

Humanism

The concept of Humanism refers primarily to a system of thought, which focusses on the autonomy of the individual. The term Humanism has several meanings. But generally speaking, it is a doctrine according to which, to quote Tzvetan Todorov, "man is point of departure and point of reference of human action". The word "humanist" figures perhaps first time in the writings of the French thinker Montaigne when he contrasts his own thought with that of theologians. Humanism was a product of Renaissance and Enlightenment in Europe and found its fullest expression in the American and French Revolutions.

The concise Oxford Dictionary defines Humanism as follows: "An outlook or system of thought concerned with human rather than divine or super natural matters. A belief or outlook emphasizing common human needs and seeking solely rational ways of solving human problems, and concerned with mankind as responsible and progressive Intellectual beings." Humanists believe in the potentiality of human beings. They suggest that human being has great potentiality and if developed fully one can reach to the greatest height, provided, of course, one gets proper opportunities to develop. Humanists also have faith in the good nature of human being. Gandhi, Russell and Tolstoy were great humanists of the twentieth century. In his early writings Marx was also a humanist. Early writings of Marx include Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1842), written much before the publication of Communist Manifesto (1848). M.N. Roy was a humanist: we'll learn about his humanism a few pages ahead. His ideational journey was long. He began his journey from Marxism and ended it with Radical Humanism.

In the Middle Ages human beings were subordinated to God. They had access to secrets of nature but in ultimate analysis their submission to God was total. Renaissance and Enlightenment brought about a change in this perspective. Man became the centre of the universe. He now would have the possibility to will freely and to be his own masters. He would have the freedom to choose a life for himself and his fellow human beings rather than being dictated either by traditions or by God. This meant that henceforth he would have freedom to choose his home, profession and also to deviate from traditions or canons of religious texts, religion did continue to play an important role. But the significant change that occurred was that man had the right to make a distinction between true and false, right and wrong, just and unjust, and good and bad.

In humanist thought, man becomes free in his private life. He was not only unique but also different and could not be reduced to the other. He also acquired inherent natural right to decide

the rules of moral living. Later another component was added to this when man claimed freedom in the public domain also and asserted the right to choose his political regime. Thus, democracy became the only legitimate form of Government. The movement reached its zenith towards the end of the eighteenth century, in the American and French Revolutions. Both the revolutions were inspired by the idea that no authority, be it tradition, family or the state, is superior to the will of man.

As a result of these changes, three major orientations emerged.

Materialism

Since God's existence is doubtful and human beings are in complete charge of themselves, they will decide their own values. They will be materialists. Modern science emphasizes the role of reason and its capacity to penetrate all the secrets of nature and history. Science leads to technology, to the idea that we cannot only understand nature but also transform it according to our will.

Individualism

Since the weight of tradition and family ties circumscribes one's freedom, the individual must assert its individual autonomy and make choices according to one's own interest. Freedom is the most precious gift of Renaissance and we must preserve it at any cost. It is not that everyone has accepted this position in totality. For instance, conservatives would still cling to the value of the family and the tradition. There are others who would like to abandon the values of shared life. But humanists insist that while objectively man shares the same condition, in the inter-subjective relations, to quote Todorov, "everyone occupies a unique position; in communion with oneself, everyone is alone, and responsible for his actions". The final decision in all matters now rests with the individual. One must affirm life, assert one's power and relentlessly pursue one's own interest in relation to others.

Democratism

Since man has the capacity to decide true and false as he is endowed with reason, he has a right

to choose his political regime. Democracy is the only legitimate form of government as it is based on the idea of willing subjects.

Humanist thought tells us a little about economic policies of the way in which the state institutions should be organized. Humanism is content to provide a guiding perspective around the principles of toleration and pluralism. According to them there is no paradise; the world is imperfect and human beings have to make the best of it.

In India, M.N. Roy gave a clear expression to the idea of humanism. He regarded man as central he wrote "freedom is the supreme value because the urge for freedom is the essence of human existence." Roy accepted humanism because humanists had always approached life from the assumption of the sovereignty of man. It is man's unique capacity of knowing, as distinct from the common biological activity of being aware, which endows him with powers, not to rule over others, but to create freedom for the benefit of humanity.

It is to the credit of the humanist thought that we have moved away from the aristocratic to the democratic age in which all men are treated as free and equal. It has made us aware of need to make an individual autonomous not only of God but of all larger aggregates as well as ideologies which tend to subordinate the individual to either a hypothetical vision of history or vague universal concepts such as race or nationalism. The emphasis on history as a determining principle finally led to communism and atrocities associated with some of the communist regimes in the name of class war. The emphasis on race and nationalism culminated in the fascist regimes, which completely sacrificed the individual at the altar of the state. Humanism also rejects technological domination. Machines are made to serve human beings and not vice-versa.

The importance of humanism lies in the fact that it asserts the autonomy of the individual. It is true that this individual does not live in isolation, but only in relation to others. What is valuable in humanism is its insistence that in the ultimate analysis, it is individual's own uniqueness and

resultant moral worth, which is important. All citizens are equal members of the society. What counts is not their resemblance but uniqueness and diversity. Humanism believes that society consists of individuals, good and bad: those who can co-operate and those who cannot and those who can inflict injury and those who cannot. All of them can co-exist in a framework of plurality. The state

should protect them all and should be so organized that the individual becomes an end in itself. The state, science, technology, etc. are all means to an end namely to enable individuals to flourish: they are not ends - themselves: they cannot be allowed to dominate human life.

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