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## UNIT 12 NASADIYA SUKTA AND LOKĀYATA\*

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### 12.0 OBJECTIVES

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The main objectives of the unit are:

- The aim of this unit is to acquaint the learners with the unique philosophical perspective of Indian Philosophy to explain the origin of universe; namely, Nāsadīya Sūkta.
- To understand and explain the worldview of Indian Materialism in detail.

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### 12.1 INTRODUCTION

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The term *Darshana* is translated as, ‘to see’ and when we talk about Indian Philosophy (*Bhartiya Darshana*), there can be various different perspectives to see and analyse the vast canvas of Indian Philosophy. For example, we usually divide the schools of Indian Philosophy on the basis of *Nāstika* and *Āstika Darshanas*, but it is also true that this is not the only framework in which we categorise Indian Philosophy. We choose a specific frame of reference which depends upon what we want to analyse and the categorisation may vary accordingly. This unit is an attempt to see two extreme perspectives in Indian Philosophy.

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One has its roots in the Vedic literature, and the other one is often referred to as anti-Vedic, but one characteristic which is said to be common in both of these writings is the sceptical approach to understand the world. The conclusion they arrive at is a completely different point of discussion, but the starting point in terms of a sceptical enquiry seems to be similar.

The Vedic and Upanishadic knowledge traditions of Indian Philosophy are known for raising and resolving various fundamental questions regarding the highest reality, the difference between real and unreal, the self, the relation between atman and Brahman, and the origin of the world in the form of debate and dialogue; in the form of questions and answers, and in the form of speculative enquiry as well. Nasadiya Sukta (Ṛgveda 10. 129) is one such example of speculative enquiry, which is known for its non-establishment and non-discursive thought. It is no less than a matter of wonder that this sukta does not attempt to establish a final theory of the creation of the world. We can ask what the aim of this sukta is if at the end it does not fulfil its purpose for which it is written. Along with it, this unit also discusses the theory of Materialism in Indian Philosophy. There is no other school in Indian Philosophy which gives primacy to matter over consciousness, and not only this, materialism establishes all of its theories on the basis of this fundamental claim that matter is the only reality. We will be discussing these two perspectives with their uniquely extreme nature of enquiry in this unit.

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## 12.2 NĀSADIYA SŪKTA

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“nāsad āsīn no sad āsīt tadānīm nāsīd rajo no vyomā paro yat | kim āvarīvaḥ kuha kasya śarmann ambhaḥ kim āsīd gahanam gabhīram || 1 || Then even nothingness was not, nor existence, There was no air then, nor the heavens beyond it. What covered it? Where was it? In whose keeping Was there then cosmic water, in depths unfathomed?

na mṛtyur āsīd amṛtam na tarhi na rātryā ahna āsīt praketaḥ | ānīd avātam svadhayā tad ekam tasmād dhānyan na paraḥ kim canāsa || 2 || Then there was neither death nor immortality Nor was there then the torch of night and day. The One breathed windlessly and self-sustaining. There was that One then, and there was no other.

tama āsīt tamasā gūlham agre 'praketaḥ m salilam sarvam ā idam | tucchyenābhv apihitam yad āsīt tapasas tan mahinājāyataikam || 3 || At first there was only darkness wrapped in darkness. All this was only unilluminated water. That One which came to be, enclosed in nothing, arose at last, born of the power of heat.

kāmas tad agre sam avartatādhi manaso retaḥ prathamam yad āsīt | sato bandhum asati nir avindan hṛdi pratīṣyā kavayo manīṣā || 4 || In the beginning desire descended on it. That was the primal seed, born of the mind. The sages who have searched their hearts with wisdom know that which is kin to that which is not.

tiraścīno vitato raśmir eṣām adhaḥ svid āsīd upari svid āsīt | retodhā āsan mahimāna āsan svadhā avastāt prayatiḥ parastāt || 5 || And they have stretched their cord across the void, and know what was above, and what below. Seminal powers made fertile mighty forces. Below was strength, and over it was impulse.

ko addhā veda ka iha pra vocat kuta ājātā kuta iyaṁ viṣṛṣṭiḥ | arvāg devā asya visarjanenāthā ko veda yata ābab || 6 || 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?

iyaṁ viṣṛṣṭir yata ābabhūva yadi vā dadhe yadi vā na | yo asyādhyakṣaḥ parame vyoman so aṅga veda yadi vā na veda || 7 || 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.”\*

Nāsadīya sūkta is the 129<sup>th</sup> hymn given in the X<sup>th</sup> Maṇḍala of the Ṛgveda. This sukta consists of seven verses. These verses are concerned mainly with the origin of the universe, but this sukta does not propound a concrete theory regarding the origin of the universe, rather the sukta presents a speculative enquiry about the beginning of the world.

The discourse of Nāsadīya sūkta presents a complex and obscure structure; and due to such structure, it allows for multiple interpretations of the sukta. The aim of this sūkta, which starts with the puzzlement about the origin of the universe, does not end with a final or a concluding word or by giving a fix theory of the origin of the world, rather it ends by putting forth some more puzzles in the form of questions which again opens up a possibility of wide range of other questions. The most significant point of this sūkta, that the aim of the sukta was not to construct a final description and an explanation of how and why the universe started, becomes clear from the open-endedness which we find in all of its verses. It seems that the structural and analytical incomprehensibility is aimed knowingly in order to keep it open for multiple complex interpretations, in order to keep the process of thinking alive, and this stream of obscurity throughout the sukta constructs and reconstructs the history of Indian Philosophy.

Starting with the metaphysical enquiry about the fundamental questions of origin and creation of the universe, it progresses towards an epistemological issue as well. The metaphysical enquiry starts with putting forth the puzzles about the most fundamental problem of why, how, and by whom, about the creation of the universe. It does talk about the epistemological foundations, but an important aspect of the sukta is that the epistemological framework presents a presuppositionless view for the creation of the world. That is, it does not

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\* <https://www.swami-krishnananda.org/vishnu/nasadiya.pdf>

presuppose any infringement from the knowing subject. It transcends the epistemic enquiries of the knower. This surpassing of the knowing subject points towards the limitations of what one can know and what the boundaries of the knowing subject are. This knowledge is something which is beyond the boundaries of human intellect.

Negations, questions, and possibilities characterise the main theme throughout the sukta. Starting with a possibility, every sukta ends either with negating that possibility or in the form of questioning. The first verse starts with a denial of both the categories *sat* (existence) and *asat* (non-existence), of the world of experience, of space, and of sky. It shows the indeterminate character of *sat* and *asat* as the primordial cause of the world. The first verse presents the structure moving from negation to question and then to a questionable possibility. While the first verse gives the general description, second verse moves to specific details about death signifying mortality, and deathlessness signifying immortality, but these detailed particularities were not mentioned as an attempt to reach to the final answer, rather it signifies, more specifically, ‘what is not there’ before creation.

Contrary to the first verse, there is a mention of “the One” in the second verse which shifts the structure of the verse to a positive description of what does exist. The nature of the second verse increases the complexity of the process of cosmogony. The third verse again comes up with a possibility in the form of potential for existence, a power which was there in the form of heat. The fourth verse describes that thought originated from desire; here in the fifth verse desire thus becomes the origin of the world. Moreover, here thought which appears in the fifth verse, can be equated with the “One” which was the concealed subject of first three verses. By describing thought as the primal semen, or the fundamental principle, the fifth verse finds the reason of the process of reflective thinking of the earlier verses. What was presented in the first four verses was an attempt to build a gradual understanding through reflective thinking and finally the fifth verse presents a concrete idea about manifestation. Thought, along with desire as the manifested form of thought, are considered responsible for the manifoldness of the world. This verse signifies the role of thought in the trajectory of creation. However the search for the final answer does not end with this verse, for the last two verses come with questions again. Discussing about the possibilities of the origin of the world in first five verses, the last two verses reject all the earlier possibilities with the question that “who really knows how the universe came into existence”. This verse denies Gods being the creator of the world because it claims that Gods themselves are bound by the limits of time, i.e., something that originated after the creation of the world, something that

came after the bounds of space and time cannot be regarded as the creator of the world. The last verse again rejects all the previous attempts and efforts made to find a definite answer by putting forth the ultimate question that, “he who is the overseer of this (world) in the highest heaven might know, or if he does not know....?” This sukta does not resolve the mystery of creation; rather all steps which were moving towards clarity and certitude are rejected in the last two verses. Thus, the epistemic range of these verses goes from knowability to unknowability, and finally it comes into a realm which is beyond the categories of both known and unknown.

Thus we see that first five verses of Nāsadiya sūkta attempt to show a gradual development towards the core argument that thought is the seed of creation. Starting from the general principle, it moves to specific details, and after that it claims to have a form, and in the last step it reveals as thought. Apart from thought as the main creative principle, this sukta presents some other signs and references of creation and reproduction. We find the mention of “egg” in the third verse, the “breathing” principle in the second verse, and the reference of “without wind” and in the third verse, the mention of “**sign-less ocean**”, these two are interpreted respectively as “embryo” and the “fluid” in which the embryo rests. These hints cover all possible options of the principle of creation. All these different forms were attempts made to discuss the possibilities which could be responsible for the origin of the universe.

Though not offering a final theory, the structure of the sukta seems to have designed in such a manner which points towards an ending with a final polished outcome. Recursiveness in first and last verse can be seen as a sign of proving the initial proposal, the last verse repeats what was said in the first verse, in this poetic composition, the end line repeats what was said in the first line for the purpose of closure, or to strengthen the thesis which was proposed in the beginning. However, despite having a recursive nature, the last verse of Nasadiya sukta does not offer a closure, or prove the thesis which was proposed in the beginning. What it repeats is the uncertain nature of the origin, both in the beginning and in the end.

Lastly, the most important and intriguing part of the sukta is that the structured search to resolve the puzzle of origin leaves the final question un-answered, and leaves it to the listener or reader to find the fundamental, deep seated principle of creation. The goal of the sukta was not to explain the nature of that primordial creative principle or to present a comprehensive and complete picture of the origin. The aim was to spark within a thinking process by putting

forth questions in front of the listeners and that is what marks the central idea of this sukta which gives birth to possibilities for various interpretations.

### Check Your Progress I

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

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. How does Nasadiya Sukta explain the origin of universe through all its verses?

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2. What characterises the main theme of Nasadiya Sukta?

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## 12.3 INDIAN MATERIALISM

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Indian materialism is generally termed as Lokāyata; the term Lokāyata means philosophy of the people, a philosophy that was common among the people; or a philosophy that belongs to this world (of matter). Cārvāka School of philosophy is also known from the name of materialism, but we also find the claim that Cārvāka was one of the founders of the philosophical school of Indian Materialism (and if we accept this claim then Cārvāka becomes the name of one philosopher), *Ajita Kesakambalin* (a thinker of early Buddhist period) is said to be the other founder of this school. Another interpretation which we find for the name Cārvāka is that the word Cārvāka is used as a common name for those people who are sweet-tongued, or who are materialists. By Materialism, one can understand that school of thought, which believes in the reality of matter. The claim of the materialists is that the reality of whatever exists beyond the world of matter, or what is not empirically verified, cannot be established. This central claim of materialism makes the approach of this school of thought scientific or naturalistic, and also set its path different from all other schools of Indian Philosophy.

### 12.3.1 The Early Sources

Unfortunately, there are no written texts available which can be claimed as the authentic source of thoughts pertaining to materialism; whatever description we find about materialism is available only in the form of criticism and refutation done by other philosophies.

We find references of some significant concepts of materialism in pre-Buddhist period. The use of the term Lokāyata is found in some early Buddhist literature. One such text is *Kuṭadanta Sutta*, where this word ‘Lokāyata’ has been used, and another is *Brahmajala Sutta*, wherein the concept of self is identified with the body<sup>\*</sup>, which shows the footprints of materialistic thought in these pre-Buddhist texts. We find the theory of accepting only four elements in an early Buddhist source which sums up the views of Ajita Kesakambli: “There is no such thing, O king, as alms or sacrifice or offering. There is neither fruit nor result of good or evil deeds. A human being is built up of four elements...”<sup>†</sup> Two implications can be drawn positively from the quotation mentioned above, one is that the fifth element, i.e., akasha is refuted by early materialist scholars, and second is the refutation of the law of karma. It thus proves the thesis of the refutation of transmigration of the soul by early materialist thinkers.

Another source of materialist thought is found in Buddhist dialogue Pāyāsi suttanta and Jaina work *Rāyapaseṇaijja*.<sup>‡</sup> Here again, the argument of both of these texts presents mainly the refutation of the existence of other world, and denying of bearing the fruit of one’s good and/or bad karmas.

Based on these early Buddhist writings, the fundamental claims of metaphysical and ethical principles of early materialists’ thought can be sketched easily, which mainly revolve around the concepts of this worldliness, identification of self with body, denial of the doctrine of karma, refutation of the re-embodiment or rebirth of the soul, because of denying any kind of karmic retribution of the soul. We find that theories pertaining to later Materialism are also characterised by similar chain of thoughts. We will discuss metaphysical and epistemological doctrines of materialism in detail in the next section of the unit.

### **12.3.2 Main Doctrines of Indian Materialism**

The central argument of belonging to ‘this worldliness’ or material world is derived from the fundamental idea that reality consists of only four elements; these four elements are namely:

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<sup>\*</sup> Chattopadhyaya Debiprasad. Lokāyata: A study in Ancient Materialism. P.20

<sup>†</sup> Chattopadhyaya Debiprasad. Quoted in, Indian Philosophy: A Popular Introduction. P.194

<sup>‡</sup> Chattopadhyaya Debiprasad, Indian Philosophy: A Popular Introduction. P.195

earth, water, fire, and air; akasha is not included in the list of fundamental elements by the materialists because its existence cannot be proved by sense perception, it is not perceived but inferred. Materialism claims that everything that exists in this world can be explained in terms of different combination and permutation of these four elements. Consciousness is also considered only a by-product of matter; it emerges when the four elements combine in a certain proportion, and perishes with the disintegration of the material body. The conscious principle is not denied by the materialists, it denies considering it as an independent entity. They claim that it is the result of the modification of matter in a certain proportion, and by saying this, they establish the primacy of matter over consciousness. The existence of a separate, eternal soul or a self beyond the physical body; everything, including independent reality of consciousness is rejected, because everything is reduced to matter, and can be explained in terms of material interactions. It is always seen associated with the body and never as independent from the physical body. Consciousness manifests itself through the living body, it is not something that continues to exist even after fading away of material body. They deny the existence of a permanently abiding soul and with this they reject the claim of idealists that soul can have a separate existence, for them, embodied self can only exist. Self is body qualified by the intelligence. This worldview of locating self/consciousness in the body/matter is also referred to as Deha-Vāda or Dehātmavāda.

Materialism considers sense-perception as one and the only valid means of knowledge. The materialistic understanding of the term Lokāyata also has its roots in the interpretation of it by some scholars 'as all that can be the object of sense-perception'. Knowledge that we attain through inference cannot be regarded as valid knowledge because materialism rejects the validity of inference. The basis of this rejection is the argument that, in case of inference, the universal relation (*vyāpti*) between the middle term and the minor term cannot be established. No source of valid knowledge can substantiate this universal relation, say between smoke and fire. Inference can sometimes be true and sometimes be false because it is limited to association or memory of past perceptions. Since the association is based on the observation of particular instances, there cannot be a logical certainty in case of the inductive relation, i.e. *vyapti*. Being limited only to particulars, perception cannot establish the universal relation, we would require another inference in order to verify it by inference; verbal testimony and other sources of knowledge rely on inferential knowledge, and thus they cannot verify the universal relation. Thus, not only inference, all other means of knowledge such as verbal testimony, *upamana*, etc. is considered invalid by materialistic philosophy.

Some scholars have raised questions upon the claim of completely rejecting the validity of inference by the materialistic philosophy. Hiriyanna has commented upon it by saying, “Thus it is commonly assumed by the critics that the Cārvāka denounced reasoning totally as a *pramāna*; but to judge from the reference to it in one Nyaya treatise, they seem to have rejected only such reasoning as was originally thought sufficient by others for establishing the existence of God, of a future life etc.”\* Chattopadhyay has also doubted the claim of absolute refutation of inference by the Lokayatikas†. Some materialistic thinkers (*Purandara*) (*Purandara*) have claimed that inference is not useful in establishing any truth of the transcendental world, but it is a useful tool in determining the nature of things related to this world. Thus based on the above mentioned references, it can be regarded as one of the possibilities that inference which was helpful in the matters of empirical world was not rejected completely in the materialistic framework. Only those claims of inferential knowledge were denied which were beyond the reach of this world (e.g. life after death, existence of soul as something separate from matter, law of karma, etc.)

Third thesis of materialism is characterised by their denial of the law of karma. By denying this, they end the possibility of the concept of other world; of reaping the fruits of one’s karma, and of a trans-migrating soul. For them, pleasure of the individual becomes the sole aim of life, and death becomes the end of life because nothing remains after it. The concept of general good/the good of other is not accepted by this school of thought, for which the individual can make his/her interests secondary. Rejecting the chain of cause and effect has its roots in the rejection of the law of karma. Materialists advocated the idea of *svabhāvavāda*, which regards that the manifoldness of things is due to the nature/*svabhāva* inherent in things themselves and is not originated from any cause. By accepting *Svabhāvavada*, they basically reject the theory of causation, because they claim that there is no causal connection between cause and effect. We also find reference of the refutation of the law of causation in Jaina writings, Jaina thinker Guṇaratna‡ rejects all possibilities of the law of karma, and with this he also claims that the manifoldness of the world can be explained by natural causes.

Out of four *purusharthas*, materialism accepts only two human values or *puruṣārthas*, i.e., *Kāma* and *Artha*, and rejects *Dharma* and *Mokṣa*, and thus it limits the efforts of the

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\* Hiriyanna, M. *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, p. 188

† Chattopadhyay, Debiprasad, *Indian Philosophy: A Popular Introduction*. P.189.

‡ Quoted in Chattopadhyay, Debiprasad, *Indian Philosophy: A Popular Introduction*. P.194.

individual to attain the pleasures of the senses only. We do not find any mention of accepting qualitative pleasure, or a difference between quantitative and qualitative pleasures in the ethical principles of materialistic outlook. What it considers is only the quantity of pleasure, i.e. one's work should be aimed towards attaining maximum pleasure and that is the sole aim of life, and following this principle enjoyment becomes the only reality, which is also termed as unqualified hedonism by some scholars.

One of the main reasons of criticism of materialism by other schools of Indian Philosophy may be the denial of moral values, human values which we acquire to act in accordance with certain norms of any specific institution, and the larger aim of it is to work for the betterment of the society; and second, the denial of the supreme end of life which is regarded as something over and above the bodily pleasures.

At the end, it can be said that by emphasising upon the world of senses through the process of speculation; Materialism, or Lokāyata closes all the doors of a higher virtuous life, with a place and respect for human values. With this it repudiates all other concepts of authority, of a belief in a transcendental being which is regarded as the supreme principle in almost all other schools of Indian Philosophy. However, the primacy of matter over spirit may said to be a bold outlook, and to explain the world on the basis of matter as well.

### Check Your Progress II

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.  
b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. How does materialism prove the existence of consciousness?

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2. What are the reasons to reject the validity of inference by Materialism?

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## 12.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have tried to explain two major philosophical approaches: one explaining the

possibilities of the origin of the universe, and the other attempting to explain everything in terms of material interaction. We observed how Materialism boldly rejects all those claims which cannot be established through the existence of matter and reduces even the existence of self to a bodily self. We also observed the significance of unanswered questions in Nasadiya Sukta, and how it nourishes our intellectual capacities in order to ponder over and reconstruct new possibilities of interpretations and ask more questions.

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## 12.5 KEY WORDS

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**Cosmogony:** The study of structure and origin of the universe.

**Dehātmavāda:** A theory which explains the existence of consciousness in and through matter.

**Transmigration of Soul:** A form of reincarnation or passing of soul from one body to another after death.

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## 12.6 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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<https://www.swami-krishnananda.org/vishnu/nasadiya.pdf>

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## 12.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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(**Note:** Only hints are given here for answering the questions, please elaborate your answers with the help of these hints.)

### Check Your Progress I

1. Starting from the general principle, it moves to specific details, and after that it claims to have a form, and in the last step it reveals as thought. This sukta does not resolve the mystery of creation; rather all steps which were moving towards clarity and certitude are rejected in

the last two verses. Thus the epistemic range of these verses goes from knowability to unknowability, and finally it comes into a realm which is beyond the categories of both known and unknown

2. Negations, questions, and possibilities characterise the main theme throughout the sūktā. Starting with a possibility, every sukta ends either with negating that possibility or in the form of questioning.

### **Check Your Progress II**

1. Consciousness is the result of the modification of matter in a certain proportion, The existence of a separate, eternal soul or a self beyond the physical body; everything, including independent reality of consciousness is rejected, because everything is reduced to matter, and can be explained in terms of material interactions. It is always seen associated with the body and never as independent from the physical body.

2. The reason to reject the validity of inference is that in case of inference, the universal relation (*vyāpti*) between the middle term and the minor term cannot be established. No source of valid knowledge can substantiate this universal relation, say between smoke and fire. There cannot be a logical certainty in case of an inductive relation, i.e. *vyāpti*. Being limited only to particulars, perception cannot establish the universal relation, we would require another inference in order to verify it by inference; verbal testimony and other sources of knowledge rely on inferential knowledge, and thus they cannot verify the universal relation.