

Materialism in Indian Philosophy

-with special reference to Carvaka materialism

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Abstract : Materialism is a form of philosophical monism which holds that matter is the fundamental substance in nature and that all phenomena, including mental phenomena and consciousness are the results material interactions

"Indian Materialism" refers to the school of thought within Indian philosophy that rejects supernaturalism. It is regarded as the most radical of the Indian philosophical systems. It rejects the existence of other worldly entities such as an immaterial soul or god and the after-life. Its primary philosophical import comes by way of a scientific and naturalistic approach to metaphysics. Thus, it rejects ethical systems that are grounded in supernaturalistic cosmologies. The good, for the Indian materialist, is strictly associated with pleasure and the only ethical obligation forwarded by the system is the maximization of one's own pleasure.

Key words : Materialism, Carvaka, India;
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Introduction :-

The word "materialism" is a commonly used word and more so in present time when capitalism and consumerism is on the rise in India. There is misconception that materialism is modern age phenomenon. In reality this phenomenon is as old as the human mankind irrespective of the place and time. It has been mentioned in ancient Indian literature also. The names of Carvaka and Brhaspati have been associated with the philosophical school of materialism in Indian literature.

The terms Lokayata and Carvaka have historically been used to denote the philosophical school of Indian Materialism. Literally, "Lokayata" means philosophy of the people. The term was first used by the ancient Buddhists until around 500

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B.C.E. to refer to both a common tribal philosophical view and a sort of this-worldly philosophy or nature lore. The term has evolved to signify a school of thought that has been scorned by religious leaders in India and remains on the periphery of Indian Philosophical thought. After 500 B.C.E., the term acquired a more derogatory connotation and became synonymous with sophistry. It was not until between the 6th and 8th century C.E. that the term "Lokayata" began to signify Materialist thought. Indian Materialism has also been named Carvaka after one of the two founders of the school. Carvaka and Ajita Kesakambalin are said to have established Indian Materialism as a formal philosophical system, but some still hold that Brhaspati was its original founder. Brhaspati allegedly authored the classic work on Indian Materialism, the Brhaspati Sutra. There are some conflicting accounts of Brhaspati's life, but, at the least, he is regarded as the mythical authority on Indian Materialism and at most the actual author of the since-perished Brhaspati Sutra. Indian Materialism has for this reason also been named "Brhaspatya".

Traces of materialism appear in the earliest recordings of Indian thought. Initially, Indian Materialism or Lokayata functioned as a sort of negative reaction to spiritualism and supernaturalism. During the 6th and 7th centuries C.E. it evolved into a formal school of thought and remains intact, though consistently marginalized.

Vedic thought, in the most comprehensive sense, refers to the ideas contained within the Samhitas and the Brahmanas, including the Upanisads. Historians have estimated that the Vedas were written and compiled between the years 1500 B.C.E. It is difficult to point to one philosophical view in the Upanisads, at least by Western standards; however they are considered by scholars to comprise all of the philosophical writing of the Vedas. The Vedas exemplify the speculative attitude of the ancient Indians, who had the extreme luxury of reflecting on the whence and whither of their existence.

The Vedic period marked the weakest stage of the development of Indian Materialism. In its most latent form, Materialism is evident in early Vedic references to a man who was known as Brhaspati and his followers. The literature suggests that Brhaspati did not attempt to forward a constructive system of philosophy but rather characteristically refuted the claims of others schools of thought. In this sense, followers of Brhaspati were not only skeptical but intentionally destructive of the orthodoxies of the time. It is thought that any mention of "unbelievers" or "scoffers" in the Vedas refers to those who identified with Brhaspati and his materialist views. Thus, Materialism in its original form was essentially anti-Vedic. One of Brhaspati's principal objections to orthodoxy was the practice of repeating verses of sacred texts

without understanding their meaning. However Brhaspati's ideas (Brhaspatya") would not become a coherent philosophical view without any positive import. His followers eventually adopted the doctrine of "Svabhava", which at this point in history signified the rejection of 1) the theory of causation and 2) the notion that there are good and evil consequences of moral actions. "Svabhava" enhanced Brhaspatya by providing it with the beginnings of a metaphysical framework.

The term "Svabhava" in Sanskrit can be translated to "essence" or "nature." Brhaspati used the term to indicate a school of thought that rejected supernaturalism and the ethical teachings that followed from supernaturalist ideologies. Brhaspati and his followers were scorned and ridiculed for not believing in the eternal nature of reality and for not revering the gods and the truths they were supposed to have espoused. It is interesting to note that while other schools have incorporated the "Svabhava" as a doctrine of essences or continuity of the soul, the use of the term by Brhaspati was specifically meant to represent his association with the philosophical naturalism.

The major work of the Epic Period of Indian history (circa 200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.) is the Mahabharata. The Great War between the Kurus and the Pandavas inspired a many-sided conversation about morality. Conversation developed into intellectual inquiry and religion began to be replaced by philosophy. It was around the beginning of this period that the Brhaspati school began to merge with the philosophical naturalism of the time. Naturalism rejected the existence of a spiritual realm and also rejected the notion that the morality of an action can cause either morally good or evil consequences. Naturalist underpinnings helped to further shape Indian Materialism into a free-standing philosophical system. The term Lokayata replaced Brhaspatya and scholars have speculated that this was due to the desire for a distinction between the more evolved philosophical system and its weaker anti-Vedic beginnings. The Lokayata remained oppositional to the religious thought of the time, namely, Jainism and Buddhism, but it was also positive in that it claimed the epistemological authority of perception. Furthermore, it attempted to explain existence in terms of the four elements (earth, air, fire, water). While there is little certainty about the formal development of the Lokayata school during the Epic Period, it is suspected that its adoption of naturalistic metaphysics led to its eventual association with scientific inquiry and rationalistic philosophy. Materialism stood out as a doctrine because it rejected the theism of the Upanisadic teachings as well as the ethical teachings of Buddhism and Jainism. It stood for individuality and rejected the authority of scripture and testimony.

The Lokayata adopted its hedonistic values during the development of the Brahmanical systems of philosophy (circa 1000 C.E.). As a reaction against the ascetic and meditative practices of the religious devout, Indian Materialism celebrated the pleasures of the body. People began gratifying their senses with no restraint. Pleasure was asserted as the highest good and, accordingly to the Lokayata, was the only reasonable way to enjoy one's life. Some scholarship suggests that during this stage of its development Indian Materialism began to be referred to as "Carvaka" in addition to the "Lokayata". This is contrary to the more popular view that the school was named Carvaka after its historical founder helped to establish the Lokayata as a legitimate philosophy. The term Carvaka literally means "entertaining speech" and is derived from the term charva, which means to chew or grind with one's teeth. It is possible that Carvaka himself acquired the name due to his association with Indian Materialism, which then led to the school acquiring the name as well.

According to the teachings of materialism, Lokayata is the only shastra; perception is the only authority; earth, water, fire and air are the only elements; enjoyment is the only end of human existence; mind is only a product of matter. There is no other world: death means liberation. Some of the important sutras of Brhaspati which are quoted in the various philosophical writings may be gleaned as follows:

- " Earth, water, fire and air are the elements (1)
- " Bodies, senses and objects are the results of the different combinations of elements (2)
- " Consciousness arises from the matter like the intoxicating quality of wine arising from the fermented yeast.(3)
- " The soul is nothing but the conscious body.(4)
- " Enjoyment is the only end of human life.(5)
- " Death alone is liberation.(6)

The Sarva-darshana-sangraha(7) gives the following summary of the Charvaka position : 'There is no heaven, no final liberation, nor any soul in another world; nor do the actions of the four castes, orders etc. produce any real effect. The Agnihotra, the three Vedas, the ascetic's three staves and smearing one's self with ashes, were made by Nature as livelihood of those destitute of knowledge and manliness. If a beast slain in the Jyotistoma rite will itself go to heaven, why then does not the sacrifice forthwith offer his own father ?If beings in haven are gratified by our offering the Shraddha here, then why not give the food down below to those who

are standing on the house top ? While life remains let a man live happily, let him feed on ghee even though he runs in debt; when once the body becomes ashes, how can it ever return here?.....(All the ceremonies are) a means of livelihood (for) Brahmanas. The three authors of the Vedas were buffoons, knaves and demons.'

There are no existing works that serve as the doctrinal texts for the Lokayata. The available materials on the school of thought are incomplete and have suffered through centuries of deterioration. Mere fragments of the Brhaspati Sutra remain in existence and because of their obscure nature provide little insight into the doctrine and practices of ancient Indian Materialists. Clues about the history of Indian Materialism have been pieced together to formulate at best a sketchy portrayal of how the "philosophy of the people" originated and evolved over thousands of years.

Epistemological thought varies in Indian philosophy according to how each system addresses the question of "Pramanas" or the "sources and proofs of knowledge." (Mittal 41) The Lokayata (Carvaka) school recognized perception (pratkaysa) alone as a reliable source of knowledge. They therefore rejected two commonly held pramanas: 1) inference (anumana) and 2) testimony (sabda). Because of its outright rejection of such commonly held sources of knowledge, the Lokayata was not taken seriously as a school of philosophy. The common view was that Carvakas merely rejected truth claims and forwarded none of their own. To be a mere skeptic during the time amounted to very low philosophical stature.

However, there are additional accounts of the Lokayata that suggest that the epistemology was more advanced and positivistic than that of mere skepticism. In fact, it has been compared to the empiricism of John Locke and David Hume. The Carvakas denied philosophical claims that could not be verified through direct experience. Thus, the Lokayata denied the validity of inferences that were made based upon truth claims that were not empirically verifiable. However, logical inferences that were made based on premises that were derived from direct experience were held as valid. It is believed that this characterization of the epistemology of the Lokayata most accurately describes the epistemological position of contemporary Indian Materialism.

Carvakas were, in a sense, the first philosophical pragmatists. They realized that all sorts of inference were problematic; in order to proceed through daily life inference is a necessary step. For practical purpose, the Lokayata made a distinction between inferences made based on probability as opposed to certainty. The common example used to demonstrate the difference is the inference that if smoke is rising from a building it is probably an indication that there is a fire within the building.

However, Carvakas were unwilling to accept anything beyond this sort of mundane use of inference, such as the mechanical inference forwarded by the Buddhists. The Lokayata refused to accept inferences about what has never been perceived, namely god or the after-life.

The ontology of the Lokayata rests on the denial of the existence of non-perceivable entities such as God or spiritual realm. Critics of this school of thought point to the fallacy of moving from the premise "the soul cannot be known" to the conclusion "the soul does not exist." Again, there is a pragmatic tendency in this sort of thinking. It seems that followers of the Lokayata were not concerned with truths that could not be verified; however they were not entirely skeptical. The Lokayata posited that the world itself and all material objects of the world are real. They held that all of existence can be reduced to the four elements of air, water, fire and earth. All things come into existence through a mixture of these elements and will perish with their separation. Perhaps the most philosophically sophisticated position of Indian Materialism is the assertion that even human consciousness is a material construct. According to K.K.Mittal, the ontology of the Lokayata is strictly set forth as follows:

1. Our observation does not bring forth any instance of a disincarnate consciousness. For the manifestation of life and consciousness, body is an inalienable factor.
2. That body is the substratum of consciousness can be seen in the undoubted fact of the arising of sensation and perception only in so far as they are conditioned by the bodily mechanism.
3. The medicinal science by prescribing that certain foods and drinks (such as Brahmighrta) have the properties conducive to the intellectual powers affords another proof and evidence of the relation of consciousness with body and the material ingredients (of food). (Mittal 47)

Mittal reports (ibid.), apparently two schools of thought within the Lokayata arose out of these tenets. One forwarded the position that there can be no self or soul apart from the body; another posited that a soul can exist alongside a body as long as the body lives, but that the soul perishes with the body. The latter view adopted the position that the soul is pure air or breath, which is a form of matter. Therefore, the Lokayata collectively rejects the existence of an other-worldly soul, while sometimes accepts the notion of a material soul.

To speculate as to why the universe exists would be an exercise in futility for an Indian Materialist. The purpose and origin of existence is not discoverable through scientific means. Furthermore, the speculation about such matters leads to anxiety and frustration, which reduce pleasure and overall contentment. There is no teleology implicit in Indian Materialism, which is evidenced in the school's position that the universe itself probably came into existence by chance. Although there can be no certainty about the origin of the universe, the most probable explanation is that it evolved as a result of a series of random events.

There is also no doctrine of Creation in the Lokayata. The principles of karma (action) and niyati (fate) are rejected because they are derived from the notion that existence in itself is purposeful. The fundamental principle of Indian Materialism was and remains "Svabhava" or nature. This is not to suggest that nature itself has no internal laws or continuity. It would be a misinterpretation of Indian Materialism to suppose that it forwards a cosmology of chaos. Rather, it resembles most closely the naturalism forwarded by the American philosopher John Dewey. While it posits no "creator" or teleology, Indian Materialism regards nature itself as a force that thrives according to its own law.

The crude Charvaka position has been vehemently criticized by all systems of Indian Philosophy all of which have maintained the validity of at least perception and inference. To refuse the validity of inference from the empirical standpoint is to refuse to think and discuss. All thoughts, all discussions, all doctrines, all affirmations and denials, all proofs and disproofs are made possible by inference. The Charvaka can understand others only through inference and make others understand him only through inference. Thoughts and ideas, not being material objects, cannot be perceived; they can only be inferred. Hence the self-refuted Charvaka position is called sheer nonsense. Perception itself which is regarded as valid by the Charvaka is often found untrue. We perceive the earth as static but it is moving round the sun. Such perceptual knowledge is contradicted by inference. Moreover, pure perception in the sense of mere sensation cannot be regarded as a means of knowledge unless conception of thought has arranged into order and has given meaning and significance to the loose threads of sense-data. The Charvaka cannot support his views without giving reasons which presuppose the validity of inference.

The Charvaka admits the existence of four elements-earth, water, fire and air-only and he rejects the fifth, the ether, because it is not perceived but inferred.

Similarly, soul and God and the hereafter are rejected. Everything which exists, including the mind, is due to a particular combination of these four elements. The elements are eternal, but their combinations undergo production and dissolution. Consciousness is regarded as a mere product of matter it is produced when the elements combine in a certain proportion. It is found always associated with the body and vanishes when the body disintegrates. Just as the combination of betel, areca nut and lime produces red colour or just as fermented yeast produces the intoxicating quality in wine, though the ingredients separately do not possess either the red colour or the intoxicating quality, similarly a particular combination of the elements produces consciousness, though the elements separately do not possess it. Consciousness is the result of an emergent and dialectical evolution. It is an epi-phenomenon, a by-product of matter. Given the four elements and their particular combination, consciousness manifests itself in the living body. The so-called soul is simply the conscious living body. God is not necessary to account for the world and the values are a foolish aberration.

Severe and contemptuous criticism has been leveled against this doctrine by all schools of Indian Philosophy if consciousness is an essential property of the human body, it should be inseparable from it as Carvaka claims. But it is not. In swoons, fits, epilepsy, dreamless sleep etc. the living body is seen without consciousness. And on the other hand, in dreams, consciousness is seen without the living body. Moreover, if consciousness is a property of the body, it must be perceived like other material properties. But it is neither smelt nor tasted nor seen nor touched nor heard.

The most common view among scholars regarding the ethic of Indian Materialism is that it generally forwards Egoism. In other words, it adopts the perspective that an individual's ends take priority over the ends of others. Materialists are critical of other ethical systems for being tied to notions of duty or virtue that are derived from false, supernaturalist cosmologies. Indian Materialism regards pleasure in itself and for itself as the only good and thus promotes hedonistic practices. Furthermore, it rejects a utilitarian approach to pleasure. Utilitarianism regards pleasure (both higher and lower) as the ultimate good and therefore promotes the maximization of the good (pleasure) on a collective level. Indian Materialism rejects

this move away from pure egoism. The doctrine suggests that individuals have no obligation to promote the welfare of society and would only tend to do so if it were to ultimately benefit them as well.

So it may be said that as a materialist school of philosophy, in ethics, the Caravka regards sensual pleasure as the summum bonum of life. Eat, drink and be merry, for once the body is reduced to ashes, there is no hope of coming back here again. There is no other world. There is no soul surviving death. Religion is the means of livelihood of the priests. All values are mere phantoms created by a diseased mind. The ethics of the Carvaka is a crude individual hedonism; pleasure of senses in this life and that too of the individual is the sole end.

Conculusion :-

Many causes for the downfall of Carvaka in India could be guessed such as rejection of Vedas, denouncement of priests, rejection of God, denial of soul and theoretical reduction of the mind to the matter. But the main cause that should be sought for in Carvaka downfall is his denial of all human values which make life worth living. Life without values is the animal life, not the human life. Sensual pleasure is a very faint shadow of the supreme pleasure. There is a qualitative difference in pleasure. The Pleasure of the pig is certainly not the same as the pleasure of the philosopher. It was for this reason that, later on, distinction was made between Crude and refined materialists. The celebrated work Kamasutra of Vatsyayana, recommending the desirability of pleasure including sensual pleasure, yet regards Dharma or the moral values as the supreme end of life and says that acquisition of pleasure should be in conformity with Dharma. Vatsyayana recommends a harmonious cultivation of all three values of life-Dharma, Artha and Kama. No value should be rejected, suppressed or even looked down (8)*. As man after all is also a biological animal, satisfaction of the senses is as natural as the satisfaction of hunger or thirst. But because man is not merely a biological animal, but also a psychological and a moral creature, a rational and a self-conscious person capable of realizing the values, he should, therefore instead of falling down to the level of the beast, transform the animal pleasure into human pleasure by means of urbanity, self-control, education, culture and spiritual discipline.

Note:

- (1) * prthivyaptejovayuriti lattvani
- (2) * tatsamudaye sharirendriyavisayasamjna
- (3) * kinvadibhyo madashaktivad vijnanam
- (4) * chaitanyavishistah ka>ah pumsah
- (5) * kamaevaikah pnrusarthah
- (6) * maranamevapavargah
- (7) * chapter I
- (8) * parasparasyanupaghaiakain trivargam sevela. Kaniasutra. Ch.2

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