

The Materialist

Prof. K. S. Arjunwadkar

The materialist in Sanskrit tradition

The materialist school is known in Sanskrit tradition by two names: Chaarvaaka and Lokaayata. The first name is explained to mean one whose advice is attractive (chaaru + vaak); the second to mean the view that is widespread among the people. Materialistic views are found interspersed in literature from the oldest times, though not in a systematic manner. They are supposed to have been systematised by one Brihaspati; but no authentic work of this system has reached us. All that we get about the views of Chaarvaaka is what we find in the works of his adversaries who quote his views only to refute them. Whatever their intention, we must thank these adversaries for recording the Chaarvaaka views faithfully which would have otherwise been lost.

Views of Chaarvaaka

Chaarvaaka as represented in his adversaries' works accepts perception as the only or major means of knowledge. This stand naturally results in his denial of the existence of the soul after death or a world beyond the known one – heaven and hell -- where it is supposed to experience the results of its good or bad deeds under the supervision of God who, in his view, does not exist either. Concepts like liberation are a far cry for him. This naturally leads to his denial of the orthodox scheme of do-s and don't-s which to him is sheer nonsense based on imaginary concepts. The only sensible way for him is to do one's best to get pleasures of the world which are sacrificed by the stupid in the hope of gaining superior other-worldly ones. That they are mixed with pain is no reason why one should turn one's back to them; for there can be no pure pleasure or pain in this world. Chaarvaaka naturally denies the authority of scriptures which, in his view, are clever devices of cunning Brahmins to serve their private ends. His motto is: one should attempt to live happily as long as one can; for, the body, reduced to ashes after death, is never restored, and there is no soul that survives death. The world is as it is by its nature; it does not need any one like God to create or take care of it. Chaarvaaka criticises many orthodox beliefs and practices in derisive terms.

To Chaarvaaka, the dichotomy of matter and spirit is not acceptable. He believes that consciousness arises out of the integration of material constituents – the four elements: the wind, the fire, the water, the earth -- in the same manner as the property of intoxication arises in the mixture of constituents of the liquor that lack it. Consequently, it disappears at the disintegration thereof. It is, therefore, idle to talk of heaven or hell or liberation, for no one exists to experience them. According to some, Chaarvaaka is willing to accept inference as a means of knowledge, but would like to restrict it to this-worldly life.

Criticism of Chaarvaaka views

Since conclusions are based on the position regarding the means of knowledge, critics of Chaarvaaka attempt to establish the validity of inference which he either denies or limits to this-worldly life.

© *Prof. K. S. Arjunwadkar*