

Human Rights or Human Duties?

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'Rights' imply exchange process whose direction is from others unto me. 'Duties', on the other hand, reverse the flow in terms of from me unto others. Sustenance of human values, ethics and morals in human society is an important goal; the duties leading to rights or from-me-unto-others sequence are decidedly a more effective and meaningful educational philosophy to follow and from the viewpoint of spiritual psychology, duty-mindedness offers an even deeper personal contribution.

It had been reported in *The Statesman* (July 1, 1998) that a certain state government will impart 'Human Rights Training' to police personnel. The Human Rights Commission will help in this effort. This is an encouraging and innovative step in making police personnel more sensitive to the minimum ground rules for people in their charge. However, we would have thought 'Human Duties Education' to be intrinsically a more sound and mature approach to the problem. We are strangely insensitive to the vital distinction between 'training' and 'education'. The police (and many others) have to be 'trained in skills' for their respective special tasks. But you cannot train for duties. For this we need to have education in values/duties. Let me elaborate.

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'Rights' imply an exchange process whose direction is from others unto me. 'Duties', on the other hand, reverse the flow in terms of from me unto others. The question is: Between these two directions which one is more sound for organizing human affairs? It seems pretty evident that all traditional, stable and enduring societies and institutions have preferred the duties option to the rights option. Why?

We offer two hypotheses. First, both the cultivated rishi-mind and the natural intuitive mind in the days of yore had proceeded to interpret the lower from the viewpoint of the higher, the phenomenal from that of the monumental, the mundane from that of the mystic, the natural from that of the supernatural. That this indeed is the correct way to gain true knowledge and understanding has been asserted by Sri Aurobindo: "You must know the whole before you can know the part, and the highest before you can truly understand the lowest." This big-picture bent of theirs led them to intuit the law governing the working of supra-human (not merely material) cosmic agents in the universe, e.g., the sun, the wind, the water, the earth, the light. This intuited law was: All these work-symbols in the universal system embody the duty-orientation. Thus, the Cosmic Will, working through the sun, acts from a duty-motive. There is no assertion of rights here. The *swadharma* of the sun is to give heat and light and thus nourish all life. The major practical insight into this Cosmic process is, one of commitment to duty, responsibility. Questions about the Cosmic person, its love, etc., may be left out for the time being. What about human beings then?

The second hypothesis comes in here: The ancient lawmakers for society were acutely rational; they had realized vividly that duties done are the cause, and rights fulfilled are the effect. Parents doing their duty to control their ego and anger allow their children to enjoy their right to a congenial home. Bank employees doing their duty punctually behind the counter satisfy the depositor's right for timely encashment of cheques. Teachers doing their duty of devoted study and preparation ensure the right of students to learn the subject the way it should be. Doctors performing their duty to serve ailing people protect their right to good health. The owner of a business doing his duty to care for employees and their families beyond narrow contractual limits satisfies the right of employees to be treated as human beings and not just as a resource. Sons and daughters doing

their duties towards old parents preserve the latter's right for caring and company. When humankind does its duty to curtail its material greed, non-human Nature is able to sustain its right to survive. If I do my duty not to litter, the right of the other home is protected. If the rich—nations and individuals—do their duty of humble sharing, the rights of the poor will be naturally ensured.

Therefore, if sustenance of human values, ethics and morals in human society is an important goal, the duties leading to rights or from-me-unto-others sequence are decidedly a more effective and meaningful educational philosophy to follow. In the *Encyclopaedia of Applied Ethics*, (1998, Vol. 3, p. 875) the author offers a random list of 20 'rights', and ruefully comments 'that we seem to live in a world filled with rights' (Rights Theory). It is also remarkable that this encyclopaedia does not include any entry on 'Duties Theory'!

It seems reasonable to suggest that today's mounting din about rights from every quarter is due to two reasons: (a) Wanton dereliction of duties by relevant functionaries and institutions forcing the affected people to register their protest by openly emphasizing rights; (b) Rabble-rousing power-seekers who manipulate non-existent or irrelevant or harmful expectations and demand among different segments of the population. In all cases loud assertion of rights is only a reaction against the perception of either genuinely neglected duties or cleverly manipulated claims. Is it proper, in principle, to institutionalize this phenomenon of *reaction* in the form of Human Rights Day or Human Rights Commission? Is this not on the verge of barking up the wrong tree? Moreover, it seems much easier to gain cheap popularity or the status of a hero by inciting people for rights. Rare have been the heroes who became so by calling upon us to do our duties.

So we ask: Why not declare a Human Duties Day? Why not constitute a Human Duties Commission? They will prove our sagacity to synchronize the pulse of human society with the Cosmic Spirit of Duty. They will make us proceed in the correct sequence—from duties as cause to rights as effect. True, Sri Aurobindo says that "no such general thing as duty exists" (*Synthesis of Yoga*, p. 260). But then this is a remark which applies only to those very few who have gone beyond ethical and moral purification towards spiritual consummation. Sri Aurobindo also says, in the same breath, that duties "are of great value in

training the immature moral nature and setting up a standard which discourages the action of selfish desire” (p. 260).

In his treatise on *Karma Yoga* (*Collected Works*, Vol. I) Swami Vivekananda devotes a full chapter on duty. He accepts that like every other universal abstract idea, duty too is difficult to define precisely. But he adds quickly that duty can be understood well by knowing its practical operations and results. This is exactly what all the examples given earlier serve to illustrate. Each context, each network, each relationship offers a natural and relevant meaning of duty specific to it. And the bulk of our daily lives revolves around such transactions. Each role in society and organizations is actually an aggregation of duties expected of the person occupying that role. Whether we study the counseling session of Bhishma to the *Pandavas* and *Kauravas*, or the details of householder’s and king’s roles in the *Manusmriti*, it is always the portrayal of duties that reigns supreme. Rights are hardly ever mentioned. Mahatma Gandhi also has defined civilization as “that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty” (*Selected Works*, Vol. IV).

Such emphasis on duty for good social governance is perhaps the natural corollary of the Asiatic, Indian temper which has always seen the individual in the context of the whole—both societal and Cosmic. Not just living off, but living for the whole, without contradicting individual perfection, had been the persistent civilizational ideal in the East. Duty-based modelling of social relationships has, therefore, evolved as a practical scheme to fulfil this ideal. Our concern and feel for the whole can grow in the same proportion as our obsession with egotism can be curbed. That the duty to curtail raw egotism, self-centeredness and arrogance is the means for growing towards higher states of being is neither told or explained, nor understood or accepted.

The rights-oriented discourse of our times is a direct outcome of ego-centric separateness. It is time to realize that divisiveness and rights-orientation go together, whereas harmony and duties-orientation complement each other. A dignified duty-based culture at home is more wholesome and elevating than a shrill rights-based climate—this we might all have experienced in our lives. The penchant for rights appears to result in constriction and miserliness of being. But education for duties contributes to expansion and sharing. Duty gives, right grabs.

The more the duty of giving is performed, the less becomes the need for the right of grabbing. That grabbing sometimes is a necessary evil—and no more than that—this we must be made to learn. So should be the case with rights. The less there is need to assert rights, duties being well done, the healthier the society and organizations are. Let not the rights-model become the blueprint for future society. Instead of allowing it to be entrenched permanently, the current wave of rights proclamations must be treated for what it truly is—no more than a passing phase, an alerting signal. The *Human Development Report, 2000*, (pp. 10–26) is gravely flawed in this respect.

On deeper reflection, it also becomes clear that several cherished human values, making for a good human being (GHB), are natural correlates of duty-mindedness: Humility, self-sacrifice, gentleness, nobility, dignity, generosity charity, gratitude, and so on. If such duty-mindedness is cultured as the basis of character formation for more and more citizens, much of the sting and stridency of many rights movements would become redundant and irrelevant. The rights of have-nots will flow naturally when the haves become duty-centered.

The famous verse II.7 of the *Gita*, now being recognized beyond India too, as the best principle of work-life (e.g., C West Churchman in the USA, and Stafford Beer in the UK—father figures in operations research and cybernetics), proclaims our ‘right to duties’, not our ‘right to rights or rewards’. This is the principle which can attune the spirit of human work, specially the work of the fortunate elite of society, with the spirit of Cosmic/Universal work. This is what Tagore had once reminded us as man’s responsibility of working in cooperation with God. Clearly, for quite sometime man had been working in a mood of confrontation with God. And most of the rights movements are a symptom of this adversarial mentality. Back to Tagore again: “Progress which is not related to an inner ideal, but to an attraction which is external, seeks to satisfy our endless claims. But civilization which is an ideal gives us power and joy to fulfil our obligations” (*Lectures and Addresses*, pp. 56–57). Read for claims, rights and for obligations, duties. Then the Tagorean admonition, uttered in China in 1924, had articulated unambiguously the order of preference for moving towards a sound society. It seems that when idealism is at a discount, rights begin to enjoy an extravagant premium at the expense of duties.

From the viewpoint of spiritual psychology, duty-mindedness offers an even deeper personal contribution. For Divine realization or for 'seeing God' an indispensable condition is purity of heart, not brilliance of intellect ('Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God'—*The Bible*). A duty for the sake of duties, without hankering for personal rewards, is among the surest ways to purify the heart (*chittashuddhi* or *antarshuddhi*). Of course, devoted application, *sadhana*, is necessary and the orientation grows slowly. It is our surmise that the highly impersonalized, left-brained, intellect-centered education of our times has been at the root of the clamour for many crude rights which alienate us from the Divine. That is why Swami Vivekananda had said: "We must do our duty for duty's sake... Then in the purity of hearts shall we see God" (*Collected Works*, Vol. IV, p. 191).

So far as the educational philosophy of Indian tradition is concerned, before entering the social life of householdership, the student is supposed to be steeped in a disposition to relate to the world as a debtor. Thus, the *Yajurveda* lays down that every member of society has to repay three debts throughout his/her life: Debts to the *rishis* by learning and practising their truths; debts to Gods (*deva rin*) by doing penance and sacrifices; and debts to the parents and ancestors (*pitri rin*) by serving them and propagating the family lineage. In this rin-model of social life too it is the note of duty that rings loud (R K Mukherjee, *Ancient Indian Education*, pp. 69–70).

There are other versions of the rin-model which speak of fivefold debts, the fourth being *nri* (humanity) rin and the fifth *bhuta* (subhuman species) rin (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*). *Nri rin* is to be discharged by charity (*danam*) in a broad sense. And as the *Bible* aptly says, while doing *danam*, the left hand should not know what the right hand is giving. *Bhuta rin* is to be met by caring for and conserving the sub-human species. This rin-blueprint for social intercourse is duty-based, more robust and worthy than the rights-model. Unto-others-from me, rather than from-others-unto-me, must be an altogether welcome philosophy for an exalted human society.

If the Constitution of a nation is the blueprint for wholesome management of its society, then we feel this goal cannot be served well unless it is built on the

soundest and most enduring elements of the culture which it symbolizes. In this sense, with due respect to our Constitution makers, the Indian Constitution does not reflect the inner spirit of Indian culture, its *swadharma*. It is mostly a baggage of imitation jewellery. A duty-oriented, rin-model, sustainable culture has been given a predominantly rights-oriented Constitution which is unlikely to be sustainable in the long-run—despite short-term or partial improvements here and there. Already the USA is said to be talking about a ‘statue of responsibility’ on the West coast to balance the ‘statue of liberty’ on the East! It is difficult to appreciate how some of the basics of Indian civilization had seemingly impacted so little on our Constitution-makers. But we are now paying the price for all this with compound interest.

Sri Aurobindo, though in physical self-exile, was always seriously concerned with the basic problems of India. He was aware that democracy could be either rights-based or duty-based, implying that the latter would be relatively better than the former. But the Indian response need not stop at this first round choice.

For him the keynotes of democracy—human liberty, equality and brotherhood—could be achieved only when man is free in spirit. He summed up the principle neatly: “It is the *dharma* of every man to be free in soul” (*Collected Works*, Vol. I, pp. 759–760). Then democracy becomes a blooming, fragrant, ever-unfolding flower where society and its citizens can transcend the dichotomy of right and duties. Hardly, anything even remotely connected to such an original Indian ethos informs our Constitution. Too much perhaps to expect of men who have professed to be secular (which means the material, the mundane) with a vengeance. The sacred would naturally be anathema to them. Hence, secular rights are pushing sacred duties to the background. Motivation having sent off inspiration of exile, it is but inevitable that rights have enthroned themselves in place of duties. Secularist bigotry of rights has no redeeming feature.

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