

THE JUSTIFICATION OF HUMAN EXISTENCE: AN ETHICAL APPROACH*

BUDDHISWAR HALDAR

The world of twenty-first century is the world of crisis. Injustice, harassment, anger, violence are very common to our day to day life. Terrorism is the most important news item of newspaper, magazine, television, web-log etc. Human society, from the primitive Stone Age has reached the diplomatic world of today and occurrences of violence increase rapidly. We find everywhere social integration is hampered. As a result human welfare is at stake. The root cause of this undesirable violence is the absence of tolerance in admitting multiplicity in terms of race, caste, creed or religion and so on. So it can be said that if we can eradicate such feelings from the core of human mind, the occurrence of such unwanted cause can at least be restricted. Now, the question arises how to remove such feeling from human beings and how a human being's existence be justified in the society by performing good deeds or activities.

In Indian tradition it has been acclaimed that the assumption of birth as a human race is rare and it also depends on an individual's results of actions performed in this birth or in earlier birth. Such a birth would become in vain if he does not utilize his existence as a human being. Generally, a question may be raised: how and when does an individual think his existence justified in our society? The concept of existence is otherwise called *Sat* in Indian tradition. This concept has been interpreted in various ways in Indian tradition. Therefore, it depends on the nature of Reality realized by an individual and hence the subjective elements in understanding the same cannot be ruled out. It will be shown in the following pages that the Reality is of different types as realized by different individuals. The Reality realized by the Buddhists is

* Some portions of this paper have taken from my PhD dissertation, for which I am thankful to my supervisor Prof. Raghunath Ghosh.

different from that of the Jainas and *Advaitins* and hence, the concept of being is also changing.

It has already been said that the notion of being is, to some extent, subjective to an individual, which is evidenced from the following facts. To a section of people this justification of existence lies in the realization of self. It is said in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* that the thing, which cannot provide us Immortality, is taken to be non-existent one (*yenāhanāmnamṛtamsyāmtenāhamkimkuryāma*). The same picture is also found in the *Kathopaniṣad* where Nachiketā did not find justification of his existence in mere enjoyment of wealth etc. and hence to him self-realization alone justifies of his existence.

Again, the Jainas believe that the Reality is of the probable form (*syāt*). To them the term *syāt* is used in such context in the sense of relativity and their theory '*syādvāda*' may be translated as the theory of relativity. Reality or *sattā* has its infinite dimensions that are all relative and some of them are capable of being known. All the sentences depicting Reality are necessarily relative, conditional and limited. This is not self-contradictory on account of the fact that the real nature of Reality is indeterminate and complex and hence affirmation and negation of an object may be from a different standpoint. The absolute statement about the nature of Reality is erroneous. To them Reality is infinitely complex (*anantadharmātmakamvastu*) and it can allow all opposite predicates from different standpoints. It is real as well as unreal (*sadasadātmakam*). If it is viewed from the substance, it is real, universal, permanent and one. If it is viewed from a different mode, it is unreal, particular, momentary and many. The Jainas are in favour of quoting the story of the six blind men and the elephant. The man who touched the ear of the animal described elephant as a country-made fan. In the same way, the man touching the leg describes the same as a pillar. Another person who had realized only the trunk described it as a python etc. All the six persons were quarrelling among themselves regarding the real nature of an elephant, but a

person is noticing the parts of the elephant considering it as a whole. All philosophical differences are based on mistaking a partial truth as the whole truth.

Such type of Reality has also been admitted by the *Mādhyamikas* who think that the Reality is *śūnya* in nature i.e., indescribable (*avācya* or *anabhilāpya*) as it is beyond the purview of four categories of intellect (*catuṣkoṭivinirmukta*). It is Reality, which goes beyond existence, non-existence, both and neither. From the phenomenal point of view it means relativity (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and from the absolute point of view it means Reality (*tattva*). The Reality is indescribable because it is neither existent nor non-existent; the Absolute is indescribable because it is transcendental and no categories of intellect can be adequately describing it.

From the above standpoint it can be said that the Being or Reality is not of one type and hence it can be of any type depending on the ontological and metaphysical presuppositions of the believers. By way of rounding off the concept an effort has been made to show that some social and ethical background prevails behind the formulation of this concept. The same social and moral idea remains in the concept of *sat* as propagated by the Buddhists, *Naiyāyikas* etc. though it is not openly written or discussed in their philosophical or commentarial literature. Here an attempt is being made to throw some light on this aspect which seems to be apparently novel with the help of some arguments. In this connection different meanings of the term *sat* have been highlighted. It has also been pointed out that these meanings have some bearing social harmony and peace. In other words, the concept of *sat* is used in Indian tradition in the sense of *justified existence* as mentioned earlier.

Let us seek to clarify the concept of *sattā* from the Indian ethical point of view. An individual having *sattva* element may also be called *sat* in as much as the term '*sattva*' is derived from '*sat*' and hence, a balanced person can also be described in terms of *sat* as he possesses the balanced quality i.e., *sattva*. Let us try to understand the literal meaning of the term '*sat*'. The literal

meaning of it is 'existence' or 'that which exists'. One who is existent is called *sat*. It may be argued that each and every living being is existent and hence all the entire existent persons should be described as *sat* leading the non-availability of the negation of it. In reply, it can be said that a man who exists physically is not taken as *sat*, but a man who has justified his existence is called *sat*. If a man does not perform any work, good or bad, he is not at all known to others and hence his existence is not known to others or his existence is not justified in the sense that he has not made his existence *meaningful*. If a man is known to all and has made his existence meaningful by way of performing many social works, he is called *sat* or existent. Thus, a man may be remembered due to some actions having some positive value in the society is called as *sat* (existence). This *sattva* or *sattā* (existence) does not mean a man's mere physical existence.

It may be argued that a man may prove his existence negatively or positively. In other words, one may think to prove one's existence after performing many antisocial and immoral works. In this case can he be taken as *sat*? In reply it may be said such persons are negatively famous or negatively prove their 'existence' and hence, their existence should be denied for which they should be regarded as *asat*. A man may be remembered due to some actions having some positive value in the society or he may be so due to some works having negative value in the society. The former is *sat* while the latter is *asat*.

It follows from the above discussion that through the performance of various duties in various spheres of his (towards our family member, social member etc.) by way of performing good works like social welfare, service of mankind etc. our existence is justified and hence we are called *sat* who is otherwise known as honest. Let us try to understand the term '*satatā*', the Sanskrit-rendering of the term 'honesty', which is originated from the term '*sat*'. If my relative gives me an object for my use, it would be my sacred duty to enjoy the use of it in order to show honour to him and to his faith on me, but

not to destroy it. If I destroy the object without using, it is also a kind of dishonesty. In the like manner, our valuable 'existence' which we have got through natural courses should be made justified, failing which we may be charged as dishonest (*asat*) due to the misuses of our valuable property i.e. existence.

The Buddhists, I think, also believed in this concept of sat. They admit that an object is to be understood as sat if it has got some casual efficacy (*arthakriyākāritvam*). In other words, an object is sat if it has capacity to serve our purpose and to fulfil any action. On the other hand, the object which does not serve our purpose is called *asat*. The jar, pot etc. would come under the first category (i.e. sat) as they have got the above-mentioned capacity. The hare's horn etc. is called *asat* as they do not have such capacity.¹ I believe that this doctrine which is applicable to this epistemic world can be extending to other places. In other words, behind the formulation of the definition of sat or *asat* and coinage of the terms sat etc. there is functioning some idea related to social welfare and sense of morality, which needs some focus here. These Buddhist notions of sat may also cover an individual who is described as sat in the sense mentioned above. A man may be described as sat or *asat* after keeping his *arthakriyākāritva* by way of doing social welfare, adopting *maitrī* and *karuṇā* etc. or *anarthakriyākāritva* respectively in view. Just as an object having causal efficacy in the positive sense is sat in the true sense of the term. On the other hand, our existence which is not endowed with such causal efficacy or which is endowed with causal efficacy in the negative sense is called *asat*. Hence *sattā* or *asattā* of an object or of us is determined in terms of causal efficacy or non-efficacy respectively. To the Buddhists the human body is nothing but an object. As it is a body of human being, the *sattā* of it is determined in terms of causal efficacy connected with human value or social value, which leads him to the path of *maitrī* and *karuṇā*. Hence, the causal efficacy of human being is different, which is not expressed in an explicit way in Buddhists literature. The same idea can be traced when they described sat as

svalakṣaṇa or unique. Just as the causal efficacy of water lies in the object itself, but not in the word ‘water’, the causal efficacy lies in human being, but not in the name, race or caste etc. possessed by him. From this it is understood that an individual has to prove himself as *sat* by his own causal efficacy in the form of good works, but not through his name, race, caste etc.² Hence, the Buddhists have coined the term *kalpanā* in order to refer to this name, race etc. They have preferred to mention them as *kalpanā* or imagination on account of the fact that they have no value in proving a man *sat*. A man having unique character and free from imaginary attributes is self-luminous. A man is *svaprakāśā* and hence, he does not need to mention his name, father’s name, race etc. to make him famous or *sat*. If a person without doing any work related to the welfare of society claims himself as *sat* due to having his high post or high family etc. he is not taken as *sat*. In other words, a man who is self-luminous through his own auspicious deeds is *sat*. The view has found its echo in the religious poem composed by Kabir, which runs like this: “*Vadāhuyā to kyāhuyā jaisevadikhejur/ Pānthakochāyānāhi phallāge atidūr*”³

That is, what is use of being born in a high family? Just as big date-palm tree has no significance to the society in as much as it does not provide the travellers with shadow and the fruits exist in such a high place that they cannot be plucked by the social beings, a man born in a high society or having high education etc. is insignificant to the society if he does not engage himself in auspicious works like social welfare etc. From this it is known that a man proves himself really existent by way of doing such good works, but not through his birth in high family or race etc. In this situation an individual can maintain harmony between his own welfare and that of social members and thereby he becomes *sat*.

The same idea has been expressed by Bhartṛhari in the *śloka* of *Nītiśataka*, which runs as follows:

“Eke satpuruṣāḥparārthaghatakāh Svārthānparityajya ye/
Sāmānyāstuparārthamudyamabhṛtā Svārthā-virodhena ye,
Temīmānavarākṣakāḥparahitam Svārthāyanighnanti ye
Ye tughnantinirarthakam Parahitamtekena jānīmahe”//4

i.e. “There are some *satpuruṣas*, good people, who engage themselves in the good of others sacrificing their own self-interest; the *Sāmānyas*, the generality of people, on the other hand, are those who engage themselves in the good of others so long as it does not involve the sacrifice of their own self-interest. There are those others, the *Mānavarākṣakas*, a devilish man, who sacrifice the good of others to gain their own selfish ends; but alas, what am I to say of those who sacrifice the good of others without gaining thereby any good to themselves or to anyone else.”⁵

The *satpuruṣa* or good men have got their overwhelming goodness which is not at all vitiated by their selfish motive and hence they become glorified or they have glorified their existence. If they would engage themselves to serve their own self-interest without paying any heed to the welfare of others, they are not *sat*.

On the other hand, the people ‘who destroy others’ welfare in order to have more pleasure or comfort in their own lives are called *Mānavarākṣasas*, the devilish men or *asuras*. At this stage an individual tries to develop or satisfy his biological or physical needs, but fails to develop his morality though he has so called proper education. Due to lack of moral education a man dares to adopt unfair means in order to fulfil his own interest. Here self-interest is fulfilled sometimes at the cost of others’ life. Hence, this type of people is known as devil in the form of man. The person having this devilish attitude (*asuratva*) is called as ‘anti-social’ who fails to maintain harmony with the society or social needs. But this type of man can be transformed to *sattā* from the world of *asuratva*, the devilish attitude.

It is true that at present day society the melody is complete by lost due to having this devilish attitude in man and it can be regained if this attitude is removed. *Satpuruṣās* can be brought again. For this our nation’s moral health is to be improved. Swami Ranganathananda observes: “The moral health of

the nation entirely depends upon this immense group. Steadying itself by drawing inspiration from the small minority of the *satpuruṣa* group above it....the self- criticism which is evident in our nation today, and which is a sure sign of the basic health of our society will slowly generate the necessary moral forces to cure the nation of its present ailments. The ailment is a moral ailment and the remedy has to be a moral remedy. We all desire that our nation should be healthy; physically as well as mentally....Cynicism, self-centredness and utter unconcern for others are more deadly than the most deadly physical diseases and viruses that cause them; for they corrode the nation's resolve to be free, to be united and to march onward to progress. We cannot be blind to the fact that this disease has already invaded our body-political, including our youths. We have to take energetic measures to arrest the further progress of this disease and to eliminate it from the body politic. And the nation has to be alert thereafter to see that these deadly mental viruses do not invade our society again".⁶

The *Vedānta* philosophy can provide us some solution to such problem. It offers a wonderful idea to life and world and it teaches us "Oneness". It shows that diversity remains only in name and forms but not in actual Reality. Reality is one. This message of unity in the midst of diversity is very essential to have happy society without hatred, anger, violence and full of fellow feeling. According to Shankara, One and Absolute, i.e. *Brahman*, appears as many as the world. Due to the ignorance we cannot realize it. Whenever we overcome this ignorance, we can realize that this Absolute is imminent in all being and the world with its diversity vanishes. But this knowledge or realization of Absolute as Shankara told is not for all. Although the teachings of Oneness are very effective for social integration, classical *Vedānta* being abstract failed to attract ordinary people and to achieve such. Swami Vivekananda, a follower of *Vedānta*, brings a light on it the abstract living and a matter of strengthening everyday life. In his *Practical Vedānta* his abstract ideal offered the message of divinity of man, harmony of religious

and the unity and solidarity of humanity. His idea of “universal religion” is rooted in *Vedānta*. This idea of universal religion has been formed from the life and the teaching of his Master Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Sri Ramakrishna realised the harmony of all religion and the truth of essential unity of man’s spiritual life. Vivekananda spread this view and tried to train men about religious tolerance which may lead to broader mind to accept all religions as all religion make their way to same goal.

The Buddhists theory of being can again be substantiated in terms of its causal efficacy in the subsequent manner. A section of the Botanists believe and justify that each and every plant is medicinal on account of the fact that all the plants including the negligible ones have got some medicinal value. To them some plants may seem to be redundant so far as their causal efficacy is concerned at very outset. But ultimately they will prove their causal efficacy so far as their medicinal value is concerned. From this theory a decision can be taken that they have got places in the lap of Nature because they have some utility or causal efficacy either in the protection in the environment or in the protection of human beings. From that fact of their existence from the time immemorial it can be presumed that they have some contribution for the sustenance of this earth. Now-a-days the Zoologists also have properly realized the importance of the animals and insects for the protection of the environment. We now often come across with various Government organizations and projects like tiger project, crocodile project, etc. to save our assets in the forest (*banajasampad*). In fact, in lap of Nature nothing can be redundant. Had it been so, it would have been destroyed absolutely without keeping any trace in the earth or keeping any chance of their survival. Hence by the fact of their existence from a longer period of time it may easily be presumed or inferred that they have got causal efficacy for the protection of the environment and human being, which again reminds me the Buddhist phrase- *Arthakriyākāritvalakṣaṇam sat*.

Society is a process but not a product, a becoming and not a being. A social structure is sustained by moral law. A man's truly moral life would be a social life. Society is the field for the realization of the ultimate end. Thus, social order alone could bring the good of man, society and universe. In society, everyone has to offer his service directed to the welfare to the others. In terms of their welfare acts, all and an individual attempts to bring social reform. Since, social order is based on ethical values. Thus, society is the laboratory for moral and spiritual development of man. Whereas man is not to end as man, he is potentially and essentially divine and this divinity is to be realized by living a value-oriented life. The concept of value is in consonance with the inner ethos of Indian tradition, but it gives a new meaning to it. Thus, the practice of value gives us depth, power and purpose to experience.

Again, some moral principles can be applied in our daily life for the fulfilment of our needs and for the enrichment of our lives. These principles, if we practiced and implemented properly, can give rise to peace and harmony in society and can provide the younger generations with self-confidence, patience, universal-brotherhood, equality, freedom, courage, vigour strength and a broader outlook. Thus, a new model of revolutionary society is to consist of the goal of qualitatively better society and a peaceful world social order where welfare of all will be concerned of all and social norms shall prevail. It is the only revolutionary model that will help the world to protect of our environment and to obtain sustainable development, the only one that will bring about a peaceful world which will be governed by the norms and values and by a moral man and will be characterized qualitatively superior humane, social relationship. But, it will demand sacrifices and inner changes on the part of many of the people of the society.

From the above standpoints, I personally think in accordance with the Indian ethical standard as well as a human being, each and every human being that they should justify their existence by way of doing some good works or welfare acts, self-sacrifice to others by way of good superiority, they should be

broader in heart and attitude. So they can provide peace, solace and well-being to others. Thus, the people can remember them after their demise.

References:

1. *Sayanamadhava: Sarvadarśanasamgraha*, Bauddhadarsana, (with Hindi translation by Umashankar Sharma), Chawkhamba, Varanasi, 1964.
2. Dharmakīrti: *Nyāyabindu*, edit. C.S. Shastri, Chawkhamba, Varanasi, 1929.
3. *Donhawali*, p. 135, Basumati, Kolkata.
4. *Bharṭṛhari: Nitiśataka*, Verse no. 64, Nag Prakashaka, edit., Gopinath Bhattacharyya, 1989.
5. Swami Rangathananda trans. '*Eternal Values for Changing Society*', Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, Bombay, 1971, p. 580.
6. *Ibid*, p. 582.