



Indian Culture and Human Values

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ABSTRACT

Indian culture plays an important role in inculcating values. There are four main values of life have been highlighted from Vedic periods that have been considered as basic values. They are

- *Dharma (righteousness),*
- *Artha (wealth),*
- *Kama (enjoyment)*
- *Moksa (salvation or liberation).*

Indian culture is complex in nature and with diversity in religion and their customs we live with unity. The two most important tenets of Indian culture are Human Values and Holism. Human values refer to moral, spiritual and ethical values while Holism means oneness or unity. Indian culture is very rich and diverse and teaches us to be tolerant to others. Human values are inculcated from the Vedic teachings to lead a peaceful integrated life. Indian Culture shows us evidences of development of values in life by training and experience. The Bhagawad Gita is considered as the essence of the Vedas and Upanishads. A man has duties and commitments in all stages of life. The Vedas teaches how to perform them. It contains entire range of knowledge. Veda is the source of all Dharma i.e. religion, morality, righteousness and good conduct. It has the highest authority over other materials of the past. According to the Vedas, the nobler virtue is truth, and then follows other virtues.

The Bhagavad Gita acts as powerful catalyst for change and renovation in one's life. The verses from this book contribute to improve self-reflection, better the senses and expands one's inner development, makes the life more active and joy at any circumstances, through attitudinal changes in the individuals. It offers us the tools to connect with our deepest insubstantial spirit, and leads us to participate in the battle of life.

Keywords: Indian, human, culture, values, vedic, holism, Gita, dharma, spirit, conduct, tolerant

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INTRODUCTION

Dharma is essential for the individual's happiness and for the family and the society. Ramayana contains the universal human values and the sense of morality which can regulate the code of society for the betterment of establishing peace. It is because, through various characters, social and moral values are displayed. There is an explanation in this epic to differentiate the term human value from social value. Rama sacrificed all his pleasures for the welfare of the subjects of his kingdom. He abandoned Sita for the satisfaction of his

criticisers. Jataka Tales are an important part of Buddhist literature. Jatak stories represent former incarnations of Buddha and are intended to impart values of self-sacrifice, morality, honesty and other informative values to people.[1,2]

India is a pluralistic and multi-cultural society where many faiths and belief systems regulate the life of individuals. India is not a Hindu society even though Hinduism is the religion of the vast majority of the people. In this part of the globe many religious traditions, both indigenous and foreign, have been established over the years. We have

Buddhism, Sikhism, Bhakti cult, Sufi tradition as well as Islam and Christianity. Many religious gurus, law-givers, social reformers and statesmen have come to guide and influence the life and culture of Indians. The Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Bhagvat Gita as well as the Quran, the Bible, the Guru Bani, etc., have molded the thinking pattern and consciousness of Indians. So also the Hindu caste system and the joint family pattern have a decisive influence on the followers of other religions.

The struggle for human rights essentially reflects the concerns and requirements of modern human being whereas the cultural values operated in a traditional context where many of the agencies which at present account for the violation of human rights norms were not known. Since human rights is basically a problem between authority and the individual it is essential to examine the Indian understanding of the origin of authority.[3,4]

Broadly speaking Indian culture never saw the individual and society as antagonistic to each other. The Hindu vision was that of an orderly society, with each individual doing his assigned job. The individual and society were viewed as two complementary and incomplete entities tied to a relationship of mutual obligations, a commitment which was essential to ensure the well-being of all. Those who acted as the guardians of society and worked out the delicate nuances and detailed network of the social order were neither concerned about, nor even conscious of, the concept of human rights. They were more commercial about the moral dimension of a human being's activities than the legal aspect. Much emphasis was placed on the understanding of society from a moral perspective. Of course this understanding was highly elitist reflecting the brahminical vision of a perfect society. However, this is not to deny the existence of a legal framework and law books to regulate social relationship at various levels. Those were of different nature and have nothing to do with the present concept of Rule of Law which is the main vehicle to ensure the equality of all -- a fundamental objective of the human rights movement. As regards the origin of the government (authority), the Hindu tradition believed in a supernatural source. According to it, human beings in a state of defenselessness and social disorder appealed to the gods. The gods appointed a king in their own image and on their behalf whose task was to protect the people and maintain law and order. In return, the king would claim a share of one sixth

of the produce. The caste-based social order also emerged from this divine source.

In terms of well-codified norms and level of the people's consciousness, the notion of human rights did not exist. But in terms of implications, i.e., ensuring a person's protected position, one can say that people enjoyed their rights. Thus in the Indian culture rights flowed from duties. The performance of one's boundless duties in accordance with dharma (duties) ensured the rights of another. Non-adherence to the neatly defined and minutely worked out duty code would lead to a state of anarchy in society which would destroy the individual himself. Another dimension of this duty-first value system of Indian culture is that since the emphasis on rights leads to conflicts and claims of one's own due, the architects of society and its law-makers, probably sought to avoid a scenario wherein each one would be fighting for his rights. Such a situation would have resulted in an anarchy defeating the very purpose of arranging a stable social order.[5,6]

DISCUSSION

Another dictum of the Gita which has taken deep roots in the Indian mind is *Karmanye badhika rastu ma falesu kadachan*. That is, one must go on performing one's duties without being worried about the rewards or the results. One finds most of the Indian parents consoling their children by citing this Gita bani in the event of the latter's failure in any endeavour despite hard work and sincere efforts. The habit of conformism ruled out any scope for challenge which is the main vehicle to ensure one's rights. Further, the concept of an individual was also not there. The individual as an individual had no identity as he essentially belonged to his family group, caste or sub-caste, etc. Each individual is called upon to perform his duty without being concerned about the reward for or consequences of such an action -- *nishkama karma*

Ahimsa can be identified as another key Indian cultural value which ensures rights by implication and interpretation. Since the concept of ahimsa emerged out of a very healthy Buddhist tradition, it is essential to understand the Buddhist theory on the origin of government or authority. The Buddhist theory did not believe in any divinity. As opposed to the Hindu tradition, it was rooted in a republican mold. It talked about a "golden age which gradually decayed through the institution of private property and other social evils". As a result, the people assembled and elected one from among themselves

to rule over and ensure an orderly society. This has various implications. The ruler is a chosen representative of the people and not a monarch appointed by God with absolute powers. Thus the emphasis is on the sovereignty of the people which naturally leads to a stress on the rights of the individual in society. Even though the idea of the sovereignty of the people remained central to the Buddhist political philosophy, it could never be developed into a theory of the rights of the people. May be it was not necessary then. Nevertheless ahimsa, which gives every life a right to live, is a reflection of the belief in the sovereignty of the people.[7,8]

In a broader sense, ahimsa means much more than non-violence. It means not hurting anyone or any life both physically and psychologically. Basically it is a negative concept from which flows a positive value, i.e., protection. Ahimsa aims at ensuring and providing a protected existence to every one free from mental and physical violence and it is here that the basic postulation of ahimsa coincides with the main concern of the present human rights movement worldwide.

India's cultural canvas is large and mosaic and its heritage runs into several centuries. It is myopic to think that such a complex and varied culture would bequeath only positive values. It is true that certain values in Indian culture are contradictory to, and violative of, many articles in the UDHR. Yet there are many others which are similar to and supportive of many of the articles contained in the Declaration. Hence the relationship between Indian cultural values and the UDHR is both conflicting and complementary at the same time.

The Hindu tradition does not believe in the concept of equality. The practice and prevalence of inequality has both the divine sanction and the sanction of the Law Books or the Dharma Shastras. There is no equality before the law or equal protection of law is not there since society has been arranged through a rigid system of social hierarchy based on caste. In the context of human rights, the Hindu caste system which enjoys a pan-Indian presence assumes an added importance. It plays an important role in the stratification of Indian society. By its very nature, the caste system goes against respect for an individual's dignity (Article 01), right to recognition as a person (Article 06), right to freedom of opinion and expression (Article 19). Further it has a racial origin since a person's caste is determined from birth itself and on the basis of colour. For instance, an important verse in the Mahabharata explains the linkage between caste

and colour. Bhriji explains the nature of castes to Bharadvaja as follows: "Brahmins are fair, Kshatryas are reddish, Vaishyas are yellowish and the Shudras are black. This racial division violates Article 02 of the UDHR. The Hindu tradition has been following a peculiar approach as regards religious freedom. While all other above mentioned rights were denied to the individual explicitly, the right to religious freedom was granted implicitly. Hinduism does not believe in monotheism. It is often described as a way of life allowing enough flexibility in the forms of worship and gods, the fundamental goal of Hindus being salvation (moksha) or liberation from the cycle of existence.[9,10]

The basic tenets of Buddhism are non-violence (ahimsa), non-hatred (tolerance), service, compassion, friendliness to all and personal morality. Buddha rejected the unequal caste structure. Arising out of its stern and unwavering ethical code, Buddhism emphasized the unqualified supremacy of moral law over politics. Law should be for the welfare of all humankind and not merely for the welfare of a powerful elite. Further, as said earlier, the Buddhist theory emphasized the quasi-contractual nature of the beginnings of government and on the sovereignty of the people which is more or less similar to Article 21 of UDHR. Such a republican background naturally contained an individualistic tradition within it with a strong support for the kind of social and moral attitudes implicit in human rights. Even though it had to contend with the trappings of a caste society, the rights of the individual were given due stress.

Apart from a strong emphasis on the broad concept of equality of all human beings, many provisions in the Buddhist tradition are akin to some of the rights found in the UDHR. For instance, the Buddhist tradition regarding education was in striking contrast with that of the Hindu tradition. The Buddhist monasteries were open to persons of any caste. Still more important was the fact that the syllabus had a wider range and contained disciplines of practical interest unlike the Hindu syllabus which was mainly aimed at training the brahmins in the elite language of Sanskrit. As a result, the introduction and spread of secular education for all became one of the most significant contributions of Buddhism. Various organized universities were established under the direct impact of Buddhism.[11,12]

In medieval India there were many folk religions/sects subscribing to the heterodox

opinion which challenged brahminical orthodoxy. Most of these movements operated at the regional/local levels, though the influence of their teachings did spread to various other parts of India. The most prominent and well known among them is the Bhakti movement. Bhakti, the path of devotion, implies a belief in the supreme person not in supreme abstraction. Hence it is a very simple and straight forward philosophy or belief. The propounders of Bhakti emphasized the devotion to a personal God as a means of attaining salvation (moksha) as opposed to the pathways of action (karma) or knowledge (gyan).

The common feature of all these preachers, from the perspective of human rights, is that all of them challenged the unequal caste system and racial division and segregation. They spoke and wrote in Hindi and not in Sanskrit which was the special preserve and prerogative of the upper castes. They gave the utmost importance to human equality and freedom, communal harmony (especially Kabir) and universal tolerance. Further, they struck at the very roots of Brahminical orthodoxy by rejecting superstition and ritualism.

RESULTS

Sufism came to India in the medieval times. The first Sufi teacher, Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti, came to India in 1193. The early Sufis took their ideas from the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet. But they gave a mystic representation to the verses of Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet.

Like the Bhakti saint-poets, the sufis too rejected the artificial division of society into various strata based on caste and other considerations. Muhiyudin Ibn Arabi, the great Sufi Saint, founded the doctrine of Wahdat al-wujud, oneness of being. This doctrine carried many far-reaching implications. It considered all human beings, and in fact, all created beings, as manifestations of God. Ibn Arabi used to say: "My heart is a mosque, a Church, a synagogue and a temple".[13]

The Sufis also practiced full equality between the sexes. Among the women saints, the universally revered Rabi'a al-Adawiyya was a Sufi par excellence. It is said that the Sufis value women as much as they do men because they believe in nothing less than the unity of God. "In this unity", Fariduddin Attar asks: "What remains of the existence of "I" or "thou"? So how can "man" or "woman" continue to be?"

The Baul movement, which traces its origin to the fall of Buddhism and Vaishnavism, is mainly confined to Bengal. The Baul philosophy

emphasizes the simple human being's search for God. Literally Baul means Vayu or wind. The followers are called so because they are like free birds moving anywhere and in any direction they like, without being tied to any religious tradition. They reject the caste division. Neither do they worship any particular deity nor do they believe in going to a temple or mosque. They sing, "what need have we of other temples when our body is the temple where our spirit has its abode?" They believe in an absolute normal worldly life.

Viewed in its totality, the Baul philosophy also comes close to the broad ideas of the UDHR -- equality and freedom. Its rejection of the caste-based stratification presupposes its rejection of the principle of discrimination on the basis of one's social origin, caste, colour or creed. Its non-adherence to any particular religion respects one's right to religious freedom. One can extend this logic a little further to discover a secular dimension of the Baul ethos. By leaving religion to the absolute free choice of an individual it seeks to keep it as a private matter indeed.[14]

Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak who was a brilliant product of the Bhakti movement in northern India. Kabir's teachings had a deep impact on Nanak as also the Islamic and Sufi ideas. Like Kabir, Nanak found a common link between Hinduism and Islam. The term "Sikh" has been derived from the Sanskrit word "Sishya", meaning disciple. Sikhism is also a religion of the common person. It is known for its simplicity. Nanak conceived of God as formless Nirakara and rejected idol worship and superstitious beliefs. Nanak wanted to found a new religion which could combine the teachings of Hinduism and Islam.

From the perspective of human rights, what is important is the fact that Nanak spoke of, and believed in, the equality of all human beings and rejected discrimination or distinction on any ground -- religion, social standing, colour or even sex. He was the harbinger of Hindu-Muslim unity. He initiated the tradition of community kitchen or Guru ka langar to highlight the egalitarian philosophy of Sikhism.

Islam is not of Indian origin. It was first brought to India by the Arab traders on the west coast, but later it spread to other areas with the conquest of the north west. The Muslim conquest of India and the advent of Islam had a deep impact on the religions and culture of India. So much so that despite being of foreign origin, Islam has become the second most important religion today.

Islam believed in the most important of all the rights of each human being -- the right to equality, irrespective of caste, creed, colour, race or descent. The Prophet himself made an important declaration regarding the equality of humankind, more than thirteen hundred years ago. While delivering his "Farewell Sermon" to a large gathering at Mecca in 632 AD, i.e. a few months before his death, he said: "O mankind, the Arab is not superior to non-Arab, nor vice-versa; the white has no superiority over the black nor vice-versa; and the rich has no superiority over the poor. All of you are Adam's descendants and Adam was made of earth."

Islam also respected an individual's right to religious freedom (Article 18).

At the day-to-day existential level, the provision of Ramzan fast provides a good example of ensuring the protection of many rights, though by implication, contained in the UDHR. The Ramzan fast, which the Qur'an makes mandatory for all devout Muslims, is basically a "lesson in self-restraint". It awakens "the sense of humanity in all humans". It teaches the individual to master the art of self-discipline and cultivate greater human virtues like compassion, serenity, mercy, equanimity. In a word, it provides a course of training that would enable a devout Muslim to "lead a righteous life".

Christianity is believed to have arrived in India during the first century after the birth of Christ. There is a tradition which believes that Thomas, one of Christ's Apostles, reached India in 52 AD. Like Islam, the advent of Christianity also had a deep influence on the Indian social life due to its emphasis on and belief in the equality of all human beings, tolerance, love, and brotherhood. It even teaches: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despise you and persecute you ."[15]

Such laudable prescriptions provide no room for the infringement of an individual's right to life, right to profession, right to follow a particular religious faith, right to be treated equally before law without any discrimination, right to marry and found family, as also other rights. It also cannot tolerate slavery (Article 4) and cruel or inhuman punishment to anyone (Article 5).

With the advent of western liberal ideas in the nineteenth century, there followed a spate of reformist movements in India aimed at renovating and rationalizing the unequal Indian social order. Of particular importance, from the UDHR perspective, are the Brahmo Samaj movement of Raja Rammohan Roy, the Hindu spiritual

movement of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and his illustrious disciple, Swami Vivekananda, the Prarthana Samaj of Mahadev Govinda Ranade and the Arya Samaj of Swami Dayanan Saraswati.

The basic approach of all these movements was the attack on religious orthodoxy and emphasis on progressive values. They began to advocate radical social reforms which challenged the prevailing social practices. Rammohan Roy denounced the evil practice of "Sati" (Article 16). Keshabchandra Sen, his follower, advocated more radical social changes. He denounced child marriage and polygamy, and championed the emancipation of women and advocated widow remarriage. These ideas correspond to Articles 16, 3, 4, 5 and 25 of the UDHR.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa was a great champion of religious freedom or the right to freedom of thought, conscience and belief (Article 18). To drive home this point, he even practiced other forms of religious belief such as Islam and Christianity. Swami Vivekananda sought to interpret the Hindu spiritual concepts in the light of modern rationality and progressivism.

CONCLUSIONS

The duty-first value system is an important positive aspect of Indian culture which needs to be highlighted. This implies that in this modern age of representative government and Rule of Law, the government and its agencies should perform their duties well and faithfully so that the citizens can enjoy their rights. The example of the duties of the King in the ancient period should be cited to highlight the responsibilities of the institutions and individuals which have been entrusted with the task of governing. Another aspect of the earlier monarchical phase and the caste system was that the non-performance of dharma was accompanied by danda (punishment). In today's context it is the courts which act as watchdog and compel the other agencies -- the executive and the legislature -- to do their duties.

The heterodox tradition which challenged the Hindu vision of social order has always highlighted the equality of human beings and other values such as compassion, non-violence, tolerance, human dignity, etc. The young Indians must be reminded over and over again about what Rabindernath Tagore said: "The Sakas, the Huns, the Pathans and the Mughals all have merged into one body."

In today's India, which remains divided over religious and communal differences, a fundamental

duty of the human rights movement (this should include both the non-governmental and governmental agencies) is to enter into a dialogue with various faith and sectarian movements. A continuous interaction and exchange of ideas between the two would go a long way in dispelling many of the misgivings which ultimately result in violent and abnormal human behaviors. No religion talks about intolerance and violence. The main emphasis of all religions is on the broader and brighter sides of human life like tolerance, co-existence, brotherhood and fellow feeling, etc. These values need to be collectively highlighted and inculcated.

At the negative level, attention should be on three areas: the place and position of women as conceived in India's culture; the caste ideology and untouchability; and the evils of poverty, ignorance and illiteracy.

A culture of human rights cannot flourish in an unilateral way. One cannot have just rights and no duties and responsibilities towards society. Similarly one should not be expected to go on shouldering only the responsibilities of the burdens of society.[16]

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