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The Humanist View of Man

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The word 'humanism' has come to mean several things in the history of thought. But today as a philosophy it means 'any system of thought or action which assigns a predominant interest to the affairs of men as compared with the supernatural or the abstract.'¹ But this particular meaning of humanism has come to us through a long historical process. To help us to put our thinking in the right perspective, I shall briefly trace the origin and growth of humanism.

Humanism started as a literary movement in Italy in the fourteenth century, as a revival of interest in Greek and Latin classics. This renewed interest in classics led to the discovery of various MSS and the admiration and imitation of the life portrayed in the classics. The human element in these classics was discovered and a spirit of freedom and independence sprang out of it. This meant a revolt against the authority of the Church and a cry for freedom of thought. So eventually the literary movement became a social one which in its turn paved the way for a philosophical movement in which man was the centre and measure of all things. The famous maxim of Protagoras summarises the basic thought of humanism: 'Man is the measure of all things, of those that are that they are and of those that are not that they are not.'²

As far as India is concerned, Buddhism can be seen as a humanist movement. One could see in Buddhism a shift from a preoccupation with religion, doctrine and rituals to a concern for human problems such as suffering and death. But the humanist emphasis of Buddhism did not make such an impact on Indian thought as it could have. It was through western oriented education that the educated in India came into contact with humanism. The humanistic trends in the thought of Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, M. N. Roy and others bear witness to this fact. In Tamilnadu, the humanistic approach seems to have come along with a fresh interest in Tamil literature and language. The Dravida Kazhagam and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam have both shown a great interest in the renaissance of Tamil literature along with their humanistic concerns.

There are several types of humanism too. Humanism first sprang up in a religious context. So religious humanism is one type. This means a humanism which, accepting a particular religious, doctrinal

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¹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (fourteenth edition), Vol. XI, p. 876.

² As quoted by W. P. Haas in the article on secular humanism in *The New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Vol. VIII, p. 226.

framework, seeks to emphasise the role and centrality of man. Erasmus and the reformers were humanists of this type. In our century Jacques Maritain presents us with an 'integral humanism' which operates within the framework of Christianity. In one way we can say that most of twentieth century Christian theology has been humanistic in its approach.

Humanism's inbuilt reaction against ecclesiastical authority has given it another face too, namely secular humanism. Secular humanism is one which exalts man at the expense of religion. As Haas puts it, it is 'any philosophical, political or cultural affirmation of man as the principal object of concern, to the exclusion of all religion or theological theses about his origin and destiny.'³ Scientific humanism, which takes scientific truth as its epistemological basis and rejects anything transcendental, belongs here. The extreme position in humanism would be atheistic humanism which explicitly denies the existence of God. The thought of Karl Marx can be termed as atheistic humanism.

In India today, we can see three trends in humanistic thinking.

1. *Religious humanism*: Mahatma Gandhi epitomizes this humanism. Gandhi's humanism is based on religion but oriented towards the secular. His theology is the basis for his interest in man. People mattered to him and hence his movement and struggle for freedom was a people's movement. He could organise the masses and make them realize their power. Religion gave him the basis and tool for his concern for and communication to and conscientization of the people.

2. *Secular humanism*: The founding fathers of our nation and the early leaders of independent India were secular humanists. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru is a supreme example of this. For him man was important and he was a thoroughgoing secular person. India as a secular state was one of his great visions. The Constitution of India is a document which clearly reflects the secular humanism that is prevalent among the élite of our country. One could trace this back to the writings of Thomas Jefferson, the American President who drafted the Declaration of Independence in 1776. In this sort of humanism, there is a strong sense of optimism about man. Man can make history. Through his political and economic activity, he could better his life on this earth. There is no need to appeal to any transcendental power or external force to help in the ordering of society. The individual's religious affections are accepted and hence the Constitution guarantees religious freedom. As far as socio-political life is concerned, religion is bypassed. Democracy and the philosophy behind it come to take the place of religion. Man as free and man as equal are the two great pillars of this philosophy. Our Constitution has this sort of secular humanism as its basis. But the humanism that is imbedded here, though secular, has its roots in religion, with special reference to Christianity and western Christian culture.

3. *Atheistic humanism*: The humanism of Marx is an atheistic humanism which is interested in man solely in relation to society and history. Marx's thought is very much in the air in India and it has its

³ *Ibid.*

own impact and influence on the Indian understanding of man. Since we heard a separate paper on the Marxist view of man we do not go into details here.

There are two other personalities on the Indian scene who have put forward an atheistic humanism. They are M. N. Roy and E. V. Ramasamy Naicker (Periyar). We shall look at their thought in detail.

(a) M. N. Roy

M. N. Roy was 'a full-blooded materialist. He maintained that life came out of inanimate matter and man is the highest product of the process of organic evolution.'⁴ For him two things mattered most—the rationality of man and the urge for freedom. Both freedom and rationality are from the physical aspect of man. Roy could trace every aspect of man's being to the biological make-up of man, thus denying any room for the transcendental aspect or idea of God. The God-hypothesis meant a curtailment of human freedom for M. N. Roy. This freedom is not an instrumental value. It is not just a means to achieve something but it is an end in itself.⁵

While discussing ethics, Roy sees rationality as the secure foundation of morality. He himself says, 'To be moral, one needs only to be human; it is not necessary to go in search of divine or mystic-metaphysical sanction. Humanist morality is evolutionary.'⁶ Thus Roy explains all the dimensions of human life in terms of biological being.

One may question how Roy could take a narrow and limited view of human personality. How would he explain the non-rational elements of man's life? In his understanding of morality, he is too optimistic about man and forgets the darker side of man. The problem is that man chooses to be selfish and irrational. How shall we explain that?

(b) E. V. Ramasamy Naicker

E. V. R., the founder of Dravida Kazhagam, started his career as the leader of those who felt the need for freedom from brahmin domination in society and politics. His movement had four fronts: (i) Political—to achieve a casteless society, the brahmins need to be gotten rid of. This is possible if the Dravidians realize their self-identity, (ii) Cultural—renaissance of Tamil and Tamil culture; (iii) Economic—economic progress is intimately related to anti-brahmin activities; (iv) Religious—brahmin domination is possible because of Hindu superstitions and religious beliefs. To eradicate that, atheism based on reason is advocated.

E. V. R. took reason as the sole guide and therefore argued that all of life's concerns should be severely limited to the tangible world in which man was the ultimate criterion of values. Man, the agent of reason, is the

⁴ G. P. Bhattacharjee, *The Evolution of the Political Philosophy of M. N. Roy*, p. 104.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁶ As quoted by G. P. Bhattacharjee, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

centre of the universe and all life. It is this kind of humanism that is the foundation of E. V. R.'s programme of reform and revolt. Moreover the nineteenth century rationalism of the West is the backbone of E. V. R.'s arguments and thinking. This sort of naive rationalism is out of date and superceded by a much more realistic and comprehensive understanding of man.

We have in this paper only attempted a bare outline of the humanistic thinking in India. There are several points of contact for us beginning with the common concern for man. The transcendental aspect of life is the point at which we depart and here again there is room for dialogue.