

## INDIAN PERSPECTIVE OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF VOLUNTARY SERVICE

PURNIMA DAS

When we perform some work out of our own accord without being pressurized by other higher authorities or seniors or any other external force with a noble intention in mind, it is called a voluntary action. Normally a human being is inclined to perform some action if he has got some sort of cognition towards the conduciveness of what is desired (*iṣṭa-sādhanatā-jñāna*). This is a kind of desired action but not a voluntary one, if there is a narrow intention to perform some work connected with our own pathological interest. Each and every human being is involved in such action. In this context, there is no greatness and broadness in action and hence it, though voluntary, is taken as a self-chosen action for the fulfillment of one's mundane desire. In such cases there is no sense of service to the society.

The *Bhagavadgītā* and *Upaniṣad* teach us to have an inclusive attitude towards human society and nature. Otherwise, voluntary service towards society is not possible. The Upanisadic seers, though superior, do not neglect the inferiors who have not achieved the spiritual status. They always advised them to pass through the stages of passive, obedience and submissive studentship to attain such broadness. In order to maintain the social and individual peace they advised three things, the first of which is '*datta*' i.e. the injunction of being liberal and charitable to others which is followed by '*damyata*' i.e. 'resist yourself' from the passion of the sense-organs, pride etc. At last the attitude of compassion has been prescribed by the term-'*dayadhvam*' ('*damyata datta dayadhvam*'). From above it is proved that for being generous to other social beings by way of rendering voluntary service it is essential to control our internal enemies like anger, greed etc. which give rise the attitude of being compassionate to them. That is why; some education or training is needed to inspire others towards voluntary service.

The *Īsopaniṣad* says that the whole word is covered by self and hence one should not exploit others and should not be greedy with others properties ('*mā gṛdhah kasyasviddhanam*')<sup>1</sup>. This notion gives an impetus to an individual to adopt voluntary work as a vow. Such tendency does not arise if there is desire for exploiting others and for being greedy to others property. *Upaniṣad* again gives us the message of 'enjoyment through renunciation' ('*tyaktena bhujīthā*')<sup>2</sup>. One should not enjoy one's life after confining oneself within but one can enjoy by sharing it with others. From this it follows that any type of voluntary sacrifice for others provides us a pure disinterested enjoyment or joy through sacrifice (*sevā*) which has no connection with our mundane life.

The *Upaniṣad* further teaches us to adopt what is 'good' (*śreyah*), but not 'pleasant' (*preya*). To exploit others, to be greedy towards others properties etc. may

seem to be 'pleasant' for us but not 'good.' That which brings universal welfare is called 'good' (*śreyah*). On the other hand, the factors serving narrow interest of an individual is *preya* or pleasant.<sup>3</sup> Those who can see all beings in his own self and self in all beings cannot hate others (*'yastu sarvāni bhūtāni ātmanyevānupaśyati/sarvabhūteṣu śatmānam tato na vijugpsate'//*).<sup>4</sup> If some one voluntarily donates his blood for saving of others or any other voluntary works, it is to be taken as 'good' as opposed to 'pleasant' attainable through the performance of actions meant for fulfilling our narrow interest. Hence, voluntary service is always glorified in Indian tradition.

If someone thinks others as separated from him, he cannot provide voluntary service to them. When he looks at others as his own self, he cannot think them as separated from himself and hence there does not arise of hating others or being fearful from others. It is hinted in the *Pāṇinian Sūtra - 'Dhruvamapāye'pādānam'*.<sup>5</sup> One can be fearful from others, if one thinks oneself separated from others (*'bhītrārthānām bhayahetuh'*). If non-separated, he attains a feeling of identity with them, which is beautiful in the sense of *suṣamā* ('perfect balance'). If the situation is otherwise, it is unequal or the stage of disbalance (*viṣama*) leading to the idea of alienation. That is why, a self-knower is called a 'fearless man' (*abhīh*). This situation is very essential or favorable for performing the voluntary service.

Those who are engaged in doing welfare of others are called *dhārmikas* in the true sense of the term. The qualities that make a man's life meaningful are called *sadguṇas*. The *Mahābhārata* endorses that all these have to be obtained for the development of complete humanity. The forgiveness (*kṣamā*), steadiness, non-violence, equality, truth, non-miserliness (*akārpaṇya*), sense of obligation or shamefulness (*hrī*) etc. are included in the *sadguṇas*.<sup>6</sup> From the inclusion of *akārpaṇya* among the *sadguṇa*-s it is presumed that, if an individual thinks of his own self-interest ignoring that of others, it is due to his narrowness in attitude called miserliness (*kārpaṇya*), which again indicates the lack of sacrifice. Selfishness or miserliness is attitude the lack of sacrifice. Selfishness or miserliness is described as a fault countering the human nature in the *Bhagavadgīta* (*kārpaṇyadoṣopahatasvabhāva*). The performance of sacrifice is the only way to prosper. Just as a man gets whatever he needs from a mythological cow (*kāmadhuk*),

a man can have all desired object through sacrifice. Hence the term *prasavidhvam* i.e. prosper can be taken in the sense of both this worldly and other worldly prosperity. If the selfish attitude is strictly adhered to, the idleness may grasp us. Moreover, one who enjoys something from others without giving them any thing in return is a thief '(*apradāyaibhyo yo bhunkte stena eva sa*)'<sup>6</sup>. Hence, sacrifice for others is an essential quality of a human being, which is reflected in the voluntary activities.

In conclusion, it can be said that humanity in a human being is revealed through his selfless voluntary action, which is called service or *sevā* towards the social beings. It should also be borne in mind that there is a gulf of difference between mercy or *dayā* and sacrifice or *sevā*. In the former there is the expression of ego of an individual. For, an individual who is merciful to others is said to be superior and the persons to whom mercy is shown is considered as relatively inferior. In order to avoid such complication among human beings the term service or *sevā* has been taken into account. In serving others no question of superiority comes into being and hence *sevā* is always glorified in Indian culture. Let us take a vow to serve other social beings or downtrodden people voluntarily to honour our humanity.

In the *Bhagavadgīta* sacrifice (*yajña*) which is included in the divine qualities is taken as the essence of ethical life. Without the sense of sacrifice an individual cannot think of serving others. In a society there can be harmony if each and every social being does not sacrifice for others. A real well being is possible if each and every social being finds some value in *achieving his own end* as well as *getting that of others*. Here lies the question of sacrifice. The self is a social being and cannot sustain itself without social help. In this way, it can be said that the world is a systematic unity in which there is no gap between self and society. All these are interconnected. Sacrifice or *Yajña* is only a grateful offering made by the *Jīva* as the moral self to the universe for what it has received from it in its psycho-physical make up. It is a fact that one should perform duty to the ancestors (*pitryajña*), celestial world (*devayajña*), material world (*bhutayajña*), society (*nryajña*?) and preceptors, because each of them is essential for our existence.<sup>7</sup>

Divinity and human effort, moral and economic value, even desire unopposed to morality (*dharmāviruddho kāmah*)<sup>8</sup>, sacrifice for the human (*nryajña*) and non-

human world (*bhūta-yajña*) etc have been shown for leading a peaceful and harmonious life in present day society. In the society each and every one is dependent on other from the morning to dusk and hence one should remain obliged to them. This sense of obligation goads him to do some service towards him in return and in this way reciprocal love and respect among all human beings becomes possible. If the sweepers or other persons doing some so called inferior work in the society go on strike, nobody can remain in the society, which makes us understand that all activities and the performers of such activities are to be taken as sacred. If it is realized then an individual being who is benefitted by their service must repay his indebtedness to them through service. This phenomenon is called ‘sacrifice to mankind’ (*nṛ-yajña* or *nṛ-ṛṇa*). Human beings in the society are meant for themselves as well as others. If the cultivators do not till their land, if the shop-keepers close the shutters, others would not be able to survive in a society in spite of having sufficient money and property. In the same way it can be easily opined that without the active cooperation of the animals and plants our environmental balance would be at stake. Environment is protected by both the worlds that are called *bhūta*-s and our indebtedness towards them is called *bhūta-ṛṇa*.<sup>9</sup> Rabindranath Tagore has seriously felt the necessity of the plant and animal world for the protection of the earth. He feels that flowers get blossomed in the forest. But in order to enjoy the beauty of the flowers we need an enjoyer who is nothing but bird. Hence the birds should be taken back to the forest from the remote sky (“*Bane yadi phuḷo kusum nei kena sei pākhī nei kena/ Kon sudūrer ākās hate ānbo tare dāki//*”). If our indebtedness is not repaid to them, they must take revenge of the same leading to various natural disasters like earth-quakes, global warming, and tsunami etc. That is why; a time has come to protect them in the earth to save ourselves and hence various forestation programmes, wild-life sanctuary, protection of wild-born property (*banaja-sampad*) etc have been done very seriously by private and public sectors. In the *Bhagavadgītā* such indebtedness is called sacrifice or *yajña*, but not *ṛṇa*. But we believe that the indebtedness towards a particular community may be repaid only through sacrifice towards them. The term ‘*yajña*’ is to be taken in the sense of sacrifice. Whatever service is rendered to them from whom we are benefitted is a kind of sacrifice to them which is metaphorized as a *yajña*. In the same way, we can repay our indebted to our fore-fathers (called *pitṛ-yajña*) from whom we have come into being, to our seers (called *ṛṣi-yajña*) who are

our lineage and deities (*deva-yajña*), the sources of our energy. In this way the Gītā and other texts ask us to repay personal and social our indebtedness to the concerned worlds. Though there is the glorification of social inclusion in our tradition, it gives us pain when we see the incidents like witch - killing, *Harijan*-killing, untouchability, bride-burning, exploitation in the name of caste, race, and separatism in the pages of newspapers and other electronic media. We must concentrate to the problems and try to remove the same through counselling, advertisement, highlighting our heritage and tradition.

References:

1. *Īśopaniṣad*-1/1
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Kāthopaniṣad*-1.2.2.
4. *Pāṇinisutra*-1.4.24.
5. *Mahābhārata, Virāṭparva*-6/20
6. *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*-3/12
7. *Ibid*-18/73
8. *Ibid*-7/11
9. *Ibid*-18/5