



THE RADICAL MATERIALISM OF CHARVAKA: A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The Charvaka school, sometimes also referred to as Lokayata, represents the most radical departure from the metaphysical traditions of ancient Indian philosophy. Unlike the dominant orthodox (Astika) and heterodox (Nastika) schools like Vedanta, Jainism, and Buddhism, Charvaka repudiates the supernatural and emphasizes a strictly materialistic worldview. It is regarded as one of the earliest forms of empirical and skeptical thought in India, prioritizing direct perception (pratyaksha) as the only valid source of knowledge. The Charvakas reject inference and scriptural testimony, especially the authority of the Vedas, which they consider unreliable and human-made. They deny the existence of God, the soul, karma, and any form of afterlife, thereby challenging the moral and spiritual frameworks of other Indian philosophies. Their ethical outlook is often interpreted as hedonistic, advocating the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain as the primary goals of life. However, this perspective also reflects a pragmatic approach to human existence grounded in the here and now. This paper attempts an overview of the origin of Charvaka, its radical materialism, its rejection of God and the Vedas, and the broader philosophical implications of Charvaka thought in the context of Indian intellectual history.

Keywords

Materialism, Perception, Four elements, Hedonism, Heterodox, Atheistic, Artha, and Kama, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

The Charvaka philosophy is one of the prominent ancient Indian philosophies and it is called the materialism of the Indian thought. Materialism is a metaphysical theory which holds that matter is the only reality. It explains mind and consciousness as the products of matter. It seeks to reduce the higher phenomena to the lower ones. In this sense materialism is opposed to all kinds of spiritual interpretations of the universe. School of materialism is very old in India. We find some references to it in the Vedas, the Buddhistic literature and Epics, but there is no systematic work or any organized school of followers of materialism. In Indian philosophy materialism must have arisen as a reaction to the orthodox Vedic philosophy. It must have arisen also as a protest against the externals of ritualism, the idealism of the Upanishads, and exploitation of the masses by the petty rulers and monks and the political and social crises of the Upanishadic period. It held its sway in 6th century BCE. But materialisms soon died down when Jainism and Buddhism with their ethical and spiritual background appeared in the picture.

Origin and Meaning:

It is generally believed that a thinker by the name Charvaka is the founder of this school. There is one more view in which Charvaka is not a proper name but a common name given to the practitioners of materialistic philosophy. The term signifies a person who believes in “eat, drink



and be merry”. Although *Charvaka* is an independent and heterodox school of Indian philosophy we have very few reliable sources validating its teachings.

Charvaka’s Radical Materialism:

Charvaka firmly believed that there are only four elements i.e. Air (*Vayu*), Fire (*Agni*), Earth (*Prithvi*) and Water (*Aap*). Charvaka recognized only these four elements because they can be perceived. And to Charvaka, Perception (*Pratyaksha*) is the only authoritative means of true knowledge. All other means including inference are not valid. To *Charvaka* inference wherein we proceed from the known to the unknown is like mere leap in the dark. A general proposition may be true in perceived cases, but there is no guarantee that it will hold true even in unperceived cases. He argued that the reliability of only perceptible objects can be asserted. Therefore God, soul, heaven, life before and after death are not real as they are not perceptible. Only the material objects whose existence alone can be perceived are real.

The Philosophy of Consciousness (*Dehatmavada*):

This school of thought strongly asserted that the ‘Soul’ is nothing but the conscious body. The soul dies the moment when the body loses life. This philosophy is known as *Dehatmavada*. They rejected the notion of liberation of soul (*Moksha*). They believed in neither afterlife nor the other world. There is no transmigration of soul from one body to other, no heaven and no hell. Death itself is liberation. The religious rituals like *yagnas* and *yagas* are only a means of livelihood for elite caste people. Charvaka School criticized Vedas calling it hypocritical and nonsense.

Charvaka’s Rational Hedonism:

Charvaka believed that since there is no Karma and no life after death, people should center their life on pleasure (*Kama*) and material prosperity (*Artha*). He argued that out of the four values, namely, *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama* and *Moksha*; only *Kama* in the sense of sensual pleasure and *Artha* in the sense of wealth is valid. Charvaka disparages *Dharma* and *Moksha* as being useless and serving no practical purpose. He holds that enjoyment should be the supreme aim of human life. His philosophy is epitomised by a famous verse, “While life remains, let a man live happily; let him feed on ghee even though he runs into debt; when once the body becomes ashes, there is no return” (Charvaka). So, he appeals people to live happily without any irrational fear. He is perhaps the first to advocate hedonism in ancient Indian history. However hedonism advocated by him is not wild, but rational as he asks to enjoy life wisely.

Rejection of God:

The *Charvaka* school is atheistic in the sense that it rejects God as the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the world. There is no need for the God as the creator, for the material elements produce the world without any need for the so called efficient cause. The material elements have their own inherent and fixed nature (*svabhava*) and laws according to which they combine together to form the world. There is no proof that the objects of the world are the products of any design. Here Charvaka’s views are strikingly similar with the views of the great physicist Stephen Hawking. Stephen Hawking says:

We are free to believe what we want and it is my view that the simplest explanation is there is no God. No one created the universe and no one directs our fate. This leads me to a profound realization. There is probably no heaven and no afterlife either. We have this one life to appreciate the grand design of the universe.... (Professor Stephen Hawking)



Charvaka believed that objects of the world can be explained more reasonably as the fortuitous products of the four elements. The world in itself has no conscious purpose. So, *Charvaka* is considered atheistic, materialistic, mechanistic and positivistic for it believes only in positive facts or observable phenomena.

Rejection of Vedas and Varnas:

The *Charvak* School rejected *Vedas*, *Upnishadas* and other religious scriptures as ‘false, tautological and self-contradictory’. It views them as the tools created by priests to earn their livelihood and social status. *Vedas* are not considered as the valid means of knowledge so the authority of *Vedas* should not be held in esteem, for they are the works of some cunning priests who earned their living by duping the ignorant and credulous with false hopes and promises and persuading them to perform Vedic rites. They also rejected the caste system (*Varnvyavastha*) arguing that all humans are made of the same material elements, so all humans are bound to be equal. They considered no human being superior or inferior to other human being. Thus they advocated principle of social equality.

Conclusion:

Charvaka is actually the most celebrated proponent of material philosophy in Indian history. While most Indian schools of thought like Vedanta, Yoga, Jainism and Buddhism are concerned about *Karma*, *Moksha* and soul; *Charvaka* takes an opposite turn towards the physical and sensual enjoyment. *Charvaka* is the ‘black sheep’ of ancient Indian philosophy as it rejects everything metaphysical. It is firmly grounded in mundane reality. Consequently, *Charvaka* is categorised as one of the heterodox (*nastika*) schools of Indian philosophy.

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