

Humanism as Reflected in Indian Thought

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Abstract: Humanism is a philosophical orientation that emphasizes the dignity, value, and potential of human beings. Although the concept of humanism is often associated with Western intellectual traditions, similar ideas have long been present in Indian philosophical and cultural thought. Indian traditions emphasize compassion, moral responsibility, non-violence, and the interconnectedness of all human beings. Ancient scriptures such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita highlight ethical principles that align with humanistic ideals. Concepts such as Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family), Ahimsa (non-violence), and Dharma (righteous duty) demonstrate the strong humanistic orientation embedded in Indian thought. These principles encourage respect for human dignity and promote harmonious social relationships.

The present paper examines the concept of humanism within the context of Indian philosophical traditions. It explores how humanistic values are reflected in classical Indian texts and in the teachings of influential thinkers such as Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi, and Swami Vivekananda. The paper also discusses the relevance of Indian humanistic ideals in addressing contemporary social challenges, including inequality, conflict, and cultural divisions. The study suggests that Indian thought provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human dignity and ethical responsibility, offering valuable insights for the development of a compassionate and inclusive global society.

Keywords: Humanism, Indian philosophy, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, Ahimsa, Indian thought, ethics

1. Introduction: Humanism is a philosophical perspective that emphasizes the worth, dignity, and potential of human beings. It focuses on the development of human values such as compassion, rationality, ethical responsibility, and social harmony. Historically, humanism gained prominence during the European Renaissance, where scholars emphasized human creativity, individual freedom, and intellectual inquiry. However, the fundamental principles of humanism are not limited to Western traditions; similar ideas can be found in the philosophical heritage of many cultures, including India.

Indian philosophical traditions have always emphasized the unity of existence and the importance of ethical conduct in human life. The concept of human welfare occupies a central position in Indian thought. Philosophical teachings found in ancient scriptures highlight values such as compassion, respect for life, moral duty, and universal brotherhood. These principles reflect a deeply humanistic outlook that places the well-being of humanity at the center of ethical reflection.

Indian thought does not view human beings in isolation; rather, it emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals with society, nature, and the cosmos. This holistic perspective encourages individuals to develop a sense of responsibility toward others and contribute to collective welfare. Therefore, humanistic ideas in Indian philosophy are closely linked with spiritual and ethical principles.

This paper aims to explore the concept of humanism as reflected in Indian thought. It analyzes the humanistic values present in ancient philosophical texts and examines the contributions of influential Indian thinkers who promoted compassion, social justice, and universal human dignity.

2. Humanistic Values in Ancient Indian Scriptures: Ancient Indian scriptures provide a strong philosophical foundation for humanistic thinking. Texts such as the Vedas and the Upanishads emphasize the unity of existence and the spiritual equality of all individuals.

One of the most significant teachings found in the Upanishads is the idea that the ultimate reality, known as Brahman, exists within every individual as Atman. This concept implies that all human beings share a common spiritual essence. As a result, the recognition of this unity encourages individuals to treat others with respect, compassion, and empathy.

Another important concept reflecting humanistic ideals is Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, which means “the world is one family.” This principle promotes a universal outlook that transcends social, cultural, and national boundaries. It encourages individuals to view humanity as a collective community rather than as separate groups divided by differences.

Similarly, the concept of Dharma emphasizes moral responsibility and ethical conduct. Dharma guides individuals to act in ways that promote harmony and justice within society. The fulfillment of one's duties toward others contributes to social stability and collective well-being.

These teachings illustrate that Indian philosophical traditions have long recognized the importance of human dignity, ethical responsibility, and mutual respect among individuals.

3. Humanism in the Bhagavad Gita: The Bhagavad Gita is one of the most influential philosophical texts in Indian thought. It provides profound insights into ethical living, moral responsibility, and spiritual development.

The teachings of the Bhagavad Gita emphasize the importance of selfless action (Nishkama Karma). According to this principle, individuals should perform their duties without attachment to personal gain. Such an approach encourages individuals to contribute to the welfare of society rather than focusing solely on individual interests.

The Gita also highlights the importance of compassion, self-discipline, and inner balance. These values promote harmony both within the individual and in society. By encouraging individuals to cultivate wisdom and ethical awareness, the text reflects a humanistic concern for moral development and social responsibility.

Furthermore, the Bhagavad Gita emphasizes the equality of all individuals at the spiritual level. This perspective fosters respect for human dignity and promotes a sense of unity among people.

4. Humanism in the Teachings of Indian Thinkers

Buddha and Compassion: Gautama Buddha emphasized compassion (Karuna) and the reduction of human suffering. His teachings focus on ethical living, mindfulness, and the cultivation of kindness toward all beings. Buddhism encourages individuals to develop empathy and understanding, thereby promoting social harmony and moral responsibility.

Mahatma Gandhi and Non-Violence: Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of Ahimsa (non-violence) represents one of the most powerful expressions of humanistic thought in modern India. Gandhi believed that non-violence and truth were essential principles for achieving social justice and peaceful coexistence.

His idea of Sarvodaya, meaning the welfare of all, emphasized inclusive social development. Gandhi advocated for equality, social justice, and the upliftment of marginalized communities.

Swami Vivekananda and Service to Humanity

Swami Vivekananda promoted the idea that service to humanity is the highest form of spiritual practice. He believed that every individual possesses immense potential and that education should aim to develop the physical, intellectual, and moral capacities of human beings.

Vivekananda encouraged individuals to work for the upliftment of society and emphasized the importance of compassion, tolerance, and universal brotherhood.

5. Humanism and Social Harmony: Humanistic values in Indian thought are closely connected to the idea of social harmony. Ethical principles such as compassion, tolerance, and respect for diversity play an important role in maintaining peaceful relationships within society.

Indian philosophy encourages individuals to recognize the interconnectedness of life. This perspective promotes cooperation, mutual understanding, and collective well-being. When individuals act with empathy and ethical awareness, social conflicts can be reduced and harmonious relationships can be strengthened. The principle of Sarvodaya highlights the importance of inclusive development and social justice. It emphasizes that progress should benefit all members of society rather than a privileged few.

6. Relevance of Indian Humanism in the Contemporary World: In the modern era, societies face numerous challenges such as social inequality, cultural conflicts, and environmental crises. The humanistic principles found in Indian thought provide valuable guidance for addressing these issues.

The idea of universal brotherhood encourages individuals to move beyond narrow identities based on religion, nationality, or social status. Similarly, the emphasis on compassion and non-violence promotes peaceful coexistence among diverse communities.

Indian humanistic traditions also highlight the importance of moral responsibility and self-discipline. By cultivating empathy, ethical awareness, and respect for others, individuals can contribute to building a more harmonious and inclusive society.

Therefore, the principles of Indian humanism remain highly relevant in addressing contemporary global challenges.

7. Conclusion: Humanism as reflected in Indian thought highlights the dignity, unity, and moral responsibility of human beings. Ancient philosophical traditions emphasize compassion, ethical conduct, and respect for all individuals. Concepts such as Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, Ahimsa, and Dharma illustrate the deep humanistic values embedded in Indian culture and philosophy.

The teachings of influential thinkers such as Buddha, Gandhi, and Vivekananda further demonstrate the practical application of humanistic ideals in social and ethical life. These perspectives encourage individuals to work toward the welfare of humanity and promote social harmony.

In an increasingly interconnected world, the humanistic principles found in Indian thought offer valuable insights for building a more compassionate, just, and inclusive global society.

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