

Materialism As Viewed in Indian Philosophy

The word 'Materialism' is a commonly used word and more so in present times when capitalism and consumerism is on the rise in India. There is a misconception that materialism is a 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. Charvaka and Brahaspati have been associated with philosophical school of materialism in Indian literature.

This article attempts to throw light on:

- Teachings and epistemology of philosophical school of materialism as mentioned in Indian literature
- Reasons why materialism has been rejected by other schools of Indian philosophy
- How materialism view ethics and human values

Introduction

The school of materialism in India seems to be very old. References are found to it in the epics and in the early Buddhistic literature. Several vestiges show that even in the pre-Buddhistic India proclaimers of purely materialistic doctrines appeared. It must have arisen as a protest against the excessive monkdom of the priests. The externals of ritualism which ignored the substance and emphasized the shadow, the idealism of the Upanisads unsuited to the commoners, the political and the social crises rampant in that age, the exploitation of the masses by the petty rulers, monks and the wealthy class, the lust and greed and petty dissensions in an unstable society paved the way for the rise of materialism in India in the post Upanisadic and pre-Buddhistic age. But materialism in Indian philosophy has never been a force. Born in discontent, it soon died in serious thought. Though the materialistic way of life, the way of enjoying the pleasures of the senses and the flesh is as old as humanity itself and will surely last as long as humanity lasts, yet materialism as meta-physics has never found favour with the Indian philosophers. Jainism and Buddhism arose immediately and supplied the ethical and spiritual background which ejected materialism.

Brahaspati, a heretical teacher, is regarded as the traditional founder of the school of materialism. His sutra has unfortunately perished. Sometimes this Brahaspati is equated with the teacher of the gods who propagated materialism among the Asuras so that they might be ruined. Charvaka, after whose name this school is so called, is said to be the chief disciple of Brahaspati. According to another view, Charvaka is the name of the founder of this school. According to still another view, the word 'Charvaka' is not a proper name, but a common name given to a materialist, and it signifies a person who believes in 'eat, drink and be merry' (the root 'charva' means to eat) or a person who eats up his own words, or who eats up all moral and ethical considerations, or a person who is 'sweet-tongued' (charuvak) and therefore whose doctrine is superficially attractive. Another synonym of Charvaka is Lokayata which means a

commoner and therefore, by implication, a man of low and unrefined taste. In Ramayana, they are called ‘fools who think themselves to be wise and who are experts in leading people to doom and ruin.

Teachings of Materialism

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 Brahaspati which are quoted in the various philosophical writings may be gleaned as follows:

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

The Sarva-darshana-sangraha gives the following summary of the Charvaka position:

‘There is no heaven, no final liberation, nor any soul in another world.... 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?’

Epistemology of Materialism

The epistemological doctrine of the Charvaka school is that perception (pratyaksha) is the only means of valid knowledge. The validity even of inference is rejected. Inference is said to be a mere leap in the dark. Charvaka accepts the validity of perception and thereby upholds the truth of the means of valid knowledge, though he rejects all other means of knowledge as invalid. But the Shunyavadin and the Advaitin reject the ultimate validity of all means of knowledge as such including perception, though they insist on the empirical validity of all means of knowledge. The distinction between the ultimate and empirical knowledge is unknown to Charvaka. To accept the validity of perception and, at the same time and from the same standpoint, to reject the validity of inferences is a thoughtless self-contradiction.

The crude Charvaka position has been vehemently criticized by all systems of Indian Philosophy all of which have maintained the validity of atleast 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 flat but it is almost round. 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.

Materialism Rejects Metaphysics

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 Charvaka 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.

Materialism and Ethics

In ethics, the Charvaka 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 Charvaka is a crude individual hedonism; pleasure of the senses in this life and that too of the individual is the sole end. Out of the four human values-Dharma (righteousness, ethical code of conduct) , Artha (wealth), Kama (desires) and Moksha (liberation)- only Kama or sensual pleasure is regarded as the end and Artha or wealth is regarded as the means to realize that end, while Dharma and Moksha are altogether rejected. Pleasure is regarded as mixed up with pain, but that is no reason why it should not be acquired. 'Nobody casts away the grain because of the husk'. Should nobody cook because of beggars? Should nobody sow seeds because of animals?

Many causes for the downfall of Charvaka 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 Charvaka 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 the three values of life- Dharma, Artha and Kama. No value should be rejected, suppressed or even looked down. 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.