rigid moral expectations imposed upon her. Yet, despite this emotional humiliation, she reveals her love and affection for the boy. In a stereotypical Indian fashion, the girl is at fault and is forbidden from seeing the boy, Ajju, again. (Mital) The males of the family then all march to Ajju's house to give him some trashing for violating the daughter. But what turned out to be an anticlimax, Ajju started crying seamlessly, looked like just a 'lamb' in Bauji's words. After seeing with his own eyes that Ajju is completely the opposite of all the rumours attributed to him. This moment becomes epiphanic for Bauji, initiating a series of questions in his mind.

From here on, Bauji could no longer trust things he had not learned first-hand. The next morning, Bauji argues, "How silly we are! How blindly we believed every nonsense that the Pandit's boy told us about Ajju." (*Ankhon Dekhi* 00:12:18-27) Here, Bauji implies that human beings often grow up surrounded by a flood of ready-made ideas—beliefs governed by society, tradition, media, and authority. Many of these are absorbed without reflection, pressed into consciousness so repeatedly that they begin to feel natural and unquestionable. Then tries to articulate his ideas, "I have understood one thing very clearly. That we have been deceived drastically. That we have been told so many lies, so many times. What a huge deception has been perpetrated against us!" (*Ankhon Dekhi* 00:13:20-32) The human condition, therefore, is marked by a paradox. While individuals perceive themselves as autonomous agents capable of independent thought, their consciousness is frequently formed by inherited assumptions and ideologies. Over time, these socially transmitted "lies" are naturalised and experienced as their "own truth".

"My truth will be the truth of my experience. From today, I will refuse to believe anything that I have not seen or heard myself." (*Ankhon Dekhi* 00:15:36-43) There are three *Pramāṇas* (proofs), *Pratyakṣa* (perception), *Anumāna* (inference), and *Śabda* (word),

epistemically reliable and valid means of knowledge, according to the *Sāṃkhya* school of Hindu Philosophy. (Larson 9; Deutsche 245–248; Grimes 238) Bauji initially relies on *anumāna*—inference—to form his judgment about Ajju, imagining him to be a hoodlum and a womaniser based on assumption rather than direct knowledge. This constructed image reflects how easily suspicion can harden into certainty when it is not tested against lived reality. However, this perception collapses when Bauji encounters Ajju face-to-face. What he witnesses through *pratyakṣa*—direct perception—is not a delinquent figure, but a distressed young man, overwhelmed and repeatedly asking what wrong he has committed. Bauji’s *Pratyakṣa* (perception) starkly contrast with his *Anumāna* (inference), unsettles Bauji’s certainty and exposes the fragility of his earlier conclusions. It reveals how quickly assumptions can distort understanding, and how direct experience has the power to dismantle prejudice. Through this confrontation, the narrative foregrounds the tension between imagined truths and lived reality, suggesting that genuine knowledge often emerges only when one is willing to see beyond one’s own preconceptions. Thus, the epiphanic incident becomes the backbone for Bauji’s newly found philosophy when he declares, "I will only believe what I can see through my own eyes." (*Ankhon Dekhi* 00:15:20-25). Evidently, it completely resonates with the Cārvāka’s philosophical doctrines. Of the six means of knowledge mentioned in the Indian philosophical literature (especially the Advaita Vedānta): *Pratyakṣa* (perception), *Anumāna* (inference), *Upamāna* (comparison and analogy), *Arthāpatti* (postulation), *Anupalabdhi* (cognitive proof), and *Śabda* (from reliable experts), the Cārvākas accept just *pratyakṣa* and vehemently reject all kinds of inference as false. (“*Ankhon Dekhi*”)

A series of significant scenes portrays Bauji experimenting with his newly adopted principle of accepting only what can be verified through direct experience. Within the domestic space, particularly before the household shrine, he gradually withdraws from conventional modes of worship. He no longer performs rituals mechanically, nor does he accept the existence of God as an unquestioned “fact.” Even *prasād*, once treated with reverence, becomes just another sweet (Kalakand). These gestures are the first manifestations of his newly found belief, “How can you believe something that didn’t come from your own experience?” (*Ankhon Dekhi* 00:14:43-47), but eventually unsettle his devout wife and relatives, who perceive his actions not merely as eccentric but as quietly disruptive of inherited faith.

Beyond religion, Bauji begins to interrogate everyday assumptions—beliefs about luck, omens, moral character, and social reputation. His questions spark mildly comic yet revealing exchanges in the *mohalla*, where neighbours oscillate between amusement and discomfort. At home, however, these challenges destabilise the fragile equilibrium of family life, as routine certainties are replaced by constant debate. Bauji’s insistence on testing heat by putting his finger into tea, or sweetness by tasting *prasād*, underscores a fixation on *guṇas* accessible only through direct contact, echoing the Vaiśeṣika school’s emphasis on

perceivable qualities as the entry point into ontology. The newly embraced ideology brings a renewed sense of vitality to Bauji's life. It not only infuses his everyday existence with greater meaning and emotional richness but also cultivates a deep inner contentment, which is aptly relatable in the lyrics from the song:

“Haath laagi laagi nai dhoop
(Today, I felt I found new sunshine in my hands)
Hey aaj laagi laagi nai dhoop
(New sunshine has touched my hands)
Ki dikhe dhuli saaf mann ki chadariya
(Now I can see that all dirt that surrounded my soul has vanished)
Bina daag saari dagariya
(the small road lane has become clean)
Duson disha aaj sanvariya liye naya roop
(All atmosphere has changed; all directions took the new look)
Aaj laagi laagi nai dhoop...
(New sunshine has touched my hands...)
...Dagar wahi pehchaani hai
(The small path road is known to me)
Khabar wahi jag jaani hai
(The news is old which world already knows it)
Aankhon dekhi toh maani hai
(Only believe it if seen by the own eyes)
Jaadu ye anup...
(This magic is unique and cannot be compared...)
 (“Lyrics with English Translation”)

Nyāya places central emphasis on *pramāṇa-śāstra*, the systematic and disciplined inquiry into the means of valid knowledge. It recognizes perception, inference, comparison, and reliable testimony as legitimate sources of understanding, while also insisting that claims be examined through reasoned debate and logical scrutiny. In this framework, knowledge is not a matter of private conviction alone but of careful testing and intellectual responsibility.

The film thoughtfully juxtaposes this epistemological rigour with Bauji's oft-repeated assertion, “I will not believe what I have not seen”. While his stance initially appears as an assertion of experiential authenticity, the narrative gradually reveals its practical limitations. Everyday situations—medical diagnosis, travel arrangements, financial decisions, and even the basic trust that sustains family and social life—inevitably depend on inference and credible testimony. Through these recurring instances, the film subtly echoes Nyāya's critique of the Cārvāka rejection of *anumāna* (inference), suggesting that an exclusive reliance on direct perception is ultimately untenable. In doing so, it dramatises the tension between radical empiricism and the broader epistemic frameworks necessary for lived human experience.

As the narrative progresses, Bauji's position undergoes a subtle yet significant transformation. The very man who once resisted unquestioned belief gradually becomes an object of uncritical reverence. His followers begin to cite his words as authoritative, accepting them without reflection or examination. In doing so, they inadvertently reproduce the very structure of blind faith that his earlier stance sought to dismantle. To this, Bauji said vehemently, "I am selling mirrors in the city of blinds." (*Ankhon Dekhi* 01:26:11-13)

This development recalls Nyāya's careful distinction between *āpta-vāda*—the testimony of a genuinely reliable and competent speaker—and authority grounded merely in social prestige or emotional admiration. ("Ankhon Dekhi") For Nyāya, testimony is valid not because it is uttered by a revered figure, but because it emerges from knowledge, integrity, and rational accountability. The film thus reveals how even an ostensibly anti-authoritarian impulse can ossify into dogma when it is no longer subjected to logical scrutiny. What begins as a call for experiential verification risks becoming another unquestioned doctrine, sustained not by reasoning but by the aura of personality.

Vaiśeṣika proposes a categorial ontology of *padārthas* (substance, quality, motion, generality, particularity, inherence, and later absence) and an atomistic universe composed of eternal *paramāṇus*. (Chatterjee) *Ankhon Dekhi* builds an almost tactile world of cramped rooms, fan noise, bodies jostling, food, cards, and money, foregrounding *guṇa* (qualities) and *saṃyoga-vibhāga* (conjunction and disjunction) in every frame as if to underline that what is "really real" for Bauji is precisely this textured, composite world.

The joint family home may be read as a vivid illustration of *dravya*—a substance composed of multiple parts yet experienced and understood as a coherent whole. Though constituted by distinct individuals, temperaments, and roles, the household functions as a single living unit. Its unity, however, is not static. It is continually shaped by processes of conjunction and disjunction: members argue, withdraw, reconcile, leave, and return. In this ongoing negotiation, the house becomes more than a physical structure; it embodies a dynamic ontology in which relational bonds sustain the identity of the whole even as its parts shift and rearrange themselves.

Similarly, Bauji's repeated insistence on verifying heat by dipping his finger into tea or confirming sweetness by tasting *prasad* reveals his preoccupation with *guṇas*—qualities apprehended through direct sensory contact. For him, knowledge must be tactile, immediate, and embodied. This orientation echoes the philosophical emphasis on perceivable qualities as the primary gateway to understanding reality. Yet the film subtly suggests that while such sensory verification offers certainty at one level, it may not exhaust the full complexity of being. In foregrounding Bauji's reliance on direct contact, the narrative invites reflection on the limits of a purely perceptual approach to ontology.

Bauji's vow— "I will believe only what I see"—is a cinematic statement of empiricism: he rejects inherited beliefs, newspapers, scriptures, even widely shared scientific facts (like "a tiger roars") unless they have passed through his senses. This aligns with empiricism's claim that the mind should be filled only by experience, not by pre-given rational structures or innate knowledge. As philosophical doctrines, rationalism and empiricism differ strikingly. While rationalism holds that reason is the most reliable source of knowledge, empiricism considers that all knowledge arises from sensory experience. Bauji discards second-hand 'reasons' ("it's dangerous", "everyone knows this", "it's written in the book") if they lack experiential backing. He treats concepts like God, heaven, or even distant events in the news as epistemically empty, because no sense-experience guarantees them. (Chauhan) Bauji systematically privileges sensory data over any deliverance of abstract reason or tradition.

Ankhon Dekhi does not simply celebrate empiricism over rationalism; it tests both and exposes their limits when absolutized. Bauji's strict empiricism quickly becomes impractical: he cannot plan for the future, trust a doctor, or care for others' inner states without relying on some non-experienced assumptions. Empiricism becomes ethically and practically thin; rationalism becomes a tool for dogma unless checked by experience. A narrative that begins from hard empiricism (all knowledge from sense), relentlessly exposes the need for rational structure (inference, planning, caring for what is not yet seen), and ends in an ambiguous space where neither sensory data nor pure reason fully guarantees "truth."

Classical Sāṃkhya articulates a fundamental distinction between *puruṣa* (pure consciousness) and *prakṛti* (the primordial matrix of material nature). (Lusthaus) Seen in this light, Bauji's midlife rupture acquires philosophical resonance. His sudden break from routine may be interpreted as the stirring of a *puruṣa*-like self-awareness within a lifelong immersion in the dense fabric of *prakṛti*—domestic responsibilities, social conventions, and unexamined habits of belief. What appears outwardly as eccentric rebellion can also be understood as an inward awakening: a moment in which reflective consciousness seeks to disentangle itself from the accumulated weight of conditioning. The film thus frames his transformation not merely as a personal crisis, but as a deeper confrontation between awareness and the structures that quietly govern everyday existence.

Bauji's initial state is *tamasic* and *rājasic*—a dull acceptance of custom punctuated by restless frustration—until the pivotal incident with the boyfriend triggers a shift towards a more *sattvic* lucidity, where he begins to observe his own beliefs as objects rather than inevitabilities. His experiment with perception is less about the metaphysics of the external world and more about disentangling his consciousness from *prakṛti*'s inherited scripts; each refusal (to accept gossip, to condemn gambling, to obey managerial authority) is an attempt to de-identify *puruṣa* from those social forms.

Yet the narrative also exposes the limits of a purely analytic detachment: Bauji's "seeing" cannot fully separate him from the suffering of his wife, brother, and daughter, suggesting that *puruṣa–prakṛti* dualism remains aspirational rather than fully realized in the messy interdependencies of a modern middle-class family. *Sāṃkhya* thus appears as an undercurrent, embedded in Bauji's inward crisis and oscillation between contemplative clarity and worldly entanglement.

Bauji's dream of flying in the sky is realised because of his ideological belief in relying only on his own eyes and senses for the perception of truth. When he finally believes he has grasped this truth, it feels as though he has grown wings. That experience of finding reality (*Yathārtha-jnana*) has given him wings to fly. The act of "flying" becomes a symbol of liberation, of rising above doubt and illusion. Bauji's *ātman* (real self) became liberated only when he relinquished the confines of his *avidyā* (ignorance) and *māyā* (appearance) of the world (*Saṃsāra*) (Menon "Advaita Vedanta"). It is also ironic that what he describes as the act of flying is, in literal terms, actually a "suicide". But metaphorically, it signifies that our own "truth" would be starkly different from what it seems. Bauji's act of diving to fly isn't the act of suicide as it seems, but it is the act of becoming part of *Anant* (Infinite). His flight, therefore, is both a triumph of personal conviction and a tragic reminder that truth is complex, fragile, and often paradoxical.

With this layered texture, the film both manifested and critiqued the *Ṣaḍdarśana* - Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsa and Vedānta ("Shaddarshana") in the narrative. *Ankhon Dekhi* is an experiment with the multifaceted dynamics of empirics to provide a cinematic experience of Indian philosophy. Ultimately, the film suggests that Indian philosophy is not just confined to the textual exegesis or ascetic withdrawal—it persists as lived inquiry within the ordinary rhythms of domestic existence.

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