

What is Materialism?

Before proceeding to details, it is necessary to understand what, in the philosophical context, materialism stands for.

George Stack has recently defined materialism as follows:

Materialism is a set of theories which holds that all entities and processes are composed of—or are reducible to—matter, material forces or physical processes. All events and facts are explainable, actually or in principle, in terms of body, material objects or dynamic material changes or movements.¹

Keith Campbell enumerates three basic tenets of materialism:

- 1) Everything that is, is material.
- 2) Everything can be explained on the basis of laws involving only the antecedent physical conditions.
- 3) There is a cause for every event.²

Campbell also cautions the naïve reader that metaphysical materialism does not entail the psychological disposition to pursue money and tangible goods despite the popular use of ‘materialistic’ to describe this interest.³

The Indian Context

Those who have had their initiation in philosophy through the Western tradition feel baffled when they encounter the Indian scenario. Instead of individual philosophers, they find a number of philosophical schools. Despite certain basic similarities in their approaches, they contend against one another regarding several issues that are quite alien to the Western tradition. Belief in rebirth is, for example, axiomatic to nearly all the Indian schools, be it Brahminical, Jain or Buddhist. Their sole aim is to find a way to escape from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. This is what is meant by *mukti*, *mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa*. Whether subjective idealist or realist, theist or atheist, adhering to the doctrine of the inerrancy of the Vedas or not, each of these schools believed that it alone could provide a way to deliverance from all earthly sufferings.

However, there was one philosophical school which did not start from the premise that *darśana* was *mokṣa-sāstra*. The very concept of deliverance and whatever it entailed were objects of ridicule to this school. This school is known as the Cārvāka or Lokāyata.

The Cārvākas and the Presocratics

Unlike the other schools of Indian philosophy, the Cārvākas resemble the early materialist tradition of philosophy in ancient Greece. Both the Presocratic philosophers and the Cārvākas started from the premise of four elements as constituting the whole world. Matter to them was primary; consciousness could not exist without a material substratum. The presence of God or gods was irrelevant to them. They intended to view the world in terms of nature in its various manifestations. This kind of approach was so unique that the materialists, both in India and Greece, had to suffer misrepresentation in the hands of their opponents.

The problem of understanding materialism is bedeviled by the fact that the original writings of the Indian and the Greek materialists are available only in fragments, quoted or paraphrased in the works of their opponents and others. Despite this limitation it is still possible to reconstruct, with some degree of certainty, the philosophical position of the Cārvākas, as similar attempts have been made in case of their Greek counterparts.

In what follows we shall try to trace the development of materialism in ancient India.

Materialism before the Cārvāka/Lokāyata

Scepticism about the generally accepted views regarding the origin of the universe is encountered in the *Rgveda* itself. A famous hymn ends with the following verses:

But, after all, who knows, and who can say
whence it all came, and how creation happened?
The gods themselves are later than creation,
so who knows truly whence it has arisen?
Whence all creation had its origin,

he, whether he fashioned it or whether he did not,
 he, who surveys it all from highest heaven,
 he knows—or maybe even he does not know.⁴

(10. 129. 6-7)

However, when we come to the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.1ff) we meet the first inklings of materialism in Uddālaka. In the Buddhist sources we read of Ajita Kesakambala, a senior contemporary of the Buddha, who preached:

There is no (consequence to) alms-giving, sacrifice or oblation. A good or bad action produces no result. This world does not exist; nor does the other world. There is no mother, no father (all good or evil done to them produces no result). There is no rebirth of beings after death. In this world, there are no samanas [*śramaṇas*] or Brāhmaṇas established in the Noble Path and accomplished in good practice, who, through direct knowledge acquired by their own efforts, can expound on this world and the other world. This being is but a compound of the four great primary elements; after death, the earth-element (or element of extension) returns and goes back to the body of the earth, the water-element (or element of cohesion) returns and goes back to the body of water, the fire-element (or element of thermal energy) returns and goes back to the body of fire, and air-element (or element of motion) returns and goes back to the body of air, while the mental faculties pass on into space. The four pall-bearers and bier (constituting the fifth) carry the corpse. The remains of the dead can be seen up to the cemetery where bare bones lie graying like the colour of the pigeons. All alms-giving ends in ashes. Fools prescribe alms-giving; and some assert that there is such a thing as merit in alms-giving; but their words are empty, false and nonsensical. Both the fool and the wise are annihilated and destroyed after death and dissolution of their bodies. Nothing exists after death.⁵

The passage contains most of the elements of the materialist system which flourished in the seventh or eighth century CE and came to be known as the Cārvāka/ Lokāyata. Jābāli in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa, 100. 2-17) echoes Ajita Kesakambala in many respects; the *Mahābhārata* (Śānti Parvan, 211. 22-30) and some of the Purāṇas such as the *Padma Purāṇa* and the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and an Upapurāṇa, the *Viṣṇudharmottara Mahāpurāṇa*, also contain references to materialism. These texts and some others seem to refer to some pre-Cārvāka materialist ideas. They anticipate the Cārvāka view except in one respect: they speak

of five natural elements, namely, earth, air, fire, water and space, while the Cārvākas reject the fifth, presumably because space is not perceptible to the senses. Some of the Presocratic philosophers, however, do not speak of all the four as the basic elements. Thales took water alone to be so, Anaximenes, air, Heraclitus, fire, etc. But there are others who thought of the aggregate of all the four elements as *arche* (origin).

Sources for the Cārvāka/Lokāyata

As mentioned before, no texts of the Cārvāka/Lokāyata have survived. Hence we have to depend exclusively on the works of its opponents who polemicized against materialism. There are also a few philosophical digests that offer a summarized version of the Cārvāka/Lokāyata, although their representation is not always beyond question. However, the basic tenets can be gathered from various Brahminical, Jain and Buddhist works. It is certain that there was at least one collection of aphorisms (*sūtras*), brief, terse statements setting down the fundamental position of the system. Second, several commentaries on this work (no fewer than five) were also composed at different times. Third, a number of verses and satirical epigrams were current till the fourteenth century when Sāyaṇa-Mādhava wrote his philosophical compendium, *Sarva-darśana-saṃgraha* (*SDS*). Of these three sources, the first two can be admitted as more or less authentic and hence reliable evidence. But the third is of dubious authenticity, for some of them might have been composed by Buddhist and Jain poets, who, along with the Cārvākas, ridiculed the Vedic rituals involving animal sacrifice. However, the verses and epigrams contain nothing more than what can be found in the first two sources. They merely confirm rather than add to our knowledge of the Cārvāka system.

The Cārvāka Fragments

(a) Aphorisms

Let me first quote the aphorisms which can be taken as more or less genuine, i.e., emanating from Cārvāka sources.⁶

1. *Materialism*

1.1 We shall now explain the principle.

- 1.2 Earth, water, fire and air are the principles, nothing else.
- 1.3 Their combination is called the 'body', 'sense', and 'object'.
- 1.4 Consciousness (arises or is manifested) out of these.
- 1.5 As the power of intoxication (arises or is manifested) from the constituent parts of the wine (such as flour, water and molasses).
- 1.6 The self is (nothing but) the body endowed with consciousness.
- 1.7 From the body itself.
- 1.8 Because of the existence (of consciousness) where there is a body.
- 1.9 Souls are like water bubbles.

2. *The Doctrine of Inherent Nature (lit. Own Being, svabhāva)*

- 2.1 The world is varied due to the variation of origin.
- 2.2 As the eye in a peacock's tail.

3. *The Doctrine of the Primacy of Perception*

- 3.1 Perception indeed is the (only) means of right knowledge.
- 3.2 Since the means of right knowledge is to be non-secondary, it is difficult to ascertain an object by means of inference.

4. *The Doctrine of the Denial of Rebirth and the Other-World*

- 4.1 There is no means of knowledge for determining (the existence of) the other-world.
- 4.2 There is no other-world because of the absence of any other-worldly being (i.e., the transmigrating self).
- 4.3 Due to the insubstantiality of consciousness (residing) in the other-world.

5. *The Doctrine of the Uselessness of Performing Religious Acts*

- 5.1 Religious act is not to be performed.
- 5.2 Its (religion's) instructions are not to be relied upon.

It is to be noted that there is not a single aphorism advocating hedonism. The opponents of the Cārvāka often bring this charge against materialism, but they have never been able to cite a single aphorism purporting to do so. Second, although some of the aphorisms are negative statements, the majority of them (13 out of 18) do affirm the positive tenets of materialism. So the charge brought against them, that no positive precept is prescribed in their works, is baseless.⁷

(b) Fragments of the Commentaries

The fragments of the commentaries mostly refer to aphorisms 1.1, 2, 4 and 3.1, 2. The Cārvāka apparently developed along the line of the other philosophical systems of India. The commentary and sub-commentary tradition is not always consistent in every respect. The commentators and sub-commentators sometimes manipulated the aphorisms to suggest what they would like them to mean. It is therefore necessary to take note of the Cārvāka/Lokāyatika philosophers known to us.

The names of two Cārvāka philosophers are given in Śāntarakṣita's *Tattvasaṅgraha* and Kamalaśīla's *Pañjikā*.⁸ One is called Kambalāśvatara and the other, Purandara. Purandara's *vṛtti* (gloss), apparently on the collection of the *sūtras*, is mentioned in a Prakrit work, Pupphadanta (Puṣpadanta)'s *Mahāpurāṇa* and Vādidevasūri's *Syādvāda-ratnākara*. It should be noted that Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla were Buddhists while Pupphadanta and Vādidevasūri were Jains.

The third name is Aviddhakarna, which is found in the *Nyāya-viniścaya-vivaraṇa* by Vādirājasūri, *Siddhi-viniścaya-ṭīkā* by Anantavīrya, *Pramāṇavārttika-svopajñā-vṛtti-ṭīkā* by Karṇakagomin, and *Tattvasaṅgraha-pañjikā* by Kamalaśīla. The name of his commentary is also given by Kamalaśīla: *Tattvaṭīkā*. All that can be said about these three commentators is that they must have flourished in or before the eighth century.

Cakradhara mentions the fourth name, Bhāvivikta, whom he describes as a *cirantana-cārvāka*, a traditional Cārvāka. He may have written his commentary even before Kambalāśvatara and Purandara. Unfortunately no extract from his work has been quoted in *Granthibhaṅga* by Cakradhara.

The fifth and so far the last commentator we know of is Udbhaṭabhaṭṭa, also mentioned as Bhaṭṭodbhaṭṭa. This Udbhaṭa might be identical with the rhetorician from Kashmir. Kalhaṇa in his *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* mentions a minister bearing the same name. As regards Kambalāśvatara and Purandara, all that can be said is that they belonged to the eighth century or before. As to Udbhaṭa, if all the Udbhaṭas were the same, we may fix the time at the ninth century. His name occurs in

Syādvāda-ratnākara and *Granthibhaṅga*. Vālidevasūri respectfully refers to him as ‘a venerable old twice-born’ (*jarad-dvijanmā-mahānubhāvaḥ*). Considerably long extracts from Udbhaṭa’s commentary are quoted as the exponent’s view (*pūrvapakṣa*) by Cakradhara and Vālidevasūri.

From Kamalaśīla we know that there were at least two commentaries (if not more) on the *Cārvāka-sūtra* in or before the eighth century. The commentators explained one *sūtra* (1. 4: *tebhayaś caitanyam*) in two different ways. Cakradhara mentions Bhāvivikta as one among many of the traditional Cārvākas. So the number of commentators may have been more than five that we have been able to ascertain.

The names of Aviddhakarṇa and Bhāvivikta are also found in the Nyāya literature. But at the present state of our knowledge we cannot say, as Eli Franco writes, whether they were “Cārvākas who converted to Nyāya or Naiyāyikas who converted to the Lokāyata.”⁹ Franco is also of the opinion that “the possibility of their having introduced Vaiśeṣika categories into the Cārvāka school is certainly not unimaginable.”

Of all the commentators, Udbhaṭa deserves more notice than others. While the other commentators seem to have followed the literal meaning of the aphorisms (so far as can be gathered from the available fragments, admittedly inadequate to form any definite opinion), Udbhaṭa was indeed a ‘revisionist’ among the materialists. Let me quote a few of his remarks as reproduced by Vālidevasūri:

While explicating the two aphorisms in the *Lokāyatasūtras*, “We shall now explain the principle” and “Earth, water, fire and air (are the principles)” [see aphorisms 1.1 and 2], he (*sc.* Udbhaṭa) described it in another way, forsaking the conventional interpretation. In the first aphorism, the term, *tattva*, tells the impossibility of laying down any fixed number and essential characteristics of the sources of knowledge and objects of knowledge. The second aphorism, too, is explained by him as referring to the objects of knowledge. The word, *iti* in (the aphorism), “The earth, water, fire and air *iti*”, indicates also the possibility of similar objects of knowledge other than the earth, etc. Such is his view.

The word, *iti* does not denote the end, (but) it is illustrative. There are other principles such as consciousness, sound, pleasure, pain, desire, aversion, efforts, impression and others. There are also prior non-existence of the earth, etc., posterior non-existence, and mutual difference

which are quite apparent and distinct (from the principles, viz., earth, etc.).

This goes against the very grain of the Cārvāka approach. Like Aviddhakarṇa, Udbhāṭa too was an accomplished logician. He could and did use the technical terms of Nyāya to justify the orthodox Cārvāka position. However, he succeeded more in obfuscating than expounding the significance of the aphorisms. Here is an example (the least opaque of the fragments related to logic):

The one who framed the definition [see 3.2 above] aimed at brevity of expression, but not only because of this does inference become secondary. And if they were to define the characteristics of probans [*sādhya*, i.e., inferable property, such as ‘fire’ as attributes of the thing which is a part of the probandum [*hetu*, reason, such as ‘smoke’], there would be no secondary significance even in the definition.

It is probable that Jayantabhaṭṭa had Udbhāṭa in mind when he said, “The Cārvākas, the well-learned ones, say that it is really impossible to specifically state the number of the instruments of cognition.” Given Udbhāṭa’s refusal to delimit the number of the objects of cognition, it is only one step further to deny any definite number of the instruments of cognition.

In fact, in one instance, Udbhāṭa seems to verge on pure idealism. He says, “[T]here is an unseen property of the elements, the particular nature of the elements that constitute the body, which brings about the experience of diverse pleasures and pains.”

(c) Verses Attributed to the Cārvākas

Now we come to the last of our sources, viz., verses attributed to the Cārvākas. The epigrams given below are mostly satirical in intent, affirming at the same time the fundamental materialist position *vis-à-vis* religious rites (specially the post-mortem ones), and belief in the existence of the incorporeal soul. Although the Cārvāka philosophers were presumably Brahmins, they had no hesitation in debunking the priests and their pre-occupation with the Vedas. Some of the epigrams run as follows:

1. 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.

2. Br̥haspati says—The *agnihotra*, the three Vedas, the ascetic's three staves, and smearing one's self with ashes—

All these are the livelihood of those destitute of knowledge and manliness.

3. If a beast slain in the Jyotiṣṭoma rite will itself go to heaven,

Why then does not the sacrificer forthwith offer his own father?

4. If Śrāddha (*offering of rice balls to a dead person*) produces gratification to beings who are dead,

Then oil may rear the flame of an extinguished light of a lamp.

5. If Śrāddha produces gratification to beings who are dead,

Then here, too, in the case of the travellers when they start, it is needless to give provisions for the journey.

6. If beings in heaven are gratified by our offering the Śrāddha here,

Then why not give the food down below to those who are standing on the housetop?

7. While life remains let a man live happily; nothing is beyond death.

When once the body becomes ashes, how can it ever return again?

8. If he who departs from the body goes to another world,

How is it that he comes not back again, restless for love of his kindred?

9. Hence it is only as a means of livelihood that Brahmans have established here.

All these ceremonies for the dead—there is no other fruit anywhere.

10. The three authors of the Vedas were buffoons, knaves, and demons.

All the well-known formulae of the pandits, *jarphari*, *turphari* etc.

11. And all the rites for the queen (e.g., holding the penis of the horse) commanded in the Aśvamedha (the Horse sacrifice)—

These were invented by buffoons, and so all the various kinds of presents to the priests,

While the eating of flesh was similarly commanded by night-prowling demons.

12. O, the naked one (Jain), ascetic (Buddhist), dimwit, given to practising physical hardship!
Who has taught you this way of leading life?
13. Man consists of only as much as is within the scope of the senses. What the vastly learned ones speak of (as true) is but similar to (the statement) 'O, Dear! Look at the footprint of the wolf!'
14. O, the one with beautiful eyes! Drink and eat (as you like). O, the one with a charming body! That which is past does not belong to you. O, the timid one! The past never comes back. This body is nothing but a collectivity (of the elements).
15. Penances are only various forms of torments, and abstinence is only depriving oneself of consuming (pleasures of life). The rituals of *agnihotra*, etc., appear only to be child's play.

Some of these verses call for elucidation but it would require considerable space to do so.¹⁰ Here are a few more verses of a scholarly nature:

16. No concomitance being possible in the case of the particular and there being the charge of 'proving the proved' in the case of the universal, the subject cannot be justified as a locus of the probandum. How can, therefore, one talk about inference (as a source of valid knowledge)?
17. It is easily possible to find, in all cases, that one's inference is contradicted either by probans 'which nullifies one's own thesis', or by a probans 'which is an invariable opposite'.
18. Indeed, who will deny the validity of inference when one infers fire from smoke, and so on; for even ordinary people ascertain the probandum by such inferences, though they may not be pestered by the logicians.
19. However, inferences that seek to prove a self, God, an omniscient being, the other-world, and so on, are not considered valid by those who know the real nature of things.
20. Simple-minded people cannot derive the knowledge of probandum by such inferences, so long as their mind is not vitiated by cunning logicians.

The issue is logic, more particularly the problem of inference as a valid means of arriving at a universally valid conclusion. The dig at ‘cunning logicians’ is worth noting. Unlike other schools, the Cārvāka did not aim at ascertaining any truth that would be valid for all times, past, present and future. They were satisfied with what was apparent from perception, e.g., the invariable relation between *fire*, the antecedent, and *smoke*, the consequent. Such an inference was acceptable to them, for it was based on perception. But when the domain of inference was extended to extra-sensory areas (e.g., the existence of God, or of an omniscient being), they would firmly reject it.

Some Common Misrepresentations Examined

(a) Did the Cārvākas Refuse to Admit Inference?

In the Indian philosophical context, besides the issues of rebirth, after-life and other-world, the instruments of cognition (*pramāṇa*) are considered to be of seminal importance. The Cārvākas are generally branded as a philosophical school that accepted perception as the only means of knowledge. But there are enough evidence to show that, in addition to perception, the Cārvākas also admitted inference as a valid means of cognition in so far as it was based on perception and hence verifiable by perception. As to verbal testimony, analogy and other instruments of cognition accepted by various schools, the Cārvākas refused to accept them. We shall now delineate on this issue.

All college textbooks and most of the popular digests and handbooks of Indian philosophy describe the Cārvākas as *pramāṇaikavādin*, i.e., they recognize no other instrument of cognition except one, viz., perception. Vācaspatimiśra (ninth/tenth century) satirizes the Cārvāka in the following way:

Moreover, even beasts, with a view to obtaining the beneficial and avoiding the harmful, move towards a field green with soft, fresh grass and leave one full of dried grass and thorns. The Nāstika, not knowing what would lead to his own good or what would lead him into harm, is more beastly than a beast. In this matter (of determining a thing as desirable and undesirable), which is the basis of an effort for obtainment (*pravṛtti*) or an effort for avoidance (*nivṛtti*), and can only be known by inference, perception is not capable of doing anything.¹¹

Many other Brahminical and Jain philosophers have similarly condemned the Cārvākas as *pramāṇaikavādin*. But such a branding is not only wrong but betrays some design as well. Let us take the following instance.

To prove that the Cārvākas declined to admit inference as a valid means of knowledge Śāntarakṣita and Jayantabhaṭṭa cite several verses. All of them, however, are taken from Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya*. Śīlāṅka, Vācaspatimiśra and Vādidevasūri too follow them. Now Bhartṛhari was a staunch Vedist. He did not believe in any other means of knowledge except verbal testimony. Both perception and inference were unacceptable to him. Yet the opponents of the Cārvāka prefer to cite his view as if it corresponds to the Lokāyatikas'. If there were any aphorism denying the validity of inference in the Cārvāka works, why did the antagonist all quote Bhartṛhari and then set out to refute the Cārvākas? One has the impression that Śāntarakṣita and others simply use the Cārvāka as their Śikhaṇḍin: the butt of their attack was really Bhartṛhari or the school of grammarians, although they never declared it in so many words.¹² If any school of Indian philosophy is to be branded as *pramāṇaikavādin*, it is the school of grammarians, not the Cārvāka.

The fact is that the Cārvākas did admit inference along with perception as an instrument of cognition. Let us have a look at the evidence.

Kamalaśīla in his commentary on *Tattvasaṅgraha*, verses 1481-82, quotes a line: "Purandara however says, 'The Cārvākas too admit of such an inference as is well-known in the world, but that which is called inference [by some], transgressing the worldly way, is prohibited [by them]'." Soon after the publication of this work (1926) Satkari Mookerjee (1935) referred to this sentence as did Surendranath Dasgupta (1940).¹³ Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya (1989), too, devotes a section on "The Evidence of Purandara".¹⁴

Dasgupta also refers to Vādidevasūri, who says that, according to the Cārvākas, "Since in the supposed supra-sensuous transcendent world no case of the *hetu* [reason] agreeing with the presence of its *sādhya* [inferable property] can be observed, no inductive generalization or law of concomitance can be made relating to this sphere."

M. Hiriyanna too notes that the opponents of the Cārvāka may even have misrepresented its tenets:

Thus it is commonly assumed by the critics that the Cārvākas denounce reasoning as a *pramāṇa*; but to judge from the reference to it in one Nyāya

treatise, they seem to have rejected only such reasoning as was ordinarily thought sufficient by others for establishing the existence of God, of a future life, etc.¹⁵

Hiriyanna observes: “Such a discrimination in using reason alters the whole complexion of the Cārvāka view. But this is only a stray hint we get about the truth. What we generally have is a caricature.”

The Nyāya treatise Hiriyanna mentions is Jayantabhaṭṭa’s *Nyāyamañjarī*, the first printed edition of which appeared as early as 1895. None before Hiriyanna, however, noticed this hint. (Hiriyanna in his turn also failed to notice the passages in the works of Kamalaśīla and Vādidevasūri which provide categorical assertions—not mere stray hints—regarding the limited validity of inference admitted by the Cārvākas).

Besides Kamalaśīla, Jayanta and Vādidevasūri, *Sarvamata-saṅgraha*, an anonymous and undated digest, presents the Cārvāka view more elaborately:

This rice, because of its riceness (*annatva*) satisfies hunger as it did yesterday—such an inference as this is included there (*sc.* in the Lokāyata Śāstra), due to its being rooted in perception. The fruits of worldly goods (*abhyudaya*) and *summum bonum* (*niḥśreyasa*), the matter of religion and *brahman* as well as the Veda are devoted to the pretersensual, hence are not (to be admitted as) means of knowledge—this is the conclusion.¹⁶

Ratnaprabhā, a Jain philosopher, too, seems to echo Purandara when he writes:

The Cārvākas, however, contend that they admit inferences which are of practical utility, such as the inference of fire from smoke, and deny only those which deal with such supernatural matters as the heaven, the unseen power (*apūrva*) which generates in a next birth fruits of acts done in a present life, etc. etc.¹⁷

Guṇaratna, another Jain philosopher, repeats the same view:

The Cārvākas admit the validity of inference which tend to facilitate the daily activities of ordinary people (*loka-yātrā-nirvahaṇa-pravaṇam*), such as the inference of fire from smoke, etc., but they never admit the validity of extraordinary inferences which seek to establish the heaven, merit and demerit, etc.¹⁸

Last but not least, Sukhlalji Sanghvi, the eminent Jain scholar of our times, prefers to follow this view. The Cārvāka, according to him, belongs to the side which accepts the dominance of the senses (*indriyādhīpatya-pakṣa*) as opposed to those who reject the senses (in favour of the mind or the self), those who admit the dominance of both the senses and the mind (or the self), and those who admit only the dominance of the Vedas.¹⁹

In fact, the distinction made between two kinds of inference—one confined to the ways of the world (*laukika*), and the other relying on the scriptures or the supra-sensual (*śāstrasiddha*)—is the lasting contribution of the Cārvākas to Indian Logic. It is a sad commentary on the state of scholarship that the true Cārvāka view regarding inference has all along been distorted and wilfully misrepresented. Is it too much to expect that the writers of the twenty-first century will take note of these discoveries (not all of them very recent) and put an end to caricaturing the Cārvāka position? They should realize what S. Radhakrishnan, no friend of materialism, said long ago in relation to the verses at the end of *SDS*, ch. 1: “A philosophy professed seriously for centuries could not have been of the coarse kind that it is here reported to be.”²⁰

(b) Were the Cārvākas Sensualists?

All that has been said above is enough, I think, to dispel the notion that the Cārvākas were a happy-go-lucky lot and their sole aim in life was sensual gratification. Had it been so, all their opponents would not have dealt with them so seriously. The Cārvākas, of course, did not believe in the other-world and were not credulous enough to believe in the existence of two separate places called heaven and hell. So the opponents of the Cārvāka have portrayed them as immoral people preaching “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die”. But none of the opponents quotes a single *sūtra* in support of such representation. Serious scholars like Richard Garbe and M. Hiriyanna noted long ago that such a (mis)representation has all the characteristics of a caricature.

Let us re-examine the sources of the basis on which the Cārvākas have been branded as unrestrained hedonists. The only “evidence” that is cited is a verse found in *SDS*.

yāvajjīvet sukhaṃ jīved ṛṇaṃ kṛtvā ghṛtaṃ pibet /

bhasmībhūtasya dehasya punar āgamaṇaṃ kutaḥ//

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 again?

The same verse, however, is quoted in no fewer than thirteen sources both before and after *SDS* and almost everywhere the second hemistich reads *nāsti mṛtyor agocaraḥ* (nothing is beyond the scope of death).²¹ Whatever other variants there may be, nowhere does the second hemistich reads *ṛṇaṃ kṛtvā ghṛtaṃ pibet*, excepting in *SDS*. More interesting is the fact that Sāyaṇa-Mādhava himself quotes this verse twice in the same chapter, once at the beginning and again at the end. In the first instance he too quotes the second hemistich as *nāsti mṛtyor agocaraḥ*!

There is no proof to show that the verse under discussion originated from among the Cārvākas. It is first found in the *Viṣṇudharmottara Mahāpurāṇa* (108. 18-19). Here, too, the second hemistich reads *nāsti mṛtyor agocaraḥ*. The verse is attributed to King Beṇa who, both in this Purāṇa and elsewhere, is represented as a king who did not believe in the other-world. So he never cared to conform to the traditional duties of a devout person. There is no mention of any such term as Bārhaspatya or Cārvāka or Lokāyata in this context. In fact, most of the verses that are attributed to Bṛhaspati by Sāyaṇa-Mādhava and others are of doubtful authenticity.

Whatever be the authenticity of the *yāvajjīvet* verse, the fact remains that this very verse has been generally taken to be the quintessence of the Cārvāka philosophy. But what the verse says in its original form is pretty simple. The message is quite clear: Since there is no rebirth, there is no use of practising austerity; death will overpower everyone anyway.

Let us look at the matter from another angle. Jayantabhaṭṭa has no soft spot for the Cārvākas. He controverts at some length the Cārvākas regarding the acceptance of inference as an instrument of cognition both in his philosophical work, *Nyāyamañjarī* and his allegorical play, *Āgamaḍambara*. He, however, refuses to accept the view that the Cārvākas prescribed any hedonistic doctrine. He rather believes that the Lokāyata “is only the assertion of the *vaiṭaṇḍika* (representing merely the destructive criticism of others); it is not really a body of precepts.”²²

A putative opponent is said to object: “But then there it has been (positively) prescribed: ‘Live in pleasure as long as you live’.” Jayanta brushes aside this

objection. “No,” he says, “the fact being naturally established, a prescription in this regard becomes useless.”²³ In other words, the verse, according to Jayanta, does not contain any prescription at all.

It is also to be noted that other philosophers who have crossed swords with the Cārvākas have concentrated solely on epistemological questions. We may mention the names of Śāṅkarācārya, Śāntarakṣita and Prabhācandra who find fault with the Cārvāka doctrine on both epistemological and metaphysical grounds, but they never call it hedonistic or anything of that sort. There is no denying the fact that the Cārvākas did not abide by the Vedas, nor did they believe in the doctrine of rebirth and *karman*; they also refused to accept any statement based on inference unless it was supported by or based on perception. All these objections have been raised and contested from the Brahminical, Buddhist and Jain points of view. But in the philosophical works no charge has been levelled against them that involves moral depravity. It seems that a facile equation was made by the custodians of orthodoxy between the denial of the other-world and indulgence in sensual gratification.

Such an equation is also met with in ancient Greece. Epicurus (341-270 BCE) lived an austere life, as did Ajita Kesakambala.²⁴ Yet Epicurus was maligned as a glutton in subsequent Greek and Roman literature. Two modern English words, ‘Epicure’ and ‘Epicurean’, stand for “a person who takes particular pleasure in fine food and drink” (as given in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 2001).

But did Epicurus not preach that pleasure was the highest good? Most certainly he did. But by “pleasure” he meant intellectual pleasure. In a letter to Menoeceus he made his position amply clear:

So when we say that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of the dissipated and those that consist in having a good time, as some out of ignorance and disagreement or refusal to understand suppose we do, but freedom from pain in the body and from disturbance in the soul. For what produces the pleasant life is not continuous drinking and parties or pederasty or womanizing or the enjoyment of fish and the other dishes of an expensive table, but sober reasoning which tracks down the causes of every choice and avoidance and which banishes the opinions that beset souls with the greatest confusion.²⁵

If, in spite of, such crystal clear exposition, the Epicurean view of pleasure could be so much distorted, what could the poor Cārvākas do? Not a single fragment of the Cārvāka sources contains any reference to pleasure or what the founders of that system meant by pleasure. Yet, thanks to some poets and playwrights and the writers of popular digests of philosophy (both ancient and modern), the word, *cārvāka*, has become synonymous with sensualism. Generations of men and women have been victims of this malign campaign. It is high time that we get rid of such a misconception.

Conclusion

What comes out of the above is pretty clear: The Cārvākas were uncompromising materialists, caring nothing for religion of any sort, be it Brahminical, Jain or Buddhist. They refused to go beyond nature and rejected everything called ‘supernatural’. They made fun of asceticism, priestcraft, rituals and glorification of gift (*dāna*) to the Brahmins. The system betrays a very early origin, since it is firmly rooted in the concept of four basic elements (*bhūtas*, viz., earth, air, fire and water). But one cannot fail to notice the keen observation implicit in their philosophical speculations. Referring to aphorism 1.5, B. K. Matilal remarks, “This empirical methodology might have been the precursor of scientific thought in India.”²⁶

The Cārvākas did not believe in the caste (*varṇa*) system (see verse 1) in which respect they are at one with the Buddhists as they are in their rejection of the infallibility of the Veda. More importantly, they were gifted logicians, well versed in the technicalities of Nyāya. At the same time, they knew how slippery was the path of argumentation, which started from certain axioms concerning some concepts not verifiable by perception (e.g., heaven and hell, God, etc.). All these made them targets of attack of all other philosophical schools, more particularly of the followers of Nyāya (including Vaiśeṣika), Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta among the Vedists, the Yogācāra and Madhyamaka Buddhists, and the Jains. The denial of heaven and hell was misconstrued to suggest that the Cārvākas were addicted to sensual pleasure and hence thoroughly immoral in their attitude to life. Their insistence on perception as the only viable instrument of cognition was distorted to mean they were so stupid as to deny the validity of inference as such. And, last but not least, they were projected as naive and rather infantile, not worthy of consideration by serious philosophers.²⁷

Although some modern writers, in spite of their affiliation to one idealist system or the other, doubted the veracity of such representation, the authors of textbooks and popular digests of Indian philosophy persist in the same game of maligning the Cārvākas, as their counterparts in Europe did in slandering Epicurus. How much is ignorance of primary sources to be blamed, and how much ideological opposition, is worth pondering.

Notes and References

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2. Campbell, Keith. 1972. 'Materialism' in Paul Edwards ed. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Vol. 5, p. 179.
3. Campbell, p. 179.
4. Trans. Basham, A. L. 1954. Reprinted in Mircea Eliade. 1979. *From Primitive to Zen*. London: Collins. p. 110.
5. *Ten Suttas from Dīgha Nikāya*. 1987. Samath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies. p. 83.
6. For details of the sources, etc. see Bhattacharya, Ramkrishna. 2002. 'Cārvāka Fragments: A New Collection'. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* (Dordrecht), 30 (6): 597-640. All the fragments and verses that follow will be found here. Earlier, Dakshinarājan Shastri and Mamoru Namai attempted to collect the fragments that were available to them.
7. Jayantabhaṭṭa brought this charge against the Cārvākas in *Nyāyamañjarī*. 1982 Gaurinatha Sastri ed. Varanasi: Sampurnanand Sanskrit Vishvavidyalaya. Ahnika 4. Part I. p. 388.
8. For the details of the sources, see my article mentioned above (n. 6).
9. Franco, Eli. 1997. *Dharmakīrti on Compassion and Rebirth*. Wien (Vienna): Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien. p. 142.
10. Interested readers may consult my articles and notes published in 1999. *Indian Skeptic*, 11 (12); 12 (1); 2002. *Jain Journal*, 36 (3); 1996. *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, 14 (1); 1999. 17 (2). For the details of textual variants, translations, etc. see my article 2002. (n. 6).

11. *Bhāmaitī*, sub-commentary on the *Brahmasūtra* (3.3.53). See Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya and Mrinal Kanti Gangopadhyaya ed. *Cārvāka/Lokāyata*. 1990. New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research. p. 243.
12. Śāntarakṣita quotes verses 32-34 in their right order, Jayantabhaṭṭa quotes verses 32, 42, and 34 (in this order both in *Nyāyamañjarī* and *Āgamaḍambara*). Śīlāṅka quotes verse 42 only, while Vācaspati and Vādidevasūri quote verse 32 only. For textual details, see Bhattacharya, Ramkrishna. 1999. 'Paurandarasūtra Revisited'. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 27(5): 489, 495.
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21. For details see Bhattacharya, Ramkrishna. 1996. '“ṛṇaṃ kṛtvā gṛṇaṃ pibet”—Who Said This?' *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, 14(1): 170-174 and 1999. '“jīvikā dhātūnirmita” or “jīvikiṭi bṛhaspati”?' *JICPR*, 17(1): 171-176.
22. Jayantabhaṭṭa. *Nyāyamañjarī*. Ahnika 4. Part I, p. 388.
23. *Nyāyamañjarī* (n. 7 above). p. 388.
24. For details see Bhattacharya, Ramkrishna. 1999. 'Ajita Kesakambala: Nihilist or Materialist?' *The Journal of the Asiatic Society*, 41(1): 74-83.

25. Long , A. A. and Sedley, D. N. 1987. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Vol 1, p. 114.
26. Matilal, B. K. 1987. 'Cārvāka' in Mircea Eliade ed. *Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Vol. 3, p. 165.
27. Jayantabhaṭṭa derisively calls the Cārvākas *varāka*, "wretched" in *Nyāyamañjarī* (n. 7 above). Āhnika 3. Part I, p. 229. Hemacandra also employs this derogatory word against the Cārvākas in *Yogaśāstra*. 1926. Bhavnagar: Srijainadharma Pracharasabha. 2. 38. f. 96b.