

# Introduction

## Charvak Speaks

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**Y**OU KNOW SOMETHING about me, but not a lot. Let me tell you a little bit about myself.

They call me the great denier (*caram nāstik*) – one who questions the veracity of most things ordinary people hold to be true. They say I am a *nāstik* who denies the existence of the most sacred entities that people revere. The Brahmans nurse a special hatred for me. They say that while Buddhists and Jains may be *nastik* because they do not acknowledge the sanctity of the Vedas, they at least do not deny the existence of the next world (*parālok*). Charvak denies both! Charvak, the Brahmans say, is the *nāstik śiromaṇi*, the jewel in the crown of unbelief. They allege that I am a crude materialist (*jaḍavādi*) who preaches that no valid knowledge can be acquired by inference from facts obtained by direct perception, that there is no such thing as morality, and that the enjoyment of pleasure is the only object of human life.

And then there are the modern scholars armed with their tools of philological and historical analysis. Most of them claim there was no such person as Charvak, only an ancient school of materialist thought that went by that name. According to them, the Charvaka school was probably founded by someone called Bṛhaspati, although who that person was remains a mystery. There was Bṛhaspati the scholar of music, Bṛhaspati the writer

of an *arthaśāstra*, and Bṛhaspati the compiler of a *dharmasāstra*. Who was the Bṛhaspati who founded the Charvaka school of philosophy? Little do these learned men and women know of my complicated relation to the sage Bṛhaspati. The excuse these modern scholars give for their lack of clarity is that there are no texts in existence that were composed by the Charvaka philosophers themselves. Every scrap of information about them comes from others who have written on the views of the Charvakas, usually from a position of great hostility. Well, one feels a little sorry for these well-meaning modern scholars sitting in their book-lined studies, sending out platoons of eager research assistants to search for musty texts and commentaries in old libraries and archives. Let us leave them to their barren pursuits; they have worked hard and are entitled to their flights of speculative fancy.

In actual fact, I am neither a crude materialist nor a hedonist (*kāmuk*). But I am, if you wish to call me that, a sceptic (*saṃśayvādī*). I do not take common-sense truths at face value. Contrary to what the Brahmans say about me, I do not hold that no valid knowledge is possible through inference from facts. All I say is that such knowledge is conditional upon the observations on which the truth is claimed. Thus, if you tell me that we know the truth that the sun comes up in the east, I will not be so foolish as to deny that knowledge. But I will qualify it by saying that your truth is conditional upon the observations you have made so far of the sun's rising in the east, even though there may have been a million such observations. If you then insist that we are justified in inferring from those million observations the unconditioned and universal truth (*sāmānya jñān*) that the sun comes up in the east, I will object. What if the natural movement of the heavenly bodies is such that after moving in one direction for several thousand years, it reverses, entirely by natural causes, and begins to move in the opposite direction? What if that is the natural law? In that case, is it not

possible that you might get up tomorrow morning and discover to your horror that the sun has risen in the west? Accuse me of splitting hairs, if you like, but I don't like muddled thinking. Knowledge by  *anumān*  or inference is, for me, conditional knowledge ( *viśeṣ jñān* ).

It is because of the same distaste for muddled thinking that I do not believe in reincarnation, or an extracorporeal soul that flies out of the human body after death and roams around as ghosts or spirits, residing in trees and ruined buildings, perhaps to re-enter some other human body. I do not believe in the efficacy of religious rites to bring about material or spiritual results. I do not believe in the next world, or fate, or the results of our karma in this life determining our next life. I do not believe in any of these things because there is simply no tangible evidence that anyone has ever been able to produce about their validity. For the same reason, I do not believe that there are supernatural causes of natural phenomena. In short, I am a realist ( *vāstāvāvadī* ) who does not engage in fantastic imaginings and respects the limits of human knowledge. I speak the truth to the powerful few who spread dreams and lies to confuse and mislead the people in order to perpetuate their tyranny. No wonder the Brahmans hate me so much.

But it is not philosophy that I wish to talk about today. My subject today will be  *rājānīti* , the principles of statecraft. You and your friends are obsessed with what you call  *politics* .<sup>1</sup> You think you know its principles – all the things that are right and wrong in politics. Armed with that knowledge, you debate endlessly in your coffee shops and internet blogs and tweets, cutting off the king's head and carrying out daily revolutions. But do you know the truths and lies of politics? Unless you know what is true and what is false, how can you make judgements about what is right or wrong? So let me take up a subject over

<sup>1</sup> The word  *politics*  appears in the text as an English word.

which your friends have been greatly agitated recently. Who is a patriot and who is anti-national? Isn't that what you have been shouting about? Come, let me show you all the lies that have been told about nationalism. Along the way, I will also tell you about some of its truths.