

Re conceptualizing Humanism from the Eastern Philosophical Traditions

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Abstract

The concept of 'humanism' is intrinsically connected with the idea of liberation or freedom. By projecting 'man' as the centre of reason and rule, this philosophical concept has created a space for men to evolve and evade. As the great English poet Shelly once said "We all are Greeks", more mature growth of humanism in its modern version has been under the influence of Greek philosophy. But prior to the thoughts of the enlightened minds in Greece, sages in the East used to philosophize existence through their words which transcends time and ages. For instance, in India, hermits once used to chant the most charismatic and secular mantras of all time, *Pavamana Mantra* from *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣhad* is one such classic example of this :

*asatomā sad gamaya,
tamasomājyotirgamaya
mr̥tyormāmṛtaṁgamaya*

And these words define the glorious philosophical tradition and perception of the East on humanity but in course of the time, the essence of these words just vanished in the air. Unfortunately, the invisible influence of deities and religious dogmas have always made the life of men in the East more complex and complicated. Fortunately, in the West, the rebirth of classical literature during the Renaissance nurtured an old model of Hellenistic analysis of life, which accelerated the development of humanism. At the same time, humanism in the East was deteriorating due to certain religious and cultural principles and practices, though ancient history was completely different.

Therefore, the first part of this paper primarily argues that the concept of 'humanism' in its most matured and refined form can be traced back to Eastern philosophical traditions in accordance with its gradual rise from Eastern religions and cultures. And this paper also elucidates why the East later failed to promote the growth of this great concept though it remained as the cradle of secular thoughts and religions.

Key Words : *Humanism, West, East, Religion, Culture, Greek, Philosophy, India, Bhagavad Gita, Holy Bible.*

Introduction

"The transition to the modern world was marked by the recovery of the ancient" (Radhakrishnan 1974: 19) is an observation made by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, in his influential work 'Western Thoughts and Eastern Religion'. Humanism is a relatively modern philosophical idea carved out of ancient Greek wisdom. The idea of ignorance and the

scope for correction in Hellenistic philosophy could provide a secular and liberal analysis of the history of humankind. By projecting 'man' as the centre of reason and rule, this philosophical idea has created a space for men to evolve and evade. Though this is a modern perception of humanism, it shows some similarities with the Eastern religious and philosophical traditions which are much older and more secular than Western traditions. For instance, *Bhagavad Gita* says, '*Atmai vasya jyotir bhavati*' (Bhagavad Gita 13:18) which means 'the self serves as his light'. The whole purpose of humanism was the complete material and intellectual progress of individuals and that is why it is being theorized in terms of the material and spiritual entities. The idea of a 'self' or individual portrayed in the sacred texts of the East is more liberal and secular than the definition given by the West. In his analysis of the concept of 'human dignity' in Confucian philosophy, Quianfan Zhang quotes the great Confucian authority, Xunzi whose argument reinforces the secular nature of man in the universe when he says, "Water and fire have essences but not life; herbs and trees have life, but no knowledge; birds and beasts know, but no sense of justice. Humans have an essence, life, knowledge, and, in addition, a sense of justice; thus, he is the noblest on earth." (Zhang 2016: 23). The nature of this short and precise comparative argument itself renders a progressive and democratic perspective of mankind in the East. Once, ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras proclaimed that "Man is the measure of all things", I do not deny the fact that these words uphold the motto of ultimate freedom and authority of humankind. Still, there is also an element of a mild dominating voice that diminishes the value of other creatures in the universe. It is in this context, the concept of 'self' in *Bhagavad Gita* which is depicted as 'light', and the Confucian notion of man as the 'noblest form' on earth emerge as a more mature thought than the intimidating Western image of self.

Tracing the essence of Humanism in the Eastern sacred texts

The role of man as the noblest creature and a rational being in the universe is not to exploit his fellow beings but to emancipate them from all the adversities in the world. Hence, humanism has been having certain incarnations in different periods of history as Romantic Humanism, Renaissance Humanism, Radical Humanism, Marxist Humanism, Liberal Humanism, etc. All these forms of humanistic definitions formed were based on certain social, economic, political, and cultural changes. Dynamic scientific inventions and the birth of revolutionary thoughts soon after the Renaissance in Europe have made both positive and negative impacts on Western society. Therefore, to reinforce the faith in humanity few philosophers who have quickly adapted to modern material changes came up with their ideas to make others also compromise with the transformations in the name of 'progress'. Philosophical ideas related to humanism in Europe were not sufficient to convince the people about the changes in the history of mankind and that is why humanism was forced to have such periodical incarnations. Whereas in the East, though the material progress was minimal the intellectual tradition was rich enough to guide humanity for the next hundred million years. And *Pavamana Mantra* from *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* (1.3.28) is a classic example of this and the mantra chants :

asatomā sad gamaya, (Lead me from unreality to reality)
tamasomājyotirgamaya, (Lead me from darkness to light)
mṛtyormāmṛtaṁgamaya. (Lead me from death to immortality)

This charismatic mantra was once chanted by the Hermits in India not as a prayer of the Hindu religion but as a prayer of Humanity. The core message of this mantra defines how secular the Eastern tradition was and these words are much more profound and prophetic than the philosophical tradition of the West. Again, *Yajur Veda* upholds the perceptions of this great tradition when it teaches that :

“Oh lord we invoke you for (purification of) heart; we invoke you for the mind. We invoke you for heaven. We invoke you for the sun. May you place our sacrifice above in heaven among the enlightened ones” (*Yajur Veda* 37.19)

These words have emerged from the enlightened souls of an archaic age, who were limited by the physical world but liberated as universal beings. The greatness of these words can only be understood when it has some resonance beyond the borders of time and space. The modern philosophers who have made a great impact all over the world were in one way or the other might have influenced by the teachings of the East. According to the Bhagavad- Gita, *Athman* is equal to *Bhraman*, and again in chapter 13 on ‘Nature’, *Gita* says “The Super-soul is the source of all senses, yet He is without senses. He is unattached, although He is the maintainer of all living beings. He transcends the modes of nature, and at the same time He is the master of all modes of material nature”. These words from the ancient scripture display some similarities with Nietzsche’s idea of ‘Superhuman’, the aim behind the inception of his revolutionary concept was to challenge mankind to overcome the barriers of caste, creed, race, and religion to attain the supreme goal, ‘moksha’ or ‘liberation’ by proclaiming the ‘truth’ without any fear. In the Eastern tradition long before the birth of ‘Superhuman’, Swami Vivekanand’s prophetic words simplified this whole idea in one simple sentence when he observed that the whole secret of existence is to have no fear. The sacred teachings from the East purified the soul, minds, and bodies of men from all over the world. Krishna’s advice, Buddha’s enlightened words, and Confucius’ thoughtful conversations created a new form of social and religious order in the world. What makes these religious teachings so unique is that all of them placed ‘man’ as the crux of their teachings and that god was only a facilitator to attain ‘salvation’.

Confucius observes that life is really simple, but we insist on making it complicated, the thoughts on life in all these religious teachings were very simple and direct but the hands of men made it more complicated. History reveals that in India, before the arrival of *Manusmriti* the Hindu tradition enjoyed unlimited privileges both in public and private life but the new form of rules and regulations introduced by Manu made things more complex and confined. The inception of these new laws reinforced the distinction between right and wrong in everything and that is how the caste system was idealized and became the foundation of Hindu religious life.

Secular Greeks and sentimental men of the East

The revival of Greek literary and philosophical tradition in the West began during the time of the Renaissance and Enlightenment. One of the reasons behind this sudden rebirth was the excessive influence of Christianity in Europe, and its obsession with the ideas of ‘sin and body’. Holy Bible says that all men are born with ‘original sin’ and that means by birth a man becomes a sinner. Greek philosophical tradition denied this idea of ‘sin’ and embraced the idea of ‘mistakes’. The replacement of ‘mistakes and the rejection of ‘sin’ was much more acceptable and convincing than the medieval Christian theologies. Inspired

by this rich archaic tradition the philosophers of the Renaissance and Enlightenment laid the foundation for a secular and progressive Europe. In a letter to his friend Karl Marx observes that “his sense of freedom must be awakened in the breast of people. This sense vanished from the world with the Greeks, and with Christianity, it took up residence in the blue mists of heaven”. (Davies 2008: 11)

Fortunately, in the West, the rebirth of classical Greek literature and philosophy nurtured an old model of Hellenistic analysis of life which promoted ‘man’ as the centre and its ultimate benefit resulted in the formation of this new concept called ‘Humanism’. When the West was creating milestones by reviving the ancient wisdom of Greece, the condition in the East was deteriorating due to the excessive influence of religion. Social and cultural spaces in the East began to get influenced by the new forms of rules and regulations introduced by different religious texts. The history of legendary rulers like Mahavira, Budha, and Chandragupta Maurya began to fade from the collective consciousness of Indians as a result of the fight for religious predominance. Gradually, the humanitarian face of Eastern religious texts was erased by individual interpretations. The quest for religious power and dominance in the East was much more severe than in the West as it was considered to be the cradle of the world’s most popular religions. This race for power and prestige wiped out the humanitarian values preached by enlightened souls and ancient sacred texts. And the vested interest of rulers also resulted in the formation of completely fragmented societies in the East. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan argues that “What East has gained in insight seems to have lost in power” (Radhakrishnan 1974: 258). When the West created a ‘rebirth’ by bringing back the Greek classic works, the East was completely focused on the expansion of divided princely states, though the ancient and medieval Eastern tradition gave birth to some of the greatest sages in the world.

Conclusion

The role of language in Europe was pivotal in the spread of the idea of humanism. ‘Renaissance Latin’ was the name given to a special form of the simplified Latin language that was used to translate Greek literary works during the time of the Renaissance. This simplified version of Latin made ancient Hellenistic ideas more popular and accessible to mainstream societies in Europe. At that time, the situation in the East, especially in India was not that much different from the West. Sanskrit as a source of ancient sacred texts was accessible only to a privileged section of people and the intricacies of the caste system became a hurdle in the popularization of this language. So, the wisdom of the *Gita* and the *Upanishads* were very much detached from the common people in India. This difficult situation restricted the growth of secular and liberal philosophies which are expressed in those sacred texts.

Finally, a quote from Swami Vivekananda will elucidate the core substance of the concluding part of this article, he says that “Who will give the world light? Sacrifice in the past has been the Law; it will be, alas, for ages to come. The earth’s bravest and best will have to sacrifice themselves for the good of many, for the welfare of all” (Swami Vivekananda 1981: 70). The history of the East has witnessed the sacrifice of many enlightened souls but all those sacrifices were under the banner of religion except a few. But the history of humanism in the West is highly influenced by the sacrifice of two noble souls, the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates and the medieval scientist Galileo.

Socrates embraced the death sentence given by the law and order in a 'democracy' and Galileo accepted the death pronounced by the law and order of the 'Catholic Church'. These two incidents in European history have made a tremendous impact on later generations. Socrates 'inner voice' and Galileo's 'rational mind' helped to frame the outlook of a modern European society based on truth and reason. The lack of such inspiring sacrifices in the name of convictions or beliefs from the East has resulted in the gradual decline of humanist ideas.

Hence, the time has come for introspection and immediate action to bring back the glorious tradition of the East. This Twenty-first century demands nothing but only one thing and that is 'Humanity'. The fall of mankind in the form of genocides, famine, civil war, communal violence, terrorism, etc. can only be redeemed by propagating the value of the concept of 'Humanism'. We inherit a tradition of infinite knowledge and possibilities and that is why T.S. Eliot concluded one of the monumental works in the history of English literature by borrowing the conclusion from the Upanishad, '*Shantih Shantih Shantih*' (Eliot 1922: 22). We inherit the great tradition of peace and harmony in which our ancestors once used to chant the secret mantra of survival from the *Maha Upanishad*, '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' which means 'the world is one family'. Therefore, the moment is now to act by redefining the concept of humanism with the lantern of hope and promise from the sacred texts and traditions. Hence, let us redeem our life, or else we perish.

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