

ARUNABHA MISRA

Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya and his Understanding of the Science and Society in Ancient India

Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya was born in Kolkata on November 19, 1918. 2018 was his birth centenary year. A philosopher, a progressive writer, a lifelong communist with full commitment to Marxism, and a left nationalist, Debiprasad is mostly known for his studies on ancient Indian materialism. To resurrect spontaneous or native materialism in the ancient thought of Indian civilization, which has been portrayed by the western philosophers as being uniquely spiritual, is a task of immense value, and it was quite efficiently done by Debiprasad. Significant contribution in the direction of a rational reconstruction of the evolution of scientific ideas and native materialism in Indian antiquity was made by him. Described by Walter Ruben as a 'thought reformer', he was in Ruben's words "Conscious of his great responsibility towards his people living in a period of struggle for national awakening and of world-wide fighting of the forces of progress, humanism and peace against imperialism and militarism". He has written his book '*Lokayata: A study of ancient Indian materialism*' standing against the old fashioned conception that, India was, and is land of dreamers and mystics.

Debiprasad's native village was at Ghatakpara of Bankura District. His father Basantakumar was the first native Auditor general of independent India. His elder brother Kamakshiprasad was a famous children litterateur and editor of a well known children journal

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Rangmashal. Kamakshiprasad became famous by translating Russian books into Bengali. Debiprasad completed his school education from Mitra Institution, Bhawanipur. Then he earned his undergraduate degree in philosophy from Presidency college and post graduate degree from Calcutta university securing highest marks in both B.A and M.A. As an emerging and prolific litterateur he joined Progressive Writers Association, which was later renamed as ‘Anti Fasist Writers Association’ and became very close to famous Bengali poet Bishnu Dey. He got an introduction to the Marxist views of society from his friend Samar Sen, and later a thorough understanding of Marxism from Bankim Mukherjee, Radharaman Mitra, and Bhawani Sen (Bhawanisankar Sengupta). In an interview Debiprasad expressed that, at that time he was much illuminated by two books namely ‘Communist Manifesto’ by Marx and ‘Dialectical and Historical Materialism’ by Stalin. Bhawanisankar Sengupta was the person who inspired him to applying Marxism in ancient Indian Philosophy. His first venture in this line was *Lokayata*.

Lokayata means materialist philosophy. *Lokayata* also stands for peoples’ philosophy. In his *Lokayata*, Debiprasad consistently denied existence of *Brahman* as the one and only reality and considered ‘*Pratyaksa*’ (perception) as the sole means of knowledge. This was a big blow to the assiduously cultivated view of Indian philosophy. He not only established the in-depth study of various strands of Indian philosophy as a serious academic task, but also contributed significantly in changing the popular perception of Indian philosophy. Being a Marxist he used the method of historical materialism to study primitive ‘*dehavada*’ and the primitive rituals related to it. Dale Riepe, during reviewing his book ‘Indian philosophy: A popular outline’ remarked that he “combines the analytic sagacity of Hume with impatient realism of Lenin”. His unbiased survey of Vedas showed that in early stages of *Veda*, and at least in *Rig-Veda*, religious consciousness is totally absent.

In his book ‘What is living and what is dead in Indian philosophy’, in 1976, Debiprasad demonstrated that, similar to that of other

countries, in ancient India also sharp conflict exists between the idealist and materialist school of philosophy. *Nyaya* and *Vapsheshikas* are the followers of materialist outlook. According to them 'after a knowledge is proved true in practice, then there remains no doubt about its proof; hence the question of proving it again does not arise'. He showed that anti idealists like *Varahamihira* and *Bramhagupta* used Aesopian languages to express their views in a camouflaged manner to prevent any censorship from the strong idealist school led by Manu.

One very important work of Debiprasad is 'Science and society in ancient India'. In this book he established Uddalaka Aruni as the first 'natural scientist' in the intellectual history of mankind. He wrote, 'Uddalaka collected observations as far as his historical conditions permitted him and even went on diligently to make experiments to understand nature and man.' Uddalaka did this experiment upon his son Svetaketu to prove that, the mind consists of food, life consists of water and speech consists of heat. Svetaketu, an arrogant person for his scriptural knowledge on Veda, failed to recite the Rig verses, the Yajus formulas and the Saman chants before his father, after spending 15 days by drinking water only, and not eating anything. Hence, it was proved that material food is the sole cause of mind or consciousness, the prime tool of idealists. Debiprasad used this incident of Upanishad as a strong example of existence of materialist outlook in *Veda*. Debiprasad also used to say that there are two interconnected aspects of science, the ideology and the technique. Any divorce of one from the other spells disorder.

Debiprasad's work provided us the critical basis on which one could take pride in the achievements of Indian civilization. With its own specificities, the ancient Indian civilization made as much contribution to the growth of human knowledge as any other. The ancient Indian thought, philosophy, scientific knowledge was sustained by pluralism of ideas. That is what constituted its strength. The cacophony that is trying to strait-jacket Indian thought in the name of religion is damaging the very civilization in the name of

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which it seeks to speak. Debiprasad's work was motivated to overturn the existing popular consciousness of Indian philosophical thought.

Our Indian society is presently facing serious problem related to its ancient scientific discoveries and developments. Some people with 'Jagatguru complex' were spreading the rumors that India is the origin of all scientific, technological and cultural developments of the world. Some false claim regarding ancient surgical, aviation and bio technological developments in India was creating much controversy. Some people also talking about the existence of stem cell research in ancient India. Some are claiming that, 'Everything exists in Veda'. At this juncture it is very important to aware people about the exact picture of science and technology in ancient Indian society.

Debiprasad did a great deal of work in this line, starting from *Lokayata* (1959) to *In Defence of Materialism in India* (1989). In 1969, in his book '*Indian Atheism: A Marxist Analysis*', he described how native materialism in India was found in our Vedas and how materialism developed over ages culminating in dialectical materialism. According to Debiprasad, the study of Indian Atheism is important because without adequate idea of this our knowledge of traditional Indian wisdom remains imperfect and incomplete. Debiprasad had shed new light on the relationship of philosophy to science. He wrote, "Though usually neglected by the historians of Indian philosophy, what Indian science bequeaths to Indian philosophy is of immense significance. Without noting this, we can hardly understand the real source of the important trends of ancient Indian philosophy, particularly of those that have an overly secular and empirical interest."

He is pioneer in devoting his studies in the '*History of Science and Technology in Ancient India*'. His main aim of this study is to showcase our heritage of defending scientific temper. He wrote, "An antidote to the malevolence with which we are being confronted is the spread of the scientific temper. And one of the special problems created in the country is the illusion fomented by the regional chauvinists, communalists and fundamentalists in their claim to be the real custodians of our national cultural heritage. The claim is a

fiction; in fact, the most dangerous fiction. And it has got to be debunked. But it cannot be debunked with mere demagoguery. We have to lead our people to meet the technicians, engineers and scientists in our own history and to show how they were defending the scientific temper in their own way, defying the dark forces that threatened it. This indeed had been a very significant aspect of our national cultural heritage.' *Nature* identified this work as "more than a book on the history of science". The reviewer also wrote, "He reconstructs the true story through the fog of the intervening religious fanaticism and undoes the tangled knots of mangled texts brought by the centuries of distortion and suppression."

Bharate bastubad prasange (concerning materialism in India) is a very important book of Debiprasad. This book was written at the last phase of his life (1987). Second edition of this book was published in 1991. Debiprasad himself translated this work into English. In this book Debiprasad quoted scientist Prafulla Chandra Ray to cite the exact reason behind the degradation of ancient medicinal and surgical expertise in India. Those two most important reasons, according to Prafulla Chandra, are i) social and ii) philosophical. The social reason is *Varnashrama* which dissociates the thinkers from the artisans. Thus a separation of head and hand occurred creating a sharp barrier in cultivation of experimental and operational endeavor. Prafulla Chandra explained, "The very touch of corpse, according to Manu, is enough to bring contamination to the sacred person of Brahmin... Anatomy and Surgery fell into disuse and became to all intents and purposes lost science to the Hindus. It was considered equally undignified to sweat away at the forge line a Cyclops.The intellectual portion of the community being thus withdrawn from active participation in the arts, the how and why of phenomena- The condition of cause and effect-were lost light of- the spirit of enquiry died out...and India for once bade adieu to experimental and inductive sciences. Her soil was rendered morally unfit for birth of a Boyle, a Descartes or a Newton and her very name was all but expunged from the map of the scientific world." Secondly, "the Vedanta philosophy

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as modified and expounded by Samkara, which teaches the unreality of the material world is also to a large extent responsible for bringing the study of physical science into disrepute.”

The forces of orthodox *Hindutva Vaad* with fangs of old *Var-nashrama* and *Vedanta philosophy* are now trying to dominate socio-cultural and political atmosphere of India. Inculcation of findings of Debiprasad may help us a lot at this critical juncture to uphold idea of united secular and modern forward looking India.