



HUMANISM AND INDIAN THOUGHT

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INTRODUCTION

Humanism is philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and generally prefers critical thinking and evidence (rationalism, empiricism) over acceptance of dogma or superstition. The meaning of the term humanism has fluctuated according to the successive intellectual movements which have identified with it. The term was coined by theologian Friedrich Nietzsche at the beginning of the 19th century. Generally, however, humanism refers to a perspective that affirms some notion of human freedom and progress. In modern times, humanist movements are typically aligned with secularism, and today humanism typically refers to a non-theistic life stance centred on human agency and looking to science rather than revelation from a supernatural source to understand the world.

There is a yearning in the human heart that is nourished only by philosophy and so man cannot live without it. Functions of philosophy have been varied for various people. Whether it seeks to satisfy the intellectual curiosity of man, or investigates into the character and status of values or suggests a way of life, philosophy remains an essentially human pursuit. Humanism is a world-view of any philosopher who is inclined to see man as the center and the goal of his philosophy. It is an outlook which recognises the value or dignity of man and asserts the centrality of human being. As it is stated by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, "In recognising the central importance of man in the scheme of things - and emphasizing his freedom and individuality, and creative power - his role in shaping and moulding his environment with a view of making a better and happier world, humanism preached the gospel of activism, full of hope and promise for the future of mankind - a philosophy likely to rescue man from the slough of despondency and vivify him with self-confidence and faith in his own power as the shaper, not only of his own destiny, but as one who is also destined to play an effective part in the larger field of human welfare and progress." Thus, humanism seeks to enrich man's aims, values, goals and to realize his complete humanness by bringing him in deeper and intimate kinship and harmony with the life and society around him.

Humanism aspires for the upliftment of human beings in all fields - social, cultural, political or economical and advocates that science and philosophy, art and literature, or anything that man has achieved by rational thinking and intellectual acumen must aim at the well-being of man. Its chief aim is to attain human freedom, joyous life with progress and prosperity without any kind of discrimination among men. It held that the panacea for all the evils lies in spreading the message of international friendship and essential brotherhood of mankind. Thus humanism is an attempt to explore the ways and means to bring about common welfare and progress of mankind through an enrichment of the lives of the individuals.

Genesis and growth of humanism

The word 'humanism' is derived from the Latin word 'humanus' which means 'human being'. It means a system of thought

concerned with 'human affairs in general. Its tradition is as old as Greek philosophy and the Sophists and Epicureans of Greece were perhaps the first among the humanists in history. Protagoras, a Greek philosopher of the fifth century B.C., is considered as one of the earliest humanists of the West, if not the father of humanism. He proclaimed that 'Man is the measure of all things.' Though traces of humanistic tradition can be seen in the thoughts of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the European Renaissance is regarded as representing a golden era of humanist revival.

The thinkers of the period of Renaissance were preoccupied with a serious concern for man and their studies were centred on the problems like the dignity of man, immortality of soul and the unity of truth. It was also an age of free thinking and creativity. The Renaissance saw the rise of humanism that recognised human reason, passion and values. It also asserted the intrinsic worth of man's life and the vastness of his potentialities. Breaking away from the authority of church, the Renaissance thinkers claimed freedom of thought and expression leading to the beginning of a great era of all round development of man. God, who had remained as the most powerful force in the medieval period, yielded place to the sovereignty of man. Man and his world reached the apex of evolution and it resulted in the greatest mental and intellectual revolution. The writings of Marx displayed his deeply humanistic outlook. He placed man as the central reality of the Universe and rejected the idea of a supernatural power or deity. The universe would not possess any value according to him, without man's presence. He treated human suffering as a serious problem which was in urgent need of solution in order to ensure safety to mankind. Marx considered capitalist system as responsible for man's alienation from his true being.

Existentialism is a philosophical outlook which regards the existing man as the centre of philosophizing. It is an outlook which is passionately concerned about the existential situation of the individual and his problems. It claims itself to be a form of humanism in the sense that it is very much concerned with genuine human values and their realization through an authentic existence of the individuals. All existentialists place man above everything else and attach great importance to the individual freedom and responsibility. The concept of self in existentialism is usually explained in the light of man's freedom and dynamism. Thus while the Marxist humanism treats man as a species, Existentialist thinkers treat him as a distinct individual person. But the main idea that man must remain the supreme being was not belittled. F.C.S. Schiller also supported the saying 'Man is the measure of all things.' His Pragmatic Humanism tries to give us a humanistic interpretation of Pragmatism. He recognises the dignity and role of man as a summum. He provided a solid basis for human volition, conduct and values. He also expressed the necessity of the power of reason to liberate man from his own sensuous nature. Pragmatic Humanism implies the supremacy of human interests which must be served by everything else including nature and its operation without the help of any supra-human agency. According to Schiller, the task of humanism was to raise the intellectual and spiritual status of man, in keeping

with the increasing awareness of the universe around him, assimilating all the constructive aspects of science and philosophy. Thus, Existentialism, Marxism and Pragmatism deals with the problems of man and their chief interest centres around man. So they have a common denominator in humanism. We also come across numerous other forms of humanism developed by Western thinkers which includes evolutionary humanism, Religion of Humanity, Democratic Humanism and Scientific Humanism.

The Humanistic Approach in Indian Thought

We come across several ideas of humanistic thought in the Mahabharata, the great Indian epic, from which Dr. Radhakrishnan quotes a stanza which is characteristically humanistic: Guhyam brahma todidam vo bravimi, na manusat sreshataram hi kincit. (I tell you this, the secret of Brahman: there is nothing higher than man.)¹² The appeal of the humanism of some of the medieval Hindu saints and later that of Islam and Sikhism, has as its background the corrupt and degraded life of man associated with and brought about by the rigid Hindu caste society. These humanisms were mainly attempts to elevate the downtrodden and the lowly and so they preached the brotherhood and equality all men and pleaded for the creation of a casteless society.

At a time, when men were steeped in intolerance and sunk in superstition and when religion was reduced to caste distinctions, there arose in different parts of India saints who boldly tried to remove social inequalities and injustices: Jnanesvar and Namdev in Maharashtra, Narsi Mehta in Gujarat, Chaitanya in Bengal, Kabir in Uttar Pradesh, Vallabhacharya in Andhra, Basavasvara and Akka Mahadevi in Karnatak and others. All these infused a new faith into the hearts of man by preaching devotion, love and kindness. They were all human in the sense that they believed that since the same God has made all men, we should not divide the brotherhood of men into distinctions of castes and creed. Nanak, for instance, says: Let faith in God be the staff on which thou leanest; Let brotherhood with every man on earth Be the highest aspiration of your Yogic Order.

Modern India has also produced several humanists. The humanism of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who is rightly remembered for his many social reforms, was essentially a part of his fight against the evil aspects of Hinduism. Service of mankind was one of Roy's primary loves and he even contemplated a universal religion which, he believed, would be embraced by all mankind. Gandhi and Tagore were humanists, too. Neither rejected the ideas of God. Still they are called humanists for both loved man as they would love God himself. In fact, they saw God in man and so proclaimed that the worship of God lay essentially in the service of mankind. Gandhi's humanism, similar to Tagore's in several aspects, however, had a profound mass-appeal because of the Mahatma's dedicated devotion to the cause of the lowly and the down-trodden. But the humanisms of both Gandhi and Tagore have a mystical and religious bias. Dr. Naravane has explained it clearly:

M. N. Roy, indeed a variable intellectual giant of the generation, dissatisfied as he was with Communism as well as Parliamentary democracy, expounded a social philosophy with certain political aspects of its own, and designated it as Radical Humanism or New Humanism. Roy insists on the essentially rational and moral nature of man and his capacity to build a free, harmonious and just social order. He too believes in the Protagorean aphorism and says that a social or political institution can be useful only in so far as it can give man freedom to enjoy not only political and economic security, but also a social-psychological atmosphere which helps individuals realise their intellectual and human potentialities.

Roy's philosophy with its glorification of the individual as against the collective ego of a nation, its insistence on organised or pyramidal democracy as against parliamentary democracy and above all, strong faith in the urgent need for creating conditions for the achievement of man's political as well as economic freedom, gained for him innumerable admirers and followers. Since his death

in 1954, the influence of Radical Humanist Movement has perhaps, waned, but Roy's philosophy continues to evoke the attention of intellectuals throughout the world.

Concluding one of his short articles on Nehru, Mulk Raj Anand brilliantly sums up the humanist qualities of this great personality: "there emerges the image of Jawaharlal Nehru as a humanist, full of the deepest tenderness for men everywhere, a polytheist who accepted all the Gods of the world, a universalist, who felt it right to express his disagreements without denouncing them,—the Prophet of a new contemporary Indian civilisation which would experiment in the making of man, who might inherit the most vital things of the world and usher our planet into a future of one world culture, where the individual may seek his own unique perfections". It may not be incorrect to call Swami Vivekananda a humanist. This may seem strange since he was a staunch believer in Advaita philosophy which dismisses the sensory world as unreal. But the Swami's love for the lowly and his admiration for the Buddha made him view man as a living, throbbing individual who needs compassion and love. Thus, he became a sort of a humanist in his later days.

Dr. Radhakrishnan also could be called a humanist. His is a kind of spiritual or metaphysical humanism. Philosophy is no intellectual luxury for him. On the contrary, he believed that philosophy is a study of what man should pursue. As far back as 1940, he had sensed the inevitable coming of humanism into operation:

Mulk Raj Anand, one of our internationally renowned writers, has over the years evolved an eclectic philosophy which he calls "comprehensive historical humanism". While he does not fail to take cognisance of man's greed, lust, selfishness, cruelty and insensitivity, he refuses to be bogged down by despair and believes that man is potentially capable of rising from these lower passions to magnificent heights of love, compassion and sacrifice. And it is to enable man to achieve this glorious end that he fervently pleads for the emergence amongst men of "a new conception of the role of man, an emphasis on the importance of a human being as such, a profound respect for man, love for him and faith in his capacity to straighten his back and look at the stars."

CONCLUSION

Humanism is a philosophy of vigorous optimism. It is profoundly dynamic, since, it is always ready to take cognisance of the changing and growing nature of knowledge. It is anything but dogmatic and bigoted. It is simple and promising as a way of life for contemporary man and it is pre-eminently suited to the modern world, one immediate necessity of which is the creation of a community of nations which may bring lasting peace and abundant prosperity to the whole of mankind. Mankind lives today under the terrible threat of the Third World War which may reduce the whole brood of homo sapiens to a heap of radio-active ashes. The revival, in the length and breadth of the world, of humanism as a philosophy which has as its central goal the peace and welfare of all mankind, is a happy sign, and on it may well depend the very survival of mankind.

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