



Materialism in Ancient Indian Philosophical System

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Abstract

It is mostly believed that materialism is a form of philosophical monism adopted in western Circle over the last few centuries that propelled the growth and development of science and technology. The progress and prosperity that followed immediately influenced the human civilisation all over the world by changing our life and culture in great measure. This dominant world view has been so deeply entrenched in our psych today that inspite of its many adverse Impacts in the form of environmental pollution, global warming and climate change etc. afflicting and threatening extinction of life on earth; no immediate escape route seems visible. This reminds our ancient Indian Vedic wisdom, which fought successfully against the materialistic school of philosophy also being propogated at that time by establishing the supremacy of spiritual philosophy with the sacred pronouncement of “Basudhaiba Kutumbakam”.

In this article we would like to outline our ancient Indian philosophy based on materialism which was pursued by several schools of thought. Notable amongst them is the Charvak-Lokayata school, which we would high light here summarizing its propositions and it’s far reaching influences,

Introduction

Materialism holds that matter is the fundamental substance in nature. All things and beings including life and consciousness are results of material interactions on their various possible structures and configurations, In other words mind and Consciousness are simply the by-products or epiphenomena of material processes such as the biochemistry of human brain and the nervous system, except which they do not have any independent existence, This concept directly contrasts with the objective idealism of Vedic philosophy where mind and consciousness was considered as the first order realities to which matter is subject and material interactions are secondary. Never the less Vedic seers and sages had the extreme luxury and freedom of reflecting on all



aspects of the physical nature from all angles searching for the ultimate knowledge about the whence and whither of their existence. They pondered over the origin of the Universe, the ultimate source of all existence whether material or immaterial, the purpose of life and various other deep questions like all those. There were schools of thought that also rejected supernaturalism, other-worldly entities such as the immaterial Soul and God as well as the concept of life after death etc. They were regarded as the most radical philosophical systems; whose primary philosophical impact came by the way of a rather scientific and naturalistic approach to metaphysics. They rejected the ethical systems grounded in super naturalistic cosmologies. Traces of materialistic thoughts also appeared in some of the Vedic orthodox schools such as Purva Mimamsa, Vaisheshika, Nyaya as well as Shamkshya Darshan, proposing atomism, the causal logical structure of reality and the concept of perceiving nature is its of dual aspects as Purusha - the spiritual one and Prakriti- the material one. But the most radical thoughts of materialism can be associated with the unorthodox schools of Charvaka - Lokayata besides to some extent of schools associated with Jainism and Buddhism.

Charvaka Philosophy

Charvaka philosophy is an ancient school of Indian materialism which is also known as Lokayata school of philosophy. This school used to hold that direct perception (Pratyakshya), empiricism and conditional inference are the proper sources of knowledge. Adopting philosophical Skepticism; it rejected all ritualism and spiritualism forwarding the only ethical obligation in the maximization of one's own materialistic pleasure.

Charvaka and Ajita Keshakambali, the two founders of this school are said to have established Indian materialism as a formal philosophical system. Some historians posit that Charvaka may have been one of the several atheists of the materialistic schools that existed in ancient India during 6th Century B. C. Though there are some evidences of such thoughts in Vedic era, the Charvaka school must be predated to the Astika schools and also must be predecessor to Subsequent contemporary philosophies of Jainism and Buddhism. The earliest Charvaka school whose texts still survive is of Ajita Keshkambali. He had systematised the ideas of earlier materialistic schools by setting them down in the form of aphorisms in 6th century B.C. But some others also claim that Brihaspati, author of the classic work "Brihaspati sutra", was the



original founder of Indian materialism. Much of these primary literatures have been lost mostly due to the waning of popularity in due course or otherwise. However, the teachings have been compiled from secondary sources such as these found in 'Artha Shastra', Sutras, epics as well as the dialogues of Gautama Buddha and Jaina literatures. There are some early Vedic references to Brihaspati and his followers suggesting their vigorous efforts against Vedic system of philosophy. Followers of Brihaspati were not only skeptical but were intentionally opposing the orthodoxism in favour of Vedic system of the time. One of their principal objections was the practice of repetitive chanting of verses of sacred texts without understanding their meanings. His followers adopted the doctrine of 'Svabhava' rejecting the theory of causation and the notion of good or evil consequences according to 'Karma' principles. They provided a metaphysical frame-work for materialism of Brihaspati school indicating the rejection of Supernaturalism and ethical teachings. They did not believe to the eternal nature of reality and read feeling of reverence for gods. They believed in naturalism rejecting any platonic notion of essences like that of Shamkshya dualism. Shamkshya philosophy believed in the dualism by asserting there're two realms of fundamental reality; Prakriti - the material one and Purusha - the immaterial one. But in Contrast, naturalism rejects the existence of the immaterial spiritual realm and suggests that all reality is encompassed by nature which is material only Brihaspati School adopted such naturalism by rejecting the existence of a spiritual realm around the beginning of the epic period (200 BC to 200 CE). They did not believe in the morality of action that causes either morally good or evil consequences. Eventually it raised its head as a free-standing philosophical system although it had once a weaker anti-Vedic beginning in the name of Lokayata school. It was Called Lokayata because it became prevalent among people representing the world outlook of common people. 'Sada-Darshana Samuchaya'-the 8th century Jaina literature, written by Haribhadra, mentions Lokayata as the Hindu school of philosophy where there is no God, no rebirth, no karma, no duty, no fruits of merit or sin. Thus, the term Charvaka Lokayata has been used to mention the traditional philosophical school of Indian materialism.

Expressing the moods and perceptions of the common populace of the-then Indian society, charvakas were sharply critical of the Vedic religion, Brahmanism and the ideology of the priests. The doctrine of Charvaka – Lokayatas can be summarised with the following propositions.

(1) Four material elements such as fire, earth, water and air, called Mahabhutas, are considered as the basis of all that exists. These elements produce all objects both material and immaterial like soul and consciousness and also give rise to all



phenomena of nature by being spontaneously active with a force of their own inherent (swabhava) in them in combining to various specific forms.

(2) Only 'this world' (loka) exists and there is no hereafter like after-death, Life is neither continued after death in the Brahman-Atman world nor can it be revived on this mundane world. Thus, the Charvaka's dictum was: -

" Bhasmibhutasya dehasya

Punaragamana Kutah?"

Which means, how can a cremated body burnt to ashes become alive again? Therefore, it was further said that,

" Jabat Jébet sukham Jibet,

Runam Krutwa Ghrutam pibet."

Which means, as long as you live, live happily maximizing a luxurious Life even on borrowings to live sumptuously with good food enriched with ghee and honey. "While life is yours, live joyously, none can escape Deaths searching eyes; when once this frame of ours they burn, how shall it ever again return?" This is the same statement of charvaka as put forward by S. Radhakrishnan in his own words. (Vol I, page 281) charvakas criticized the religious idealist, proposition that "Consciousness is the property of the immortal soul". They insisted that Consciousness dies with the death of man, while the body is disintegrated into the four basic elements of which it was composed of. When man dies, the earthly element returns and relapses into earth, the watery elements return into water, the fiery element into the fire, the airy elements return into air and finally the senses pass into space.

(3) There are no supernatural or divine forces. The concept of God is simply an invention of the rich and the privileged class to dupe the poor and the under-privileged ones. Charvaka taught that just as any other religion, the religion of Brahmanism was untenable and harmful by distracting the attention and strength of the common man towards worshipping imaginary gods offering sacrifices to unknown divine forces. Religious writings were based on seer fantasies of certain group of privileged people.



(4) There is no soul in the sense of the religious cult. It is the matter for specific configuration that thinks rather than the Soul which does not exist independently of matter.

(5) The Law of Karma, which is about the redressal for both good and bad deeds, is nothing but an invention of idealist philosophers, the source of evil on the earth should be looked for in the cruelty and injustice existing in the society which lead to inevitable sufferings rather than its predetermined nature through the Karma of the previous birth called as "Prarabdha".

(6) The only source of knowledge of nature is the sense perception, therefore direct perception through the five senses gives man genuine knowledge called as 'Pratyakshyagyana'. Only that exists which can be directly perceived. That which cannot be perceived directly does not exist. Therefore, the religious essences like God, the soul or the heavenly Kingdom etc. cannot exist.

Charvakas also elaborated the sense perception of two kinds; external and internal, External perceptions are linked with the five sense organs, whereas the internal perception emerges through the action of reason in the 'manasa'. Therefore, there are two kinds of knowledge. The first kind called 'Pratyakhyagyana' is the result of the contact between sense organs and the objects of the external world. The second kind of knowledge called "Parokshyagyana' which arises through mental operations on the basis of the analysis of the sense data.

Glimpses of such elements of materialism are found for the 'Nyaya Darshana' of Rishi Aksapada Gautama as well as in the Baishesika Dashana of Rishi Kanada belonging to the same period in 3rd, Century BCE. Thus, materialism, no doubt, was present in varying degrees in all Indian philosophical schools, although it did not replace other ideologies. Because of its hedonistic attitudes and heretical religious views, followers of the spiritualistic schools were reticent on the subject of materialistic tendencies present in their own systems as well as in Charvaka-Lokayata system. Therefore Charvaka - Lokayata materialistic philosophy suffered marginalization.



Conclusion

Although materialism had not been widely accepted, its far-reaching influence on Indian philosophy as a whole cannot be denied. Since the Indian society starting from the Vedic era was a very open society of free thinkers, Philosophical systems thought systems were developed from various possible angles. In the Vedic era, the authority of empirical evidence carried little weight. However, at Subsequent times different orthodox schools like Nyaya Darshan, Baisherika, Shamkshya and Mimamsa including the unorthodox schools began to value the systematic and Cautions epistemology based on logical analysis, causal ordering and structure of the outer as well as the inner world. Traces of materialistic thought crept into the monolithic idealistic philosophy. Emphasis on empirical validation of Truth first appeared in the thoughts of Charvaka materialism. All these gradually led to the mindset that matter can be of some value in itself to ponder over even though it is not the fundamental entity of nature. This led to the concepts of atomism in Baishesika Darshama and many ground-breaking ones which seem so relevant today in the modern world. To speak explicitly most significant influence that materialism had on ancient Indian thought, was in the field of science, mathematics, Astronomy, Medicine and surgery as well as in technology.

References

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