GLIMPSES OF UTOPIAN AND EGALITARIAN TRADITIONS IN THE INDIAN SUB – CONTINENT

By

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Almost five thousand years ago, the Aryans who migrated into the Indus valley had already perfected the concept of a Cosmic Order which they called ***Ṛta.*** Based on their observation of the regularity of the movements of the sun, the moon and stars, the alternation of day and night and of seasons, they assumed that the universe, comprising their own world, was neither in chaos nor a blind fury of chance elements but a harmonious system working for a harmonious purpose. Applying this concept of a universal Cosmic Order to human behaviour, they conceived of an ideal moral order, a law of righteousness, which too was called ***Ṛta.*** Thus they prayed to one of their many gods. 'O Indra, lead us on the ***Path of Ṛta,*** on the right path over all evil' (***Ṛgveda X,133,6***).

Ṛta as a moral law, defined with reference to its opposites or its applications, is contrasted with ***Anṛta,*** that is falsehood, the opposite of truth and explained as ordered conduct, exemplified by kindness, hospitality and piety. Again, they prayed, 'If we have sinned against the man who loves us, have ever wronged friend or comrade,have ever done an injury to a neighbour who ever dwelt with us or even to a stranger, O Lord, free us from the guilt of this trespass.' (***Ṛgveda V,85 7***). The custodian of ***Ṛta*** was ***Varuṇa.*** He with his spies ("Their thousand eyes all scanning sweep to earth's remotest bound") snared the bad, overtook the Liars and spared the truthful. To him they prayed. 'Absolve us from the sins of our fathers and from those which we committed with our own bodies.... an intoxicating draught, passion, dice, thoughtlessness.' (Atharvaveda IV, 16,5).

The search for a moral Utopia, where righteousness prevails and evil is routed, has thus been a major preoccupation of the people of the Indian sub–continent from the very beginning of their civilization. It is in the process of this search that they evolved norms and values for society and life. In their baffling ramifications, these norms represent the unceasing quest of the human mind for what is ideal and hence, by definition, unattainable in its entirety. Such a set of values or norms was the principal of ***Varṇāśramadharma*** (literally colour and stages of life). If ***varṇa*** was a social model to perpetuate a once–prevalent division of labour, ***āśrama*** was an ideal division of life into clear – cut phases to attain a multiplicity of goats. ***Varṇa*** assumed that the fair Aryans divided themselves into three categories each with a hereditary function: Brahmans as priests and teachers. ***Kṣatriyas*** as warriors and rulers and ***Vaiśyas*** as commoners pursuing agriculture, animal husbandry and trade. The conquered Dasyus, recognizable by their dark

complexion, formed the fourth ***varṇa*** with the sole function of serving as slaves the three other ***varṇas.*** In the early Vedic literature, itself, the ***varṇa*** system – the forerunner of the Indian caste system – received religious sanction (e.g. ***Ṛgveda x,90***).

If one accepts the arguments of Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, ***varṇa*** was "introduced to meet the needs of the time when different racial types had to live together in amity". Calling it the "salvation of the country" then, he argues that only this institution "made it possible for a number of races to live together side by side without fighting each other" by enabling the "Vedic Indian to preserve the integrity and independence of the conquering as well as the conquered races" and promoting "mutual confidence and harmony" (Indian Philosophy I, pp 112 – 113). Even if the original intentions of the founders of ***varṇa*** were as conceived by Radhakrishnan, the institution which rapidly deteriorated into rigid discriminatory caste restrictions could hardly be credited with the attainment of any lofty objectives. But the Utopian character of the social innovation is more clearly marked by the fact that the inevitable racial and class admixture, guided only human passions and latent acceptance of equality, had, at no time, permitted the establishment of a clear – cut four – sector society.

The principle of ***āśrama*** had been no different in practice even though its philosophical foundation seems to have had a more pronounced impact on life. The theory is based on the assumption that a human being had four clear goals to achieve during his life – time; namely, ***Kāma***, sensual pleasure and enjoyment, ***artha***, economic prosperity and well – being, ***dharma***, fulfilment of social and religious obligations and ***mokṣa***, emancipation in the supra – mundane sense. A law, exclusively applicable to the three Aryan ***varṇas***, required a person to spend the first part of life as a celibate (***Brahmacāri***) engaged in study, maintaining one's self and one's teacher with food obtained by begging. This was the preparation for the next two stages where the first three goals of life were to be accomplished. After the ritual bath symbolizing the termination of the stage of studentship, one became a householder (***Gṛhastha***), married, had children and accumulated; wealth. With the birth of sons of one's sons, the third stage of forest—dwelling hermit (***Vānaprastha***) commenced. One was still engaged in the fulfillment one one's social and religious obligations, teaching young ones, performing sacrificial rites or simply meditating. With the onset of old age (ideally when the first grey hair was noticed) one was enjoined to renounce everything (***Sannyāsi***) and dedicate one's self to the concerns of the life after death. Here one strove for emancipation, which, as is clear from both precept and practice, could be obtained through poverty and mortification, fasting and penance.

What fraction of the ancient Indian society complied with the norms and values of the ***Varṇāśramadharma,*** it is anyone's guess. But to its originators

and its numerous exponents in the voluminous law books (***Dharmaśāstras***) in Sanskrit, a society so neatly classified and a life so meticulously ordered signified a fool – proof system where interacting members knew their place in society and life and, therefore, functioned in peace and harmony. Still, this system neither advocated nor adumbrated any norms even remotely resembling egalitarianism. An hierarchically ordered society based primarily on birth and set duties for each specified phase of one's life could hardly promote the idea that all were equal and, therefore, should have free access to all good things of life.

The revolt against the rigidities of the ***Varṇāsramdharma*** and specially the unmitigated demand for privileges by certain classes came in the form of a fantastic philosophical movement where beginnings could go back to at least 1000 B. C. Reflecting the esoteric origin of the philosophy, the texts are called ***Upaniṣads,*** meaning what one taught and learnt huddled together. The thinkers and the teachers by their sheer assumption of roles radically different from hereditary functions, challenged the systems division of labour. They openly questioned the criteria by which people were classified. But what they taught as their basic philosophy was even more impressive.

They postulated a common essence for all – a universal ***Ātman*** or soul from which were born "all life – spirits, all worlds, all gods, all beings". (***Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad II, I***) The same text said further "This ***Ātman*** is the same in the ant, the same in the gnat, the same in the elephant, the same in the three worlds, the same in the universe." (Ibid 111,22). It also stressed that it was the same in Brahmans and ***kṣatriyas*** (Ibid 11,4,6,IV, 5,7). The quintessence of these teachings, which constitute the very foundation of ***Upaniṣadic*** thought, is best summarized by one of its most ardent modern exponents, namely Arthur Schopenhauer. He said, All diversity is only apparent. In all individuals of this world, in whatever endless number they present themselves after and beside one another, yet only one and the same, truly existing Being, present and identical in them all, manifests itself. (Grundlage der Moral 22).

It is conceivable that the ***Upaniṣadic*** teachers along with their initiated disciples lived in small isolated communities perhaps similar in some ways to those which appeared in recent times in the USA (e.g. Ephrata, New Harmony, Brook Farm, Oneida, Mennonites) which experimented with Utopian social orders. One thing which comes out clearly from the texts was that it was not easy gain admission to the inner circle. The tests of suitability based primarily on the earnestness and intensity of the quest form the theme of a number of moving anecdotes. Intellectual speculation characterized by the constant realization of universal unity was the main goal. Thus, an ethical foundation for practical living – though gleanable from certain stray statements –could hardly be reconciled with the sublimation of metaphysical

knowledge to such a point as to make moral distinctions, as one normally assumes, to have no significance. For instance, note the statement in ***Kaṭhopaniṣad*** (11,19);—

> If the slayer thinks to slay
> If the slain think himself slain,
> Both these understand not
> This one slays, not, nor is slain.

The task of bringing the revolt against social stratification and uniform regulation of life from restricted forestdwelling communities to the masses awaited two leaders of thought of the sixth century B.C. They hailed not from the class of priests and scholars but from that of warriors and rulers. They were Jina ***Mahāvīra Vardhamāna*** and Gautama Buddha. Though both have gained recognition as founders of two important religions, namely Jainism and Buddhism respectively for each preached a Path of Deliverance, their experiments as social reformers with specific views on ideal social models merit discussion in reviewing the evolution of Utopian concepts in the Indian sub – continent.

Both urged that personal conduct rather than birth should determine one's caste, meaning, of course, the traditional recognition and privileges of each caste. While ***Mahāvīra*** said, "By one's actions one becomes a Brahman, a ***Kṣatriya,*** a ***Vaiśya*** or a ***Śudra***", the Buddha emphasized

> Not by birth is one a Brahman
> Not by birth is one an outcast
> By action does one become a Brahman
> By action does one become an outcast

In order to drive the point home, they both called anyone irrespective of his circumstances of birth, who attained the peak of holiness a Brahman.

On the second aspect of a uniformly regulated life of an individual, both ***Mahāvīra*** and Buddha advocated entering at any age the religious or spiritual life of poverty, celibacy and renunciation and thus skipping the stages of house – holder forest – hermit.

The social order which they proferred had a strong ethical base, but without the postulation of allegiance to or dependance on a Godhead as its source. In both systems the human being was the centrepiece. That of ***Mahāvīra*** demanded rigorous adherence to a stringent code of ethics characterized by unwavering commitment to non – violence, renunciation, and strict asceticism. The attitude of neutrality without desire or aversion to objects of the external world prompted the more pious followers even to abandon their clothes and go about naked as well as to uphold suicide as

permissible if asceticism was too hard to practice.

If the rigour of ***Mahāvīra's*** moral code made it somewhat exclusive, his contribution to the theory of knowledge was a unique proposition that all knowledge is only probable, relative or conditional and any statement is true only hypothetically under certain conditions. Called ***syād-vāda*** (literally, may – be theory), it reflects a Utopian concept of an unprejudiced, open mind which should be ready to perceive the truth even between apparently self –contradictory statements.

Founded on what the Buddha called the Middle Path, his ethical idealism required that mortifying asceticism and over – indulgence in sensual pleasure be both avoided in an effort to purify the mind of greed, hatred and ignorance. Applying this concept to the day-to-day life of the laity, the Buddha advocated a social order built on rights and obligations.

In the ***Sigālovāda-Sutta***, he went to the extent of listing five obligations which each member of the following six pairs owed the other: child and parent; pupil and teacher; wife and husband; friend and friend; servant and master; and layman and spiritual guide. He conceived of an ideal society where each one knew and fulfilled what he owed the other. For example, the husband owed the wife (i) respect, (ii) courtesy, (iii) fidelity, (iv) recognition of her authority and (v) gifts of ornaments and raiments; in turn, the wife was obliged to (i) perform her duties well (ii) be hospitable to kin of both, (iii) be faithful, (iv) protect and use economically what he earns, and (v) be skillful and industrious in discharging all her business. The master's duties to his servants were similarly listed as (i) assigning work according to ability, (ii) supplying food and wages, (iii) tending in sickness, (iv) sharing unusual delicacies, and (v) granting leave at times; and the servant was expected to (i) rise before the master, (ii) go to sleep after him, (iii) be content with what is given (iv) do their work diligently and (v) spread his praise and good name. Such a social order founded on mutual obligations and reinforced by such principles as the freedom of the individual and the non–recognition of privileges of birth or caste, was preached for all and sundry who did not or would not renounce lay – life in favour the rigorous other-wordly concentration of spiritual effort as a monk or a nun.

At the macro – social level, the Buddhist texts speak of an ideal golden age in the distant past, when prevailing standards of moral propriety precluded the need for kings and government or even private property or boundary marks or fences (***Aggañña-Sutta*** and ***Brāhmaṇadhammika-Sutta***). Gradual degradation resulting in deceit and theft necessitated all these and the first king was democratically elected as "the Great Chosen". Thus is explained the evolution of contemporary society with all its foibles and its institutions.

While a Utopian remedy for returning to the lost golden age does not figure, ample didactic counsel is given to evolve a better society. The emphasis, again, is on ethical principles. An ideal king must possess the ten royal qualities of generosity, moral conduct, sacrifice, honesty, gentleness, asceticism, non-anger, non-violence, forbearance and non-oppression. A community guaranteed its stability by assembling for consultation in harmony, doing their business in harmony and dispersing in harmony; not introducing revolutionary laws or breaking away from established conventions; honouring and obeying elders; respecting and safeguarding the womenfolk; performing spiritual obligations; and by allowing free access and facilities to saints and holy persons. An individual gained merit not only from religious observances but also from services to fellow—beings like providing roads and water supply, shade trees and resthouses, medicine and food. The protection of the old and the very young was equally enjoined.

It is noteworthy that the Buddha did not confine himself to the mere promulgation of an ideal social order. He actually experimented with one. The ***Sangha***, of course, was a monastic organization and monastic vows which its members observed made it possible for the Buddha's Utopian social values and norms to be applied. These values and norms are to be implied from the constitution, the organization and the practices of the Sangha.

It was a community open to all those who had neither physical nor social disqualifications. Along with the sick and the disabled were excluded those who were indebted or encumbered by service due to the state. The admission was in two stages; an ordination followed by higher ordination; the latter was not permitted until the candidate was twenty years of age. Higher ordination was marked by an obligatory return to lay clothes so that the return to the Sangha was a voluntary act of a discerning adult.

A prescribed quorum of qualified members had to be present for admission as well as all other decisions which the Sangha took. Precedence among members was decided by date of entry and not by caste, rank or other distinction. In fact, one lost one's caste identity on entry to the Sangha as – in the Buddha's own words – "rivers merged in the ocean and were no longer known by their names". Rules, along with prescribed penalties for every form of transgression, governed the conduct of the members in such detail as to encompass even such matters as table manners and disposal of human waste. Celibacy being obligatory, relations between sexes was regulated with minute attention to numerous aberrations.

Decentralized into democratically managed self-contained local units, the Sangha made it decisions through a process of arriving at a consensus with the aid of selected negotiating groups in the event of even a single dissenting voice. Every motion was presented to the assembly thrice and voted upon.

Procedures were prescribed for revision of a wrong or invalid decision.

What re-emphasized the egalitarian structure of the Sangha were the rules on ownership of property. Every gift –and that was the only form of revenue originally as its members neither earned nor engaged in economic pursuits –was received collectively and held in perpetuity in the name of the Sangha. Hence none had any private possessions. One's personal articles of use at death or disrobement reversed to collective ownership to be redistributed to others according to need.

The continuity of practices was maintained by fortnightly meetings of local units where the members confessed and atoned for their transgression of rules and collectively committed themselves to the observance of the 227 (according to the Southern Buddhist tradition) or 250 (according to the Chinese tradition) rules of conduct. The elaborate procedures and over – regulation of behaviour made the Sangha a social model which only the most highly motivated would adopt. Thus, though the Sangha continues to exist and thrive after over twenty-five centuries though with some relaxations in original rules, it could never be model for wider applicability to lay society. But many of its elements have been emulated by later Hindu institutions such as the Maths of ***Śankara*** (12th century) . ***Ārya Samāj*** of ***Dayānanda Sarasvati*** (19th century) and the missions of ***Rāmakrishna and Vivekānanda*** (19th-20th centuries.)

In the unique experiment of Emperor Asoka (circa 272 - 232 B. C.) to evolve and implement a humane socio-political system for the largest empire ever to exist in the Indian sub-continent, one observes the application of the Buddhist ethical principles for a practical purpose. His concept of ***Dharmavijaya*** (conquest by righteousness) was founded on a series of significant assumptions : (i) for the emperor, all his subjects were his progeny and their welfare in this life and after was his primary concern ; (ii) society needed to be guided by a simple code of ethics comprising such obligations as respect and obedience to parents, elders and religious teachers ; proper treatment of employees and servants ; and the practice of non-violence, truthfulness, gentleness and the like ; (iii) inter-religious tolerance, characterized principally by the avoidance of disparaging criticism of another's faith was indispensable as the spirituaity of every faith had a contribution to make to the development of a moral society ; and (iv) the entire state administrative structure has to be utilized for this purpose and the emperor himself had to set the example by day-long diligence.

Emperor Asoka's efforts, as revealed by nearly two hundred inscriptions so far discovered, concentrated on the two strategies of convincing the people through admonition and issuing decrees and orders. Preferring the firts, he utilized the existing educational processes to propagate his principles and supplemented them by appointing a new cadre of officers who were

particularly enjoined to undertake regular supervisory tours and by inscribing edicts and instructions on rocks and stone pillars. His decress banned animal sacrifice and the killing of a number of beasts and birds, listed in what could perhaps be the world's oldest list of endangered species to be protected. (Pillar Edict V). He reformed the judicial system to ensure leniency and impartiality. While capital punishment was not abolished, every condemned person received a reprieve of three days so that an appeal against the verdict could be filed or else religious ceremonies to prepare him for his destiny could be performed. The emperor, himself, announced his readiness to receive reports at any time during the day or the night.

Asoka's socio-political system had operated successfully for at least two decades as we have an evaluation recorded in his twenty-eighth regnal year. (Pillar Edict VII). But the empire itself declined and was dismembered almost immediately after his demise. Was it because its foundation was Utopian? This is a question for which historians have yet to unravel an answer.

In the Indian sub-continent, no thought disappeared. It sprang again and again in diverse combinations and merged into the rich storehouse of popular consciousness as exemplified by proverbs and aphorisms, gnomic and didactic verses and narratives and fables. These developed over the centuries alongside scholarly treatises which the learned composed on each of the traditionally identified goals of life. Works like ***Vatsyāyana's Kāmasūtra*** sought to perfect an art of love to achieve the goal of ***Kāma*** or sensual enjoyment. Kautilya's ***Arthaśāstra*** was a manual on statecraft and economic pursuit – both public and private – for the second goal of ***artha*** or economic prosperity. The treatises on duties and obligations comprise a voluminous library of ***Gṛhya Sutras*** and ***Dharmaśāstras***. Innumerable are the works – Vedic, Jaina, Buddhist, Hindu – whose goal was spiritual redemption.

Popularized and presented in easy doses – usually sugarcoated in metre and figures of speech – many a Utopian concept of the Indian sub-continent figures in lyrical poetry and fables. ***Bhartṛhari*** (circa seventh century) would thus bring out three anthologies each of a hundred verses on love and eroticism (***Śṛngāra***),renunciation and moral conduct (***Vairāgya***) and on practical polity (***Niti***).

It is in regard to polity, that one encounters a farreaching initiative in evolving a Utopian system of concepts and instructions, designed expressly for the education of young princes. The fable in which animals speak and act was the chosen vehicle. Politics and the practical conduct of everyday life formed the content of the advice given under the headings: acquiring friends; disrupting friendships; causing dissension; and appeasement. The polity which emerged from these fables was quite amoral. It embodied the concept that end justified the means and the king's survival was paramount to all other considerations. Neither egalitarianism nor a strictly moral foundation

of rights and obligations could figure in such a socio-political model.

This very briefly is a fleeting review of the evolution of Utopian and egalitarian traditions in the Indian sub-continent. These traditions influenced the development of different socio-political models all over Asia for over well nigh two millennia.

It must, however, be noted that China had its own Utopian traditions long before Indian influences reached it. "The way of the ancient kings" which Confucius (circa 551-479 B.C.) unfolded in his ***Analects*** developed the conception of moral goodness (***jen***) and of the ideal – that is, perfectly moral – man (***Chun-tzu*** literally the princely man). Lao-tzu's collection of paradoxical aphorisms, ***Tao-teh-ching***, presented the model of a "do-nothing" (***wu-wei***) sage-king who took the side of weakness instead of strength. Propounding further the concept of the sage-king, who was compared to a physician curing a sick man, Mo-tzu (circa 480-390 B.C.) upheld the advance of worth and employment of ability and advocated a doctrine of universal love. The interactions among traditions which stemmed from these were further enriched by the introduction of Indian thought. It was precisely the same to the west of the sub-continent. Ferdowsi's ***Shab-nameh*** (circa 1010) attributed to ancient Persian kings long and profound discourses on polity and morality which bear the evidence of strong Indian influence.

In this manner, have the Utopian and egalitarian traditions of the Indian sub-continent made a lasting contribution to the moral consciousness of humankind.