

# Evolution of Humanism and the Indian Writings

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The concept of “Humanism” has its association with the 5th and the 6th century Greek cultural manifestations. The classical Greek art and culture, through its drama was instrumental in the formulation of the modern day humanism. Greek culture focused on humanity while celebrating the human body and investigating the human condition, created the first democracies in the World. Pre-Socratic philosopher Protagoras gave the view that “Man is the measure of all things” (Matt Cherry, 2009, 31). In the 3rd century BCE, Epicurus phrased of the problem of evil and highlighted the human centered approaches in education. He was the first to give entry to women in his school and advocated equality.

The term Humanism, coined in 1808 is based on the fifteenth century Italian term “humanista”, originally used for a teacher. It preaches a way of life centered on human values.

It rejects supernaturalism and emphasizes on human

dignity and its worth. It also preaches self realization through reasoning. Historically it can also be associated with the Italian Renaissance. It can also be understood as an approach to education using literary means to enlighten students on a variety of perspectives in Philosophy and Social Science affirming the notion of human value, resting on reason, justice, morality and ethics; at the same time rejecting supernatural and the religious dogmas.

Humanism, as a phenomenon cannot be restrained to have originated in the west. There are countries all over the world exhibiting a rich legacy of humanistic and naturalistic philosophy. The Lokayata movement that persisted in India around 1000 BCE advocated a naturalistic philosophy of the cosmos. "Lokayata" means philosophy of the people. It was considered as one of the most radical reactions against supernaturalism and the existence of the other sub human beings. It can be considered as a primary treatise on the philosophy of materialism that inspired the materialistic pursuit of pleasure and existence of a human being. Four hundred years later, in the sixth century BCE, the Charvaka school of thought laid emphasis on the significance of human than the Gods. It also preached that here is no immortal soul, stressed upon the worthlessness of priests, and the importance of pleasure in life. Under its naturalistic view of the cosmos, it promoted a moral Philosophy based on the well being of human.

Renaissance Humanism, an intellectual movement in Europe emerged in the later middle ages and the early modern period. It aimed at revival of the Latin and Greek

culture, and its interpretations of Roman and Greek texts, altered the whole socio-cultural, political, and literary landscape of Europe. Humanists revived a classical debate referring back to Platonic dialogues, and promoted human worth and dignity and dwelling on the importance of liberal arts for all classes. Various Renaissance thinkers like the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch (1304- 1374), the French writer Francois Rabelais (1494-1553), the Dutch theologian Erasmus (1466-1536), the English philosopher Sir Thomas More, and the Italian scholar Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola (1463-1494) were categorized as early Humanists. The advancements in the field of learning, the scientific and intellectual enlightenment of the seventeenth century, the discoveries of Galileo and Sir Isaac Newton, the materialism of Thomas Hobbes, the rationalism of Rene Descartes, the empiricism of Francis Bacon and John Locke motivated a belief in natural law and universal order. The eighteenth century, also called the Age of Enlightenment lead to the development of a belief in the human reason.

Natural law theorists of modern times especially John Locke dwelled on the importance of rights that self-evidently pertain to individuals as human beings especially the rights to life, liberty and property. He believes that revolution is the outcome of the state's inability to secure these rights upon entering the civil state. The common point where the philosophers come upon is the supreme faith in reason thereby, vigorously attacking religious and scientific dogmatism, intolerance, censorship and other form of social-economic restraints that curtail individual liberty. The

inalienable right of man becomes their fundamental ethical and social gospel. At the same time the philosophy centering on the word “humanism” came to be used widely in countries like Germany by several leftist ideologists who criticized the repressive authorities of the church and the state. They looked upon the Greeks and the Renaissance humanists for motivation.

Naturalistic Humanist, Corliss Lamont, is of the view that man has but one life to lead and should make the most of it in terms of creative work and happiness and also goes to the extent of saying that human happiness is its own justification and requires no sanction or support from super-natural sources; that in any case the super-natural, usually conceived of in the form of heavenly gods or immortal heavens, does not exist; and that human beings, with the help of their own intelligence and their mutual liberal co-operation, can build an enduring citadel of peace and beauty upon this earth. (Gupta, 2000, 8)

The Renaissance humanists, dismantling the Christian hegemony cleared the way for questioning and rejecting the religious ideology. The later humanists moved one step ahead in this realm by creating works of art, paintings, plays, poems or novels, which all expressed the importance and meaning of human life without any religious intervention. In 1836, the early nineteenth century Humanism was the hallmark of the classical curriculum that was offered by the German school. The Humanism as articulated by the English was also based on the same ethics of the significance of human existence.

The Humanist revolution that started in the Renaissance period was also reflected through the nineteenth century discoveries and the inventions in the fields of arts and science led by Kepler, Copernicus, Bruno and Galileo. The invention of the printing press led to the circulation of books and ideas which could not be restricted by the church. The industrial affluence gave birth to a new class of people who could easily afford art and literature in the late nineteenth century in the shadow of Darwin's great discovery and gave fatal blows to the dogmatic conventions of religion. It was thought that arts could replace religion and act as a source of moral guidance and imparting humanistic values.

In the twentieth century, the term Secular Humanism was coined, and used extensively by non-conformist humanists to make a clear distinction from the religious humanism. Secular Humanism was also called scientific humanism. The fundamental principle of the concept of Secular Humanism is based on the belief that ideology (whether religious or political) should be evaluated by each individual rather than merely being accepted or rejected on faith. It also propagated a search for truth, especially through Science and Philosophy.

The fundamental basis of the Western culture is based on the Cultural Humanism evolving from the cultural traditions that originated in ancient Greece and Rome. It constitutes Law, Literature, Philosophy, Politics, Science, and more. Another study branching out from cultural humanism is the Literary Humanism, which is based on the study of the liberal Humanities, including the languages, Philosophy,

History, Literature, or everything other than physical science and the theology. The importance of cultural humanism rests not simply on the material gain but also on the cultural traditions that are inherited through the collective European history. The study of the humanities is considered by many an important virtue or a means to the foundation of an ethical and mature human being.

The term “Literary Humanism” was used in a limiting manner to reflect a movement in humanities that chiefly focused on literary culture and the ways in which literature can be helpful for personal introspection and development. In this sense it was rather elitist in its approach and was even apprehensive of the use of Science, the evaluation and introspection of human kind. Literary Humanism’s scope never included social reform or religious critique.

Attributively, contemporary Humanist thought advocates for a heightened sensibility for our human kind, our planet and lives. This form of Humanism identifies certain evils of imperialism, exploitation, prejudice, hatred, pollution, militarism, terrorism, nationalism, sexism, poverty and corruption as being persistent and an addressable human character that is essentially incompatible with the interests of our species. It calls upon for a collective action by the states and the governance to address the issues affecting the humanity irrespective of their collateral beliefs or personal religion. This form of Inclusive Humanism as against the contemporary American and British Humanism, which is thought to be centered on religion often equated with simple atheism in these societies. Dwight Gilbert Jones is of the view

that:

Humanism may be the only philosophy likely to be adopted by our species as a whole-it is thus incumbent on inclusive humanities to not place unwarranted or self-interested conditions on its prospective adherents, nor associate it with religious acrimony. (Jones 41)

Modern humanists, like Corliss Lamont and Carl Sagan, are of the view that humanity must seek for truth through reason and the best observable evidence and endorse scientific skepticism and the scientific method. They also validate that the decisions about right and wrong must be based on the individual and common good. Humanism, therefore, as an ethical process does not consider metaphysical issues such as the existence or non-existence of supernatural being. It is only interested with what is simply human. Contemporary Humanism carries a qualified optimism with it about the capability of humans, but it is a bit skeptic of believing that human nature is purely good and everyone can live up to the humanists ideals. The ultimate aim of humanism is to make the humans flourish and making life better, livable and happy for the entire species. It also aims at promoting concern for the welfare of other species and the planet as a whole. The chief interest lies on doing well and living well in here and now, and leaving the world a better place for those who come after.

The early twentieth century critics like Ezra Pound, T.E. Hulme and T.S. Eliot considered humanism to be a

feminine aspect and preferred a manly authoritarian society existing in the middle ages. Post Modern critics, the self describing anti-humanists- Jean Francois Lyotard and Michel Foucault, assert that humanism posits an overarching and excessively abstract notion of humanity or universal human nature, which was often used as a pretext for imperialism and domination of those deemed somehow less than human. The German Philosopher Heidegger considered the German humanists on the model of the ancient Greeks, but restricted it only to the German race and specifically to the Nazis. Davies is of the view that after the horrific experiences of the wars of the twentieth century, the phrases like the destiny of man and the triumph of human reason should no longer be formulated without an instant consciousness of the folly of the human kind as committing a crime is absolutely impossible without the human aspect responsible for it. In the words of Davies:

for one thing humanism remains on many occasions occupied by the only available alternative to bigotry and persecution. The freedom to speak and write, to organize and campaign in defense of individual or collective interests, to protest and disobey all these can only be articulated in humanist's terms. (Davies, 1997, 131-132)

Shakespeare's interest lay chiefly in the human nature as evident in his craft depicting the varied shades of human nature and character. Since the creation of the world, man is considered as a supreme being on the planet, next to God. He is the paragon of all species and a unique creation.



The interest of man in the universe is of utmost importance. While some consider him divine, others consider his suffering and the primordial fall arousing protest and rebellion. Most of the literary outputs are based on his joys and sorrows, his rise and fall and there are protests against his suffering and segregation. The latest humanists also draw their attention to the welfare interests of women. Modern writing is concerned with anything that obstructs or thwarts human efforts like the oppression in the name of tradition, established practice, God's control and scheme of the universe.

As seen earlier that the Indian tradition of humanism as a very old one reflecting from the Lokayata movements, the Modern Indian Humanism sprung up from a heightened interest in study of the nature of human and the flaws in his nature. It is more or less reformist in nature. There was a gradual shift away from God to the Human. The Bhakti poets centered their interest on God whereas the humanist was interested in the study of man. Human feelings, human thought, human attitude all became a subject of thought. This supreme interest around man is one of the central motives of Indian writings in English. It can be seen in Mulk Raj Anand's humanistic, socialistic and realistic concern of the man, in the social and the artistic colour given to the realistic stories of R.K Narayan, the metaphysical and the philosophical question in the works of RajaRao, in the stories of Bhabhani Bhattacharaya, and the existential question in Arun Joshi's fiction. In the hands of Kamla Markandya, it takes the Hardian spirit. Anita Desai's work flourishes out of the psychological and the emotional uncanny faced by her women characters.

Shashi Deshpande's humanism takes on the cultural and the spiritual shades.

The most visionary humanist associated with the Indian Writings is Shri Rabindra Nath Tagore. His plays are an embodiment of the core human values recognized by his unique cultural genre. His play, *Muktadhara*, is a treatise against the social evils and the tyrannical power that dehumanize the mankind. The title *Muktadhara*, signifies a mountain stream by the same name that rushes down the slopes of Uttarakut irrigating the plains of Shiv-tarai in the lower reaches. Ranajit, the king of Uttarakut, constructs a dam across the river with the help of his engineer Bibuti in order to effectively control the economic life of Shiv-tarai. Tagore highlights the values of humanity to condemn his act.

Another contemporary writer of Tagore was Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, a writer who originally wrote in Bengali. He was a staunch humanist who created characters full of sympathy and heroism. His works celebrated women characters who displayed the ability to change. He took up avant-garde issues in his works. His work "Path Ke Dawedar" and "Shrikant" portray humanist ideals.

Modern India also gave birth to popular humanists like Raja Ram Mohan Roy whose social reforms stem out of his humanist concerns for mankind. Serving the mankind was his ultimate goal of life. Unlike the western humanists, Gandhi and Tagore both kept up the ideals of humanism along with a firm devotion in God. They believed in a universal human religion exhibiting a mystical and religious faith. They both loved God and man equally. Mahatma Gandhi devoted his life

to the cause of the downtrodden. Gandhi's humanism was shaped by moral-social beliefs, whereas Tagore's was shaped by his aesthetic-mystical experience; but both firmly believed in the worth and dignity of the human individual. In their world-view, the idea of love played a dominant part; they regarded love as the magic wand which dissolves all contraries and opens the gateway of truth. (Gupta, 2008, 14)

Another off shoot of humanism was shaped by the ideas of M. N. Roy, indeed a variable intellectual giant of the generation, who on being dissatisfied with the Communism as well as Parliamentary democracy, expounded a social philosophy with certain political aspects of its own, and called it as Radical Humanism or the New Humanism.

Roy finds an essentially rational and moral nature of man and his capability to formulate a free, harmonious and a just social order. He believed in the Protagorean aphorism and called upon the utility of a social or political institution only if it can give man freedom (political and economic) along with a social-psychological atmosphere helping them realize their intellectual and human potential. Roy's philosophy is also based on the glorification of the individual against the collective age of a nation, the insistence on an organized or pyramidal democracy and a strong faith in the urgent need for creating conditions for the achievement of man's political as well as economic freedom. The influence of Radical Humanism soon faded after his death in 1954 but Roy's philosophy continued evoking the attention of intellectuals throughout the world.

Another important humanist in India, also known as

the architect of modern India, is Jawaharlal Nehru. He advocated for the welfare and happiness of the common man. He always stood against the antihumanist forces of militarism and fascism, feudalism and imperialism. He never compromised nationalism with internationalism.

Swami Vivekananda another visionary humanist also belongs to the soil of India. Considering the corporeal world illusory, he adored the Buddhist philosophy that taught him the perception of the human being as a living throbbing individual. For him, the human being was a being in need of love and empathy. Another great humanist Dr. Radhakrishnan contributed the world with his spiritual or metaphysical humanism. According to him, the philosophy of a man is a result of his need rather than an intellectual luxury. He was a visionary who foresaw the inevitability of humanism in the due course of the future ahead. In the times ahead, the world was becoming a global village and the increasing interdependence of the technology and the economy, humanism was a necessity for the welfare of mankind. So, it was also necessary for seeking an order in a disordered world and creating bonds between the fellow human beings.

There was a large number of Indian Writers who wrote in the aftermath of the partition depicting the pain and misery of mankind. Khushwant Singh's name comes to the forefront when it comes to the discussion of the poignant picture of partition massacre. His novel Train to Pakistan is an example of characters arousing pity and concern. In a similar vein Amrita Pritam writes about her concerns for the women characters. She depicts the inner sufferings of women. Her

work Pinjar is set in the backdrop of partition and reveals the affects of the partition on the tender psyche of the women. Among the modern writers come the names of Jhumpa Lahiri and Arundhati Roy who also voice their concerns for the humanity. Jhumpa Lahiri writes on the plight of the immigrant characters. Whereas Arundhati Roy voices her concern for the unrepresented and the silenced others of the Indian community like the untouchables, the women and the gendered minorities. There is a large number of Indian writers who celebrate the ideals of humanism in their writing in one way or the other.

To conclude, it can be said that although in the recorded history, Humanism is said to be originated in the West but there is no denying the fact that humanism has always remained an integral part of the Indian culture since the dawn of history. It may be seen in the teachings of various saints and preachers who had a strong urge to cure and heal the sufferings in the World. In the contemporary times that have been dominated by technology and computers, human beings are losing the significance, so a revival of interest in the core human values is of the utmost importance. Modern life is dominated by the digital and the social media world, where empathy for the fellow being has been replaced by apathy, so a revival in humanism is the need of the hour.

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