

SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY OF RĀMĀNUJA : ITS MODERN RELEVANCE

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Rāmānuja is an advocate of Viśiṣṭādvaita, and he developed his thought at the time when Buddhist '*sādhana mārga*' and, equally significant, '*Nirguṇa Brahman*' of Śaṅkara had almost banished the concept of God from the philosophical sphere. The philosophical thoughts of the Buddhist and that of Śaṅkara were too difficult to be comprehended by the general mass. Rāmānujāchārya, synthesized both the views on the ground of *bhakti*, and thereupon, developed a composite philosophy of love.

The basic tenet of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta is that there is only one reality *Brahman*, which is qualified with matter and soul. Matter and soul are not accessory to God, but the two are completely dependent on Him. Now, if everything is dependent upon Brahman, it seems there is no room for human freedom, and, thereupon, there is no social philosophy different from its ontology. In this paper we shall try to ascertain Ramanuja's position on these problems, and thereafter, trace its modern relevance.

Social philosophy in Vedāntian parlance, is known as '*lokāyana*'. Prof. S. L. Pandey has rightly defined *Lokāyana* as "...the '*ayana*' or movement of this *loka* in thought and reality from its natural state-of-affairs to its perfectly rational state-of-affairs."¹ The Vedāntian way of life, whether viewed from political point-of-view or social point-of-view, presents itself as an integrated course of duties and actions for the attainment of the spiritual ideal.

Every society has two aspects - a natural-cum-traditional aspect, and a man-made aspect. Prof. Pandey uses the term '*loka*' for the former aspect and '*samaja*' for the latter one². He argues, quite rightly, that *loka* is more comprehensive than society. In other words, *loka* comprises society as well. Societies are integrated

and disintegrated in the *loka*. However, *loka* is eternal. It is the bed-rock of all societies. This is for the reason that :

Creation is not out of nothing, but is only the transformation of the potential into the actual (*sat-karya-vada*). The effect is continuous with the cause temporally and logically, and does not contradict it, and by applying this rule to religion Vedantin concludes that by knowing *Brahman* everything is known. The real without a second wills to be many and becomes the world of name and form (*nama-rupa*) by its own inner creative urge.³

It is clear from the above lines that Rāmānuja's social philosophy is based on the *pariṇāmavāda*-form of *sat-kārya-vāda*. This world is a real transformation of its material cause, i. e. *Ishvara*, but is completely dependent on him. "In all of them there is the same *Brahman*, on which all are dependent for existence just as all gold articles are dependent on gold."⁴ Although the fabric of social order is eternal, the basic societal facts are individuals, as well as social groups. Social groups are based on their own norms, customs, rules etc, which are changing according to the changes in the lifestyles of its individual members. All these are always found to be inter-related. Rāmānuja, therefore, suggests a way of life pertaining to individual and social groups, both of which are equally important. The way of life, i.e. the social order in Vishishtādvaita, is a moral order. This sort of order is known as '*ṛta*' in the Vedas. It is manifested in the hierarchy of values *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*. These values compose the spectrum of *loka*.

The crux of all values is man's desire for the better. Although man is an embodied spirit but, as a member of the earthly and the temporal order, he cannot evade his responsibilities. Therefore, Ramanuja holds that the eternal truth, which forms the basis of the rule of conduct, must be realized in social and temporal terms. Hence, the correct understanding of the *loka* must be based on the community of values that determine the *loka*. Any partial or abstract view of values destroys the multi-faced base of social foundation.

Way to Liberation

According to Rāmānuja, individual soul on account of *avidyā* confines in a material body. It is, apparently, a degradation of the soul as its *dharmabhuta-jñāna* is contracted due to *avidyā*. Ramanuja has used the word '*avidyā*' in the sense of *varṇāshrama karmas*⁵, which bring about the contraction and expansion

of the *dharmabhuta-jñāna* of the individual soul. *Avidyā* creates a pseudo sense of agency in individual soul which, quite obviously, has adverse effect on the individual's attitude towards the world. The individual thinks himself to be the lord of the world. Subsequently, the whole and sole purpose of the world, according to him, is to cater various needs and comforts only. The false attitude towards the universe impels him to forget that *Ishvara* is the ultimate source of everything. he, thereby, considers himself to be the controller of the world. Thus, *avidyā* stands in the way of self-realisation and God-realisation, resulting into the individual's strong yearning for the ordinary pleasures of life. Anyway, *mukti* or release is a state when the individual is freed from *avidyā* and has the intuition of the Supreme.

Hence, the summon bonum of human life in Vedāntian social philosophy is salvation, which means dissociation of the self from all influences of *avidyā*. *Avidyā*, in fact, prevents the individual self from having a true knowledge of its free nature. In other words, liberation, for Rāmānuja, is permanent removal of all the obstacles which cause contraction in the *dharmabhuta-jñāna*. Therefore, Rāmānuja seems to attach importance to the performance of the vedic rites also, because vedic actions, too, help a man to realise the distinction between the immortal soul and perishable body. This is also *tattvajñāna*, although of a lower order. Higher type of *tattvajñāna* means full knowledge of true nature of the eternally free self, and this is attained through *bhakti* and *upāsana*.

Further, Ramanuja is of the view that devotion in co-operation with knowledge and action constitutes the means to reach the summon bonum of life. *Bhakti* consists of knowledge of the object of adoration, and intense affection and respect for the same. Complete self-surrender, which is the essence of devotion, becomes possible only when the individual realises his own nature, the nature of God and, also, the nature of his own relation to God. Not only knowledge, but, also *karma* (action) performed in a proper spirit is equally necessary for the awakening of devotion in the heart of man. It is the disinterested performance of *nityanaimittika karma* (daily and occasional duties) that purifies the mind of an individual and makes him fit for grasping the ultimate truth. Both knowledge and action are necessary forerunners of *bhakti*, and as such these are the contours of *bhakti*.⁶ When all scriptural duties are performed in the spirit of a servant of God one reaches the supreme goal without much difficulty. Thus, Rāmānuja holds that duties related to various *varnas* and *ashramas* should be discharged even by a wise man because *karma* contributes to *vidya* which means meditation on the

selfless devotion to God. In fact, regular discharge of duties in an attitude devoid of egoism, pride and arrogance is itself the worship of God.⁷ Therefore, *bhakti* or devotion constitutes the principal means, and knowledge and actions are its two essential non-separable auxiliaries.

Rāmānuja in his *Vedārtha-Samgraha* says that *Brahman* grants emancipation from worldly bonds to a person if and when he performs the ordinary obligatory and ceremonial duties, practices highest ethical virtues and attains true knowledge through the *shastras*. It is only when a man has, thus, qualified himself that he can ultimately attain emancipation from all worldly bonds through *bhakti* towards *Ishvara*. The special feature of *bhakti* is that by it a man loses all interest in everything else. Every action is done for the sake of *Ishvara*. For Ramanuja *bhakti* is not merely feeling but a special kind of knowledge, which seeks to ignore everything that is not for the sake of *Ishvara*.

Thus, Ramanuja has recognized a close connection between *bhakti* (devotion) and *jñāna* (knowledge). Knowledge is the base of *bhakti*. Knowledge not only produces *bhakti*, but it also enriches it. Love cannot spring forth in the heart of a man unless he knows the nature of the object he is going to love. So, knowledge is necessary for the emergence of devotion in the heart of an aspirant. Through *bhakti* the soul becomes more and more vividly conscious of its relations to God, and, at last, it surrenders itself to God. The complete resignation to God has been called "*prapatti*". When *prapatti* sanctifies the heart of a devotee, he at once surrenders his whole nature to God, and consequently, freedom from selfish desires, equal mindedness and love for all arise in his mind. Devotion is perfect in this stage, and forces of attraction and repulsion, friendship and enmity, pleasure and pain cease to affect him.

Through *prapatti* Ramanuja appears to be trying to open the gate of salvation even for the so-called low castes, and also to remain faithful to the spirit of Brahmaical religion. The path of *bhaktiyoga* was opened for the three higher castes which were allowed to study the scriptures and practice *vaidika* rites. The lower castes, who were debarred from *vaidika jñāna* and *vaidika karma*, could not adopt the path of *bhaktiyoga*. So, the path of *prapatti* was introduced for them in order to enable them to adopt *vaishṇava* customs. The goal is the same, the essential ingredients are identical. The only difference is that while *bhaktiyoga* is an approach through philosophical knowledge, action, love, and respect, *prapatti* is an approach to *Ishvara* through faith and selfless love accompanied with an

attitude of self-surrender and resignation.

Rāmānuja asserts that the so-called caste distinctions do not touch the nature of the soul. Caste distinctions belong to the bodies, and determine the duties which the individual owe to the society. Moreover, Ramanuja has also made provision for the liberation of the persons who have committed great sins. Such persons may have recourse to the *prapatti* method. If a man succeeds in offering himself sincerely to God, the sins of his past criminal actions shall be wiped out. There is neither scripture, nor any rule for one who has deep devotion. In this way Rāmānuja preaches equality in worship, and proclaims that *bhakti* transcends all distinctions.

Karma, Freedom And Responsibility

We have seen in the last section that *avidyā* veils the real nature of the self. The removal of the veil of *avidyā* is possible through the path of *bhakti*, which consists of knowledge and action. But it is solely dependent upon the individual will to either select the path of liberation, or to suffer in the cycle of birth and death.

Ishvara allows individual souls to perform actions according to their own free will. But the fulfillment of the desires of the soul are possible only through the approval of *Ishvara*. Nevertheless, *Ishvara* does not interfere in individual's act, and, thereby, does not limit his freedom. If one desires to do bad actions, God allows one to act accordingly, although such desires takes one farther away from God. On the other hand, He is favourable to those who are specially attached to Him. Hence, we see that, although the choice of desires are determined by the character of the individual, desires become effective through the grace of God. In other words, God gives the fruits of actions in accordance with the *adrishṭa* of the individual. Thereupon, desires are determined by individual's own deeds or *adrishṭa*. *Adrishṭa* is unconscious, and, thereby, unable to function itself. It requires to be controlled by a conscious agent. So God is the controller of *adrishṭa*. An individual, therefore, has freedom for selecting his own line of action. But when such actions are performed and, consequently, the *adrishṭa* of the individual is formed, he is liable to reap the fruits of his actions. Hence, individuals are themselves both, masters and slaves of their own acts. They (i.e. individuals) are the masters of *knyamana karmas* (actoins done in the present life) and a slave of the *prarabdha karmas* (past actions which have started bearing fruits). Since *prarabdha karmas* bear fruits under the supervision of God. the kind of pleasures

and pains that an individual will undergo (due to his *prarabdha karmas*) is to be determined by God.

Though the law of *karma* is immutable, still there is the scope of free will and actions. Explaining this position Surma Dasgupta in her book *Development Of Moral Philosophy In India* says:

Our life is pre-destined in one sense, it is being determined by the actions in the previous existences, not only our success and failure, happiness and sorrow, but our mental attitudes also are, to some extent, shaped and fashioned by past impressions. But still we are free in our will and effort which we can direct in the direction of liberation. Determinism here is nothing but self-determinism. We are sub-ordinate to no other agency but ourselves. It is our own actions which have woven in and out the present network of our existences, and we are spinning out our future.⁸

Indeed, God is the necessary cause for the performance of every action by the individual but the special cause is the individual himself who is performing the action. An action is done when both the causes are present - God and the individual. If *adrishta* does not determine one's present action, if all actions done by an individual are mere actualisations of God's wishes, then *Jiva* will be relieved of its responsibility, and, therefore, there will be no reason why an individual should receive punishment for such action which are really the wishes of God. It has been explicitly stated that the diversities of experiences undergone by different individuals are due to their own past deeds. So a *Jiva* is both free and dependent upon God's will.

Traces Of Modern Social Philosophy

Ramanuja's recognition of *varnashrama* duties illustrates that he recognised social life as an organic whole in which each member is tied with another in an indissoluble tie. Though an individual is predominantly responsible for his own good or bad actions, he shares the collective responsibility for the good of others and of society as well. It is always due to our actions that we enjoy and suffer. But we also suffer or enjoy in consequence of the actions of others.

The sense of collective responsibility has been emphasized by the law of *karma* which granted equality to all beings, as caste was determined by *karma*. According to it, a person not only experiences happiness and sorrow, as

consequences of his own action, but has always the chance of regeneration to a higher and better life by his own efforts. Hence, we find that the fundamental concepts of social ethics are traceable in the theism of Ramanuja, as we find in it the desire of freedom from sorrow, the sense of justice and the possibility of the attainment of spiritual goal. Social philosophy does not seek merely the happiness of this life, but also a purpose of life. This purpose has been clearly emphasized in the form of *moksha*.

Further, we find the notion of justice, which is the basic concept of social philosophy, synthesised with the law of *karma* in Ramanuja's thesis. However, due to the craving for spiritual enlightenment, the concept of justice did not take the shape of retribution. It has emerged into a reformative outlook as sympathy and mercy for all. It seems that, for social stability and maintenance of order, the concept of justice was ingrained in human mind as an internal moral principle. It has a great social significance as it is concerned with the maintenance of each other's rights in the society and mutual relations. In this sense it is closely allied with the notion of equality. Recognition of rights for oneself implies the same in other and, therefore, to treat others as one's equal. Hence, the concepts of justice and equality are traceable to the emphasis on emotions of the mind, such as pity and love. One recognises human dignity and feels compassion for the distressed, and wishes that they should come upto a better situation. Thus, the proper course of action suggested by Ramanuja is not only to help the distressed, but also to provide opportunity for all to attend the basic needs of life. He has recognized divinity in all men and, thereby, tried to give them equal platform, which means that they should be given equal opportunity and treated with respect. Theist's emphasis on deep emotion and love for God sweeps away all considerations of self interest. The devotee melts into sweetness and adoration for *Ishvara* with all the force of his life and love. He does not enquire whether he has received just treatment from God or not, but wishes greater advantage to the weaker. Therefore, conquest of passion and attachment is a solution for the miseries of life, according to Ramanuja.

Moreover, Ramanuja is of the view that life has to be lived as a harmonious development of one's character towards a moral goal. The ideal is *moksha* or liberation. It is held to satisfy the longings of human mind for a spiritual ideal which is beyond the world, above the ordinary level of existence.

Conclusion:

To sum up, the social philosophy of *vishishtādvaita* has crossed the boundary of caste system, and embraced the whole humanity. It has also recognized the diversity in man's approach towards the realisation of Reality. although it preaches a proper life of feligion which belongs to the eternal order, still human beings as members of the earthly and the temporal order, cannot evade their responsibilities. The eternal truths, which give us sovereign rules of conduct for our lives, have to be realised by us on this very earth. This is not possible unless we have faith in an inner order. Hence, we find that Rāmānuja has tried to revive society on the grounds of universal salvation and equality. In the process of social restructure, the importance of the lowest of the low has been recognized. The whole system was designed to unite the heterogeneous population of India and, thereby, the whole world in one spiritual bond. In this attempt he has been successful enough as it suits the composite culture of mankind even today.

NOTES

1. S. L. Pandey, *Vedantic Social Philosophy*, (Allahabad Darshana Peeth, 1988) p. 26.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 27
3. P. N. Srinivas Chari, "The Vedanta-The Vaishnava (Theistic) Schools," *History of Philosophy Eastern and Western*, ed. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan (George Allen and Unwin Ltd. London, 1957), pp.312-13
4. Ramanuja, *Sribhashya*, quoted in S. C. Chatterjee & D. M. Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy* (University of Calcutta, 1968), p. 414.
5. *Atra avidyā śabdena vidyeta dvarṇasramacārādi purvoktain karmochyate* - see Ramanuja, *Vedārtha - Samgraha* (Lazarus & Company), p. 150
6. Ramanuja, *Yatindramatadipika* (Anandashrama Mudranalaya, Poona, 1934), Chapter VII, pp. 61-62
7. *Sribhashya*, quoted in Anima Sen Gupta, *A Critical Study of the Philosophy of Ramanuja*, (The Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, Varanasi, 1967), p 131
8. Surama Dasgupta, *Development of Moral Philosophy In India* (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 1994), p.43.