

Indigenous View on Altruism

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ABSTRACT With the rise in number of cross-cultural studies during past two decades or so, concern on the part of social scientists has also increased as to whether findings are universally applicable? An appeal, therefore, on use of indigenous concepts, "culturally appropriate researches", was made from different countries, having some unique traditional cultural inheritance (Azuma, 1984; Pandey, 1988; Sinha, 1984 and 1990). The present paper endeavours to throw light on the indigenization of altruistic research with the help of conceptualizing "altruism" through religio-philosophical perspective.

Indigenization of psychology refers to the emergence of concepts, theories, methods and measuring tools from the culture and reflects back upon the culture in which the behaviour is studied. Viewed in this regard, a review of studies shows (Aldair, Pohan and Vohra, 1993; Dash and Pohan, 1989) the degree of indigenization achieved to date is very low. In developmental psychology there is manifold increase in studies in practically all areas but there is general lacuna in conceptual and methodological framework (Anandlakshmi, 1982) and heavy dependency on western theories and researches (Saraswati and Dutta, 1987).

In India the roots of psychology can be traced to the vast storehouse of knowledge contained in ancient philosophical and religious texts, in epics and in the rich folklore. These sources contain valuable material concerning the nature of human beings, their personalities and their social and interpersonal interactions (Sinha, 1986). Thus the importance of religio-philosophical views to understand the various psychological concepts have been stressed by distinguished Indian psychologists in various national and international seminars and symposiums. Considering the relevance of indigenization of psychological concept for building up the foundation stone of research in the area of "altruism", the present paper makes an humble

attempt to focus on the Indian religio-philosophical views on altruism.

Religio-philosophical discussion of the nature of positive social behaviour has centred around two major questions. What is human nature? How should one behave toward one's fellow?

Human nature has been variously interpreted by philosophers as being selfishly motivated, positively social, or a morally ambivalent. Man's passion for pleasure and aversion to pain has been recognized in the Indian tradition. Patanjali (1978) makes specific reference to these in two of his aphorisms. Tilak (1951/1986) has asserted that most Indian thinkers have accepted the thesis that human beings always try to maximize pleasure and minimize pain (Chapter 5).

Considerable attention has been given in the Indian tradition to the analysis of types and qualities of pleasure. The Bhagavadgita (18, 36-39), for instance, distinguishes between the pleasures that are followed by pain and vice-versa. From a psychological point of view, we need to note an important difference between the western and Indian psychologies which is related to the common assumption of the pleasure-seeking tendency of human beings. Despite the central place offered to pleasure seeking and pain-avoidance in the behaviourist and psychoanalytical theories, there is no focus on the human being as an *enjoyer* of pleasure and a *sufferer* from pain. By contrast, the common Sanskrit word *bhoktr* connotes man as born enjoyer and sufferer. The view of man as a experiencer of pleasure or pain, happiness or misery, health or sickness, good luck or misfortune, is of central importance to the India psychologies. The Indian thinkers have tried to explain the paradoxical coexistence of self-seeking and altruism in a different manner. In general, the Indian view recognizes the self-seeking nature of man, but does not emphasize egoism as many

western psychologies do. While there is such a difference at the descriptive level (i.e. about what human beings are believed to be like), there is also a difference on the prescriptive level. The Hindu culture has generally stressed self-sacrifice rather than self-aggrandizement and self-seeking.

In general, all religions consider "charity", "helping", "aiding" or "comforting" as positive forms of behaviour. In several Indian mythologies and in ancient literature, the importance of *dana* has been emphasized through the characters of Karna, Dadhichi, and several others who helped needy person even at the cost of their own lives. The word *dana* implies a duty to be charitable especially on certain specified occasions.

Helping the needy person is a traditional value in India (as expressed in various religious thoughts and in some way or other by great Indian thinkers such as Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, Mahavira and many others). The political leader Subhash Chandra Bose disappeared from India in order to give Independence to Indians. However, in our contemporary society, the value reached a virtual transformation and now the increasing callousness towards one another is quite common. An example of the indifference is reported in the February issue of *Imprint* (1979). A simulated scene of a fainted man lying on the road-side was staged in Bombay. The scene was repeated in six busy roadside locations at different times and the reactions of the passerby at every time were observed. It was found that people showed an indifferent attitude and did not help. People were afraid to help for they feared their help might involve them as witnesses in prolonged police investigations or the person whom they are helping may be a pick pocket, a hustler, or a criminal. Therefore, subsequent allegations by the victim may create troubles for the helper. A Bombay advocate cautions: "sometimes the very person you are helping may accuse you of having robbed him once he is at the police station" (Kagal and Gopinath, 1979: 54). To safeguard against such reversals people may not help others.

The above cited example delineates, that occurrence of helping is a multifaceted phenom-

enon. One instance of helping differs qualitatively from the other depending heavily on why help is given, to whom and when?

In Bhagavadgita, which is the very essence of Vedic literature, the concept of sacrifice is very well defined. It classified sacrifice into three distinct types, namely, *sattwic*, *rajasic* and *tamasic*, based on three modes of nature (*gunas*). The sacrifice done for one who does nothing in return, but is done as an act ought to be done in a fit place and time to a worthy person is called *sattwic*. The sacrifice done for the sake of return benefit, or some ulterior motive or done grudgingly is called *rajasic*. The sacrifice done for an unworthy person at unfit time and place and done disrespectfully and contemptuously is called *tamasic* (Chapter 17, verse, 20, 21, and 22). Thus, the performance of sacrifice as a matter of duty and with no desire for material results, is said to be *sattwic* sacrifice. Any sacrifice performed with pride and for some material benefit should be known as *rajasic* sacrifice. Any sacrifice performed for personal gains and without sympathy must be considered to be as *tamasic* sacrifice.

In Islam too, the importance of sacrifice has been highlighted. In Islam, there are four spiritual devotions, namely, *namaz*, *zakat*, *roza* and *haj*. In Muslim religious system, they are called *irkan*, which means basic pillars. On these very pillars the building of Islam glorifies itself. Where *namaz* is for God, *zakat* is for his followers. In the Kuran Sharif we find a vivid illustration of the importance of *zakat*. At one place it has been defined as a source for the purification of heart and mind. Giving alms to the poor is essential for bringing up honestly in life. It increases prosperity and who does so, receives blessings of Allah. Giving *zakat*, a poor's due, man releases himself from the selfishness, narrowness and lust for money. It warns that *zakat* is not a gratitude, but a duty and should be given only to the destitute and orphans. As such, there should be no selfish or parochial aims such as glorify oneself (Siddiqui, 1980).

In the Bible, the term "Charity" is used in two ways - charity to mankind and charity to God. Charity to mankind is taken as donation of something to mankind. One can do charity to God by doing good deeds and be kind to all

creatures. Several examples of charity can be found in different sections of the Bible. For instance, in "Exodus", it has been said - "For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild beasts may eat, you shall do likewise with your vineyard, and with your old orchard". It has also been said in the Bible that one who considers the poor is blessed and God delivers (helps) him in times of trouble.

The Sikh religion also focusses in some way or the other, the value of service to humanity. Guru Nanak, a great spiritual leader, has clearly stated in his teachings that essence of religion lies in meakness, sympathy, goodness and purity.

Thus the importance of sacrifice has been recognized much earlier through the ages by the major religious thoughts, beliefs, and scriptures in our Indian society. Innumerable connotations are used for the concept "sacrifice". Most commonly used connotations are - *seva*, *tyag*, *dana*, *balidana*, when all these are performed for the others without any expectation of return, then it is "sacrifice" for others in true sense. Ghandhiji was one of the real Indian personalities of this kind.

"Unity in diversity" is a common phrase used for Indians. There is a distinct Hindu view of life (Radhakrishnan, 1968). Nehru (1946/1981 : 61-62) in *The Discovery of India* asserted that "all of them have their distinctive features, all of them have still more the distinctive mark of India" and inspite of all the differences "yet have been throughout these ages distinctively Indian, with the same national heritage and the same act of moral and mental qualities". Thus inspite of having four major religions (Hindu, Islam, Sikh, Christianity) in India, the appropriate common terms used for the sacrifice to others is *peropkar*, that is *per* plus *upkar*. In other words - anything done for the benefit (*Upkar*) of other (*Pers*) can be called *perupkar*. This *perupkar* may be either in its minor form (sacrificing material for the benefit of others) or in highest level

(sacrificing life for the benefit of others).

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