

Indian Atheism, 1500 BC to Now

Amartya Sen, the well-known developmental economist and first Asian to win a Nobel for economics, is one of India's prominent atheists. He recalls discussing religion with his grandfather, a close associate of Rabindranath Tagore, the famous poet.

Sen: Since my childhood thoughts – for what they were worth – did not attract me at all to religion, I asked my grandfather whether I should be concerned that religion did not appeal to me. He told me, 'No, in fact there is no case for having religious convictions until you are able to think seriously for your self – it will come with time.' Since, in my case, it did not come at all (my skepticism seemed to mature with age), I told my grandfather, some years later, that he had been absolutely wrong. 'Not at all,' replied my grandfather, 'you have addressed the religious question, and you have placed yourself, I see, in the atheistic – the Lokāyata – part of the Hindu spectrum.'

Expressions of religious doubt can be found in the earliest Indian writing. For example, the very earliest, the Rig-Veda, explains that no one knows the origin of the universe.

Rig-Veda (1500-1000 BC)

Nasadiya Sukta (Hymn of non-Eternity, origin of universe):

There was neither non-existence nor existence then;
Neither the realm of space, nor the sky which is beyond;
What stirred? Where? In whose protection?

There was neither death nor immortality then;
No distinguishing sign of night nor of day;
That One breathed, windless, by its own impulse;
Other than that there was nothing beyond.

Darkness there was at first, by darkness hidden;
Without distinctive marks, this all was water;
That which, becoming, by the void was covered;
That One by force of heat came into being;

Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it?
Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation?
Gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe.
Who then knows whence it has arisen?

Whether God's will created it, or whether He was mute;
Perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not;

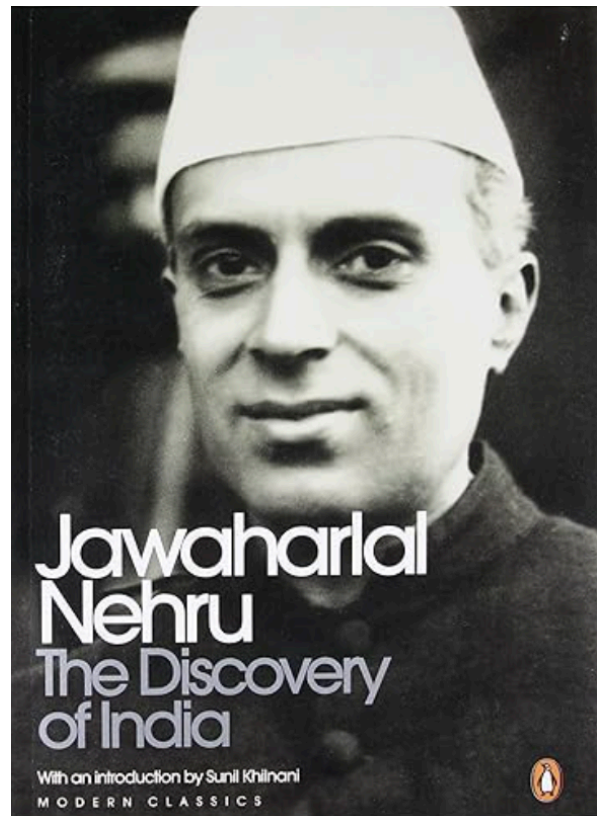
The Supreme Brahman of the world, all pervasive and all knowing
He indeed knows, if not, no one knows

By the about 600 BC a variety of schools of philosophy had developed to answer questions about the ultimate nature of the universe and the meaning of life. Most of them accepted the basic structure of mainstream Indian philosophy; the soul was immortal and was reincarnated on earth multiple times. Behavior in this life accumulated *karma* which influenced one's future reincarnations through a process of divine justice.

Lokāyata rejected this. Lokāyata taught that there were no gods and, perhaps more radically, that there was no afterlife, no reincarnation, no such thing as *karma*. Mainstream philosophers objected that without belief in *karma* people would have no reason to support the social order. They might even abandon the caste system! Indeed, Lokāyata did reject the caste system and all other god-given rules. Lokāyata taught there was not even a good reason to give money to priests!

The political leader of the Indian independence movement and first Prime Minister of independent India was Jawaharlal Nehru. Like Amartya Sen, Nehru was an atheist who was inspired by Lokāyata. In his 1944 book, *The Discovery of India*, written from a British prison, Nehru tells the story.

(Note on vocabulary. The Sanskrit word “Loka” means “people” or “world”. A literal translation of Lokāyata might be “peopleism”, or maybe (in my biased view) “humanism”. Because it is a repudiation of gods, it is often translated “atheism”. But this can be confusing. Some Buddhists would argue they are “atheists” because they don’t believe in a god with personality. But Buddhists do believe in reincarnation and *karma*, which Lokāyata rejects. So another common translation is “materialism”, the term Nehru uses below.)



Nehru: One of our major misfortunes is that we have lost so much of the world's ancient literature – in Greece, in India, and elsewhere. Probably this was inevitable as these books were originally written on palm-leaves or on *bhurjapatra*, the thin layers of bark of the birch tree which peel off so easily, and later on paper. There were only a few copies of a work in existence and if they were lost or destroyed, that work disappeared, and it can only be traced by references to it, or quotations from it, in other books. Even so, about fifty or sixty

thousand manuscripts in Sanskrit or its variations have already been traced and listed, and fresh discoveries are being constantly made. Many old Indian books have so far not been found in India at all but their translations in Chinese or Tibetan have been discovered. Probably an organized search for old manuscripts in the libraries of religious institutions, monasteries and private persons would yield rich results. That, and the critical examination of these manuscripts and, where considered desirable, their publication and translation, are among the many things we have to do in India when we succeed in breaking through our shackles and can function for ourselves. Such study is bound to throw light on many phases of Indian history and especially on the social background behind historic events and changing ideas. The fact that in spite of repeated losses and destruction, and without any organized attempt to discover them, over fifty thousand manuscripts have been brought out, shows how extra-ordinarily abundant must have been the literary, dramatic, philosophical and other productions of old times. Many of the manuscripts discovered still await thorough examination.

Among the books that have been lost is the entire literature on materialism which followed the period of the early Upanishads [800-200 BC]. The only references to this, now found, are in criticisms of it and in elaborate attempts to disprove materialist theories. There can be no doubt, however, that the materialist philosophy was professed in India for centuries and had, at the time, a powerful influence on people. In the famous *Arthashastra*, Kautilya's book on political and economic organization, written in the fourth century BC, it is mentioned as one of the major philosophies of India.

We have then to rely on the critics and persons interested in disparaging this philosophy, and they try to pour ridicule on it and show how absurd it all is. That is an unfortunate way for us to find out what it was. Yet their very eagerness to discredit it shows how important it was in their eyes. Possibly much of the literature of materialism in India was destroyed by the priests and other believers in the orthodox religion during subsequent periods.

The materialists attacked authority and all vested interest in thought, religion, and theology. They denounced the Vedas, and priestcraft and traditional beliefs, and proclaimed that belief must be free and must not depend on pre-suppositions or merely on the authority of the past. They inveighed against all forms of magic and superstition. Their general spirit was comparable in many ways to the modern materialist approach; it wanted to rid itself of the chains and burden of the past, of speculation about matters which could not be perceived, of worship of imaginary gods. Only that could be presumed to exist which could be directly perceived, every other inference or presumption was equally likely to be true or false. Hence matter in its various forms and this world could only be considered as really existing. There was no other world, no heaven or hell, no soul separate from the body. Mind and intelligence and everything else have developed from the basic elements. Natural phenomena did not concern themselves with human values and were indifferent to what we consider good or bad. Moral rules were mere conventions made by men.

Nehru mentions that much of what we know of Lokāyata comes from texts which don't agree with it. A famous example is from the Ramayana, one of the great Hindu epic poems. (The other is the Mahabharata). In the story the hero, Rāma, is the eldest son of the King of Ayodhyā. His father is tricked into ordering his son to spend 14 years in exile in the forest. Rāma the good son promises to obey, even though his father clearly has no desire to banish him. The father dies and the people of Ayodhyā want Rāma to return and rule as the new king. Rāma refuses. Keeping a promise is a sacred duty, no matter how stupid. Rāma's younger brother Bharat visits Rāma in the forest and attempts to persuade him to return. The world would be better for Rāma, Bharat, and the people of Ayodhyā if Rāma returned. Rāma's promise was a mistake in the first place. In any case the father is dead. Staying in the woods is illogical. Bharat arranges for a Lokāyata philosopher to argue with Rāma:

As an example of religious irrationality, the philosopher points out that you can't feed people a long way away by ritual, so how could you expect to feed the dead that way? The philosopher makes the claim that priests make up things just so people will give them money. He concludes that Rāma should do the obvious thing and accept the kingship

Ramayana ~500 BC

"I pity all those whosoever have made sacrifices for religious merit. For, they, having undergone suffering in this life, have met with extermination after death."

"These people say, 'The eighth day should be given up to sacrifices for the spirits of our ancestors.' See the waste of food. What will a dead man eat?"

"If food eaten by one here, reaches another's body, then let a sacrifice be offered for those who are setting out on a distant journey. Will it not become a food on their path?"

"Perform sacrifices, distribute gifts, consecrate yourselves, practise austerity and renunciation' - These writings are composed by learned men for the sake of inducing others to give."

"O, the highly wise! Arrive at a conclusion, therefore, that there is nothing beyond this Universe. Give precedence to that which meets the eye and turn your back on what is beyond our knowledge."

"Honour the judgment of the wise and regarding that which is approved by all, accept the kingdom as propitiated by Bharata."

In the story, Rāma proves his superior religious virtue by staying in the woods, keeping the promise even though it is irrational to do so. As it works out, after many complicated adventures, Rāma does end up as king of Ayodhyā. For Rāma, *karma* worked out!

(The particular story of Rāma's relation with Ayodhyā has been huge in recent Indian politics. In 1528 the Islamic Mughal empire built a mosque in Ayodhyā on Rāma's birthplace. Despite Rāma being a fictional character, militant Hindus were offended and in 1992 formed a mob which destroyed the mosque. In 2024 the current Hindu nationalist government, rather than allow the reconstruction of the destroyed mosque, opened a Hindu temple on the site. The mob won. Indian secularists, such as Amartya Sen, were, and are, furious.)

Indian atheism continues to inspire people today. Many, like Sen and Nehru, are proud of its history. But its influence was not confined to India. According to ancient Greek sources, when Alexander the Great invaded India in 326 BC, Greek philosophers travelling with him were influenced by Indian atheist philosophy. The Greek philosopher Pyrrho, who accompanied Alexander and met Indian atheists, is generally considered the founder of skepticism in the ancient Mediterranean world. Greek skepticism had, of course, enormous influence on ancient Roman and, later, Renaissance thought

While Nehru tells the story well, Larry Gonick provides a handy summary in his 1994 Cartoon History of the Universe.

