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HINDU ETHICS: SOME REFLECTIONS

Traditional Hindu philosophy may be said to have concerned itself mainly with three problems, namely, that pertaining to man's relation to himself, that pertaining to his relation to God, and that pertaining to his relation to the world. Ethics belongs to the realm of man's role vis-a-vis this world in general and his fellow-beings in particular. In this connection it may be recalled that, according to the higher philosophical thought of the Hindus, the essential self of man is never involved in the doings of this phenomenal world. From the ultimate point of view, therefore, the question about the role of man, the « real » man, in this world would have no relevance whatsoever. Even with reference to the empirical self the consideration of such a question would have but little intrinsic value. For, the highest spiritual goal of a Hindu is to transcend the limitation of his individuality, which binds him to this phenomenal world, and so to realise his identity with the Supreme Being, which is, indeed, his native character. Life in this world is accordingly to be looked upon as a bridge over which one has, of necessity, to pass in order to reach one's destination, but on which it would be unwise to build one's house. Man's role in this world thus pertains to an essentially lower stage of experience, and is generally treated as such by the Hindu thinkers. The usual charge that, in India, ethics is regarded just as an « aside » from the serious business of philosophy — a concession, as it were, to the necessity of man's contact with the phenomenal world — cannot, therefore, be said to be quite unjustified. It must be admitted that Indian philosophy transcends the

merely ethical level as much as it does the merely intellectual level.

The traditional Hindu thought has not developed any system of ethics as such. Its main concern is individual practical morality. The emphasis is always put on practice rather than on theory. That is why we hardly come across any Hindu texts dealing with the doctrine of ethics. There are ethical codes all right, but there is no regular metaphysic of ethics. The reasons for this state of things are not far to seek. For one thing, the Hindu thinkers have evinced greater interest in the ideal of *mokṣa* than in that of *dharma*. They could, therefore, as well do without ethics. The Hindu philosophical systems and the Hindu ethical codes have kept themselves aloof from each other. Indeed, it is sometimes suggested that the indifference of the Hindu thinkers to ethics is purposive. For, theoretically, ethics is believed to be not necessarily leading to *mokṣa*; on the contrary, it is likely to prove a distraction to the seekers of *mokṣa*. The Upaniṣads, as one can see, clearly lack in socio-ethical interest; their motivation is the discovery by man within himself of the ultimate reality which is an eternally established fact. Hindu philosophy, it is rightly emphasized, fundamentally aims at the development of an attitude of inwardness; it ignores man's social relationships and activities more or less completely. Conversely, whatever little ethics there is in Hindu thought is not derived from any philosophical norms. However, Hindu ethics duly recognizes the importance of natural justice as perceived by a regulated conscience as a guide for right conduct. It may be added that the Hindu thought has an ethical conception of nature and that a Hindu normally has great faith in cosmic justice.

We may note here another feature of Hindu ethics and morality. The Hindu authors usually do not set forth their ethical and moral teaching in an academic or theoretical fashion; they objectify it, so to say, through the characters and situations in their literary works. The epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, among others, will amply testify to this. Man's moral responsibility for his own actions is never disowned, though, in the ultimate analysis, one has to have recourse to the doctrine of the omnipotence of destiny. It is also to be noted that greater emphasis is

sometimes put on man's individual morality than on his social responsibility. Morality, in that case, is regarded as promoting the harmonization of the inner man. It helps man to be at peace with himself.

The present age may as well be described as the great age of the individual. Perhaps, at no other time, had the individual received such recognition and attention as now. It is, therefore, no wonder that the freedom and dignity of the individual have become basic issues also for the contemporary Hindu thought. Since long, the Hindu society has been rigidly structured, and the scrupulous maintenance of that structure has been the main concern of *dharma*. The traditional Hindu social system with its class-caste organization assigned to each man his place in the social set-up and also laid down the pattern of his behaviour in every possible contingency. A Hindu was born not as an individual but as a member of a particular caste. The role which he had to play was generally fixed, and he hardly had any free choice in that regard. Individuality was at a discount. It has been rightly said that one was *given* to oneself as it were — that one was not vouchsafed any freedom or opportunity to *realize* oneself. In this sense, *dharma* may be said to have undermined individualism. A Hindu, unless he took to *Saṁnyāsa*, was, as has been felicitously expressed, a « man-in-the-world who was not an individual ». Hindu Dharmaśāstra usually thinks in terms of groups rather than of individuals.

If freedom meant that man should himself be responsible for the motives and purposes of his actions, the traditional Hindu society cannot be said to have allowed an individual any such freedom. It may be suggested that *dharma* implies function rather than duty. The concept of duty involves at least some measure of personal decision which is almost absent when an individual is expected to sink his identity and initiative into the demands of his social role. In the caste system of the Hindus, an individual had only to fit himself into its more or less rigid pattern. In social matters he was denied what may be called creative freedom. An individual's freedom was greatly impaired also by the Hindu doctrine of karmic determinism. Nor could a Hindu find solace in the belief that man was free because he could reason.

But the attitude of the Hindu tradition towards man was manifestly paradoxical. Man was believed to be essentially free from the religio-philosophical point of view, though he was « bound » from the socio-ethical point of view. The real freedom, it was repeatedly pointed out, lay in being able to honour the commitment of the self to the self. Man could always aspire for freedom from the shackles of the uncontrolled circumstances. His potentiality for transcending the realm of *dharma* and thereby attaining *mokṣa* was fully recognized. Human personality was never considered by Hindu tradition without reference to its relationship with the underlying transcendent ground which was the Supreme Spirit. This immediately raised the status and dignity of man. Man was definitely linked to the universal. In fact, it was often stressed that the real spiritual value consisted in lifting up man's ego to the level of universality. A state of non-egoity was certainly involved in this process, but this non-egoity had a positive content. It did not by any means imply the extinction or negation of oneself; it rather implied a kind of sublimation — a transformation of man into the universality of the Spirit. What was intended was not the suppression of egoity but its meaningful canalization. Incidentally it may be added that Hindu thinkers sometimes seem to refer to three kinds of life — the rational life, the good life, and the spiritual life. According to them the spiritual life was higher than the rational life and the good life because it was truly universal. A good life was a rational life because better knowledge usually conduced to a better life, but a coldly rational life might not be necessarily a good life.

Metaphysically the individual — that is to say, the self which he embodied — was highly prized in almost all the philosophical systems of India. The Sāṁkhya, for instance, regarded it as pure, infinite consciousness; the Vedānta identified it with the Brahman or the highest cosmic reality; and theism viewed it as being coeternal with God. The dignity of the individual, it was often stressed, rested on the indwelling Universal Spirit rather than on his phenomenal characteristics. Further it was firmly believed that, by using the opportunities of this life, an individual could realize his high destiny, that he could attain the utmost spiritual

perfection. The individual was, verily, a sacred centre of potential value. It will also be seen that Hindu thinkers set great store by man's awareness of his inwardness or subjectivity which made for the realization by him of the inward reality. The essential role of man, it was pointed out, was that of a wayfarer who travelled from the world of the outward reality to the realm of the inward reality. The assumption of the extensive magico-religious affinity between man and the cosmos may also be understood as mitigating the view that man was but a creature without any freedom, dignity, and initiative. Man was believed to be able to govern the working of the cosmos through the sacrificial ritual which he performed. Indeed, he was regarded as the field of the forces which were active in the ritual and the cosmos. It may also be mentioned in this context that the theory of *puruṣārthas* did, in a sense, open out the prospect of the achievement by man of an integrated personality and spiritual fulfilment. One, not unoften, comes across statements such as that human life was a great opportunity in the course of successive lives. Instead of looking at the life in this world merely as a vale of suffering one was advised to regard it as a training ground for one's self-realization.

It is true that the traditional Hindu literature hardly ever refers, in a positive way, to the rights of an individual. Indeed, there is no word in Sanskrit which has the precise connotation of the English word « right ». The concept of right arises only when there is a sense of difference and separateness. From the higher metaphysical point of view, all beings are spiritually equal; there is, therefore, no need for bothering oneself about the individual and his rights. It is a special feature of the traditional Hindu thought — and it is certainly a highly elevating feature — that, at the level of the worldly life, human relations have always been considered in terms of duties rather than of rights. Rights have to be conceived as the correlatives of duties — as representing, so to say, the reverse side of the coin. They signify the reciprocal duties of groups and individuals to each other. When, therefore, duties are defined, rights are automatically determined. In Hindu thought, the rights of an individual have never been divorced from his social responsibilities. At the same time, the

two fundamental rights of the individual, namely, the right to life and the right to spiritual development, have been duly protected, though in an indirect way, respectively through the emphasis on *ahiṁsā* as the supreme value and the recognition of *mokṣa* as a *puruṣārtha*. And can one think of a more convincing way of establishing the freedom and dignity of the individual than by emphasizing, as Hindu philosophy has invariably done, his intrinsic identity with the ultimate reality? At the same time, the Hindu tradition may be said to have anticipated and solved the problem of the socialization of the individual — a problem which has become particularly serious in the present age — by positing that man's personality has two aspects — the individual (*jīva*) and the person (*ātman*), and that the socialization concerns the individual while the person remains free. Incidentally, it is more or less on these lines that the apparent paradox of the complete freedom in religio-philosophical matters vouchsafed to man by the Hindu tradition, on the one hand, and the strict conformity to the prescribed social practice required of him, on the other, may be resolved.