



Sakaal Times

Tuesday, March 17, 2009

CHAITANYA CHARAN DAS

Atheistic fanaticism

To an unrefined, untrained ear, a sweet tune will seem just a sound. Or maybe even just noise. A noise that is disturbing, irritating or outrageous: a noise that ought to be silenced at all costs. To spiritually unrefined, untrained people, all religious expressions – prayers, chants, *artis* – are just ordinary activities. Or maybe even pointless rituals that are pre-scientific, superstitious and/or dangerous: rituals that must be stopped at all costs. The Bhagvad Gita (15.10) cautions against such atheistic presumptuousness: “The dynamics of spirit – how the soul resides in and departs from the material body, how the soul seeks pleasure in matter under the spell of illusion – cannot be seen by those deluded by ignorance. But those illumined with eyes of knowledge can see all this clearly.” The founder *acharya* of ISKCON, Srila Prabhupada, during his talk at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, famously asked, “Why is there no study of god?”

If we were to ask a group of people, ‘Do you believe in the existence of a lepton, a meson, a baryon, an anti-quark?’ most people would stay mum. Those who know these as sub-atomic particles will say, ‘Scientists say that these particles exist. So I don’t doubt their existence.’ Such deference to scientific authority for matters far beyond ordinary jurisdiction is reasonable and desirable. Yet, if we were to ask the same group of people, ‘Do you believe in the existence of soul or god?’ almost all of them will express an opinion; some – the atheists – will be assertive, even aggressive, despite the fact that this question is far beyond ordinary jurisdiction. And they will condemn deference to spiritual authority as blind faith. This double standard begs the question: is no training, no qualification needed to pass judgment on spiritual matters?

Let’s consider quantum physics. Noble laureate physicist Richard Feynman states, “[our current physics] describes nature as absurd from the point of view of common sense. And it agrees fully with experiment. So I hope you can accept nature as she is – absurd.” A physics student has to first believe the world buzzes with components that are intrinsically unobservable and undergo training for eight to ten years before he can begin comprehending quantum reality”. Yet, when spiritual teachers ask for something similar – accept the existence of the soul and god and train yourself through material regulation and spiritual meditation to experience higher reality – objections abound. ‘Why should I follow any rules? This is unscientific.’ Don’t we need a break?

(The author is a spiritual mentor at ISKCON, Pune)