

Materialist Philosophy in Ancient India

Subrata Gouri *

A POPULAR BELIEF is prevalent in our country that this land was a place for development of spiritualism and idealistic view of philosophy. It is further believed that our *munis* and *rishis* used to be so engrossed in thoughts of *moksha* and the other world that they did not find any time for thinking about the present world of things; though in *purushartha*, it is true that *artha* and *kama* are concerned with worldly affairs subservient to *dharma* but *moksha* remained the ultimate object of life.

But a critical study of history of the philosophical thoughts clearly reveals that there was a rich tradition of materialist philosophy in our country from ancient time. In fact, a majority of the schools of philosophy that flourished in our country reflected materialistic views. But the ruling class and their standard bearers had tried to suppress these materialistic views. They even destroyed many valuable writings belonging to materialistic philosophies. On the contrary, they always upheld and patronized the idealist views. This tradition is still going on today. So it is necessary to highlight and uphold the materialistic philosophy that existed in our country.

Before entering into the main subject, I would like to point out the basic difference between the two great camps of philosophical thoughts i.e., materialism and idealism. I would like to refer to the Marxist philosopher Friedrich Engels in this context. He

defined these two philosophical currents as follows: "The great basic question of all philosophy ... is that concerning the relation of thinking and being. The answers which the philosophers gave to this question split them into two great camps. Those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature ... comprised the camp of idealism. The others, who regarded nature as primary, belong to the various schools of materialism."

In European philosophy the first who fully asserted the primacy of spirit to nature was Plato. He worked out his theory of ideas in conscious opposition to materialism. He wrote, "Why this dispute about reality is a sort of battle of gods and giants? The giants are the materialists. The gods are of course the idealists." The idealists of our country also expressed the same view. They too worked out their philosophy in opposition to materialism. Their idealism moreover was for them the philosophy of the gods or *Devas*, while materialism was the '*Upanishad*' or 'secret knowledge' of the demons or the *Asuras*.

The clearest expression of this is to be found in a legend of the Chhandogya *Upanishad*. *Indra* and *Virocana*, the representatives of *devas* and *asuras* respectively approached *Prajapati* for the knowledge of the true self. *Prajapati* asked them to look at their own images on a pan of water and they saw their own bodies 'corresponding exactly to the hair and finger nail'. This knowledge of the Self being the body proved sufficient for *Virocana*. But *Indra* felt dis-

*The author is a member of the all-India Secretariat of *Breakthrough Science Society* and one of the Vice-Presidents of the West Bengal Chapter.

satisfied and came back to *Prajapati* to be instructed in the idealist philosophy which therefore became the philosophy of *Devas*.

Thoughts of the pre-historic stage was materialistic

So it is clear that the struggle between materialism and idealism lasted for thousands of years. But when did this struggle start? In this article we shall not enter into a detailed discussion, but anthropological studies have clearly shown that the thoughts of the early humans were materialistic in nature. Idealism came afterwards after the division of the society into classes. So it is natural that this would be reflected in the early civilization. Thoughts of the early human society on this land were materialistic.

We had two traditions—Vedic and non-Vedic. Both the societies reflect the common features of existence of materialism particularly in the early part of it.

Materialist thinking in the Vedic tradition

As we know that the Vedas are orally composed songs and eulogies composed by pastoral people before the advent of written script. They called themselves *Aryas* (Aryans) and were at some stage of barbarism¹—and transmitted to the later generations by a method of sheer retentive memories and hence also called *Shrutis*, that which is heard. These immensely old oral compositions are traditionally called the *mantras*, one great division of the *Veda*, the other being the *brahmana*, which is in prose and is of later origin.

¹Barbarism implies a society more advanced than the hunter-gather stage, practising animal husbandry and/or agriculture, but before the advent of reading and writing, and advanced societal organization like urban life.

The *mantras* come down to us in the form of four compilations or *Samhitas*, viz. the *Rigveda-Samhita*, *Samveda-Samhita*, *Atharvaveda-Samhita* and *Yajurveda-Samhita*. These are also often referred to simply as the *Rigveda*, *Samveda* etc. Of these, the *Rigveda* is the oldest and considered to be the foundation of all *vedic* literature. Since the people who composed the songs of *Rigveda* were in the stage of barbarism, it is natural that the thoughts inherent in the *Rigvedic* hymns and songs would be materialistic in nature. And we have seen exactly the same in the *Rigveda*. An actual reading of the *Rigveda* gives one the inescapable impression that like the songs and chants of the surviving pastoral people, these hymns, too were but the simple expressions of the everyday desires—the desire for cattle, food, rain, safety, victory, health and progeny. The desires were predominantly linked with worldly materials.

There is no doubt that the hymns and songs are full of extravagant praises for all sorts of deities or *Devas*. But who were they? They are often crassly human heroes, looting food and cattle for the tribesmen and sharing these out among themselves; sitting with them in their assemblies and addressed by them in endearing terms like friends or the best of friends—often they were simply natural phenomena and inanimate objects, even like the hill (*parvata*), the herb (*osadhî*), the trees (*vanaspatî*), the forests (*aranyani*), the weapons like bow and arrows (*ayudha*). Sometimes again the deities are just the embodiments of purely these worldly desires, like the protection against abortion, ‘the protection against consumptive diseases’, ‘the protection against nightmare’. A fascinating deity of this kind is *Pitu*, i.e., food. The barbarian poets with their healthy appetite praised him for being savoury and delicious and

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because he makes the body fat. In the general context of all sorts of traditional and modern claims attributing the highest spiritual wisdom to the *Rigveda*, these hymns to *Pitu* may be quoted here to show their materialist leaning:

'I glorify *Pitu*, the Great, the upholder, the strong, by whose invigorating power *Trta* (the famous) tortured the deformed *Vrtra*. Savoury *Pitu*, honeyed *pitu*, we welcome thee; become our, become our protector ... Come to us, beneficial *Pitu*, a source of delight, a friend well respected and having no envy. Your flavours, *Pitu*, are defused through the regions, as the dust spreads through the regions, as the winds spread through the sky ... The minds of the mighty gods are fixed, *Pitu*, upon you; by your active assistance (*Indra*) slew *Ahi*. O *Pitu*, the wealth which is associated with the mountains went to you; hear you, O sweet one, be accessible to our eating. And since we enjoy the abundance of the waters and the plants; — therefore, o body may thou grow fat. And since we enjoy *Soma*, thy mixture with boiled milk or boiled barley; — therefore, O body, may thou grow fat ...' (Rg 1.187. Deity *Pitu*, Poet *Agastya*)

What do we find here? Anything spiritual or idealistic or simply material things?

One important deity was Sun or *Sabita*. The name of another deity was *Apangnapat*. He is the deity of water. Another important deity was *Agni* i.e., fire. Here there is no place for any supra-matter spiritual thoughts. So we can certainly say that though the later philosophers, particularly the Vedantic philosophers claimed Vedic support for their philosophies, according to the strictly Vedic tradition itself, philosophy, or for that matter, abstract thinking — was far from being the real purpose of the early compilations or *Samhitas*. Like all other primitive consciousness of the primitive societies, early Vedic consciousness

was related to the strictly natural phenomena and forces, which they encountered in their daily life, i.e., they were worshiping nature.

The Mimamsa

We find two schools of philosophy based on the Vedic tradition i.e., *Purva Mimamsa* or *Mimamsa* and *Uttara Mimamsa* or *Vedanta*. Among them *Vedanta* is the principal idealist philosophy of our land. But we find reflections of materialist thinking in *Mimamsa*.

At first let us look at the literature of *Mimamsa* Philosophy. The *Mimamsa-Sutra* is the source book of this system and it is a compilation of 2500 aphorisms attributed to a certain *Jaimini*. Though believed to be oldest among the *Sutra* works, it is impossible to be exact about its date, which could be between 300 BC and 200 AD. But the actual origin of the philosophy must have been older. *Jaimini* himself quoted a considerable number of his predecessors and the theoretical discussions concerning the rituals, the special theme of the *Mimamsa*, were already vigorously undertaken in the *Brahmana* literature, of which the *Mimamsa* was the direct outcome.

The earliest extant commentary on the *Mimamsa-sutra* was by *Sabara* and hence called *Sabara-bhashya*. The greatest *Mimamsakas* after *Sabara* were *Prabhakara* and *Kumarila*. Both of them worked on *Sabara-bhasya*, but there were sharp differences between them. The differences were strong, sometimes even fundamental. This resulted in splitting up of the *Mimamsa* into two schools called the *Bhatta* and the *Prabhakara* schools, after the names of these two exponents.

Now let us come to the subject matter of the *Mimamsa*. At first, we find that the *Mimamsa* forms the stock-example of how an orthodox system of Indian Philosophy is

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under no necessary obligation to admit the existence of God. Feeble and quite fanciful efforts are sometimes made by the modern scholars to prove that this orthodox philosophy par excellence could not possibly be atheistic. But it is true that *Jaimini* himself did not believe in God. *Sabara's* argument for the rejection of God is simply that there is no evidence of his excellence. Sense-perception does not reveal God and the other sources of knowledge are after all based upon sense-perception.

Here one point should be borne in mind that later philosophers, who believed in God, put forward newer arguments in favour of theism. So, later *Mimamsakas* had to wage determined struggle against them. For example, one important argument of the later *Nyaya-Vaisesikas* in favour of the existence of God was like this: everything which is made of parts, i.e., which is neither atomic nor infinite in magnitude, is of the nature of the effect, just as a pot is; and as an effect, it is in need of a cause in the form of an intelligent agent, like the potter in the case of the pot. Everything in this world—or, the world as a whole—is made of parts; therefore it is of the nature of an effect and as such must be in need of a cause in the form of an intelligent agent. Considering the magnitude of the task this intelligent agent is supposed to perform, he must be conceived as omniscient, omnipotent, etc. i.e., is God. He creates the world from the atoms, the eternal material cause of the world, and periodically also destroys it.

Both Prabhakara and Kumarila came out sharply against this argument.

According to both Kumarila and Prabhakara, individual things of the world have their beginnings and ends; but this does not mean that the world as a whole is ever created or destroyed. Therefore, rejecting the idea of the periodic creation and disso-

lution of the world, both argued that there is only 'the constant process of becoming and passing away.' As for the cause of the individual things of the world, nothing more need to be assumed than what is actually observed, thus, for instance, the mundane parents rather than any extra mundane god are observed to be the causes of the offspring; why then assume anything more to explain their coming into being?

But why were the *Mimamsakas* so keen on rejecting the existence of God? The real clue to their atheism is to be found in their way of looking at the *Veda* and the *Vedic* deities. As already observed, the whole of the *Vedas* can be viewed by them as nothing but a body of ritual injunctions. At the same time, the *Vedic* texts mentioned all sorts of deities in connection with performance of the ritual. How then was the relation between the rituals and the deities to be conceived? Were the rituals mere acts of worship meant to please the deities so that they would grant the desired result? *Sabara* went into great details of the question and answered it with an emphatic 'No'. The deities had no substantive forms and as such could neither eat the oblations nor get pleased by them. Moreover there was no question of their granting the desired results because they had no real lordship over the worldly things that were desired by the performer of the rituals. Who then were the *Vedic* deities? *Sabara* in fact went to the extent of arguing that for a *Mimamsaka* there was no objection to viewing them as but mere names or sounds necessary for the ritual spells.

Sabara categorically asserted that the rituals were not acts of worship or propitiation. *Sabara's* elaborate discussion of the whole subject makes it quite clear that he was trying to draw a sharp distinction between the rituals as understood by the *Mimamsakas* and what is usually under-

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stood as the essence of religion. And since he argued that the rituals by themselves i.e., mechanically or by their own inherent potency and according to their intrinsic laws did not produce the results, it is quite evident that what he meant by the rituals was the magical acts as we know them today.

Here we should deal with one pertinent question: What is magic? George Thomson observed that magic rests on the principle that by creating the illusion that you control reality, you can actually control it. In its initial stages it is simply mimetic. You want rain, so you perform a dance in which you mimic the gathering clouds, the thunder-clap, and the falling shower. You enact in fantasy the fulfillment of the desired reality. In its later stages the mimetic act may be accompanied by a command, an imperative 'Rain!' But it's a command, not a request.'

It was of course quite natural for the *Mimamsakas* to take a magical view of the Vedic rituals. For they were after all the inheritors of the *Brahmana* tradition and the *Brahmanas* in spite of grafting upon the primitive rituals the later class interests of the priests, persisted in viewing the *Yajna* as essentially magic. However for the primitive magicians, there was no question of defending logically the efficacy of the magical acts. Actually there was no alternative before them for solving problems of life. This was the primitive consciousness of the early humans. As I already mentioned the *Mimamsa* is the outcome of the *Brahmana* tradition, which was linked with this primitive consciousness, and hence the clue to everything about the *Mimamsa* is to be sought in the assumption underlying the primitive magic. Hence, the reflection of the materialistic outlook was manifested in the *Mimamsa*.

We may now proceed to consider the

refutation of idealism by the *Mimamsakas*. Kumarila explained the necessity for it from the *Mimamsa* point of view. If everything was *maya* or unreal (which our idealists believe), then neither the ritual acts nor the fruits thereof—in short nothing with which the *mimamsa* was basically concerned—could have any meaning; or if the world was like a dream, then instead of the strenuous undertaking in the form of ritual performances, people will prefer to fall asleep and enjoy pleasures in their dreams. Thus the incentive to refute idealism did not come from what we call a scientific urge. But it carried the *Mimamsakas* to develop strong philosophical considerations against the idealistic outlook.

We find long discussions by *Vrittikara*, one of the ancient *Mimamsakas*, refuting idealism. The later *Mimamsakas* i.e., Prabhakara and Kumarila refuted idealism in the same line as that of *Vrittikara*. There are so many arguments refuting the ideas of the various shades of idealism. But there is no scope of elaborate discussion for this document. So, only one argument of the *Mimamsakas* is being cited here.

According to idealism, idea is the source of everything, and there was nothing that could be called extra-mental. The object of knowledge was only a piece of knowledge itself i.e., an idea. The different forms perceived were only forms of knowledge and not of any hypothetical extra-mental object. To prove this the Indian idealist repeatedly cited the instances of the dreams and the sense-illusions: the elephant dreamt of, like the snake wrongly perceived as the rope, was after all only mental and there being no sure criterion to distinguish between the dreaming and the waking experiences, the objects perceived in the normal waking experiences too, were to be understood in the same way. The corollary was that all knowledge, because of their pretentious

claim to reveal extra-mental were to be treated as false. **Lokayata**

Contesting this position of the idealists, argued Vrittikara, what was perceived could not be a mere idea, nor forms perceived could be form of knowledge itself, because there was an objective coercion about the act of perception. In the presence of a piece cloth, one was bound to perceive the cloth and had no option to perceive a pot instead. Perceptions, thus, revealed the extra-mental objects and not thought itself. Besides, it was useless to argue that all perceptions were like the dream-experiences or the sense illusions, because dreams are eventually negated by waking experiences and illusions by correct perceptions that follow. When so negated, they were found to arise from defective causes; dreams from sleepiness, illusions from the want of proper illuminations, etc. But the normal waking perceptions were not so negated and were not found to arise from the defective causes. Thus, one of the strong idealistic arguments was refuted by the *Mimamsakas* on the basis of practice.

Materialist Philosophy outside the Vedic tradition

So far I have discussed on the materialist outlook reflected in the Vedic tradition, which is generally known as the mouth-piece of idealism in our country. But we also find bold and consistent materialist view in some schools of philosophy outside the Vedic tradition. The most important among them is *Lokayata*. The *Samkhya* system is also reflecting consistently materialist view, particularly in its older version. Other than these two systems, the *Nyaya-Vaisesikas* and the Buddhist philosophy also reflect the materialist outlook, though not consistently.

One interesting feature of the history of Indian Philosophy is that we do not find any original books or writings on materialist philosophy, particularly Lokayata, which was the most consistent materialistic philosophy in India. It is not the fact that there never existed any actual treatises of this system. Eminent writers like Tucci, Garbe and Dasgupta cite conclusive evidences to show that actual Lokayata texts were known in the ancient and early medieval times. But such texts have not reached our hands. Why? Mostly the idealists and their patrons i.e., the rulers destroyed it. Then what are the sources of our information of this materialistic philosophy? Mostly, the writings of those who sought to refute and ridicule it. In other words, Lokayata is preserved mainly in the forms of the *Purvapaksha*, i.e., as represented by its opponents.

But how old was this materialist philosophy? The author of the *Brahman-sutras* designed two aphorisms specially to represent and refute this philosophy. In the Buddhist *Pitakas*, we come across not only the name *Lokayata* but also distinct references to the view that identified the body with the self. Along with the *Samkhya* and *Yoga*, the *Arthasastra* (4th Century BC) mentioned the *Lokayata*. The *Mahabharata* and the earliest Jain sources too mentioned this philosophy and even the *Upanishads* were not silent about materialism. Judging from all these, we can easily see that the materialist tradition in India is very old—probably as old as Indian philosophy itself.

Here another point is to be mentioned. The idealists always tried to malign the materialist philosophy in various ways. I would like to cite one such example. Lokayata was also termed as *Carvaka* at a later period, approximately eighth century AD. In the *Santiparva* of the *Mahabharatha*

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there was one Carvaka. After the great *Kurukshetra* war, as the Pandava brothers were returning triumphantly, thousands of Brahmins gathered in the city gate to bestow blessings on *Yudhistira*. Among them was *Carvaka*. He moved forward and addressed the king thus: “This assembly of Brahmins is cursing you for you have killed your kins. What have you gained by destroying your own people and murdering your own elders?” This outburst of *Carvaka*, abrupt as it was, stunned the assembled Brahmins. *Yudhistira* felt mortally wounded and wanted to die. But then the other Brahmins regained their senses and told the king that this *Carvaka* was only a demon in disguise. And they burnt him, the dissenting *Carvaka*, to ashes.

So there was a conspiracy to associate the name *Carvaka* with this materialist philosophy. It was easy to convince the common people that this philosophy could not play any beneficial role for them. So, be alert and keep safe distance from it.

Now let us discuss about the content of the *Lokayata*. Directly opposing the view of the *Vedanta* which recognizes only *Brahman* or pure consciousness as real, the *Lokayatikas* did not admit the existence of anything but the four elements, i.e., ‘*Chaturbhuta*’ — ‘*kshiti*’ (earth), ‘*ap*’ (water), ‘*tej*’ (fire), ‘*varuna*’ (air). According to *Lokayata* the elements themselves did not possess consciousness, still consciousness was viewed as emerging from them. How could that be possible? Just as rice and the other ingredients of producing wine did not by themselves possess any intoxicating quality, argued the *Lokayatikas*, yet when combined in a particular way, these caused the intoxicating quality to emerge. So did the material elements constituting the material human body, though themselves without consciousness, caused consciousness to emerge when combined in a partic-

ular way to form within the human body. It was surely one of the most significant things said by our ancestors to establish the primacy of matter over the spirit. Not only that, it also rejects the claim of the idealists that the soul can exist outside the human body.

The next important feature of the *Lokayata* is its insistence on the primacy of sense perception as the source of valid knowledge. It didn’t rely upon inference from assumption or guessing as the source of valid knowledge. Here I want to mention about the attitude of argued the *Purandara*, who was himself a *Lokayatika* in this regard. His attitude to inference as summed up by Dasgupta was as follows: “*Purandara* ... admits the usefulness of inference in determining the nature of all worldly things where perceptual experience is available; but inference cannot be employed for establishing any dogma regarding the transcendental world, or life after death or the law of *karma* which cannot be available to ordinary perceptual experience.”

So the *Lokayata* did not reject all types of inferences. It rejected those inferences which had no relation to perceptual knowledge.

We know that the idealists of our country propagated the *Karma*-doctrine according to which the divine dispensation is not arbitrary but expressed itself as *karma*-law. The essence of the doctrine is of course simple. Every human action has its own inevitable results. A virtuous action results in something good, a vicious action in something bad. Therefore whatever you enjoy or suffer now is the result of your own past actions and the way you are now acting is going to determine your future. Such a doctrine has inevitably to lean on the conception of a trans-migratory soul. The idea of rebirth and the other world is linked with these concepts. We have seen

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that this idea was propagated so extensively that it did acquire a living grip on the minds of our millions. Even pronounced atheists like the Buddhists and the Jains laid supreme stress on the doctrine. In fact in their philosophy *Karma* became so important that it made God superfluous. In the general context of this traditional understanding of the law of *karma*, it is not of little significance to note that our materialists were by far the only philosophers to have vigorously rejected it. They had persistently advocated the *Svabhava-vada* or the doctrine of natural causation and the Jaina writer Gunaratna rightly saw in this denial of the law of *karma*. He cited examples according to which there is no such thing called *karma* at all, all the manifold world is to be explained by natural causes. Indeed, rejecting as they did the conception of a transmigrating soul it was only logical for our materialists to have rejected the law of *karma*.

Lokayata rejected the doctrine of the other world, which is related to the *Karma-Law*. Some ancient folk-lore depicting the views of the *Carvakas* were very interesting, which fought the doctrine of the other world with sarcasm. Some of them are as follows.

- If the *sraddha*² brings gratification to beings who are dead, then here, too, in the case of travellers when they start, it is needless to give provisions for the journey.
- If beings in heaven are gratified by our offerings in *sraddha* here, then why not give the food down below to those who are standing on the housetop?
- In the *Ramayana*, a certain *Jabali* tried to persuade *Rama* to give up the foolish ideas concerning the *Karma*-doctrine with similar verses:

²*Sraddha* is the ritual practised after a person's death.

And the food by one partakes can it nourish other men? Food bestowed upon a Brahmin, can it serve our Fathers then? Crafty priests have forged these maxims, and with selfish objects say, 'Make thy gifts and do thy penance, leave thy worldly wealth and pray!

Such were the arguments of *Lokayatikas* or *Carvakas*, who upheld materialist view consistently.

Winternitz once observed that "it proved fatal for the development of Indian philosophy that the *Upanisads* should have been pronounced to be revelations." This is true particularly in the sense that it meant a divine sanction for the world-denying idealistic outlook, and as such this became the most serious obstacle to the development of the scientific spirit in Indian philosophy. No less fatal, however, had been the loss of our materialist texts. This has deprived us of a proper idea of our heritage of scientific thinking and has in consequence given idealism and spiritualism exaggerated importance in Indian philosophy. It is, therefore, important for us today to recover the relics of the *Lokayata* and, on the basis of careful examination of these, to re-construct the half-forgotten and half-distorted history of Indian materialism.

(To be continued)

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