



Characteristics of Materialism in Ancient Indian Philosophy

Doan Chinh^{1*}, Luong Ngoc Bich²

Mekong University, Vietnam

Corresponding Author: Doan Chinh trinhtkimchi@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Ancient Indian Philosophy, Lokāyata School, Naive, Primitive, Radical, Atheistic Materialism

Received: 19, May

Revised: 20, June

Accepted: 30, July

©2025 Chinh, Bich: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



ABSTRACT

Along with the philosophical schools with rich and diverse characteristics and tendencies in ancient Indian philosophy, there was a philosophical trend with atheistic materialism, called “Six heretical teachers”, in which the most typical was the Lokāyata or Cārvāka school, with its unique characteristics. It can be said that materialism in ancient Indian philosophy in general and the Lokāyata school in particular stand out with three characteristics: one is simple and primitive materialism; two is radical materialism, and three is atheistic materialism, clearly expressed in their worldview, outlook on life, and epistemology.

INTRODUCTION

Based on historical, economic, socio-political, and cultural developments of the ancient period and under the influence, influence, and domination of the Vedic philosophy, Upanishads, and Brahmanical doctrines, Indian philosophical schools were divided into different diverse trends, which were generalized into two main systems: Āstika and nāstika.

Among them is the atheistic materialist tendency, including philosophical sects representing the new movement of freedom of thought in East India, called “Six heretical teachers” (Ṣaṭ Tīrthānkara, षट् ऋषभनाथ), such as: The theory of negating morality of the Purāṇa-Kassapa or Pūraṇa-Kāśyapa sect (पूरणकाश्यप); The fatalism of Makkhali-Gośāla, or Maskarin Gośāla (मक्खलिगोशाला); The Pakudha-kaccāyana (मीनिंगकच्चायण) school’s doctrine of seven elements; The Sañjaya-velatṭhiputta, or Sañjaya Viparyasta (सञ्जय विपर्यस्त) school’s scepticism; The Ajita Kesakambali school of materialism (Sanskrit: अजित केशकंबल), prominent among which is the Charvaka (चार्वाक; Cārvāka) school of philosophy, also known as Lokāyata (लोकायत).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research works on ancient Indian philosophy in general and on atheistic materialism in Indian philosophy in particular can be summarized into three main topics.

The first topic is research works on ancient Indian philosophy in the overall process of Indian history and culture, such as the works: *Our Oriental Heritage* by Will Durant, published by Simon and Schuster, New York, 1954, with Volume 2 titled *India and Her Neighbors*, which presented and analyzed quite deeply the history of Indian civilization in areas such as geography, population, history, economy, politics - society, customs, habits, ideology, beliefs, religion, literature, art, architecture, etc., including Indian philosophy and religion; or *The Discovery of India*, 3 volumes by Jawaharlal Nehru, published by The Oxford University Press, New Delhi, India, 1954.

The second topic is research works on the formation, development and characteristics of ancient Indian philosophy, such as: *Indian Philosophy* by S. Radhakrishnan, published by New York, The Macmillan, 1951; and *The Oxford University Press, New Delhi, India, 1956*; *Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* by Max Muller, published by Bhavan’s book University, 1899; *Outline of Oriental Philosophy* by Minh Chi and Ha Thuc Minh, Publishing Board of Ho Chi Minh City University of Science, 1993.

Introduction to Indian Philosophy by Le Xuan Khoa, Learning Resource Center, Ministry of Education, Saigon, 1972; *History of Indian Philosophy* by Thich Man Giac, Publishing Board of Van Hanh University, Saigon, 1967; *History of ancient Indian philosophy* by Doan Chinh - Luong Minh Cu, University and Vocational Education Publishing House, Hanoi, 1991, *Liberation Thought in Indian Philosophy* by Doan Chinh, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 1997.

The third topic is research on each trend and each type of Indian religious philosophy scripture. Among them are works such as: A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy, edited by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1973, including the following sections: The Vedic period (Vedas, Upanishads), the Epic period (Bhagavadgītā, Mahābhārata, Manu's Law, Kautilya's Artha-sāstra), Unorthodox religious philosophical systems (Cārvāka, Jainism, Buddhism), Orthodox religious philosophical systems (Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, Vedānta).

The Upanishads, 4 vols, published by Bonanza Books, New York, in 1949, 1953, 1956, 1959; The Bhagavad gita, by S. Radhakrishnan, Allen and Unwin, London, published in 1953; Upanishad, An Tiem, Saigon, 1972, commentary by Shri Aurobindo; Primitive Buddhist Philosophy by Kimura Taiken, Van Hanh, Saigon, 1969; Hinayana Buddhist Philosophy by Kimura Taiken, Van Hanh, Saigon, 1969; Mahayana Buddhist Philosophy by Kimura Taiken, Van Hanh, Saigon, 1969.

METHODOLOGY

Purpose: Based on a general study of the process of origin, development and characteristics of Indian philosophy, the purpose of the article is to present three characteristics of the materialist and atheist philosophical movement in Indian philosophy, notably the Lokayata school of philosophy, also known as Charvaka: one is simple and primitive materialism; two is radical materialism and three is materialist and atheist, clearly expressed in the worldview, outlook on life and epistemology.

Methodology: The article is approached from the perspective of historical philosophy, cultural philosophy, and value philosophy, and the authors also use specific research methods such as the method of unifying logic and history, analysis and synthesis, induction and interpretation, abstraction, generalization, comparison, and literary method.

Main Findings: First, an overview of the Lokayata school of materialist and atheist philosophy. Second, present and analyse the main characteristics of the Lokayata school of atheistic materialism philosophy clearly expressed in their worldview, outlook on life, and epistemology, including one is simple and primitive materialism; two is radical materialism; and three is atheistic materialism.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In the history of ancient Indian philosophy, along with philosophical schools such as Sāṃkhya (सांख्य), Vaiśeṣika (वैशेषिक), Nyāya (न्याय), Mīmāṃsā (मीमांसा), Yoga (योग), Vedānta (वेदान्त) (belonging to the orthodox philosophical system Āstika: आस्तिक) and the Jaina schools, Buddhism (belonging to the heterodox philosophical system Nāstika: नास्तिक), are philosophical sects with atheistic materialism tendencies, also known as “Nirvana” (Ṣaṭ Tīrthaṅkara, षट् ऋषभनाथ), or “Nihilistic Movement”.

With different worldviews and outlooks on life, they compete, inherit each other, “overlap each other, new and old thoughts move side by side, are not compatible and often contradict each other” (Nehru, 1954, p. 115), creating richness and diversity in their nature and tendencies, “there is polytheism, there is theism with a separate God and pure monotheism, there is also a system that both acknowledges the existence of God and is based on evolution, there is both idealism and realism” (Nehru, 1954, p. 116).

Typical of the materialist philosophical tendency of this period is the Lokāyata school (लोकायत) or also known as Charvaka (चार्वाक; Cārvāka), with its very unique characteristics. The earliest historical documents about the Lokāyata philosophical school are presented in the Vedas (वेद), in the epics Rāmāyaṇa (रामायण), Mahābhārata (महाभारत), and in the Buddhist scriptures. Up to now, no original text of this school has been found.

The ideas of the Lokāyata school, perhaps most fully presented in the philosophical treatises written by the Vedānta commentators while commenting on the Vedas, Upanishads (Upaniṣad, उपनिषद्), Bhagavadgītā (भगवद्गीता), and Brahmanical teachings to combat those atheistic materialistic ideas, in works belonging to the feudal period in India, such as the *Sarvadarśanasamgraha* (सर्वदर्शनसंग्रह, Compendium of all philosophical views) of Mādhava, *Sarvasiddhāntasamgraha* (सर्वसिद्धान्तसंग्रह, Review of all philosophical doctrines) of Sankara charya, etc.

The founder of the Charvaka school is said to be the legendary sage Brihaspati (Bṛhaspati: बृहस्पति), whose only surviving poem is famous. Of all the schools of ancient Indian philosophy, the Lokāyata school has been consistently and thoroughly materialistic and atheistic in its philosophical stance and tendencies.

It developed over centuries, and in the process, it has been quite steadfast in its opposition to religious idealism. Jawaharlal Nehru has stated: “The lost volumes contain the entire collection of materialist writings that follow the period of the ancient Upanishads. The only references to these works that have been found are in their criticisms and in elaborate attempts to refute materialist doctrines.

Yet it is clear that materialist philosophy has been taught in India for centuries and at that time had a strong influence on the people. In the immortal Arthashastra, Kautilya’s book on political and economic organization, written in the 4th century BC, materialist philosophy is presented as one of the main philosophies of India” (Nehru, 1954, p. 54).

It can be said that materialism in ancient Indian philosophy, in general and especially of the Lokāyata school of philosophy in particular, stands out with three main characteristics: simple materialism, radical materialism, and atheistic materialism, which are expressed in all issues such as ontology, epistemology and human ethics of this philosophical school.

In the ontological perspective, the Lokāyata school denies the explanation of the origin and nature of the world by a spiritual origin, consciousness or by a divine force, God, Brahma, but believes that all things and phenomena in the

world, though rich and diverse, are composed of the first four basic material elements, also known as the four great elements (the four great elements). Those four elements are earth, water, fire, and air. These four great elements exist independently, forever, and by themselves, not created by anyone, and no one can destroy them. They can exist, function, and form themselves in space and time.

Living beings and humans are also formed by the combination of those four elements. Corresponding to each of those first material elements is a special variation of it, which is the atom (called Anu: अणु). Corresponding to the earth element are earth atoms, corresponding to the fire element are fire atoms, corresponding to the water element are water atoms, and corresponding to the air element are air atoms. Atoms all have properties such as being extremely small, unchanging, indestructible, and existing forever. All forms and characteristics of things and phenomena in the world depend on what types of atoms they are combined with and on the quantity and method of combining those atoms.

The atoms of the four great elements gather to form all things. When the atoms dissolve and return to the four basic elements of the world, all things disappear. Of these, the earth part returns to earth, the water part returns to water, the fire part returns to fire, and the air part returns to air. Only the dynamism or vitality of the organs in the body returns to nothingness. Thus, the life or death of a human being is only the self-accumulation or self-dispersion of the four great elements.

Life is due to the four great elements combining to form “body”, while death is due to the four great elements dispersing to form “nothingness”. The life, soul, consciousness, and feelings of a human being only appear when the great elements of earth, water, fire, and air combine or disperse specifically. So there is no soul in the separate elements.

Therefore, according to the Lokāyata school of philosophy, the view of the so-called “immortal soul” after a person dies, as put forth by the Brahmanical philosophy and the contemporary religious idealist philosophical schools, is completely wrong. When a person dies, the body rots or is cremated along with the offerings that burn into ashes, where does the soul reside? So in the end, death is the end, and there is no immortal soul.

When alive, what people call this person wise, that person foolish, whether wise or foolish, when they die, their bodies will all disintegrate, there is no longer that wise or foolish thing anywhere; “The fool, like the wise man, when dead, his body will decay into ashes, destroyed, nothing left.” (Digha Nikaya, 1992, p. 113). The good and the stupid also perish with the body, so the so-called past life, future life, retribution, *and* reincarnation according to good or bad karma are just lies and fallacies. There is no heaven or hell. Along with it, the acts of worship, sacrifice, giving alms, and giving blessings are all illusions. Therefore, those who claim to be fathers and mothers of the world, those who claim to be teachers of the Dharma to bring people back to the immortal realm of Brahmanism, are fabricators.

Just like the content of the only poem that Brihaspati, who is considered the founder of the Lokāyata school, wrote:

“There is no heaven, no final deliverance, and no soul in the other world...

How can our bodies return to this world after they have turned to dust?

And if the dead can go to the other world, why does he not return because of the sadness of being separated from his loved ones?

All these expensive funerals are invented by the cunning Brahmins.

It is only because they make a living, but in reality, there is no reward or punishment.

While we are alive, we should enjoy life to the fullest and should not be deprived of anything.

We should borrow money from all our friends and eat and drink lavishly, with as much butter and milk as possible...” (Durant, 1954, p. 418).

Here, the Lokāyata school has resolved the relationship between matter and consciousness, between body and soul in the spirit of simple materialism, but thoroughly materialism. They understand consciousness as an inherent property of the physical body. Without the physical body, no consciousness can exist; there can be no human “I”. It is not by chance that people say “I am lame”, “I am blind”, “I am in pain”, “I am happy”, “I suffer”, “I want”, “I hate”... The consciousness of “I” cannot be separated from the characteristics of the physical body. When a person dies, the body disintegrates, the senses and the brain are destroyed, and the consciousness of “I” of the person also ends. “Has anyone ever seen a soul separated from the body? There is no immortality and no one has reincarnation” (Durant, 1954, p. 418).

In the Vedāntasūtra (वेदान्तसूत्र, also Brahma-sūtra) part III, 3, 53, while criticizing the atheistic materialism of the Lokāyata school, Śāṅkarācārya (शङ्कराचार्य) presented the view of this school on the relationship between soul and body as follows: “The materialists hold that the soul can exist only in the body and cannot be separated from it, although no one has seen consciousness in the earth or in other external elements taken separately... However, the soul can still emanate from those elements when they have the form of a body. The Lokāyata school regards consciousness, the spirit, as similar to an intoxicating substance (this quality appears when certain flavors are mixed together in a certain proportion), and man is nothing but a conscious body. Thus, for them, there is no soul separate from the body and no power to attain heaven or supernatural powers...” (Eastern Scriptures, 1925, p. 297).

In the view of the world, the Lokāyata school also has the idea of the evolution of matter. They believe that the four basic elements of the world originate and are interconnected, with the earth serving as the starting point for this transformation. The highest evolution of the combination of the basic elements of the world is when these elements are linked together in a certain way and quantity, creating a living body with sensation and consciousness. When those elements decompose, they return to their starting point.

Thus, the transformation of the first basic material elements of the world, according to Lokāyata, is a transformation of a cyclical, closed nature. It can be said that in the matter of ontology, the Lokāyata school demonstrated its naive and thoroughly materialistic nature. However, due to the limitations of the historical era and the low level of awareness, the doctrine of existence in Lokāyata still has a strong materialistic, natural, and primitive nature. It attributes the origin of all things to the first material elements, which possess intuitive, concrete, emotional, and tangible properties that human senses can perceive, such as earth, water, fire, and air. This approach contrasts with the more general, abstract, and common origin of the world of all things.

On the issue of epistemology, starting from its simple, primitive and thorough materialist stance, the Lokāyata school of philosophy puts first the principle that the only source of human cognition is sensation, perception; true knowledge arises from perception, apart from perception all other assumed sources of cognition are questionable and cannot certainly bring the truth. “It is the body with its sense organs, not the soul, that feels, sees, hears, thinks” (Durant, 1954, p. 419). The senses can perceive things in the world because the senses of the body are also composed of the same elements as the things; it also includes earth, water, fire and air. But they differ only in the way and proportion of the combination of those elements. That is the idea of similarity reflecting and attracting similarity in the epistemology of the Lokāyata school. From that point of view, the Lokāyata school completely denies the authenticity of all indirect knowledge.

According to them, conclusion, judgment, and reasoning are all wrong methods of cognition, just as the revealed truths of the Vedas are imaginary, unrealistic, and unreliable. “Only what is directly grasped by the senses exists. What is not grasped by the senses is unreal” (Madhava Charya, 1882, p. 5). Thus, although this school identifies the origin of cognition in a materialistic way, due to absolutizing the role of sensation, of sensory cognition, denying the role of abstract thinking, of rational cognition, the epistemology of the Lokāyata school falls into sentimentalism.

The simple, rustic materialism of the Lokāyata school is closely linked to their atheistic materialism. They analyzed and criticized the Vedas, not considering the Vedic ideas as revelations, having the role of being the source of truth, helping people understand their nature, the true nature of all things, and being able to be liberated. They also pointed out a series of contradictions and errors in the Vedas. According to the Lokāyata school, divine revelations as well as religious legends are all imagination, unable to bring true knowledge. Human perception cannot perceive what is called the “Supreme Creator”, the “Supreme Universal Soul”, Brahman (ब्रह्मन्)... So the propaganda about their existence is just unreliable. The world of all things inherently follows its laws.

The existence of things and their properties are all created by the four elements of earth, water, fire, and air, which gather or disperse naturally, not by gods or any supernatural force. “Fire is hot, water is cold, and the morning wind is cool. How is this difference created? It comes from their nature” (*Philosophy of the Slave Society*, 1958, p. 92). “Looking at personal experience and looking at

history, we do not see any supernatural power commanding the universe. All phenomena are natural; only fools attribute it to demons or gods” (Durant, 1954, p. 419).

On the issue of morality and outlook on life, based on a thoroughly materialistic and atheistic worldview, the Lokāyata school does not acknowledge God, deities, or “Supreme Cosmic Spirit” who creates and governs this world. It attacks the view of so-called karma, reincarnation, and the final liberation of the immortal soul to some other world, through the cultivation of morality (Karmayoga: कर्म योग, also called Karma mārga) and wisdom (Jñānayoga: ज्ञानयोग, also called Jñāna mārga), “spiritual experimentation”, giving up all desires and lusts in life, considering it the ideal of human moral life that contemporary Indian religious philosophical schools propagate.

At the same time, it also strongly criticized the Jaina school of philosophy (जैन) for its asceticism and mortification of the body to attain spiritual purity. Therefore, the Lokāyata school was called the “heretical sect” and was classified as “heretical” (*Samyutta Nikāya*, vol. 2, 1993, p. 140). In fact, according to the Lokāyata school, it was propaganda for death and completely fabricated things to deceive people.

In fact, there is no “heaven” and no “hell”. In real life, “heaven” is pleasure and “hell” is suffering. In response to the advice that people must cultivate wisdom and morality according to the precepts to liberate the “immortal soul” to the other world after death, the Lokāyata school said: “They say that you must give up the pleasures of life because they are associated with suffering, but what wise person would throw away the unhusked grain, which contains the best rice, just because it is covered by a hard husk” (*Philosophy of Slave Society*, 1958, p. 93).

Lokāyata’s views on life and morality have been strongly attacked by opposing schools. They accused the atheistic materialists of propagating a kind of “vulgar carnivorousism”. But in fact, the morality put forward by the Lokāyata school expressed a reasonable request of humans to live and accept real life, with all its bitterness and sweetness, like a grain of rice; on the outside it is a hard husk but inside it is a fragrant grain of rice. Do not lull and deceive people with illusory ideas. In that sense, the Lokāyata philosophical doctrine, also known as the “non-Buddhist” school, has clearly shown its simple materialism and radical atheistic materialism.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Among all the schools of Indian religious philosophy during the Brahmanical-Buddhist period, the Carvakas school of philosophy, also known as Lokayata, was the only school with the purest materialism and radical atheism, expressed not only in the issues of ontology and epistemology but also in the issues of ethical and humanistic philosophy.

Commenting on the characteristics of materialism in ancient Indian philosophy, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: “The materialists attacked authority and all vested interests in religious thought and theology. They denounced the Vedas, the priesthood, and the traditional religious professions, and declared

that religion must be free and not dependent on presuppositions or on mere authority of the past.

They incited against all forms of magic and superstition. Their general spirit is comparable, in many respects, to the modern materialist method, which wants to be free from the shackles and burdens of the past, from the worship of imaginary gods.

Only that which can be directly perceived can be considered as existent, all other inferences and conjectures being equally true or false. Hence matter in all its various forms and this world can be regarded as truly existent. There is no soul separate from the body.

Mind and intelligence, like everything else, develop from the same basic elements. Natural phenomena have nothing to do with human values and are indifferent to what we consider good or bad. Moral rules are mere conventions made by man" (Jawaharlal, 1954, p. 54).

FURTHER STUDY

This research still has limitations so further research on this topic is still needed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to express his sincere gratitude to the organizations and individuals who supported this research. He would like to thank the insightful comments and constructive feedback from the peer reviewers and colleagues who contributed greatly to the improvement of the quality of this work.

REFERENCES

- A Source Book in Indian Philosophy (1973), New Jersey, Princeton University Press, USA, 1973.
- Digha Nikaya (1992), vol. 1, Chapter 2, Sammanra phala sutta, chapters 20 - 23, Vietnam Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1992.
- Durant, W (1954), Our Oriental Heritage, Simon and Schuster, New York.
- Doan, C., & Trinh, T, T (2022), History of Ancient Indian Philosophy, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi.
- Eastern Scriptures (1925), London, vol. 38.
- Madhavacharya (1882), Sarvadarśanasamgraha (सर्वदर्शनसंग्रह), London.
- Nehru, J (1954), The Discovery of India, vol. 1, The Oxford University Press, India.

Chinh, Bich

Philosophy of Slave Society (1958), Truth Publishing House, Hanoi.

Samyutta Nikaya, vol. 2, Vietnam Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1993.