UNIT 1  CARVAKA

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

One of the important counter-movements in India that challenged the authority of Vedas and questioned its teachings is Caravaka philosophy. It sought to unsettle most of the traditionally held views and beliefs such as the existence of God, soul and life after death. That is why it was called heterodox school of philosophy. The aim of this unit is to introduce the students to the teachings, philosophy and arguments of this school which were diametrically opposed to those of orthodox schools of philosophy in India.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Carvaka is a non-vedic Indian materialistic school of philosophy named after a sage called Carvaka, the founder of this system, according to a popular view. But some think that Carvaka was a prominent disciple of Brhaspati, the actual founder of the school. Carvaka etymologically means ‘sweet-tongued’ (caru+vak). Carvakas have sweet words. They are votaries of pleasing ideas if only you choose to follow their ways. Some hold that ‘carvaka’ has its etymology in ‘carva’ which means to chew or eat. It is an allusion to their doctrine of ‘eat, drink and make merry.’ According to Gunaratana of eighth century C.E., ‘carva’ stands for chewing, grinding with the teeth, eating and swallowing virtues and vices. Carvakas are those who take no notice of virtues and vices. Carvaka was also called 'Lokayatya' which is the combination of the two words 'loka' (The world) and 'ayata' (basis). It accepts only the reality of the material world. In other words, Carvakas are the people who care only about the earth and not about the heaven.

1.2 ORIGIN OF THE SCHOOL
According to the scholars, the origin of the school can be traced back to post- upanishadic period. The school would have been born between 600-400 B.C.E. The Buddhist texts of this period mentions several heterodox teachers such as Sanjaya, the skeptic, Ajita, the materialist, Purana Kasyapa the indifferentist and Kosala, the fatalist and Katyayana whose ideas in someway or the other come closer to the views of Carvakas. It is probably in this ambience of skepticism, materialism and nihilism that Carvaka philosophy would have originated. It must be noted that it is around the same time that the Atomists and the Sophists became popular in Greece. Though it is a remote possibility that the Atomists, the Sophists and the Carvakas would have influenced one another, it is evident that all these shared certain common views.

But Chattopadhyaya who has written extensively on Lokayata and Carvaka schools holds that already in pre-Buddhist text of Chandogya Upanishad (vii 7-9) of seventh century BCE there is a reference to a view identifying body with the self, the philosophical position of Lokayata/Carvakas. But it must be noted that the text does not mention the word 'Lokayatas' or 'Carvakas' and attributes the view to the Asuras. According to T.M.P. Mahadevan, even in the earliest text of Rg-veda, there are references to heretics, non-conformists, skeptics, agnostics and critics of Vedas.

But Kautilya in the fourth century B.C. speaks of the Lokyatas though only once, but in the context in which he speaks of them seems to indicate that they had an established system already that time like that of the Samkhyas and Yogas. In the second century B.C. Patanjali speaks of the Lokyatas and of the Bhaguri as their supporter. The texts of second century C.E., namely, the Kamasutra of Vatsayana and the Nyayasutra of Gautama—one of earliest texts of Nyaya system contain the views of Lokyata Sutras and have an extensive discussion mainly on two topics, very commonly attributed to Lokyata/Carvaka: i) the denial of inference as a source of knowledge and ii) the denial of self distinct from the body. Besides this, the Buddhist sources such as Payasi Suttanta and Samanna-Phala-Sutta written around 4th-5th Cent CE speak about the views of materialism and the later text speaks of 'heretics' of Buddha's time including Ajita Kesakambali who is a representative of extreme materialism and regarded as a follower of Carvaka school. Hiriyanna considers Carvaka philosophy as a form of accidentalism namely yadrccha-vada or animitta-vada because, for all of them, world is basically a chaos and whatever order is seen in this world is the outcome of mere chance.

1.3 The Literary Sources of Carvakas/Lokayatas

The original writings of Carvakas, if any, are no longer extant. Most of what we know about Carvakas and their philosophy is through the Purvapaksha (refutations) as provided by the opponents. The chief among them are Madvacharya's Sarva-darsana-samgraha, Samkara's Sarva Siddanta-samgraha and Krishn Misra's Prabodha-chandrodaya (an eleventh century C.E. allegorical drama intended to popularize the Advaita view by ridiculing specifically the Carvaka view), Only exception to this is Jayasiri Bhatta's Tattvo-paplava-simgha, (which literally means 'the lion that throws overboard all categories), a treatise in defense of Carvaka philosophy. The work edited by Sanghvi and Parikh claim that the actual text of the only original work of Carvakas roughly belong to the eighth century CE. Since the text holds that no pramana
whatsoever is possible, many scholars think that it represents extreme skepticism, and it defends neither materialism nor perception as the only source of valid knowledge.

Apart from these, one more text needs to be mentioned in connection with Carvakas and it is called Lokayata-sutra or Carvaka-sutra which was only referred to by many writers but never available as a text. It is generally attributed to BrihasPati, who is traditionally regarded as the founder of this school. Yet the existence of another work known as Brhaspati-sutra (a work on political economy) attributed to the same author brings in more ambiguity. But Misra's Prabodha-chandrodaya says that the Lokayata Sutras were initially formulated by BrihasPati and later handed over to Carvaka who popularised them through his pupils.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

1. What is the meaning of the term 'Carvaka'? What is the other name for this school?

2. Who is believed to be the founder of the school? What is his major work (attributed to him) that forms the basis of Carvaka philosophy?

3. What are some of the non-carvaka literary sources that speak about the philosophy of Carvakas?

1.4 EPISTEMOLOGY

According to Carvakas, perception (Pratyaksa) is the only source of valid knowledge and they hold that nothing exists except what is perceived by five senses. Accordingly, they refuted inference (anumana) and testimony (sabdha), which are accepted by almost all other schools of Indian philosophy as valid and reliable. For them, perception is of two kinds, namely, external and internal, the former kind involving the operation of the five senses while the latter involves
the operation of the mind. Knowledge is the outcome of contact between an external object and one of the five senses, although further knowledge may be acquired through the process of the mind operating with the sense knowledge. Ultimately, then, all knowledge is derived from the senses.

For them inference is not a valid means of knowledge because universal relation which should serve as its ground is impossible. For instance let us take the following example:

“whatever has smoke has fire
The hill has smoke
therefore the hill has fire.”

Here a universal and necessary relation is assumed between the smoke and the fire. Carvakas questions this. They would ask ‘How did you get this knowledge? From the kitchen where you have seen fire and smoke? But it cannot give you necessary relation between fire and smoke? Have you observed all kitchens to affirm their (smoke and fire) co-presence. What about the past and the future instances. So no one can be certain about any relation. In inference we proceed from the known to the unknown and there is no certainty in this, though some inferences may turn out to be accidentally true.” Just because certain things are sometimes true in some instances, they need not be true at all times in all instances. Consider a causal relation between A and B in which A causes B. What you observe is A is followed by B. This induces a belief in you that this will be the case in the future too. Therefore causation is a belief, nothing more. From the observed case, we cannot infer anything about the observed. Inference is impossible and it is utmost “a merer leap into the dark.” Thus inference is not a valid means of knowledge.

Carvakas brought several other objections against the possibility of a valid inference. They are 1. Impressions created by inferential knowledge are not as vivid (aspastavat) as those made by perception. 2. Inference always depends on other things for the determination of its objects. 3. Inference has to depend on perceptual statements. 4. Inferential knowledge is not directly produced by the objects. 5. Inference is not concrete (avastu-vishayatvat) 6. Inference is often contradicted (badhyamanatvat) and 7. there is no proof which may establish that every case of the presence of the reason (hetu) should also be a case of the presence of probandum (sadhya) i.e. there is no proof establishing the invariable and unconditional concomitance between the middle and the major terms.

Carvaka’s views on inference has been criticised by many thinkers and philosophical schools. According to them, first of all, inference is inescapable for Carvaka himself. To refuse the validity of inference is to refuse to think and discuss. All thoughts, all discussions, all doctrines, all affirmations and denials, all proofs and disproofs are made possible by inference. It is through inference, not through sense-perception that the Carvaka knows what the other doctrines are, and it is through inference that the Carvaka hopes to convince others of the soundness of his argument. Secondly, the rejection of inference itself is self-contradictory. That all inferences are invalid is itself an inference, which the Carvaka must admit. Some historians of philosophy think
that Carvakas did not reject inference altogether. They did not favour the use of inference only for metaphysical categories, i.e. as regards things that have never been perceived.

They also do not accept testimony (sabda). Madvacharya in his Sarva-darsana-samgraha quotes their position as follows: “Nor can testimony be the means thereof, since we may either allege in reply...that this is included in the topic of inference; or else we may hold that this fresh proof of testimony is unable to leap over the old barrier that stopped the progress of inference, since it depends itself on the recognition of a sign in the form of the language used in the child's presence by the old man; and, moreover, there is no more reason for our believing another's word that smoke and fire are invariably connected than for our receiving the ipse dixit of Manu (which, of course, we Carvakas reject).”

Thus it is clear that testimony does not have any value for the Carvakas and accordingly Vedas are not authoritative and they are meaningless and misleading. Those who composed them aimed to confound and confuse the common people in order to achieve their own selfish purpose.

1.5 METAPHYSICS OF CARVAKAS

Carvaka Metaphysics, which is directly and logically derived from their epistemology, is “an unqualified materialistic monism.” They hold a philosophy of the matter which means 'Matter is all.' Since perception is the only reliable source of knowledge, whatever is known through it alone is real and matter becomes the only reality. Sense-perception does not reveal any metaphysical entity. What it can perceive is only matter in its fourfold form; earth, water, fire and air. Carvakas do not accept ether (akash), because it is not an object of perception. The four elements are real not as subtle forms but in their gross particle forms. There is no reality other than these four elements and their combinations.

If so, what is consciousness? How do you account for it? How do you explain the capacity of human beings for reasoning, reflecting and imagining? Carvakas do not deny consciousness but deny only that it can be independent of the body. They regard consciousness as a mere product of matter. It does not 'inhere in particles of matter' but when the latter come to be organized in a specific form, they are found to show signs of life. It is always found associated with the body and is destroyed with the body's disintegration. When the four elements of matter come together in a particular mode to form the living organisms, the animal and human consciousness appear in it. It is the result of an "emergent and dialectical evolution, an epiphenomenon, a by-product of matter.” Consciousness is an after-glow of matter. They would say “Matter secretes mind as liver secretes bile”. If none of the elements of physical body possesses consciousness, is it not that consciousness is independent of physical body? Their answer would be no. When physical elements come together to form an organic pattern, consciousness emerges. It does not inhere in any particular part of the body. It is just like certain tastes and intoxicating qualities are got out of certain combinations of ingredients, though none, taken separately, possesses it. Red is got out the betel leaf and lime, but none of it apparently seems to possess red.

The soul therefore is nothing other than the conscious living body. They say that there is no soul or no consciousness apart from body which is evidenced by the fact that consciousness perishes with the body. Therefore body is the self and the body is the product of material elements. Sankara in his Sarva Siddanta-samgraha describes their understanding of the soul as follows:
“The soul is but the body characterized by the attributes signified in the expressions, “I am stout,” “I am youthful,” “I am grown up,” “I am old” etc. It is not something other than that body. The consciousness that is found in the modifications of non-intelligent elements (i.e., in organisms formed out of matter) is produced in the manner of the red colour out of the combination of betel, areca-nut and lime. There is no world other than this; there is no heaven and no hell; the realm of Siva and like regions are invented by stupid imposters of other schools of thought.”

The Carvaka thus denies soul or Atman as a surviving or transmitting entity, but it does not mean, according to Hiriyanna, that the Carvaka denies a conscious or spiritual principle but refuses to regard it as ultimate and independent.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

1. What are the means of knowledge that Carvakas accept? What do they reject explicitly?

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2. Do Carvakas believe in the five elements of the material world? What do they deny? Why?

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3. Do Carvakas accept consciousness? How do they understand it?

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1.6 CARVAKAS VIEWS ON GOD AND RELIGION

Since Carvakas do not believe in any metaphysical reality beyond matter, it logically follows that they outrightly consider that traditional concepts of God, religion and life-after death are “pure fictions, sheer imaginations of fevered brains”. There is nothing existent beyond this material world. Hence there is no survival of anything, no other world, and no God as unmoved mover, the first cause and the creator of the universe. Since all that exists is only matter, God who is
supposed to be a supernatural and transcendental being does not exist as it cannot be the object of perception, the only valid means of knowledge. Thus Carvakas summarily deny the existence of God and dethrone God who is supposed to indwell in the human beings as antaryamin. They also de-recognise conscience, the voice of God, which guides man. Subsequently, they rule out the possibility of religion as the realm of faith and belief systems that assume human beings' innate thirst for spirituality and structure their consciousness towards a destiny beyond this world has no basis in the true nature of reality (i.e. materialistic) according to their scheme of things.

1.7 ETHICS OF CARVAKAS

The Carvaka ethics is based on the assumption that the human beings get annihilated at the point of death. She or he begins life with birth and ends it with death. Carvakas do not believe in the theory of karma and accordingly they reject the notion of re-birth after death. Since this is the only life for the individual, their exhortation is: “make the best use of it.” To get the best out of this only life, one has to enjoy this life and to seek the utmost pleasure. The basic desire of every being/creature is to gain pleasure and avoid pain. Pleasure in this life is the sole end of man. Pleasure goes with pain. But on account of this, you should not run away from pleasure. The fact that there is pain in life should not deter the human beings from pursuing pleasure. Some of the sayings of Carvakas encourage us not to be bogged down by the presence of pain in the process of seeking pleasure: “The wise man does not reject the kernel because of the husk;” “None gives up eating fish because there are bones and scales;” “Roses are not discarded because they have thorns;” “we do not cease to grow crops because the animals destroy them; we do not stop cooking our food, because beggars ask for it;” In all of these sayings the Carvakas call upon the people to enjoy pleasure at all times. Thus pleasure is the natural ethical principle. One should take efforts to minimize pain and maximize pleasure. Whatever action minimizes pain and maximizes pleasure is a good action.” A Carvaka lives in the moment for the moment. They exhort the human beings not to ignore a present pleasure in the hope of gaining some greater pleasure later. They invoke the following proverbs in support of their position: “Make hay while the sun shines;” “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush;” “A pigeon today is worth more than a peacock of tomorrow.” They debunk all religious practices and rituals. One of the reasons for their rejection is that they falsely promise people a good future life but in reality the religious rituals are mechanisms of priests to exploit others and make a living out of it. Vatsayana in his kamasutra quotes some of the Lokyata Sutras. In this connection let us see one of their aphorisms:

1. Religious rites should not be practiced,
2. because their fruition depends upon the future,
3. And is doubtful.
4. Who, unless he is a fool, gives away to others what belongs to him?
5. A pigeon to-day is better than a peacock tomorrow.
6. A sure kauđi is better than a doubtful gold coin.
These Lokyata Sutras thus appeal to people not to ignore the present at the cost of the future. In a spirit of cynicism, one Carvaka asks a priest why he sacrifices a poor animal. The priest replies that the animal sacrificed goes direct to heaven. Then the Carvaka tells the priest "If so, you can jolly well put yourself in that inevitable position."

The Carvakas do not believe in heaven or hell and for them paradise could only be on this earth. Sankara's *Sarva-siddhanta-samgraha* speaks of what has been repeatedly called the Carvaka philosophy of hedonism:

The enjoyment of heaven lies in eating delicious food, keeping company of young women, using fine clothes, perfumes, garlands, sandal paste, etc.

The pain of hell lies in the troubles that arise from enemies, weapons, diseases; while liberation (moksha) is death which is the cessation of life-breath.

The wise therefore ought not to take pains on account of that (liberation); it is only the fool who wears himself out by penances, fasts, etc.

Chastity and other such ordinances are laid down by clever weaklings. Gifts of gold and land, the pleasure of invitations to dinner are devised by indigent people with stomachs lean with hunger.

The construction of temples, houses for water-supply, tanks, wells, resting places, and the like, is praised only by travelers, not by others.

The Agnihotra ritual, the three Vedas, the triple staff carried by the priests, the ash-smearing, are the ways of gaining a livelihood for those who are lacking in intellect and energy ….

The wise should enjoy the pleasures of this world through the proper visible means of agriculture, keeping cattle, trade, political administration, etc.

From the above passage it is clear that the Carvaka's emphasis is on the individual, rather than any collective, good; accordingly, the Carvakas accept only two of the four purusarthas or traditional human values, namely, attainment of worldly pleasure (*kama*) and the means of securing it (*artha* = wealth), thus rejecting religious merit (*dharma*) and liberation (*moksha*). The Carvakas do not make any qualitative distinction among pleasures, nor do they try to distinguish the pleasures of the body from the pleasures of the mind. Except in the case of activities like trade and agriculture they accept immediately available pleasures rather than any promised ones of the future as they would say “A pigeon today is better than a peacock tomorrow,” and “a certain copper is better than a doubtful gold.”

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**Check Your Progress III**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answer.


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2. Why should I 'make the best use of life' according to Carvaka? How?

3. Why do Carvaka reject religious rituals?

1.8 LET US SUM UP

Carvaka philosophy or Indian materialism, one of the oldest doctrines in India already quite noted in the earliest text of Rig Veda, an anti-hegemonic counter-movement, has continued to influence Indian academia even into our modern times as we see in the philosophy of modern and contemporary Indian thinkers like Devatman and M.N. Roy. Some view Carvaka philosophy less as a constructive philosophy than as a reaction to the excess of ritualism, spiritualism, world-negating idealism, oppressive clericalism and inhuman casteism. However this is not to state that the Carvaka system is philosophically insignificant and unsound as Dale Riepe observes that Carvaka's epistemological outlook is empirical, their metaphysics materialistic and ethics hedonistic.

Carvaka etymologically means ‘sweet-tongued’ (caru+vak). Carvaka was also called 'Lokayatya' which accepts only the material world as real. Brhaspati is the founder of the school. Some of the texts that refer to the philosophy of Carvakas are Madvacharya's Sarva-darsana-samgraha, Sankara's Sarva Siddanta-samgraha, Krishn Misra's Prabodha-chandrodaya, the Kamasutra of Vatsayana, the Nyayasutra of Gautama—one of the earliest texts of Nyaya system and the Buddhist sources such as Payasi Suttanta and Samanna-Phala-Sutta.

The only means of knowledge the Carvakas accept is perception. And they openly question and deny the validity of means of knowledge such as inference and testimony. Carvaka do not believe in all the five elements of the material world. They deny the existence of Ether because it cannot be perceived. Carvakas do not deny consciousness but only its existence independent of the body. It is always found associated with the body and is destroyed with the body's disintegration. For them, consciousness is as a mere product of matter arising out of the combination of the four elements of matter under certain favourable conditions. Carvakas do not
believe in God because they deny the existence of anything which is not material. Hence God who is supposed to be a supernatural and transcendental being is not a reality as God cannot be the object of perception, the only valid means of knowledge. Since this is the only life for me, I must make the best use of it. To get the best out of this only life, I have to enjoy this life and to seek the utmost pleasure. Carvakas reject religious rituals because they falsely promise people a good future life but in reality they are mechanisms of priests to exploit others and make a living out of it.

1.9 KEY WORDS

Carvaka: etymologically it means ‘sweet-tongued’ (caru+vak). Some hold that ‘carvaka’ has its etymology in ‘carva’ which means to chew or eat. ‘carva’ allegorically stands for chewing, grinding with the teeth, eating and swallowing virtues and vices.

Lokayata: It is the combination of the two words ‘loka’ (The world) and ‘ayata’ (basis). This word expressed the belief of the 'Carvakas' that accepts only the reality of the material world.

BrihasPati: He is traditionally regarded as the founder of Carvaka school. Lokayata-sutra or Carvaka-sutra which was only referred to by many writers but never available as a text is generally attributed to him.

1.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES


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