

S. Radhakrishnan's Views on Materialism

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the views of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan on materialism within the broader framework of Indian philosophy. While Indian philosophical traditions are often identified with spiritualism, the study highlights the presence and significance of materialist thought from early texts such as the Vedas to the Carvaka school. Radhakrishnan critically engages with materialism, acknowledging its historical continuity while warning against its dominance over human values. He advocates a balanced synthesis of materialism and spirituality, arguing that both are essential for the holistic development of human consciousness. The paper also explores his critique of religious dogma, superstition, and blind faith, emphasizing his humanistic and rational outlook. By reassessing materialism through Radhakrishnan's perspective, the study underscores the need to reinterpret Indian philosophy beyond rigid binaries and to recognize its dynamic, pluralistic nature in shaping modern intellectual discourse.

Keywords: *Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Materialism in Indian Philosophy, Carvaka Philosophy, Spirituality and Humanism, Indian Philosophical Tradition.*

Religious theories may be mere speculation. We cannot be sure what is true, or whether anything is true at all. Life at any rate is something certain and definite, and so let us occupy ourselves with the improvement of life. (Radhakrishnan 55)

A sincere concentration on Indian philosophy came to bloom in the last years of eighteenth century by the attempts of scholars from Oxford University who began to study Indian instincts with a desire to know the tradition and history of India to make their political feet more firm and consequently Sir William Jones, Colebrook, Wilson and other scholars initiated the study of material and spiritual culture of Indian. Close to them were some more scholars like A. E. Gough, Max Muller, Dyous, Jacobi and Richard Garbe who began the work by translating the ancient scriptures of philosophy and religion into English and other European languages. Resultantly, some Indian scholars also wrote a large number of books on Indian philosophy but sadly most of them were written from idealistic view point which to a great extent neglected the materialistic tradition prevalent in India, for example; 'Charvak- Philosophy' was highly criticized for being against the national consciousness. A repeated mentioning of the difference between values of western philosophy and spiritual values of India made the people of the

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world believe that Indian philosophy is solely based on spiritualism but it remains an undeniable fact that materialism has a drastic impact on the minds and consciousness of Indian also. As S. Radhakrishnan declared that ‘materialism is as old as the philosophy itself’ and ‘the defeat of the human by material is the central weakness of our civilization.’ (Anand 156) So, keeping this significant fact in view, an apt analysis of the tradition of Indian philosophy is still required. Indian philosophy flourished at the hands of some scholars like, Raja Rammohun Roy, Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekanand, Rabindranath Tagore, J. L. Nehru, S. Radhakrishnan etc. In this paper, Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan’s views on materialism will be discussed as a whole because the part of materialism has continuously been neglected in Indian philosophy. He being a philosopher and statesman was well versed the thoughts of materialism. J. N. Mohanty in his introduction of Indian Philosophy Vol. 2, says: “Radhakrishnan is a supreme example of Indian modernity.” (Radhakrishnan)

Radhakrishnan bluntly opposes the conservatism and liberalism and recognizes that Indian philosophy has to learn much by the lessons from the West. For him, spirituality and materialism must remain hand in hand to achieve the eternal goal:

Everything in this world has been a means or an instrument for grasping of the eternal. Even the arts in which we dwell, the arts that we foster, they are said to be Kalakans paramatmanam lati grbnati iti kala. That by which we grasp the eternal, that is said to be an art and its purpose is to refine the spirit of man — atma samekriti vavo silpani. All sciences are there but we are incapable of using them for refining our own spirit. We have said it so often but in our practice, we overlook it. (Radhakrishnan 6)

Radhakrishnan believes that sense of failure in state, politics and society and neglect of humanity compels the individual back to rely on his soul and emotions. When man feels that life is a suffering, he continues his old faith in God. He says, “Man controls the uniformities in nature, his own mind and society. There is thus scope for genuine rational freedom, while indeterminism and chance lead to a false fatalism.’ (Radhakrishnan 52)

So, in their tumultuous thoughts and disintegrated faiths, the independence of man become indelible phenomena and altogether the ‘growing sense of moral weakness’ is always ready to astray man from his ever-desired path of spirituality. There are also several materialists thinkers who believe in this world of senses and Buddhists who insist more on ‘psychological teachings and high ethics’. Radhakrishnan finds that there is also a sect of philosopher who believes that in clinging to Vedas with ‘disposition of the drawing man’ can protect them from the inevitable doom and ultimately they give themselves to the moral duties of leading clean life, performing good deeds without their craving to attain the beyond. Ascetics, Tirthankaras, Gautama in this Vardnamana were the prominent reformers in this regard. Buddhist books name other teachers

like Sanjaya, a skeptic ‘who repudiated all knowledge of self’ and balanced his inquiry on the ‘attainment of peace’, Ajita Kesa Kambalin, a materialist who discarded ‘all knowledge by insight and confined man into four elements’. Purana Kasyapa, who was an indifferentist, did not acknowledge moral distinctions and ‘adopted the view of non-causation or fortuitous origin and passivity of soul’; Maskarin Gosala, the fatalist maintained that man is powerless before life and death and all things are living Jivas constantly changing until they attain perfection and Kakuda Katyayana, who held the distinctness of the ‘elements of being, earth, water, fire, air, space and soul with pleasure and pain’ and making and unmaking of the individuals.

The concept of rebirth is nothing but the clear elaboration of the doctrine of suffering in the second shift. The constant migration from one birth to another, from one life to other is a dull fancy, a heritage of the Upanishadas. To come out of this trauma of impermanence, different schools of thoughts i.e. Jagdvyparam, Samskara, Vyvaha, and Prapanca play a significant role and the law of Karma becomes their corollary. Radhakrishnan rejects both the concepts of Tapas and asceticism as the ‘displaced process of meditation and contemplation, which are suggested in the Upanishadas. To see the God in mystic vision, the soul will have to attain stillness. Commenting on the Radhakrishnan’s challenges to established pattern, S. R. Sharma says:

Radhakrishnan’s ethical mystic does not simply see the inherent value of the world and engage in its affairs. Rather, the ethical individual is guided by an intuitive initiative to move the world forward creativity, challenging convention and established patterns of social interaction. (Sharma 27)

Not only in Western culture, but the seeds of materialism are also found in Rig-Veda. Even in the pre-Buddhist era, there were followers who proclaimed purely materialistic doctrines and surprisingly those doctrines are still enhancing the number of their ‘secret followers’ who believe that man is the composure of four elements and when man dies all these elements return back and wise and fool die alike. According to Lakayata, enjoyment is the only object of human existence and there is no other world to perceive in senses while death takes all. Everything that is cognizable by senses is material and real altogether. S. Radhakrishnan says:

There is no need for us to look upon the soul as distinct from the body. It is only the body qualified by intelligence. The Atman is the body itself, which is characterized by such attributes as are implied in the expression, ‘I am stout’, ‘I am young’, ‘I am old’, ‘I am adult’, etc. We have no evidence of the separate existence of the soul and body. We do not see the self without a body... Consciousness is invariably found in connection with body. Therefore it is the body. (Radhakrishnan 230)

In reference to the Upanishad's saying which states when the body 'spring(s) forth from these elements, it is destroyed. When they are destroyed after death no intelligence remains.' S. Radhakrishnan sharply criticizes:

From this it follows that it is foolish to think that the soul is going to reap the rewards of its acts in a future state. It is an error of judgment that leads to the assumption of another world. There is no world other than this, neither heaven nor hell. These are the inventions of imposters. Religion is a foolish aberration, a mental disease. A God is not necessary to account for the world. (Radhakrishnan 231)

To him, religion is an illusion and when this illusion shatters, man finds himself at a loss and a sense of void dominates. In a more satiric tone, he affirms that man believes in deities, protectors and innocence and after committing sin, he submits himself before them that makes man hypocrite. Man succumbs to God only on account of his 'mendaciousness, feminism, weakness, cowardice or dishonesty' and thus pleasure and pain are the chief elements of life. So, hedonism of 'eat, drink and be merry' is the main concern of materialist scholars:

While life is yours, live joyously; None can escape Death's searching eye; When once this frame of ours they burn; How shall it e'er again return? (Arora)

Radhakrishnan also finds life, the end of life and there is no need to control or resist passion and instinct because they are the natural instincts of man. It is wise on the part of man to enjoy the pleasure of life as much as he can and not to bother the pain which 'inevitably accompanies' it.

Thus, materialistic thoughts of S. Radhakrishnan have a good evidence to repudiate the old religion developed on the basis of custom and magic. This Carvaka creed will prove to be an explosive weapon to explode the superstition and magic reaction of ages. In fact, materialism is a good tool to break the fascination of the past. Radhakrishnan's views on materialism offer man a vast ground of thinking apart from 'presupposition and religious superstitions'.

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