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THE SOCIAL OUTLOOK
OF THE CĀRVĀKA/LOKĀYATA:
A RECONSTRUCTION

The Cārvāka/Lokāyata school of philosophy flourished in India in or around the eighth century CE and was a living system till the twelfth or thirteenth century. Thereafter it seems to have vanished into the blue, without leaving any trace whatsoever. It was the most uncompromising philosophical system that ever appeared in India. It refused to accept the notions of after-life, heaven and hell, rebirth, any creator God, and the infallibility of the sacred texts (the Vedas in particular). Its sharp satire against all this is often reminiscent of the French Enlightenment writers. In short, it was a materialist or physicalist system through and through. All idealist schools of India, particularly Vedānta, Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya among the orthodox (*āstika*) systems, and the Buddhist and the Jain among the heterodox (*nāstika*) ones, tried their best to refute the Cārvāka/Lokāyata views. Unfortunately, all the Cārvāka/Lokāyata works – the basic texts (a collection of aphorisms, *sūtra*-s) and its commentaries and sub-commentaries – are lost. All that we have are fragments quoted or paraphrased by their opponents. Attempts have been made to reconstruct the basic tenets of the system on the basis of such a pitifully few specimens.¹

It is not easy to say what the Cārvākas really meant. The case is similar to that of many of the Presocratics whose works have come down to us in similar conditions. However, it is known

¹ BHATTACHARYA (2009:69-104).

that the views of the Cārvākas have been distorted and willfully misrepresented by those who were not only idealists and Vedic fideists, but also strong supporters of *status quo ante* in their socio-economic outlook.

Materialism in India did not begin with the Cārvāka/Lokāyata. There were inklings of pre-Cārvāka materialist thought as well as of genuine scepticism, sensualism, etc. in much older works. Like the Cārvākas, some earlier thinkers, right from the Vedic times down to the days of the Buddha and Mahāvāra (sixth century BCE) and even after, asserted the primacy of matter (consisting of five basic elements, namely, earth, air, fire, water and space) over consciousness, futility of performing religious rituals, and of offering gifts (*dāna*) to Brahmins. The Cārvāka/Lokāyata seems to have absorbed all such views that had originated before its times and turned out to be the vigorous “negative arm”.²

Attempts have been made to reconstruct the epistemology of the Cārvāka/Lokāyata system by assiduously collecting the fragments of the *sūtra* work and its several commentaries as found quoted or paraphrased by its opponents. But no serious attempt has so far been undertaken to reconstruct its social outlook. It appears from the works of Kṛṣṇamiśra and Śrīharṣa, two Vedantin philosopher-poets, that the Cārvākas were opposed to caste (*varṇa*) and gender discriminations. Since we are forced to reconstruct the whole of the Cārvāka/Lokāyata on the basis of the evidence provided by its opponents, of course with due care taken regarding the possibility of misrepresentation, and because both the authors mentioned above have been already utilized by the scholars and historians of Indian philosophy, it is at least probable that their presentation of the social outlook of the Cārvākas may not be far from the truth.

The Cārvākas Against Caste and Gender Discriminations

Let us now see what these two opponents of the Cārvāka/Lokāyata make it say regarding caste and women.

² COWELL (1862:382).

In Kṛṣṇamiśra's (eleventh century) allegorical play, *Prabodhacandrodaya* (Rise of Moon-like Intellect), *Mahāmoha* (Great Delusion), an avowed materialist, declares:

tulyatve vapuṣāṃ mukhādyavayavair varṇakramaḥ kīdr̥ṣo... |
2.18ab

If the bodies are alike in their different parts, the mouth, etc., how can there be a hierarchy of castes?

A heretic in Śrīharṣa's (twelfth century) *Naiṣadhacarita* (Life of Naiṣadha) throws a challenge to the forces of *status quo ante*:

śuddhir vaṃśa dvayī śuddhau pitroryadekaśaḥ |
tadanantakulādopādadoṣā jatirasti kā || 17.40
īrṣyayā rakṣato nārīrdhikkulasthitidāmbhikān |
smarāndhatvāviśeṣe'pi tathā naramarakṣataḥ || 17.42
tṛṇānīva gḥṛṇāvādān vidhūnaya vadhūranu |
tavāpi tādr̥śasyaiva kā ciraṃ janavañcanā || 17.58

Since purity of caste is possible only in the case of purity on each side of both families of the grandparents, what caste is pure by the purity of limitless generations? 17.40

Fie on those who boast of family dignity! They hold women in check out of jealousy; but do not likewise restrain men, though the blindness of passion is common to both! 17.42

Spurn all censorious statements about women as not worth a straw. Why dost thou constantly cheat people when thou, too, art as bad as women? 17.58

Both the authors intended to depict the Cārvākas as heretics and non-believers. Defiance of the caste system was considered a heretical idea and hence fit for censure.

Is there any truth in labeling the Cārvākas as opposed to the caste system? I think there is. Two oft-quoted genuine aphorisms attributed to the Cārvākas say that the human body is a combination of four natural elements, namely, earth, air, fire

and water³. Apparently the Cārvākas gave no credence to the late Vedic idea that the Brāhmins, Rājanyas (warriors), Vaiśyas (traders and agriculturists), and Śūdras (manual workers) were different parts of the supreme being called *puruṣa* (*R̥gveda* 10.90):

yát puruṣam vyádadhuh katidhá vyàkalpayan |
múkham kím asya kau bāhú ká ūrú pádā ucyete || 11
brāhmaṇò'sya múkham āsīd bāhú rājanyaḥ kṛtāḥ |
ūrú tād asya yád váiśyaḥ padbhyám sūdró ajāyata || 12

When they divided Puruṣa, into how many parts did they dispose him? What (did) his mouth (become)? What are his two arms, his two thighs, his two feet called? 11

His mouth was the Brāhman [Brāhmana], his two arms were made the warrior, his two thighs the Vaiśya; from his two feet the Śūdra was born. 12⁴

This was a convenient way of explaining why the hierarchy of castes was bound to be accepted and observed in social life. The law books insist on the preservation and continuation of the caste system. The Cārvākas cared nothing for Manu, the chief of the law givers. They did not consider either the words of the Vedas or of Manu to be an acceptable means of cognition⁵. Hence it is quite probable that the Cārvākas had no faith in the so-called divine origin of castes and did not observe caste rules in social life. A verse attributed to the Cārvākas runs as follows:

na svarga nāpavargo nā naivātmā pāralaukikaḥ |
naiva varṇāśramādīnāṃ kriyāśca phaladāyikaḥ ||

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.*⁶

³ BHATTACHARYA (2009:78-79, 86; aphorisms: I.2-3).

⁴ MACDONELL (1978:200-201).

⁵ Sāyaṇa-Mādhava in JOSHI (1982:8).

⁶ Sāyaṇa-Mādhava in JOSHI (1981:12). Emphasis added.

As to the defence of women and treating them as equal to men, the Cārvākas apparently were very much anti-sexist. They did not believe, as Manu did, that women in general were basically untrustworthy, were not entitled to study the Vedas, and were never to earn freedom but should always be under their fathers', husbands' and sons' protection and surveillance⁷. The Cārvākas' defence of the equality of the sexes quite logically follows from their basic anti-śāstric stance. Being freethinkers, they could also very well be free from all prejudices against women that are rampant in the law books of ancient India. They did not admit word (*śabda*), that is, verbal testimony as a valid instrument of cognition (*pramāṇa*), and so were not bound to accept what the Brahminical law books declared as something sacrosanct. This is why Sāyaṇa-Mādhava could make them say: *dhūmadhūmadhvaj ayoravinābhāvo 'stīti vacanamātre manvādivadvīśvāsābhāvācca*, «...there is no more reason for believing on another's word that smoke and fire are connected, than for our receiving the *ipse dixit* of Manu, & c.»⁸

One word more. Eli Franco once suggested perceptively: «...all the Lokayātikas were fighting for... was ultimately to found social and political institutions independently of religious dogma...»⁹. He might have had in his mind Frauwallner's view that materialism in India was created for the Realpolitikers. I do not think so, as I have shown elsewhere.¹⁰ I would, however, heartily agree with Franco's suggestion. The Cārvākas did have a vision of an ideal society in which organised religion would have no room, and there would be no caste and gender discriminations. Their approach was thoroughly rational and they denounced such discriminations as impediments to founding a society based on equality of rights and opportunities. In this sense their social outlook was essentially democratic.

The rationalism and secularism of the Cārvākas are relevant even today when irrationalism fostered by the postmodernists and fundamentalism fanned by reactionary politicians are so rife

⁷ *Manusmṛti*, 9.10-20.

⁸ Sāyaṇa-Mādhava in JOSHI (1981:9).

⁹ FRANCO (1991:160).

¹⁰ BHATTACHARYA (2009:21-32).

all over the world.

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