Chapter: iii

SOCIETY AND RELIGIOUS VALUE

EVOLUTION OF SOCIETY AND RELIGION

From the most primitive stone age to the most modern age of 21st century, man has lived in groups. Many such groups when put together, a society is formed. Every society at any given moment, to progress and flourish, invariably needs a set of law and order to be followed by its members. These sets of laws and principles that harness the society and work for the well being of the society and nation as a whole could be termed as a religion.

Society and religion have always moved hand in hand. But for a healthy society, a religion is needed which respects certain given values because religion without values is of no use for the society. By the passage of time as the society and the civilization evolved religion and religious values have also developed and adopted new forms. On the other hand, even the development in religion has affected the society and civilization to a great extent.

Every society possesses some conceptions of a super-natural order, of spirits, God or impersonal forces. In the primitive times, dogmatic or tribal religion was prevalent in which the aid of super-natural was sought for worldly concerns like health, long life, defeat of enemy, good relations with one’s own people and the like. But the object of worship was not definite.

Change is the law of life. As the time changed, so also the pattern of society and religion changed. Religion is directly related with the law of nature. In the ancient time, as theses laws were not understood in their proper perspectives, ghost worship, and like was given due importance.
Later on man turned towards the natural objects like the sun, the moon, the wind, mountains, rivers, trees, birds; and attached the concept of sanctity and religious significance to them. From this practice of mass-belief evolved the idol worship. It is also called polytheism. Yet, at this age, the religion was in extrovert form.

Then the concept of different Gods and goddesses set in. Sacrifice in different forms i.e. human, animal or kind was viewed as a social order for the propitiation. These totem and taboos were considered to be sacred. Consequently, superstitions and misbeliefs became very much a part of society and religion. At this juncture human values were disregarded and so a true religion i.e. humanity did not evolve.

"The inadequacy of religion is evident from disparity between outward allegiance and inward betrayal. Religion is confused with the mechanical participation in the rights or passive acquiescence in the dogmas." ¹

The real was conceived in many different ways through religious symbolism. Religion was considered to be an external affair as it started with the outward forms and elements. The sphere of human consciousness and self-orientation was yet untouched.

Rādhākrṣṇa rightly says, "If religion is not dynamic and pervasive, if it does not penetrate every form of human life and influence every type of human activity, it is only a veneer and not a reality. If on the other hand, we believe that our faith is widespread and its adherents are conforming their acts to the ideals they profess, then the conclusion is inevitable that religion is invaluable as a means for the improvement of the individual and the society." ²
Society and religion had passed through different phases of development from symbolic to customary and gradually to the social stage. Still the stage of proper interpretation and understanding was waited for where a due weightage to human body, mind and soul was to be given.

**A NEW ERA OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS**

Finally, with the discernments of incarnations, prophets, messengers of God and true saints mankind witnessed the dawn of true wisdom. Society realized the importance of establishing the God in its day-to-day affair. Man understood the significance of introspection. A new culture of religious consciousness developed. The object of worship became monistic. Ideology of one God was universally advocated. Religion became introvert. Thus, it is rightly said by Whitehead that ‘Religion is what a man does with himself.’

"Throughout the course of human evolution, our spiritual longings have persisted and expressed themselves in varying forms from the crude stages of superstition, animism, and myth to the refined and complicated philosophical systems and ethical cultures of today."  

Religious values or ethics are directly related to the social moral and spiritual life of an individual. If an individual rises to an understanding and the knowledge, he is in a position to practice the virtue. It is very obvious that the society or nation is constituted of individuals. So, if an individual follows the religious values; personal welfare, social integrity and national upliftment could be easily achieved.

Tagore has rightly said that good virtues could be imbibed through good habits. If habits are duly cultivated, values could be preserved. These values in turn give rise to a culture or tradition from which religion is evolved. That is how religion is established as a culture but it takes hundreds and thousands of years to establish religion as a culture.
The value has two intrinsic aspects. One is practical and the other is theoretical. The value is categorical imperative. The progress of any society or nation depends on the fundamental of its values. Correct value implies happiness, success and perfection. But, such perfection can only be achieved by a consistent practice. Therefore, we see on the global level that after the passage of thousands of years due to the consistency in practice of certain values, Islam is known for its value of brotherhood, Christianity is known for its value of service and love, Hinduism is known for its value of non-violence, renunciation and devotion.

Religious values are not time and space bound. These values have moral as well as spiritual implications. Moral implication because, it is categorical, i.e. they have to be practiced without questioning and spiritual implication because they have to be inculcated into a spiritual self. This process of converting the values into actions and ultimately to culture is not an individual affair but a collective one. Thus, it is clear that for a perfect harmony in a family, society or nation, these values should be duly understood and practiced.

**RELIGIOUS VALUE AND ŚIKSĀPATRĪ**

To practice religious value, it becomes necessary that they are available in a written form i.e. they are gifted to mankind in a form of a scripture. *Lord Swaminarayan* being a reformist realized the urgency and gifted the mankind with Śikṣāpatrī, a miniscule of code of conduct that is inevitable for the healthy progress and prosperity of society.

It is rightly said, ‘Only one who takes small things greatly is invited for great things in life.’ *Lord Swaminarayan* was a perfectionist. In order to make one’s life perfect it becomes inevitable that he lives his day perfectly, Therefore, *Lord Swaminarayan* in Śikṣāpatrī has directed our daily actions
in such a beautiful manner that we could easily attain the highest level of devotion. He says that,

“All my disciples shall awake before sunrise and after meditating on Śrī Kṛṣṇa shall proceed to discharge their bowels.”

“They should then sit at one place and brush their teeth, then bathe with clean water and then put on a clean pair of clothes, duly washed and untouched.”

“They should then sit on an undefiled āsana in seclusion, facing either east or north, and perform ācamanam.”

“All my male disciples shall then put tilak on their forehead and a round kumkum mark as aforesaid, married women should make only a round mark of kumkum.”

“They shall then reverently bow down to the images of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa and chant the holy name of the Lord in accordance with their usual and normal procedures, only after which they should start their daily routines.”

“Those devotees who lead a consecrated life like that of King Ambrīṣa shall also follow the same rituals as described above.”

“They shall then offer food to God and take prasāda only from the offered dish. Thus, in a spirit of supreme love and dedication, they should serve Śrī Kṛṣṇa.”

In Hindu philosophy, the early morning time from 3 a.m. to 5 a.m. is termed as Brahmamūhraat. It is the time when the mind is free from mental turbulence and worries. The cittavṛtti is also pure and devoid of all impurities. The Lord advises us to start our day with prayer and mānasī pūjā. The Lord has also suggested,

“... All my devotees shall offer mental worship to Śrī Kṛṣṇa.”
Mānasī Pūjā is meditational worship. During this pūjā, image of the Lord is mentally worshipped with earnest prayer accompanied by the thought of Lord’s glory. It is a type of meditation. It is not only the surest medium of purifying the mind but also making it steady and peaceful. During this pūjā, we introspect assuming the presence of God. It is the most simple and easiest way to adore God.

Just as the uniform reminds a soldier of his duty, certain religious practices helps us to remind of our loyalty towards the God. Lord Swaminarayan has asked His disciples to put on the religious mark of Tilak — āndlo on the forehead and to wear the kanthi around the neck that depicts the principle of dual worship of Akṣar Puruşottam. It helps us to live in God’s consciousness. It also reminds us that we are a part and partial of the divinity and that we should always take refuge at God’s feet.

“All my Brahmin, Kṣatriya and Vaiśya followers initiated into the devotion of Śrī Kṛṣṇa by spiritual master, shall always wear a double kanthi of tulsi beads round the neck and shall put an upright tilak mark on their forehead, chest and both the arms.”

Lord Swaminarayan has also suggested to follow certain religious codes, such as:

“They shall worship Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s idol made of either stone or metal or a sāiligrāma with offerings procurable within one’s own means; and then chant His holy name.”

“They shall go on pilgrimage to the sacred places, chief amongst these being Dwārīkā and perform proper rites and be charitable and compassionate to the poor according to their means.”

“They shall perform the necessary rites of worship and devotion to Laxmi Nārāyaṇa and other idols installed by Me in large temples.”
Financial aspect is one of the most important aspect of social life. Though it is not an end of life but definitely an inseparable part of one’s social life. The four major ideals of Hindu ideology are *dharma, artha, Kāma* and *mokṣa*. If one wants to gracefully fulfill *artha* and *kāma*, he must confine to the boundaries as laid down by *dharma*. Hence, to be prosperous and to purify the income, *Lord Swaminarayan* says,

“My disciples shall give in offer one tenth of their income or food grains if that be their agricultural income, in the service of Lord. Those with insufficient means shall offer one twentieth of their income either in kind or money.” 16

The above precept helps us not only to overcome the vice of greed but also to realize that whatever we have is a graceful gift to us from the God.

*Naivedya* is an offering to God. It signifies the importance of remembering God before every action. As God alone is the creator and bestower of all things. It is an act of expressing our gratitude towards God. It is also believed that when one offers the food or anything else to the Lord, all the subtle impurities are vanquished and it becomes sacred.

“Those votaries shall never drink water or eat roots, fruits or the like without offering the same to Śrī Kṛṣṇa.” 17

It is rightly said, ‘a small hole sinks the whole ship’. Similarly, if one violates a very small rule today, he is bound to make grave mistakes tomorrow. To check this natural inclination of human mind and to inculcate a sense of strict discipline, *Lord Swaminarayan* has emphasized on observing fast. It has a great spiritual significance. It also helps us to regulate our senses.
"My disciples of means shall perform *Ahimsaka yajnas* for propitiating Viṣṇu and should feed Brahmins and ascetics on the day following *Ekādaśī* fast or on religious day in pilgrimage." 18

*Lord Swaminarayan* sternly says,

"If one observes a fast *ekādaśī* day, he must deny all the eleven sense their respective foods. Such a fast is to be observed once a fortnight. One should be vigilant to see that the fast of *ekādaśī* is observed in the proper way. God is pleased only with those who observe the *ekādaśī* fast in the correct way. He is never pleased by simply fasting like a beast." 19

For a society to flourish, it becomes inevitable that its citizens are learned and educated in true sense. Mere learning also does not help until it is accompanied by appropriate listening and pondering over. So, *Lord Swaminarayan* has laid great stress on consistently listening to the religious discourses and studying the scriptures. It is said that *śravaṇabhakīt* is the best of nine types of *Bhakti*.

"They shall read and listen to narrations from the life of the Lord with utmost reverence and on festival days, they shall sing songs extolling Śrī Kṛṣṇa to the accompaniment of musical instruments." 20

"All my devotees shall invariably follow the course prescribed above and shall also study religious works in Sanskrit and vernacular to the best of their knowledge." 21

"My devotees shall listen with full reverence to the tenth *skandha* of *Śrīmad Bhagavat* daily or at least once a year." 22

"They (ācāryas) shall respect the saints and shall study the scriptures in a spirit of reverence." 23
“They shall study the Vedas and other scriptures and serve their preceptors. They shall avoid the company of effeminate males just as they shall avoid the company of woman.”  

Highlighting the importance of listening with faith and concentration, Lord Swaminarayan says,

“If a person listens to religious discourses with extreme love and unflinching faith, his intense and extravagant lust, anger, avarice and licentiousness disappear. There is no other means more powerful to keep the mind steady and free from sensual objects then listening to the of Lord Puruṣottam Nārāyaṇa with love and faith.”

Prostration means submitting ourselves totally to God and His will. So in Hinduism, it is customary to prostrate before the image of Lord in temples and great saints and seers as a mark of extreme reverence and unconditional surrender.

“Recitation or listening attentively to the sacred narratives from the life of the Lord, singing hymns in His praise, adoration and worship of the idol of God, chanting His holy name or His Mantra and reading the stotras, performance of pradaksinā and falling prostrate before the Lord’s idol are the eight additional duties held as the most befitting for the devotees....”

Lord Swaminarayan favours grand religious congregations. By holding such congregations, he wants to foster the we-feeling. One of the fundamental discipline of Buddhism which says ‘sangham śaraṇam gacchāmi’; I take refuge in sangha – group; is also in line with this principle. Religious rituals and festivals if performed with such a spirit nourish social nature of human being and helps to overcome his loneliness and solitude.
“My disciples of means shall celebrate the religious festivals in temples with great pomp and enthusiasm and shall give alms to the deserving Brahmins.”

The Lord asks to visit temple at least once a day. As all the activities of temple are pure and pious, they create an atmosphere of peacefulness and sanctity. Whosoever visits the temple, experiences peace and calmness. The sacred vibrations of the temple directly affect his inner being. One feels solace and gets rid of all his worries. It stimulates the quality of sattva. Moreover, the temple is known as the symbol and center of our culture.

“My followers shall go to the temple every evening and there they shall sing loudly songs in praise of Lord Kṛṣṇa the beloved of Rādhā.”

Normally, it is a tradition in the society that an offender is punished by the law. This is done in order to maintain the law and order of the society. On the other hand it is also said that self-discipline is the best discipline. Lord Swaminarayan in Śiksāpatrī shows an effective method of reaching this end. He says,

“One shall expiate for one’s sins whether small or great, done knowingly or otherwise according to one’s ability.”

All the above mentioned precepts should be followed with heart full of love and veneration to God. They should not be observed merely for the sake of observing, but with faith and allegiance. If they are observed with due reverence, good samskars in one’s life could be imbibed which leads one towards final goal.

Though the above mentioned religious values seem to be apparently common, they are absolutely important for the sanctification of mind and
body. All these religious values ultimately result in devotion. The highest type of devotion is merging with divinity and becoming one with the God.

**BHAKTI - A SOURCE OF SOCIAL PROGRESS**

_Bhakti_ gives right perspective towards life. It is only through _Bhakti_ that one can detach oneself from the natural instincts of ego, stubbornness and jealousy and draw closer to the God. It gives new dimensions to the various currents of one’s life and transforms them.

John Mackenzie has rightly said, “The society is a spiritual unity. Spiritual beings alone are capable of such a unity. They are free self-conscious beings who are conscious of themselves as persons pursuing some common good. The clearer, the consciousness of the things to be pursued for the benefit of all, the greater the unity of the social whole.”

As every religious person firmly believes that Lord is always with him, is fearless. As he does not have any expectation other than God, he does not have any self-seeking motive in his life. As he has unwavering faith in God, he is strong enough to fight for the right cause. All these and many more qualities create a perfect blend of a true citizen. If a society has such citizens, social harmony becomes very much obvious.

The value of religious faith has been accepted even by an astute logician and thinker like Bertrand Russell. He believed that he could not admit his method of arriving at truth except that of science. But in the realm of the emotion he did not deny the value of the experience which he had given rise to religion.

A devotional person heartily believes that whatever he has, belongs to God and God only. He considers Lord as the master of countless worlds, source of existence and the one from whom everything and every joy is derived. Even in his daily worship he firmly believes that he is merely
giving back to the Lord what was given to him by the Lord. He sincerely offers his ego, mistakes, pride, anger and jealousy unto the lotus feet of God.

“Dr. C. G. Jung has observed that it is truly the religion and the cultural minority which would be able to help society in creating healthy and sane way of living. Sir Richard Living Stone thought that virtue can be inculcated through moral education, which is impossible without the habitual vision of greatness. But then he added, virtue is to be acquired only by practicing it.”

In social life, too, a man of devotion contributes richly in the direction of achievement of social progress and human prosperity. He is a self-effacing, self-sacrificing entity. He respects everybody and lives with the gospel of universal love. A devotional person understands the importance of curtailing his individual liberty in order to establish a social order and help others in the society to enjoy their respective liberties. Bhakti becomes indispensable because of its high social value. The true devotees are invariably ideal social beings.

Swāmī Vivekānand remarks, “Religion has made man what he is, and will make of this human animal a God. That is what religion can do. Take religion from human society and what will remain? Nothing but a forest of brutes.”

Ethical discipline prepares the ground for the manifestation of this inner sense (ṛta). Just as eating, sleeping, recreation and intellectual pursuits are essential for survival likewise, ethical discipline and training of this caliber are imperative for the sustenance of man and for any type of progressive life, whether individual or collective.
As Rādhākrṣṇan states, “True religion is not what we get from outside, from books and teachers. It is the aspiration of human soul, that which unfolds within oneself, that which is built by one’s lifeblood.”

Though history of Eastern religions gives importance to rituals and mythologies but the fundamental idea that dominates the whole history is the renewal of consciousness. It is disarticulation of ignorance and unawareness by knowledge and awareness.

Today if we closely scrutinize the world scenario we see that terrorism, escapism, corruption, drug abuse, stealing, gambling, cheating, emotional wreckage and much more have become an inseparable part of social life. No political leader or power, money or intellect, organizations or planning has any solution for the same. If at all there is any hope, it is only in self-discretion of an individual who is a prominent unit of the society. Such self-discretion can only be attained if one sincerely follows the holy scriptures like Śikṣāpatrī.

Notes & References:

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