

BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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India has immensely enriched the mankind with moral values and ethical codes from the time immemorial through their philosophers and visionaries; of these, the contribution of Buddha is most remarkable in the field of Human Rights.

Human Rights, as we find today, is not seen in Ancient Indian Literature. The reason behind this is that these rights were submerged with the moral duties of the man and has been termed as *Dharma* which is synonym of both religion and moral duties of man for upholding and safeguarding the dignity of fellow beings. To see the Human Rights exclusively in the light of modern interpretation is a recent trend of human civilization. Although we don't find specifically any discourse of Buddha mentioning Human Rights as a separate entity but still we find strong undercurrents of Human Rights' consciousness in the discourses of Buddha as gleaned from early *Pali* texts.

To proceed further, first let us clarify what the modern interpretation of Human Rights generally means. In simpler terms whatever adds to the dignified and the free existence of a human beings is regarded as the Human Rights. Evolution and crystallization of the concept took a long time. Initially, there was confusion between the National Rights propounded by political philosophers in the bygone ages and the concept of the Human Rights. The later is an all encompassing one and with the coinage of this term - Rights of Expression and Thought, Right to Live, Right to Equality etc. were all assimilated in

the single term - 'Human Rights'.

The renaissance period of Europe impressed the emergence of the idea of Human Rights as common heritage or common language of humanity. Previously, philosophers such as Sophocles and Blackstone regarded Human rights as the 'gradual evolution' from the concept of Natural Rights. The documentation of Human Rights in a constitutional way is first seen in the *Charter of United Nations* which was adopted at San Francisco in 1945. Consequently, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was adopted by General Assembly of, U.N. in 1948. Today this Declaration is regarded worldwide as the saviour of Human Rights and Humanitarian Values. It reads as follows:

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world'.¹

In Buddhist context, we find that Buddhism as a philosophical position as well as moral way of life, has been concerned with spiritual salvation whereas Human Rights aim at natural salvation i.e. safety of the right of equality, dignity and freedom at worldly level. However, Buddhism does not talk of the imaginary idealism as misunderstood sometimes by some people. It is very much based on the experience of the day to day life.

Nearly all the *Buddha-Vachanas* strongly reflect His thrust towards humanism and

altruism, which has encompassed the dimensions laid by the modern Human Rights' concept.

It should be noted that Buddha always advocated the development of human values. He regarded compassion as the basic element of humanity. Instead of asking as a right, Buddha in his sermons preached the compassionate and selfless service towards mankind. He was also of the opinion that human dignity is not something which is asked for, or demanded from someone else, rather it should be inculcated and developed by the efforts of the man himself, as enumerated by Him as :-

Atta hi attano natho koho natho parosiya

Attanana sudantena natham labhati dullabham²

(One self is one's own master, who else there to master over you? By controlling of oneself thoroughly one can attain the rare mastership)

The doctrine of *Ahimsa* or Non-Violence to anybody is the need of anytime and is a major safeguard towards Human Rights, was the result of the Buddha's impact. None of the doctrines have the capability to serve the humanity as better as the doctrine of Rightful *Ahimsa*' propounded by Buddha. It is the greatest contribution of Buddha to world. In fact, what the world needs the most at present is the practice of the doctrine of "Rightful Non-Violence" i.e. *Samyak Ahimsa*.

He attacked all claims or superiority by birth and regarded all human beings as equal. Eulogizing the equal status of Human Rights, Buddha stands the first and foremost of all the mankind who had boldly discarded the time-old harassing disparity and discriminatory policy of caste system,

injustice with regard to creed, colour, sex and denomination etc. Since, all the tributaries having different sources of origin, after coming to ocean become the salty one and maintain no separate entity. Hence in the *Sangha* - the prince, the princess, the barber and the court women had the same equal status.³ The following verse also categorically support the above contention :

Na Jatahi na gottena na jacca hoti Bamano

Yamhi saccanca dhammo ca so suci so ca Bamano

Na Jacca vasalo hoti na jacca hoti Bamano

Kamma vasalo hoti kammana hoti Bamano⁴

(Not by matted hair, not by family, not by birth one becomes Brahmin; whoever is truthful and maintains righteousness, he is real Brahmin. Not by birth one becomes an outcast or Brahmin, but, by virtue of one's activities, oneself becomes an out-cast or a Brahmin).

Not only that, it a person feels false pride over his caste, wealth or origin and treats others as inferior to him he insults the basic human dignity and consequently declines in his life.

Jatitthaddho dhanatthaddho gotratthaddho ca yo nam

Sannatim atimanneti, tam parabhavoto mukham⁵

In fact, regard for human dignity is the basic social message of Buddhism. Each person is suggested to treat others just as he or she has love and attachment for oneself or himself.

yathaham tatha ete, yatha eto tatha aham

Attanam upaman katva, na haneyya na ghataye⁶

Buddha also condemned slavery in every form. According to him, human beings might be engaged for domestic service or elsewhere, but it was enjoined that they must be treated with as much consideration as a member of one's own family as regards their personal rights etc. He insisted on the employees' right to fair wages and conditions, regular holidays and free medical attention. A master should serve his employees in five ways :

- a) He should assign them work in proportion to their strength.
- b) He should give them due food & wages.
- c) He should care for them in sickness.
- d) He should share some luxuries with them.
- e) He should give them holidays at due intervals.

This is something that, we are still trying for. It is notable that it is a modern view regarding Human Rights and Buddha was talking it more than 2,500 years ago. The Buddhism-influenced societies even followed this ideology too.

The Right to Peace, which is one of the most important collective rights, has been prescribed by the Buddha who advocated the cause of World Peace and said that it can best be attained through the panacea of Universal Love and Selfless Service. It may be recalled that The Buddha paid the greatest head to the cause of peace. Buddhism is the greatest gift of India to World Peace. While all the religions seem to espouse the cause of peace, it is Buddhism alone which gives the greatest importance to the task of promoting peace in the mind of men no less than in the world outside.

The *Arya Ashtangika Manga* (Noble Eight-

Fold Path) which is usually summarised into three steps namely *Sila* (Morality), *Samadhi* (Concentration) and *Panna* (Wisdom) contains the message of altruism and Human Rights. It not only safeguards the rights of others but promotes the concept of human dignity also. *Sila* (physical as well as vocal) has been prescribed not for confined or individualistic application for a Buddhist monk, but it is to be exhibited through one's dignified behaviour towards others i.e. to promote the feeling of goodwill with others. *Samadhi* is defined as one-pointedness of moral mind :

Kusalacittassa ekagatta Samadhi⁸

Here the term 'moral' is noteworthy. Moral thoughts and actions are the result of moral roots namely *Alobha* (Sacrifices), *Adosa* (Friendliness or goodwill) and *Amoha* (Knowledge) for others, which clearly defines the promotions of modern concept of *Panna*.

Kusalacittasampayuttam Vipassanananam Panna⁹

In other words, wisdom is the insight knowledge associated with moral mind. A person who attains *Panna* acquires the quality of recognising reality as it is. As a result, he gets free from all sort of craving and attachment towards various things. This leads him to attain the state of complete or permanent bliss i.e. *Nibbana*. Such a person always thinks and does good and good only for others. He takes full care for others' right to freedom and dignity without any bias or expectation of return.

One notable thing about Buddhism is that it extends the Right to Live to all beings. It underlines the importance of Right to Live as a principle, not as a rule. Rules either break mankind or they break certain rules,

but principles become-a way of life. Since nobody has the capability of supplying life for the life and thus, 'Live and Let Live' remains the basic message of the Buddha as far as the term Human Rights is concerned.

In some aspects, Buddhism goes beyond the limit of so-called Human rights concept. For instance : *Metta* - Universal Loving and Kindness, *Karuna* – Compassion, *Mudita* - Selfless Joy and *Upekkha* - Equanimity, exceeds the limit of the spirit of brotherhood and thus encompasses the length and width of the concept of Human Rights.

The ethical principles of *Panchaseel* - the *summon-bonum* of Buddhist message found expression even in the domain of international political relations as the 'five principles of morality' enunciated by India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. The teachings of the Buddha are, therefore, as relevant today as these were more than 2,500 years ago. In fact, the *Majjhima Patipada* (Middle Way), the way of harmony, is the only hope for the mankind's future.

Here, we see that Buddhist thought has comparatively a wider spectrum of the concept of Human Rights than that of modern notion of Human Right. It can be

said as conclusion that though no civilization can be called perfect, however the influence of Buddhist Ethics dominated life in Asian lands and have contributed a lot as far as the modern view of the Human Rights is concerned. So in these days of worldwide indignity of man where man has become blind by the motives of self-interest and by cruel, insatiate greed, it is the need of time to follow the Buddhist concept of Human Rights and hence it is prudent to say:

Buddham Sharanam Gacchami

References :

1. Preamble, Universal Declaration of Human Rights
2. Kausalyayan, Bhadant Anand, Dhammapada, 'Attavaggo', verse -160
3. *Ibid*, 'Brahmanvaggo', verse -393
4. *Vasal Sutta*
5. Sehgal, B.P.S., Human Rights in India, p.242
6. *Ibid*, p.242
7. *Digh Nikaya*, 3-180
8. *Visuddhimagga*, -I,
9. *Ibid*, III

