

The Concept of 'Man' In Indian Tradition: An Overview

Dr. Basant Kumar Das

Asso. Prof.(Retd), RDWU, BBSR

Abstract

In the present day globalized world, man has achieved success in every sphere of life by the advancement of science and technology, as a result of which, the richness of all luxuries and comforts are available in his living room. With all richness and luxuries he has become bankrupt both in his moral and spiritual pursuits. As a result, his life has turned into an automata, machine or robot, bereft of emotions and passion and values. The universal human values like love, fellow feeling, compassion, sharing and caring have become outmoded. So we witness the strike and strive everywhere in the globe. The present day youths have become slaves of hedonistic pleasure and egoistic happiness. It will not be out of context to describe an incident that, once Baya Baba was asked by his disciple about the nature of loka(man). He immediately replied: where is loka? I see everywhere only poka. At this juncture of time it has become the pressing need to analyze and assess the true nature of man in the perspectives of our tradition, which may pave the way to realize the goal of life

There exists a difference in Eastern and Western perspectives of man. In Western tradition man is accepted as a body mind complex. But in our Indian tradition the concept of man extends beyond a mere biological definition. In reality man is more than that which he appears to be. He is not a mere conglomeration of atoms. He is not just a compound of flesh and bones, blood and skin, brain and impulses, nor is he merely the sum of these. He is something over and above the sum of his physical and mental parts. He is essentially a spiritual being, a lordly tenant in a transitory tenement. It encompasses the idea of a spiritual being called Atman, on a journey of Self-discovery and vision with the divine i.e. Brahman. This journey involves the cyclical process of birth, death and rebirth with ultimate goal of liberation or Moksha from this cycle. Man is seen as an integral part of the universe, interconnected with the nature and passing the potential for diversity. Kath Upanishad has rightly observes: know the atman as the Lord of the body, the body as the chariot, know the intellect as the driver and mind as the reins and the senses are the horses and sense-objects are the paths upon which they may travel.⁽¹⁾

In this paper I intent to address myself to the concept of man as discussed in Indian tradition with special reference to the Gita. I will discuss the nature of man starting from the Upanisadic view to the neo-

Vedantic period covering the Puranic and the Gita's view. Finally I would establish in the conclusion that man is spiritual in his true nature. But his physical nature cannot be ignored. So what is needed is that, man has to realized in his true nature, so that all differences will melt away, all ignorance will be dissolved and he will be established in the reality i.e. Brahman and be regarded as stitaprajna by realizing his self in others and others in his own self.

Keywords: Saksin, Summum bonam, Selfrealization, Nishkamakarma, Perfection, Lokasangraha, Yoga

In Indian tradition starting from Veda, Vedanta and the Gita to the present day neo-Vedantism, we find a clarion call of our saints and seers to the common man for self-awakening, for the cultivation of values both in individual and social spheres, for the attainment of the Summum Bonum of life i.e. Moksha. Morality is a living force. Moral principles are regulative in nature. They guide man along the path of righteousness for attainment of cosmic stance. Progress is the movement towards the goal and movement away from the goal is called retardation. All discussions in our tradition about the individual or social progress presuppose goal awareness. Our tradition further takes care of the ideal and inspiration to the collective life of individuals.

The problem of morality is bound up with the problem of social good. So, ethics has to solve the conflicts between the rival demands of self and society, selfishness and altruism. Our tradition believes in trifarious existence of human being i.e. physical, psychic and spiritual. Due to ignorance human beings are confined to their physical and mental states. So, they always take care of the promotion of their physical and mental welfare with total disregard for spiritual upliftment. This is seer egoism which obviously degrades man into the state of intelligent savage. An ideal person is one who is physically strong, mentally sound and spiritually elevated. Human values are determined by an appeal to all-round wellbeing, keeping in view his tripartite nature. It is the basic universal values that impart meaning and significance to the social values & customary morality which are relative to time, place and person.

Philosophy in India has discovered behind the ego, the ceaseless flow of nature, the reality as the ultimate observer or witness, whom it called Saksin or Atman. This profound reality is lying hidden in every one of us. Realization of this truth is called spirituality. Swami Vivekananda, a great seer of the modern India says; spirituality is not the privilege of sages and ascetics in the monasteries and forests, but of one and all. It is the birth right of every human being. The Upanisads also proclaim that the man is endowed with the capacity to realize this truth. What is needed is to have faith in oneself to grow in spirituality. Human excellence is well explained in Swetasweta Upanisad thus:

Srunvantu sarve amrutasya putrah, aye dhamani vidyani tasthuh.

Vedahametam purusham mahantam, adityavarnam tamashah purastat.

Tameva viditva atimrityumeti, nanyah pantha vidyate 'ayanaya.'⁽²⁾

Here Me oh, children of immortality, even those who reside in the heavenly spheres! I have realized the infinite man (behind the finite man) luminous like the sun, beyond darkness. By realizing him, alone will transcend death and there is no other way to freedom and fulfilment. The same truth is also proclaimed by Katha Upanishad.

Esa sarvesu .bhuteshu, guddho atma na prakasate.

Drusyate tvagrupaya buddhya, suksmaya suksma darsibhih.'⁽³⁾

This (infinite and immortal) atman is present in all beings, but lying hidden and therefore is not manifest. But it can be realized by those who have a subtle and one-pointed reason which has been trained to perceive subtle and still more subtle truths.

The Upanisadic seers have realised the transcendental self or Atman which is the subject of all knowledge and experience which can never be known as an object. Being the eternal subject of all knowledge, the Atman can only be realised as saksi chaitanya svarupa or eternal witness of experience or as the unchangeable reality in the individual man. The nature of Atman as pure, free, immortal and infinite-self, is well explained in Chhandogya Upanisad through the story of Indra and Virochana. Both of them approached Prajapati to get proper instruction regarding the nature of Atman. In course of discussion Prajapati has made it clear that Atman the persisting spirit remains constant in all vicissitudes of waking, dreaming, deep –sleep, death, rebirth and deliverance. The first suggestion that the self is the body which we experience in waking state is material and subject to creation and destruction, is not accepted by Indra as the self. The second suggestion is that the self is 'the self who moves about happy in dreams'. Again Indra feels that the self is not the same as dream consciousness since it is not the composite of mental states, and dream states are not self-existent. Then Prajapati gives the third suggestion that the self is the consciousness in the deep sleep. Indra also finds problems in this suggestion as in the state of deep sleep there is consciousness neither of the self nor of the objective world. So the self is gone annihilated. But the self exists even in the deep sleep for which one is conscious of his deep sleep. Then Indra realised that the self is the active universal consciousness (turya) which is not to be confused with either bodily or the dreaming consciousness in deep sleep. The true self is the absolute self, which is neither purely subjective, nor purely objective and free from abstract metaphysical categories, is the authentic spiritual self. The self is that, which sees but not object seen. He is that by which the unhearable becomes heard, unperceivable becomes perceived, the unknowable becomes known.⁽⁴⁾

In the Bhagavad Gita the true self of man i.e. saksin is described as unborn immortal, and eternal. It is described in the Gita thus,

Upadrastanumanta ch bharta bhokta maheswarah.

Paramatmeti chapyukto dehesmin purusah Parah.⁽⁵⁾

He (saksin) who is the witness, the permitter, the sustainer, the experiencer, the Great Lord and who is also spoken of as the transcendental self is the supreme person in the body. So Lord Krishna advises Arjuna to transcend the dualities of experience like heat and cold, and to identify himself with the permanent unchanging being called Saksin. The realization of the divine spark in man is called the spiritual growth. This is a growth by which one sees the world and also one's own life, in new light and establishes healthy and happy types of inter-human relationship. With the onset of this growth, human interaction becomes completely transformed. Such transformation causes his expansion in understanding sympathy, love and service beyond his organic limitations. Such expansion of man is well explicated in the Gita.

Yo mam pashyanti sarvatra, sarvachmayipasyati,
Tasyaham na pranasyami, sa ch me na pranasyati⁽⁶⁾

One who sees me in everything and sees all things in me do not go out of his vision and he is also not lost to my vision says the Lord.

The same idea is also explicated in Isoponisd, thus,

Yastusarvani bhutani, atmanyevanupasyati,
Sarvam bhutesu ch atmanaam, tato na vijugupsate.⁽⁷⁾

One who sees his self in all beings and all beings in his self, for him, there is no hatred. From the above discussion it is found that in our Indian Philosophical tradition the value structure is irrected on the foundation of self- realization or spiritual growth. With this synthetic outlook, one can impart justice to others and causes the welfare of the society. Such a person is called dharmika or self-realized, possessing all qualities (sadgunas) essential for justice, which make one's life fruitful. In Mahabharata it is also stated that all the sadgunas (moral virtues) like forgiveness, steadiness, non-violence, equality, truth, non-miserliness, shame etc. are to be cultivated for the development of complete harmony between the individual and the society.⁽⁸⁾

The same sort of description of man is also found in our Odia Bhagavata thus:

Manava dehe divya jnana, dekhi santosha Bhagabana.

With the back drop of self-realization which constitutes the Gita's metaphysics, let me explain the ethics and morality, or the values, embedded in it. The Gita being an ethical text, opens with the perennial human problem, which Arjuna asks to the Lord Krishna, is how to order life and its activities, so that, it may yield its fruit in the shape of the knowledge of Truth. How to make work (action) conducive to individual and social welfare? Shri Krishna gives a solution to this problem which is at once original and unique in the history of thought. Moral evolution is to be measured not by outward transference to higher planes of existence, but by an

inward penetration by the reduction of the ego. Thus, the Gita teaches that karma-yoga helps to transfer guidance of life, from theology to ethics. Emphasizing on karma-yoga, Lord Krishna says to Arjuna, Oh! Partha, the wisdom has been imparted to you from the standpoint of self-realization. Now listen to this wisdom from the standpoint of 'yoga', endowed with which (wisdom), you will get rid of the bonds of action. In this yoga, there is no waste of an attempt nor is there any harm. Giving a little of this righteousness saves one from great fear. ⁽⁹⁾

The Gita attributes two-fold characteristics to saksi or True self i.e. (i) detachment and (ii) universality or its freedom from limited vision. The Gita says that Duty is the first stage of ethical discipline. To this end it gives a twofold advice. Firstly all work should be performed in the sense of duty. It means work by itself is not good or bad, but the preferences of the ego evaluate all work according to its whims. It is a stage where man seeks for a comfortable life. The sense of duty teaches us to disregard the false values which the ego has attached to work. This negation of ego and values is the transcendence of ego itself, which helps us to realize the second characteristic of the saksi i.e., getting universality of outlook or freedom from limited vision.

The second advice of the Gita is not to care for the fruits of our actions. Actions are to be performed being unattached to them, which is called *niskama karma*. This is to realize the first characteristic of the saksin namely detachment. The prescription of *nishkamakarma* does not mean that all desires are to be eliminated. Srikrishna says "*Dharma viruddho bhutesu kamosmi Bharatarsava*"⁽¹⁰⁾. In beings I am desire which is not contrary to righteousness (*dharma*) oh! Arjuna! Thus all desires for the good of an individual and the society is virtuous, if they don't conflict with the larger good of humanity. The only condemnation the Gita makes of those who work with various selfish motives is that they are men of small understanding. "*Krupanaphalahetbah*" Thus the Gita teaches that all can reach the highest goal of life, being attached to 'Yoga', which is defined by Sri Krishna as '*Yoga karmasu kousalam*'- yoga is efficiency, dexterity in action. Through this efficiency, man increases the material welfare and happiness of society outwardly and through practice of *niskama karma* he achieves his spiritual growth as well, inwardly.

The next stage in the spiritual journey says the Gita is the attainment of *sakshin* consciousness, rising above the stage of duty. Duty is the first stage where man learns to crucify his ego. This stage is characterized by ceaseless struggle and tension when one succeeds in shifting the center from the ego to the *sakshin*. But itself and the individual works from the highest standpoint as a free being, criticizing and evaluating at a higher stage, the concept of duty itself. Then he becomes an endowment of all spiritual values like love, sacrificing etc. Loving another because of the mandate of scripture or teacher is good, doing so as a result of a compelling prompting from within is better, but it is best when love becomes spontaneous expression of one's whole being. In the first and second cases there is a possibility of error and selfishness. But with the transcendence of the ego and

elimination of self-love, life and love assume an eternal and pure aspect. Life becomes natural and love becomes spontaneous. Such a man can no more stop loving than a rose can stop sending out its sweet fragrance. ⁽¹¹⁾

When one attains the sakshin-consciousness he finds life in an entirely new perspective. All the false values which the ego has attached to life and its functions get destroyed. Such a life is the epitome of ethical perfection. He leaves behind him all the struggles and joys, hates and competitions, sorrows and sufferings of life. He is the man who has harmonized his life by synthesizing the values in his life and in the society. He lives in the abode of divinity with divine qualities like fearlessness, charitability, non-violence, absence of anger, renunciation, kindness and forgiveness etc. ⁽¹²⁾ He lives in love and whatever comes to his lips is love. All his thoughts make for the good of the world and all his actions seek the welfare of mankind as a whole. They are ever interested in the good of all beings. (sarvabhutahiteratah) ⁽¹³⁾. Their actions and thoughts always have only one direction i.e. the welfare of the mankind. (lokasangrahartham) ⁽¹⁴⁾

In the context, it is appropriate to quote the last verse of the Gita, which proclaims that, the happiness and the welfare of man individually and collectively, (individual and social welfare) will result, when the message of the Gita is properly understood and practiced.

Yatrayogesvarah Krishna yatraParthadhanurdharah,
Tatrasrihvijayorbhutih dhruvahnitihmatirmama. ⁽¹⁵⁾

Wherever there Srikrishna the master of yoga and Arjuna the hero of action, vision and implementation are combined together in one character or in one society, there (in that individual or society) will be found wealth and welfare, victory, general prosperity unwavering justice and righteousness.

Coming to the Neo-Vedantic period, we also find the same sort of notion of man as envisaged by our tradition. For example, Swami Vivekananda talks about the finite and infinite man i.e. man is both physical and spiritual in nature. Other contemporary thinkers like Dr, S. Radhakrishnan, Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo and the like accept the same notion of man. The poet philosopher Rabindranath Tagore while explaining the nature of man says: "Man is earth's child and heaven's heir". All of them agree that the true nature of man is spiritual. But it does mean that the physical or finite aspect is insignificant, i.e. man is both physical and spiritual.

Thus in Indian tradition human being is interconnected with the whole universe, having two aspects physical and spiritual with the objective to achieve the four purusarthas to awaken and enlighten the consciousness by which he attains absolute freedom. So he occupies an integral part of the nature and has to maintain harmony with nature. At the same time as a physical being he has to maintain family as a crucial social unit for transmitting cultural values. As human being, we must exercise our humanness that is human values and empathies with all i.e. not only to the living beings but to the entire flora and fauna. As spiritual beings, we

have to extend our services to others with the realisation of oneness i.e. the common root is one. The Upanisadic concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam-the world is one family – is not utopian. The thread and spirit of humanity and empathy run through all souls and beings. Swami Vivekananda has rightly observed that extension is life and contraction is death. Love is a powerful force which connects all of us in spite of all differential backgrounds like creed, colour, sex, age, culture etc. to which we belong to. It is the powerful means which transcends boundaries and reminds us of our shared humanity, making it the most precious and enduring aspect of human experience. Sri Satya Sai baba has rightly observed that love all and serve all. That is the only way of realising the true nature of man. Our dharma would be, live and let others live with the practice of all human values. We cannot forget the humanistic outlook of the great poet- philosopher Bhima Bhoi, who says,

“Praninka arata dukha apramita, dekhu dekhu keba sahu
Mo jibana pache narke padithau jagata udhara heu”

References

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