

## Charvaka System – Epistemology

### Introduction

Brhaspati is considered as the traditional founder of the Charvaka system. Charvaka, after whose name this school is so called, is said to be the chief disciple of Brhaspati. According to another view, Charvaka is the name of the founder of this school. According to still another view, the word 'Charvaka' is not a proper name, but a common name given to a materialist. Another synonym of Charvaka is Lokayata which means a commoner. Nastika-Shiromani or an 'arch-heretic' is another name for a materialist. They believed only in perception and in four elements. Krsnapati Mishra sums up the teachings of this system thus: 'Lokayata is only Shastra; perception is the only authority, earth, water, fire and air are the only elements; enjoyment is the only end of human existence; mind is only a product of matter. There is no other world: death means liberation'. *The Sarva-darshana-sangraha* gives the following summary of the Charvaka system: 'There is no heaven, no final liberation, nor any soul in another world; nor do the actions of the castes, orders etc. produce any real effect. The Agnihotra, the three Vedas, the ascetic's three staves and smearing one's self with ashes, were made by Nature as the livelihood of those destitute of knowledge and manliness. If a beast slain in the Jyotistoma rite will itself go to the heaven, why then does not the sacrificer forthwith offer his own father?... if beings in heaven are gratified by our offering the Sharddha here, then why not give the food down below to those who are standing on the house top? While life remains let a man live happily, let him feed on ghee even though he runs in debt; when once the body becomes ashes, how can it ever return here?. All the ceremonies are a means of livelihood for Brahmans. The three authors of Vedas were buffoons, knaves and demons'.

### Perception

The epistemological doctrine of the Charvaka School is that perception or *Pratyaksa* is the only means of valid knowledge. Perceptions are of two types, for Charvaka, external and internal. External perception is described as that arising from

the interaction of five senses and worldly objects, while internal perception is described by this school as that of inner sense, 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.

### **Rejection of inference**

The validity even of inference is rejected. Inference is said to be a mere leap in the dark. We proceed herefrom the known to the unknown and there is no certainty in this, though some inferences may turn out to be accidentally true. A general proposition may be true in perceived cases, but there is no guarantee that it will hold true even in unperceived cases. Deductive inference is vitiated by the fallacy of *petitio principii*. It is merely an argument in a circle since the conclusion is already contained in the major premise the validity of which is not proved. Inductive inference undertakes to prove the validity of the major premise of deductive inference. But induction too is uncertain because it proceeds unwarrantedly from the known to the unknown. In order to distinguish true induction from simple enumeration, it is pointed out that the former, unlike the latter, is based on a causal relationship which means invariable association or *vyäpti*. *Vyäpti* therefore is the nerve of all inference. But the Chärväka challenges this universal and invariable relationship of concomitance and regards it a mere guesswork. Perception does not prove this *vyäpti*. Nor can it be proved by inference, for inference itself is said to presuppose its validity.

### **Rejection of testimony**

Carvaka rejects the validity of testimony too. Firstly, testimony itself is not a valid means of knowledge and secondly, if testimony proves *vyäpti*, inference would become dependent on testimony and then none would be able to infer anything by himself. Hence inference cannot be regarded as a valid source of knowledge. Induction is uncertain and deduction is an argument in a circle. The Chärväka accepts the validity of perception and thereby upholds the truth of the means of valid knowledge, though he rejects all other means of knowledge as invalid.

The crude Chārvāka position has been vehemently criticized by all systems of Indian Philosophy all of which have maintained the validity of at least perception and inference. To refuse the validity of inference from the empirical standpoint 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. The Chārvāka view that perception is valid and inference is invalid is itself a result of inference. The Chārvāka can understand others only through inference and make others understand him only through inference. Thoughts and ideas, not being material objects, cannot be perceived; they can only be inferred. Perception itself which is regarded as valid by the Chārvāka is often found untrue. We perceive the earth as flat but it is almost round. We perceive the earth as static but it is moving round the sun. We perceive the disc of the sun as of a small size, but it is much bigger than the size of the earth. Such' perceptual knowledge is contradicted by inference. Moreover, pure perception in the sense of mere sensation cannot be regarded as a means of knowledge unless conception or thought has arranged into order and has given meaning and significance to the loose threads of sense-data. The Chārvāka cannot support his views without giving reasons which presuppose the validity of inference.