Karma and the Panoptic Gaze: A Dhārmika Perspective on Moral Surveillance and Self-Governance

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Abstract

This article explores the intriguing parallels and key divergences between Michel Foucault's concept of Panopticism and the karmic self-surveillance doctrine of Sanātana Dharma. Drawing on primary Dhārmika sources – including Vedic scriptures and classical commentaries by Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Madhva, Vyāsa, and Medhātithi – we examine how the notion of an "all-seeing" moral order compares to the Panopticon's internalised gaze. Both frameworks posit an ever-watchful presence that governs behaviour: Foucault's Panopticon induces self-discipline through the *perception* of constant surveillance, whereas Sanātana Dharma describes an intrinsic cosmic witness (ātman/Paramātman) and the law of karma as enforcing self-regulation. Through Sanskrit verses (with transliteration and translation) and analysis of traditional commentaries, we delve into how the Dhārmika idea of an inner moral governor and the Western idea of disciplinary surveillance each foster self-governance. While sharing structural similarities in shaping conduct, they diverge sharply in ethos and ultimate purpose: the former rooted in spiritual liberation and dharmic order, the latter in social control and power dynamics. By rooting our comparative study in authentic Sanātana Dharma philosophy and engaging with Western critical thought (Foucault, David Lyon, Giorgio Agamben, et al.), this article illuminates how ancient Dhārmika insights remain relevant to contemporary discussions on morality, power, and the governance of the self.

Keywords: Panopticism; Karma; Surveillance; Self-Governance; Moral Discipline

Introduction

How do individuals behave when they believe "someone is watching"? In Western social theory, one famous answer comes from French philosopher Michel Foucault's analysis of Panopticism, a model of internalised surveillance and discipline derived from Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon prison design[1]. In classical Indian thought, a remarkably analogous idea appears in the doctrine of *karma* and the omnipresence of the divine or moral law as a witness to all deeds. This article investigates the parallels and divergences between these two perspectives: Foucault's Panoptic gaze and the Dhārmika concept of karmic surveillance.

At first glance, these frameworks arise from vastly different contexts – one from modern critiques of Western penal and power structures, the other from ancient spiritual and ethical philosophy. However, both address a core issue of moral self-governance: how human behaviour can be guided or regulated by an unseen but ever-present watcher. Foucault famously showed how power can operate through *internalised* surveillance, producing obedient subjects who monitor themselves. Sanātana Dharma, on the other hand, has for millennia proclaimed that an *inner witness–be* it one's conscience, the Supersoul (Paramātman), or the law of karma itself–continuously observes all actions, encouraging individuals to self-regulate in alignment with dharma (moral order).

Why compare these at all? Aside from the fascinating East-West juxtaposition, examining Panopticism alongside karmic theory sheds light on fundamental questions: Is there a difference between being watched by a CCTV camera and being "watched" by one's soul or by God? Does the fear of punishment in a surveillance society operate similarly to the fear of karmic repercussions or divine judgment? How do these paradigms shape the ethical self–as an object of power, or as a seeker of moral and spiritual growth? By exploring such questions, we gain a deeper understanding of how surveillance and self-discipline function in secular modernity and Dhārmika spirituality.

This paper anchors its analysis in primary Sanātana Dharma sources – quoting Sanskrit śāstra (scriptures) and drawing on authoritative bhāṣyas (commentaries) – while also engaging critical voices like Foucault, David Lyon, and Giorgio Agamben. The discussion will remain rooted in Dharmic philosophy even as it dialogues with Western theory, ensuring that the Dhārmika perspective is not overshadowed. In what follows, we first outline Foucault's concept of the Panopticon and its implications for self-regulation. We then delve into the Dhārmic understanding of karma as an overarching moral surveillance system, referencing Vedic texts and classical commentators. Next, we examine parallels between the two – the role of the internalised gaze, the production of disciplined subjects, as well as divergences– the differing aims, theological underpinnings, and valuations of freedom. Finally, we conclude with reflections on how a Dhārmika lens

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enriches our understanding of moral surveillance and self-governance, perhaps offering a more liberative outlook than the Panoptic model. Through this comparative journey, the article aims to highlight the profound insights Sanātana Dharma can contribute to global discussions on ethics and the governance of behaviour.

Panopticism: Foucault's Theory of the All-Seeing Gaze

Michel Foucault's analysis of Panopticism, most notably presented in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), describes a new mode of power in modern societies that operates through invisible surveillance and internalised discipline. The core image is Bentham's *Panopticon*: an architectural design for prisons in which a central watchtower has a view into every cell. At the same time, the inmates cannot see the security guard. The brilliance of the design is that *visibility is one-sided* – prisoners know they *could* be watched at any moment, but cannot be sure *when* or *if* they are being observed. Foucault generalises this into a metaphor for how modern institutions (prisons, schools, factories, hospitals) exert social control. He writes that the Panopticon produces "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 201). In other words, people internalise the surveillant gaze and police themselves, reducing the need for overt coercion.

Under Panopticism, power becomes diffuse and self-enforcing. There is no need for brute force or constant direct supervision; the *idea* of possibly being watched is enough for individuals to adjust their behaviour. Foucault notes that this transforms the individual into "the principle of his subjection" – a self-regulating subject who conforms to norms even when alone (Foucault 203). The Panoptic schema thus achieves social discipline efficiently: schools produce obedient students, factories efficient workers, and soldiers dutifully follow protocols – all through *internal* surveillance that mimics external ones. Sociologist David Lyon later expanded on these ideas, observing that contemporary society has taken on a "*surveillance society*" character where not only governments but corporations and digital technologies continuously monitor individuals, creating database "profiles" that people often willingly comply with (Lyon 57). Lyon points out that with the rise of CCTV, the internet, and now ubiquitous data-tracking, the Panoptic effect is more pervasive than ever – yet frequently people internalise and normalise it, for example by moderating their online speech due to the awareness of surveillance.

Giorgio Agamben, a later critical theorist, offers a complementary critique: in his analysis of modern governance (for instance, in *State of Exception*), surveillance is one tool by which states of emergency and security paradigms render populations transparent and controllable. Agamben builds on Foucault's notion of biopower – power that takes hold of life and the body – suggesting that in the name of security, modern states watch and regulate citizens to an unprecedented degree, often blurring legal boundaries. Although Agamben's focus is more on legal power and the suspension of norms, the underlying idea resonates with Panopticism: an apparatus of monitoring that induces people to conform, even surrender rights, because *someone* (the state, the security apparatus) is always watching.

A crucial aspect of Panopticism is its secular, institutional nature. The gaze in Foucault's Panopticon is not divine or cosmic, but a tool of human-designed systems of power. It is fundamentally about control, making individuals *useful* and *docile* (to use Foucault's terms) by moulding their behaviour. Moral questions in this context are subordinated to utilitarian ones: the goal is order, efficiency, and compliance. The Panoptic gaze is indifferent to *virtue* or *vice* per se; it cares only those prescribed norms are followed. Indeed, Foucault's analysis carries a cynical undertone – the individual's sense of being ethically "watched" is in reality a political technology.

This creates an eerie form of self-surveillance: one becomes both the watcher and the watched in one's mind. We might say the Panopticon externalises conscience, then re-internalises it as an alien presence. Foucault himself was not advancing a moral system but diagnosing a mechanism of power. Nonetheless, his insights have often been applied to questions of morality and self-governance: for instance, how people might refrain from wrongdoing because they feel under an abstract "eye" of authority. At this point, the parallel with specific religious or philosophical doctrines becomes apparent, which leads us to the Dharmic perspective, where the idea of an ever-watchful presence has been discussed in a very different register for ages.

Before turning to the Dhārmika viewpoint, it is worth summarising the key features of the Panoptic model: (a) an omnipresent gaze (or the feeling of one) that one cannot escape; (b) the internalisation of this gaze, leading to self-monitoring and self-censorship; (c) the function of this surveillance is to enforce norms and behavior desired by an external authority (prison warden, state, social system); (d) it operates on individuals even in isolation – one behaves as if being watched *even when alone*. These features will provide a reference point as we examine the concept of karma and

internal surveillance in Sanātana Dharma.

Kārmika Surveillance in Sanātana Dharma

Sanātana Dharma (the "eternal law," a traditional term for what is often called Hinduism) posits a moral and metaphysical order in which *karma* plays a central role. *Karma* in Sanskrit literally means "action," but in philosophical usage it also means the universal principle by which every action yields appropriate results (*phala*) – often summarised as the law of cause and effect on the moral plane. A common way to explain the inescapability of karmic results is to say that the universe is watching. Even if one is a fellow human, do not witness a wrongful deed; the deed is still *seen* and recorded by the cosmic order, and it will bear fruit sooner or later. This implicit surveillance system is not manufactured; it is woven into the fabric of *dharma* (the underlying cosmic law and righteousness).

Dhārmika texts speak vividly of an ever-present witness to all our actions. The *Upaniṣad*s, foundational philosophical scriptures, frequently mention the concept of an inner witness (*sākṣī*). For example, the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (6.11) describes the Supreme Being in precisely these terms:

एको देवः सर्वभूतेषु गूढः सर्वव्यापी सर्वभूतान्तरात्मा ।

कर्माध्यक्षः सर्वभूताधिवासः साक्षी चेता केवलो निर्गुणश्च ॥

(Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 6.11)

[The One God, hidden in all beings, all-pervading, the inner Self of all beings; the overseer of all actions (*karma-adhyakṣa*), residing in all beings; the witness (*sākṣī*), the consciousness, the One without a second, beyond qualities.]

This remarkable verse encapsulates the Dharmic idea of an all-seeing presence. The Divine is *sarvavyāpī* (omnipresent) and *sarvabhūtāntarātmā* (the inner self of all creatures). As *karma-adhyakṣaḥ* (supervisor of karma), the Divine keeps account of the moral ledger of the universe; as *sākṣī* (witness) and *cetā* (conscious knower), it is aware of every action and even every thought. We thus find the notion of a panoptic divinity– an all-seeing supreme consciousness – millennia before modern surveillance theory. However, unlike Bentham's cold prison guard or Foucault's faceless gaze of power, this Dharmic watcher is deeply tied to moral truth and the cosmic order, not merely discipline for its own sake.

Another famous Upaniṣad-powered allegory is the parable of the two birds on one tree. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (3.1.1) says:

द्वा सुपर्णा सयुजा सखाया समानं वृक्षं परिषस्वजाते ।

तयोरन्यः पिप्पलं स्वाद्वत्ति अनश्नन् अन्यो अभिचाकशीति ॥

[Two birds, inseparable friends, cling to the same tree. One of them eats the sweet fruit, while the other simply watches without eating.]

The two birds symbolise the individual self (*jīvātman*), who experiences worldly pleasures (the fruit), and the Supreme Self (*Paramātman*), who observes as a non-partaking witness. Śaṅkarācārya, in his commentary on this passage, explains that the witnessing bird represents the *ātman* that does not eat the fruit of karma – it merely watches, untouched by pleasure or pain, allowing the individual soul to act in freedom (albeit with consequences). This concept of the *ātman/Paramātman* as a detached observer recurs throughout Vedānta. It reinforces the idea that *something within us is always aware* of what we do – an unerring inner witness.

The *Bhagavad Gītā*, one of the most authoritative Dharmic texts, explicitly describes the Supreme Being (or Supreme Self) as the omnipresent observer dwelling in every individual. In Bhagavad Gītā (13.23), Śrī Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna:

उपद्रष्टानुमन्ता च भर्ता भोक्ता महेश्वरः ।

परमात्मेति चाप्युक्तो देहेऽस्मिन्पुरुषः परः ॥

[Within this body resides the Supreme Self (*puruṣaḥ paraḥ*). He is said to be the Observer (*upadraṣṭā*), the Permitter (*anumantā*), the Supporter (*bhartā*), the Experiencer (*bhoktā*), and the great Lord (*maheśvaraḥ*). He is thus proclaimed as the Paramātman.]

Each epithet in this verse conveys an aspect of divine oversight: *upadraṣṭā* – the one who looks over or witnesses; *anumantā* – the one who gives sanction or permission; *bhartā* – supporter or sustainer; *bhoktā* – the experiencer (of the results along with the jīva); *maheśvaraḥ* – the Supreme Lord. Rāmānuja, the 12th-century Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta philosopher, in his *Gītā Bhāṣya* (commentary on the *Gītā*), interprets this verse as describing the Paramātman inhabiting the body with the individual self. He explains that the Divine Self within is the "spectator and approver" of the body's actions, the supporter of the body, and the experiencer insofar as it gives capacity to the jīva to experience pleasures and pains. The Paramātman is thus the *antaryāmī* – the Inner Controller who "rules and supports the body" while remaining transcendent.

On the other hand, Śaṅkarācārya (8th-century Advaita Vedānta exponent), commenting on the same *Gīta* verse, emphasises the purely witnessing aspect of the ātman. He gives a vivid analogy: during a Vedic sacrifice, priests are busy performing actions, but a learned elder called the *Brahmā* sits nearby observing to ensure everything is done correctly. This elder does not himself act; he only watches and notes merits or errors. Similarly, the ātman within is *upadraṣṭā*– the proximate

watcher that is "unengaged" and "witnesses the merit or demerit" of the body-mind's activities. Śaṅkara stresses that this inner Self is *different* from the body and senses, "remaining nearby" yet not entangled in the actions. It neither acts nor is tainted by the actions, but its presence allows the jīva to act. Moreover, Śaṅkara notes that as the innermost Consciousness, the Self illumines the mind-intellect, which then performs actions; in that sense, the ātman is the *bhartā* (supporter) and even *bhoktā* (experiencer) only in that, without consciousness, no experience could manifest. Thus, Advaita Vedānta presents the ātman/Paramātman as the ultimate witness – *sākṣī* – enabling the play of karma but not bound by it.

The law of *karma*, closely tied to this ever-watchful ātman/Paramātman, functions as the moral calculus that ensures *ethical surveillance* across time and space. The principle is simple: for every action (mental, verbal, physical), the universe ("Higher Authorities," one might say) dispenses a corresponding result or lesson. The *Manusmṛti* (8.15), an ancient legal and ethical text, aphoristically states this thus:

धर्म एव हतो हन्ति धर्मो रक्षति रक्षितः ।

तस्माद् धर्मो न हन्तव्यो मा नो धर्मो हतोऽवधीत् ॥

[Dharma, when destroyed, destroys (the destroyer); dharma, when protected, protects (the protector). Therefore, one should not destroy dharma, lest dharma destroyed destroy us.]

This verse, commented upon by the jurist Medhātithi (9th c. CE) and others, underscores that violating the moral law (dharma) will in turn bring about one's ruin, whereas upholding it ensures one's safety. In effect, *dharma itself* is portrayed as an unseen enforcer – a panoptic guardian of morality. Even if a crime or sin is secret, ultimately *dharma* "knows" and reacts: a very karmic notion. Another way of phrasing this (found in folklore and later literature) is "the wheels of God grind slow but sure", meaning no deed escapes the cosmic account-keeping.

Beyond scriptural verses, later texts and popular Hindu tradition personify this karmic surveillance in figures like *Chitragupta*, the record-keeper of Yama (the Lord of Death and Justice), who tracks every person's actions to balance their accounts after death. Yama himself, also called Dharma-rāja, is depicted as judging souls based on their lifelong deeds – a mythic representation of the law of karma, ensuring that nothing goes unaccounted. While such personifications are more theologically poetic than philosophically rigorous, they reinforce the cultural consciousness that "someone/something is always watching and judging."

It is crucial to note, however, that the Dharmic idea of being "watched" is not intended to create a culture of fear or paranoia. The ever-present witness is simultaneously the loving indwelling Lord and one's own highest Self. The purpose of this surveillance is profoundly ethical and spiritual: to guide the soul toward *dharma* and ultimately *mokṣa* (liberation). In the Yoga tradition, for instance, conscience (*śraddhā* or *dhī*) is cultivated alongside the knowledge that one's higher Self knows one's lower self's intimations. The Kaṭha Upaniṣad (3.8-9) speaks of the *antarātman* (inner self) that sits in the heart as a judge of all, encouraging the seeker to merge with that highest Self through purity of mind. The notion of self-governance here is not merely to obey external authority, but to align with the inner divine will and the moral law of the cosmos. In a sense, the ultimate "observer" in Dharmic thought is identical to one's deepest being, which is quite a contrast to the external observer of Foucault's Panopticon.

Classical Commentators on the Inner Witness

Classical philosophers and commentators of the Dharmic tradition have added nuanced understandings to this idea of an inner moral surveillance. We have already seen perspectives from Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja on the Bhagavad Gītā verse. To further illustrate the range:

A) Madhvācārya (13th c. CE), founder of the Dvaita Vedānta school, also comments on Gītā (13.23) by emphasising the distinctness of the *jīva* (individual soul) and *Paramātman* (Supreme Soul). He interprets *upadraṣṭā* as the "intimate witness, the monitor" who impartially oversees all thoughts and actions of the *jīva*. Madhva underscores that while the *jīva*s have minute independence to choose their actions, the Lord as *anumantā* (sanctioner) is the ultimate cause who *allows* the results of those actions to manifest, including the *jīva*'s birth in higher or lower conditions according to its merits. Thus, in Madhva's theistic dualism, God is very much like a cosmic supervisor, just and omnipotent, "the monitor of all actions" and the one who empowers the jīva's consciousness to act while also holding it accountable. This view aligns with a strong karmic *theism*: for every lie, every charity, and every crime, God knows and will respond in accordance with justice.

B) Vyāsa, revered as the compiler of Vedic literature and author of the *Brahma Sūtras*, is traditionally credited with a commentary (Vyāsa Bhāṣya) on the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali. In this yogic context, the concern is not ethics per se but liberation. Nevertheless, Vyāsa's commentary on Yoga-Sūtra I.25 sheds light on the concept of an all-knowing

divine principle. The *sutra* states: *"tatra niratiśayaṁ sarvajña-bījam"*– "In Him (Īśvara) is the unsurpassed seed of omniscience." Vyāsa explains that Īśvara (the Lord) is free from karma and afflictions, and possesses unlimited knowledge – essentially, *Īśvara knows all and sees all*. This aligns with the Upaniṣad view of a cosmic witness. For a spiritual aspirant, the relevance is that by meditating on such an omniscient Īśvara (as a *puruṣa viśeṣa*, a special Self), one can attain the clarity and focus needed for liberation. Indirectly, however, it also means that there is nothing one can hide from Īśvara; one's inner obstacles, one's efforts, are all known and supported by the Divine when one surrenders. The *Bhagavata Purāṇa* (Śrīmad Bhāgavatam) echoes this, stating that the Lord as Supersoul is "within everyone's heart" and aware of the minutest details of the mind (Bhāgavatam 2.2.33, 6.4.24, etc.). Such texts build a spiritually charged notion of surveillance – not a malicious Big Brother, but an all-knowing Guide or Witness who ultimately *helps* the soul to evolve.

C) Medhātithi, as a commentator on the legal text of Manu, takes a somewhat different angle, being concerned with social ethics and jurisprudence. In discussing *Manusmṛti* 8.15 (cited above) and related verses, Medhātithi expounds on how even if a violator of law escapes human detection, they cannot escape the consequences of their act because of *adṛṣṭa*. This unseen force carries forward karma. He articulates that the reason to avoid sin is not only fear of worldly punishment but the certainty of *invisible repercussions* orchestrated by the cosmic order (which could manifest as evil fortune, inner turmoil, or suffering in another life). In this sense, Medhātithi reinforces a *culture of conscience*: an individual ought to restrain themselves from adharmic (unrighteous) acts even in secrecy, because Dharma itself is an enforcer. This is morally self-regulating: a person is expected to feel the weight of *dharma* watching, through their own cultivated understanding and fear of spiritual consequences.

The convergence of these voices– Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Madhva, Vyāsa, Medhātithi– despite their doctrinal differences, is striking on one point: an insistence that nothing in the moral realm truly goes unseen or unaccounted. Whether one emphasises an impersonal law (as Mīmāṃsā and Dharmaśāstra often do with *adṛṣṭa*) or a personal God (as Vedānta traditions do with Paramātman/Īśvara), the result is a universe in which there is no absolute privacy from the moral viewpoint. One's *self* is one's witness, and/or the Lord is witness, and *dharma-karma* will unfailingly bring the fruit of action.

We can already sense an analogy to the Panopticon here. In the Dharmic worldview, an individual may refrain from sin not just because of police or social opprobrium, but because of an internalised awareness of the ever-watchful eye of karma or God. A person alone in a room with the opportunity to commit a crime might stop themselves by recalling "I would know, and God would know – and I will have to answer for this." This is an internal moral surveillance par excellence.

Parallels Between Panoptic and Dhārmika Self-Governance

Despite arising from disparate cultural universes, Foucault's Panopticism and the Dharmic concept of karmic surveillance share some intriguing structural similarities. Here we outline the key parallels, showing how each system creates self-governing individuals via an internalised gaze:

A) **Omnipresent Observer:** Both frameworks centre on the notion of an ever-present observer. In Panopticism, this is the hypothetical guard in the watchtower – *perhaps absent, but presumed to be there*. In Dharmic thought, it is the Paramātman or the law of karma – an entity that is metaphysically present everywhere and "never sleeps." In either case, there is effectively no *escape* from the gaze: the Panoptic prisoner has nowhere in the prison unobservable by the tower's line of sight; the soul has no action, however private, that is not witnessed by the ātman within or the gods without. The *felt presence* of an observer is continuous.

B) **Internalisation of Surveillance:** As a result of that omnipresence, individuals internalise the surveillance and become self-regulating. This is the most striking parallel. Foucault emphasises how people *modify their behaviour* under the conscious awareness of being possibly watched. Similarly, the devout Hindu or follower of Sanātana Dharma internalises the presence of conscience and the eventual karmic result, leading them to restrain impulses and act dharmically even when alone. In both cases, the surveillance moves from an external fact to an internalised mindset – effectively becoming what we call **conscience** in the broad sense. One begins to feel *accountable to oneself* or to the divine, which in practical terms equals behaving as if under surveillance at all times.

C) **Preventive Function:** The surveillance in both systems is primarily preventive or prophylactic. The Panoptic mechanism aims to prevent disobedience or crime by its mere looming threat, rather than having to catch and punish every infraction. The karmic watcher concept prevents sin by instilling an

innate hesitancy or fear of doing wrong ("I will incur bad karma," or "The Divine Law will punish this"). Thus, both work more at the level of **psychological deterrence** than immediate intervention. In a well-functioning Panoptic prison, the guard rarely needs to intervene because the prisoners behave. In a person with a strong dharmic outlook, external enforcement is rarely needed because the person *self-enforces* ethical conduct.

D) **Universal Applicability:** Panopticism, as Foucault generalises it, is not limited to prisons – it can apply to all hierarchical structures and even society at large (e.g., surveillance cameras in public, or the knowledge that one's data is tracked online leads people to self-censor universally). The karmic surveillance is likewise universal – it is not bound by location or situation. Whether at home, in the temple, in the marketplace, or a distant forest, the dharmic individual believes their karma is being recorded. The epic *Mahābhārata* illustrates this through anecdotes. In one story, a guru tests his students by asking them to sacrifice a goat in a place where no one sees them. All the students quickly find hiding spots and perform the act, except one, who returns with the goat alive, saying: "I found nowhere that no one was watching, for the Self within me was always watching." That student exemplified the internalisation of the dharmic gaze, much as an ideal Panopticon subject internalises the guard's eye. The lesson: the sage acts *rightly* even in total solitude, as if the world were watching.

E) **Normalised Compliance:** Both systems tend to normalise a sure compliance as "just the way things are." In modern society, especially with digital surveillance, people often come to accept a loss of privacy and constant tracking – it becomes a new norm to behave under watch, even voluntarily sharing data (social media, etc.), effectively participating in one's surveillance (Lyon 152). In many religious contexts, similarly, the belief in an omniscient God and karma becomes a normal background condition of life. A religious child is raised to think "God is always watching you" – a phrase that, barring the theological difference, could be straight out of a Panopticon manual for behaviour control. Over time, this creates a populace that "just behaves" correctly as second nature, rarely questioning the all-seeing moral order. Notably, this normalisation in the Dharmic context is tempered (as we will discuss) by the emphasis on liberation and love. However, at the level of day-to-day social ethics, it functions comparably to the Panoptic normalisation of discipline.

F) **Reputation or Record:** In Foucault's discussions, panoptic surveillance is tied to the idea of dossiers, records, and examinations – the watched individual accumulates a record of behaviour which defines him/her (e.g., school report cards, medical records, criminal records). In karma theory, every action contributes to one's karmic record, which effectively defines one's future (e.g., one's next birth, one's fortune or suffering). The difference is that the karmic record is metaphysical and carries across lifetimes, whereas the disciplinary record is institutional and primarily limited to one's current life and social identity. However, both introduce the idea that what one does is indelibly written in an account: in a bureaucracy's file or the universe's subtle ledgers. This can create a kind of *panoptic memory* in both cases, making individuals aware that not only the present but the future is shaped by what the "observer" notes about them.

Given these parallels, one might conclude that religions like Hinduism simply anticipated the Panopticon concept in a theological guise. Indeed, some scholars have drawn comparisons between the Protestant idea of an omniscient God instilling a work ethic and Foucault's notion of disciplinary society. Similarly, one could map karmic law to that paradigm of social control. However, such a conclusion would be too simplistic and would ignore the profound divergences and different intentions underlying the two frameworks. The following section will address those divergences: the ethos of *dharma* versus the ethos of *power*, the end goal of spiritual freedom versus social utility, and the overall psychological effect – is it paranoia and repression, or conscience and enlightenment?

Divergences: Moral Order vs. Power Dynamics

Due to their structural similarity, panoptic surveillance and dharmic self-surveillance diverge fundamentally in their nature and purpose. Understanding these differences is crucial, especially to appreciate the Dhārmika perspective on its terms rather than simply as a pre-modern "thought police" system.

A) Benevolent Cosmos vs. Disciplinary State: In Sanātana Dharma, the all-seeing gaze originates from the Divine or the cosmic moral law (which is ultimately benevolent/just in intent). The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* verse we saw describes the One as "kevalaḥ nirguṇaś ca" – the pure, attributeless consciousness – implying absolute clarity and benevolence, not malice. The gaze of karma is rooted in *ṛta* (cosmic order) and *dharma*

(righteousness). In Panopticism, by contrast, the gaze originates from human systems of power, often devoid of benevolence. It is a tool of the state, the warden, the factory owner, or more abstractly, the ruling class or system imperatives (like profit, control, security). The motives can be self-serving or, at best, maintaining order, but not necessarily the *ultimate good* of the watched individual. Thus, while karmic surveillance is underwritten by a kind of divine compassion and justice (even if stern), Panoptic surveillance is underwritten by utilitarian and power interests. Being watched by God or one's own higher Self carries a very different psychological and spiritual valence than being watched by the authorities.

B) **Fear vs. Conscience (External vs. Internal Motivation):** The Panopticon typically governs through *fear* – fear of being caught and punished, or at least fear of being seen deviating (which could bring shame or penalty). It is essentially an external motivation internalised. Dharmic teachings, while they do use the fear of hell or bad rebirth in some contexts, ultimately aim for one to develop *conscience* and *devotion*, which are internal motivations. A devotee avoids sin not only because "I will be punished" but because "it is wrong and displeasing to the Divine, and I, as soul, do not wish to accumulate impurity." There is a qualitative difference between these motivations. Conscience involves an inner moral sense and often love or reverence (for dharma or God). In contrast, fear of surveillance in the Foucauldian sense does not require one to agree with the morals of the system, only to comply out of self-preservation. In fact, a Panoptic subject might harbour the desire to transgress, but suppress it; a truly dharmic individual ideally transforms their desires to align with the good, a transformation aided by the concept of an inner divine witness guiding them.

C) **Telos – Liberation vs. Obedience:** The end goal of karmic self-regulation is ultimately *liberation (mokṣa)* or at least a harmonious life that progresses the soul spiritually. The surveillance of karma is coupled with the promise that by following dharma and purifying one's mind, one can transcend the cycle of birth and death – essentially escape the "prison" of saṁsāra (worldly existence) altogether. It is paradoxical: one consents to the rules of the cosmic law in order to eventually go beyond all laws and attain spiritual freedom. Foucault's Panopticon has no such liberating end – in fact, it is a metaphor for the entrenchment of individuals in systems of control with *no escape*. Panoptic surveillance aims for perpetual obedience, not transcendence. In a literal prison, the best outcome is that one becomes a model prisoner (and maybe is released by the authority's grace, but within society, they remain under some surveillance). In society, the aim is a permanently disciplined population. There is no concept in Foucault that surveillance leads the individual to an enlightened state beyond the need for surveillance. In Sanātana Dharma, however, the hope is that by living righteously and gaining actual knowledge (*jñāna*), one becomes *independently virtuous* and eventually even transcends karma (becoming *akṛta* – beyond cause and effect, as some Upaniṣads describe the state of the jīvanmukta, the liberated soul). In short, Panopticism is a closed loop of control; Dharmic ethics is an open pathway to freedom.

D) **Relationship to Selfhood:** Panopticism can produce alienation; one aspect of Foucault's analysis is that constant surveillance breaks down any private sense of self, turning the individual into a perpetual object of scrutiny. This can lead to self-alienation – the person is divided, with part of themselves always spying on the rest of themselves. In Dharmic practice, while there is an idea of observing oneself (as in meditation techniques or cultivating introspection), it is done to discover a *more authentic Self*, not to fragment oneself. The *witness* in Hindu thought (*sākṣī*) is actually one's true identity (ātman) or intimately related to it (as Paramātman). So, when a Hindu reflects, "Krishna is in my heart watching me" or "my conscience sees me," it can actually *integrate* the personality around a higher centre. The surveillance of dharma is meant to align the ego with the ātman. Contrastingly, the surveillance of the Panopticon does not integrate the self; it subjugates the self to an external schema.

E) **Transparency vs. Privacy in Different Senses:** Both systems abolish a particular kind of privacy – morally, nothing is private. Nevertheless, the Dharmic system maintains an **inner privacy** in another sense: the relationship between jīvātman and Paramātman is profoundly personal and internal. One could argue that for realised being, only God's opinion matters, not the world's; thus, they might even appear to break social norms if following a higher dharmic call (saints often do unconventional things, caring only for God's gaze). In a Panoptic society, however, it is external social norms that one is bending to; privacy from society is gone, and society's opinion is paramount. Dharmic thought actually advises a kind of indifference to worldly observers – "Let the world think you mad, as

long as your conscience (and God) know you are true." In this way, the dharmic "observer" (the ātman/Paramātman) can empower one *against* oppressive human surveillance or norms. We see this in Hindu history where a mystic poet like Kabīr or Tukārām defied social authorities, proclaiming answerability only to God. Such a stance is the polar opposite of Panoptic conformity – it is a divine individualism enabled by belief in a higher surveillance that trumps human judgment.

F) **Abuse and Paranoia:** A practical difference is that human surveillance systems (Panopticons, CCTV networks, data monitoring) can be abused – used for political manipulation, wrongful targeting, or discrimination. They can generate paranoia, distrust in society, and a chilling effect on free expression. The karmic surveillance concept, being a metaphysical postulate, cannot be "abused" in the same way – no one can hack the law of karma or selectively apply it against someone. It applies equally to all and is, in theory, perfectly just (in practice, the perception of karmic justice might be delayed or subtle, but the principle is that nobody is exempt). Of course, religious authorities *invoke* the concept to exhort or sometimes control followers, but the concept itself is impartial. One could argue that an exaggerated fear of divine surveillance could lead to *religious paranoia* or guilt complexes – e.g., someone feeling extreme shame for everyday thoughts because "God is watching and judging me." This is a psychological issue that has parallels with the anxiety people feel under modern surveillance. However, Dharmic traditions often counterbalance that fear, emphasising God's mercy and the possibility of atonement (*prāyaścitta*, or devotional surrender). The healthiest Dharmic view of karma encourages personal responsibility without crippling guilt: yes, all your deeds are noted, but you also can purify and overcome past *karma* through right living and grace. Panoptic surveillance, in contrast, offers no such concept of mercy or erasure; it is simply a watch-and-punish (or watch-and-reward) machine with little compassion.

G) **Community and Self-Regulation** systems can yield a kind of community self-regulation, but in different ways. In a society conscious of surveillance (like one riddled with government CCTV), people might also watch each other and enforce norms (neighbour reports a suspicious activity, etc.), leading to a peer-policing effect. In a dharmic society, the internalisation of karmic law fosters *individual self-policing* but also can create a supportive moral community because each person knows that each other also reveres dharma. A devout community might collectively abstain from corrupt practices, not because Big Brother is watching, but because each member's conscience and fear of sin keep them straight. This was an ideal in many traditional societies – that *dharma* held the social fabric together more than law enforcement did. Dharma-rakṣa (protecting dharma) was a duty of the king, but equally of every citizen. The saying *"dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ"* ("Dharma protects those who protect it") implies that if society as a whole upholds dharma, everyone is guarded – a far more positive outlook than the suspicious mutual monitoring of a Panoptic society. In fact, modern surveillance society is often marked by a loss of trust (we need cameras because we cannot trust people.

In contrast, a *dhārmika* society ideally functions on intrinsic trust and virtue (cameras not needed because people choose the right). This ideal, of course, is not always a reality. However, it is important to note the philosophical aim: the internal surveillance of karma is meant to *replace* external enforcement, not augment it. Foucault observed that Panopticism replaces visible chains with invisible ones; Dharmic thought tries to replace chains with conscience – a subtle but meaningful difference.

To summarise, Panopticism and karmic/dharmic surveillance both embed an observing function into the individual's psyche, but one is a *tool of power* and the other a *path of righteousness*. The Panoptic gaze creates a compliant citizen/prisoner; the Dharmic gaze aims to create a conscientious, spiritually progressing person (and ultimately a liberated soul). The former is heteronomous (the law comes from outside, e.g., the state), the latter can become autonomous (the law realised within as one's own highest nature or God-immanent). In a way, Sanātana Dharma relocates the watcher from the guard tower to the *heart*. This inward relocation is not meant to terrorise the person, but to awaken their own higher capacities of judgment and virtue.

Conclusion

In exploring "Karma and the Panoptic gaze," we have traversed two very different yet analogous landscapes of thought– one modern, secular, and critical; the other ancient, spiritual, and prescriptive. The comparison yields rich insights. On the one hand, it highlights how sophisticated and psychologically astute the Dharmic conception of karma and inner surveillance truly is. Thousands of years before Foucault, Dharmic sages had grasped that the most effective governance

of conduct comes not from brute force but from the internalisation of an observing principle – whether that be the watchful eye of Dharma, the presence of an inner ātman, or the all-pervading Paramātman. This speaks to a deep understanding of human psychology: we are always influenced by what we believe *sees* us. Sanātana Dharma harnessed that for moral and spiritual ends, instilling a sense of responsibility and self-scrutiny that operates even in solitude.

On the other hand, the juxtaposition also serves as a critique by contrast. Foucault's Panopticism casts a cautionary light on how internalised surveillance can become a tool of oppression, something Dharmic traditions need to be wary of. Suppose If religious or social authorities twist the karmic doctrine merely to instil fear and obedience (stripping it of its compassionate and liberative context. In that case,), they risk creating a dystopian religiosity not unlike a spiritual Panopticon. Indeed, history is not without examples of exploitative priestly classes or sects that use fear of divine punishment in a very Panoptic, disciplinary way. Thus, the Dharmic perspective itself must be kept aligned with its higher purpose – guiding individuals to align with *dharma* joyfully and sincerely, not cowering under a cosmic CCTV. The best Dharmic teachers always emphasised love, knowledge, and inner transformation as the motivators for goodness, with the law of karma simply being a truth to understand, not a whip to terrorise.

For scholars of philosophy and religion, this comparison opens new avenues. It invites a re-reading of Foucault through a cross-cultural lens: could we imagine a benign Panopticon, a "dharma-opticon," that empowers individuals rather than subjugating them? The Dharmic case suggests that when the observer is reconceived as one's own higher self or a loving God, surveillance takes on a very different character. Power, in the Foucauldian sense, is not the ultimate game in town – *dharma* is. Moral surveillance in Sanātana Dharma is ultimately in the service of *śreyas* (the highest good), not merely *śāsana* (discipline/management). This does not invalidate Foucault's analysis but provides a complementary paradigm where internalised gaze is tied to transcendence, not domination.

Conversely, viewing the law of karma through a Foucauldian lens adds nuance to our understanding of how religious ethics function sociologically. It helps us see that, aside from lofty metaphysics, there is a pragmatic social mechanism at work: belief in an unseen witness does regulate behaviour effectively. It is arguably one reason for the resilience of dharmic norms over millennia, even in times and places with weak external policing – people largely policed themselves. However, unlike Foucault's subjects, Dharmic actors were not mere cogs in a machine; ideally, they were engaged in a meaningful moral order. This gives them agency and dignity, which Foucault's prisoners lack. The very concept of *dharma* implies a willingly embraced law (the word can mean "that which is upheld"). In the Bhagavad Gītā, Arjuna chooses to follow Krishna's counsel of dharma not because Krishna threatens him with surveillance (though Krishna *does* reveal his cosmic form that sees all), but because Arjuna gains insight into truth. Knowledge (jñāna) and devotion (bhakti) complement the framework of karma.

In concluding, we might say that Panopticism and karmic doctrine are like mirror images seen through a glass, darkly – similar shapes, different substance. Each involves a gaze that we carry within us. Each profoundly affects how we act when we think no one is watching. However, one gaze belongs to what Dharmic traditions would call *Māyā* (the realm of power, illusion, control), and the other to *Ṛta* (the realm of truth, order, justice). The Panoptic gaze can make us compliant; the Dharmic gaze, if properly understood, can make us righteous and ultimately free.

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