



PHILOSOPHY OF INDIAN HUMANISM

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Introduction :

Humanism considers man as the measure of all things and keeps man at the centre. It is a programme directed towards the realization of the inherent potentialities of man and is concerned with development welfare and happiness of man. Humanism is committed to the values of life and continues to be unrelenting quest for truth. In the East, unlike in the West, humanism has not been developed as a system but the traces of humanism could be discerned. Despite the differences from the western tradition, the trends of humanism such as human dignity, human development, human welfare, emphasis on man and his values could also be found in Indian thought. In Western tradition humanism has been distinguished from spiritualism and supernaturalism. We don't find such distinction in Indian Tradition.

Among Indian humanist thinkers one finds two types of humanism. While Jawaharlal Nehru and M.N. Roy etc. support naturalistic humanism, borrowed from the West, M.K. Gandhi and Radhakrishnan follow the Indian brand of humanism coming from the ancient *Vedas*, the *Upani?ads*, and the *Bhagavad Gîtâ*. The later is represented by the traditionalist group of Indian philosophers. Therefore, it is their humanism which forms the essential element of Indian philosophy. Although not a part of the orthodox school, the *Châruvakâ* School of thought can be considered an important philosophical movement within humanism.

Philosophy of *Lokâyatâs*:

Lokâyata repudiated the old religion of custom and magic. Nothing needs to be accepted by the individual which is not supported by the evidence of reason. The *Lokâyatâs* or the *Châruvakâs* who denounced the divine world had a faith on the materialistic world. They had stressed the importance of happiness for which the man is craving for. The *Lokâyatâs* had underlined the need of materialism. *Lokâyata* means the philosophy of the people and it also implies the philosophy of this worldliness.¹ For them there is no God, no soul and life after death, denied all religions and moral values and cared only for the sensual pleasures. The literal meaning of *châruvâka* in Sanskrit is sweet tongued. *Câru* means 'sweet' and *vak* means 'word'. So *châruvâka* might mean pleasant words.² Although it lacked a solid, scientific basis, it contained many brilliant ideas which blazed the trail of social advance. It rejected supernaturalism and divine intervention in human affairs. It helped the people to break free of superstitions and taught them not to hope for happiness in a world



beyond the grave, but to strive for it here on earth.

Teachings of *Bhagavad Gîtâ*:

Bhagavad Gîtâ depicts the world as a scene of an active struggle between good and evil. God is interested in the welfare of mankind. God upholds the dignity of man. Whenever by the abuse of freedom unrighteousness increases and the world get stuck in a rut, he creates himself to lift the world from out of its rut and set it on new tracks. Out of his love he is born again and again to renew the work of creation of a higher plane.³ *Gîta* contains the actual living truths; it will be suitable to the mentality and helpful to the spiritual needs of our present-day humanity, man is a possessor of freedom and potential to realize good by his conscious effort. Lord Krishna says to Arjuna, “*Advesh?tâ sarvabhuthânâm Maithrah karuna eva chah! Nirmamô nirahamkârah samadukha sukha kssah mee!*”⁴ (He who hates no creature, who is friendly and compassionate to all, who is free from attachment and egoism, balanced in pleasure and pain and forgiving is dear to me). Man has to lead a life in which his acts will not be rooted in desire. He has to render his duty in a spirit of desire less action – *niskama karma* – renunciation. The revival of the *Gîtâ* teachings of Selfless action, surrender, dedicated service and fight against evil, ignorance and injustice has resulted in the release of a large fund of religious energy for social work in the present times.

***Upani?ads*:**

Upanisads started as a movement towards the liberation of the individual from the shackles of external authority and excessive conventionalism. According to *Upanisads*, Life on earth is the means to attain self-perfection. Life is a stage in experiencing spiritual perfection, a step in the passage to the infinite. It is the time for preparing the soul to enter into eternity.⁵ The central theme of the *Upanisads* is concerned with the humanistic philosophy which is the quest for certainty. The seers of the *Upanisads* lead the people to the central reality which is of infinite existence, (*sat*) absolute truth (*cit*) and pure delight (*ânanda*). We have to love our neighbor as ourselves because all are one in reality. The moral life is supported by understanding and reason and not of mere sense and instinct. There is need to recognize the ideal prescribed by reason and if the higher moral is not accepted, our life will be one of animal existence without any goal or aim where we are randomly busy, loving and hating, caressing and killing without purpose or reason. The presence of reason is indicative of something higher than nature and requires people to transform their natural existence into a human one with meaning and purpose. It is through reason that man is a part of cosmic reason.⁶

Although in certain aspects *Upanisads* are steeped in idealism, a healthy recognition of the realities of the material world. The *upanisadic* thought has shown deep concern to the human life and an abiding faith in the potentialities of human activity. The thought strives towards a fullness of live in a more comprehensible and happier world. It reflects the urge of man towards wholeness, to become something



more than mere 'I' by merging the transient individuality in the essence of collective humanity in the universe itself.⁷

Buddhist path way of life:

The Buddhist philosophy is basis for humanism. It invoked the feeling of happiness through the *Astânga Mârga* and four Noble truths called *Ârya Satyâs*. The Buddhist Philosophy has clearly envisages that man can overcome from his problems by leaving behind the desires in hidden. Buddha raised his voice in protest against superstition and unreason. Buddhism resembles positively in its attempt to shift the centre from the worship of God to the service of man. Buddha does not liberate men, but he teaches them how to liberate themselves as he was liberated himself. He endeavoured to rid himself of all legitimate of speculation build from the raw material of experience and assist the spiritual growth of suffering humanity by an honest and unbiased expression of the results of his thought and experience.

Buddha explores the possibilities for the conquest of human suffering and misery. He was convinced of the four noble truths, that there is suffering and it has a cause that it can be removed and that there is a way to accomplish this. The first noble truth is concerning the suffering. Buddha has made an appeal to the men who were longing for a way of escape, to resort to *Nirvâna*. Never in this world does hatred cease by hatred – hatred ceases by love. Victory breeds hatred, for the conquered is Unhappy. One may conquer a thousand men in battle; but he who conquers himself is the greatest victor. Let man overcome anger by kindness, evil by good not by birth. Buddhism is humanistic in a sense that it is a religion of love and values. Buddhism represented a progressive world outlook and expressed in its won distorted manner the discontent of the oppressed people and their aspirations for social equality and a better life. It believes in the ability of the individual to achieve ethical goals in this world without non human aid. "Not to do any evil (*pâpa*), to cultivate the good (*ku?ala*), to purify one's mind (*citta*); this the teaching of the *Buddhas*."⁸

Humanistic approach of Jainism:

The ethics of Jainism is humanistic. Jainism held that it was possible for any human being to realize absolute knowledge and attain absolute bliss through the intense human effort. The faith in self-reliance for achieving perfection was an integral part of Jainism. The Jainism teaches claim that the teachings of the Jainas only can stand the scrutiny of reason.⁹ The Jainas attached great importance to the five vows – non-violence (*ahimsâ*), truth (*satya*), non-stealing which implies not to take anything to which one was not entitled (*a?teye*), celibacy or abstention from self-indulgence (*brahmacharya*) and non-possession or renunciation (*aparigraha*). Non-violence was accorded utmost importance among these principles. The three doctrines of Right faith, Right knowledge and Right conduct which were known as three jewels constituted the foundations of Jainism. Jainism believes that man is capable of controlling his own moral life. He can make ethical decisions and find ethical goals without non-human assistance of intervention. Jainism and Buddhism attached great importance to character



but not to one's birth. It believes in the inherent potentialities of all men and their abilities to realize them to become perfect.¹⁰

The Bhakti Movement and Humanistic reforms:

The *Bhakti* Movement is remarkable of its kind for the religious unity and for the emancipation of poverty. They have advocated humanism, equality between men and women. They condemned the social evils like casteism and Sati. They have preached the oneness of God. This great humanistic movement of the middle Ages has not only helped the development of a composite Indian culture embracing different linguistic and religious communities but also paved the way for united struggle against feudal oppression.

Humanistic reforms of Ramananda, Kabir, Ravidasa, Tulasidas, Tukaram:

Ramananda made no distinction between Brahmins and members of the degraded castes. He wanted to promote the ideal of inter-dining. He took people as disciples from all the castes including the degraded castes.¹¹ Ramananda started a religious renaissance: According to him all men and women are equal. He had Muslims and Hindus as his followers. He had Sudras – the outcaste or untouchables as his disciples.

The chief aim of the teaching of Kabir was to find an acceptable means to reconcile the differences between diverse castes and religious communities. Kabir preaches for the harmony, love, understanding of Hindus and Muslims. His concept of non-violent (*ahimsa*) society is indicative of a peaceful community living in virtue and goodness. He has set before the world an idea of love and universal brotherhood.

Ravidasa criticizes teachings of religion which did not appeal to the human reason. He stands against those religious actions that are contrary to human nature. He opposed Continence, Yogic control, and fasting and termed them as unhumanistic tendencies. His hospitality and service to the poor and needy is worthy to be noted. Lord resides in everybody's hearts is not knowable through rites or performances. Highest expression of religion in life is the service of man. Ravidasa exhorts the people to rise above evils of pride, anger, greed, attachment, jealousy and lust.¹²

Tulasidas writing, *Ramacarita manasa* relating to the life story of Rama stood as a great force in preventing disintegration of the Sanatana Dharma. Tulasidas says that man is responsible for his sorrows and joys in life. He attaches great importance to the man associating with the good and holy.

Tukaram attaches utmost importance to character and values. In Tukaram's teachings we find emphasis on the point of no compromise for those who successively wish to follow the path of truth, "Blessed in the world are the compassionate. Their true home is Vaikuntha, but they have come here to serve mankind. They speak no false word, sweet is the speech on their lips, there is room within their hearts. Man has to treat others as ends in themselves but never as means to his own ends. To treat



others as his means is to reduce the source of human value and dignity.

Philosophy of Indian renaissance humanists Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dayananda Saraswati, and Swami Vivekananda:

Raja Ram Mohan Roy has totally rejected the dogmas prevalent in Hindu society in regard to their numerous Gods, rituals, the doctrine of rebirth; avatars, their practice of idol worship, animal sacrifices and above all the evil practice of sati prevalent in those days which inhumanly forces widows to commit suicide by plunging into funeral pyres of their husbands. He continues to fight against this evil practice and could be successful in arousing the public opinion through the wide spread campaign.¹³ He stands for the granting of equal property rights to women and supported widow remarriage and against child marriages, advocates the women education. Through Brahma Samaj, he opposes the social discrimination and played a great role in quickening the forces of national humanistic regeneration towards progress and freedom.

Dayananda Saraswati was one of the leaders of the Indian renaissance humanism. His attack on casteism is most noteworthy. The suffering women folk whose social position is similar to the untouchables also have drawn the attention of Dayananda. He stands for the equal and just treatment of women and his scheme envisages a free and compulsory education for all. Dayananda strives hard for the happiness of man, explores possible human ways for the radical removal of the human suffering. He wants people to live in harmony and co-exist peacefully. He upholds human values and emphasis the need for the regeneration of man and restoration of the cultural values.¹⁴

Swami Vivekananda is one of the greatest humanist thinkers of Indian Renaissance. He criticizes strongly the evil practice of untouchability, the feeling of caste superiority, priest craft and religious tyranny. He prefers to see the people as confirmed atheists rather than as superstitious fools, so it holds good if the mankind become atheist by relying on reason rather than blindly believing in two hundred millions of Gods. Emancipation of women and uplift of the masses are the two important items in Swami Vivekananda's programme of social regeneration of India. He promotes the common interests of people, which can bring justice, honesty, peace and goodness. "The basis of all systems social or political rests upon the goodness of man. No nation is great or good because Parliament enacts this or that, but because its men are great and good."¹⁵

Thus in Indian tradition from *Vedas* up to the renaissance, certain values directed towards the realization of the inherent potentialities of man and concerned with development, welfare and happiness of man were cherished and propagated which are humanistic in content and spirit. Of course Indian humanism has not developed as a systematic philosophy with a sound Metaphysics and Epistemology as in the case of western tradition.



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 - ⁴ Ramakrishnanandagiri swami., *Geethathathrya Pradeepam*, Ch. 12-13, p. 291.
 - ⁵ Radhakrishnan, S., *Indian Philosophy*. Vol. I, p. 147.
 - ⁶ Raju, P.T., *The Concept of Man*, p. 246.
 - ⁷ Damodaran, K., *Indian Thought A Critical Survey*, p. 55.
 - ⁸ *Dhammapada.*, 183.
 - ⁹ Padmanabh S. Jaini., *The Jaina Path of Purification*, p. 89.
 - ¹⁰ Raju, P.T., *The Concept of Man*, p. 266.
 - ¹¹ Bhandarkar, R.P., *Vaisnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems*, pp. 67.
 - ¹² Bhattacharya, Haridas., *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. IV. p. 380.
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