

# humanist outlook

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*for the furtherance of human values  
through an ethics based on human  
perceptions and capabilities*

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## OUR COMMON TASK AND RESPONSIBILITY\*

Abe Solomon

The secularisation of life which is being brought about in this country by the exigencies of economic development and political needs, has not been accompanied by a spread of rational thinking and a scientific attitude. The roots of emotional responses and even conscious thinking are still buried in the mire of religious obscurantism and a confusion of mythology with history. The suffering caused by fanaticism and superstition throughout the ages continues to be a fact of life on the Indian sub-continent. I am convinced that there can be no short cut to sanity and tolerance in this country, except through a long, determined and consistent onslaught on the forces of unreason. A ceaseless war on obscurantism in all its forms, religious, social, political or cultural, has always been the price of all freedom and progress.

To attack superstition and dispel obscurantism may appear a negative task, but it is an essential requirement in our country today if the ground is to be cleared and the minds of the people are to be made receptive to tolerance and fundamental values. Ignorance is not just absence of knowledge and understanding. It is the presence of wrong ideas and misunderstanding, often sincerely adhered to. To speak against popular beliefs, to counter public sentiment, to live according to once convictions and at the same time remain committed to the principle of personal freedom and the right of each one to live his own life, requires courage with humility. There is no other way if one is concerned about, and interested in, improving the quality of life in our society. But, then, what else matters when man is on his own and this life is all we know of?

The belief in the fatherhood of God has not led to the establishment of the brotherhood of man, but, in fact, to the division of mankind into warring sects. The concept of oneness of mankind has gained intellectual recognition but needs emotional acceptance to be effective in practice. Let us leave the question of "What is the meaning and purpose of life" to philosophers, or others who spend their life in contemplation of a future life, escaping from the social responsibilities of the present. It is time ordinary men and women started asking themselves "What is the purpose of *my* life?" And in the process of answering that question, make their lives meaningful and dedicate themselves to self-fulfilment according to their lights in the context of social reality.

A common task awaits, and a responsibility rests upon us all. It does not need genius to improve the world nor riches to contribute to the welfare of our fellow-men, just dedication to human values in thought and action on the part of ordinary people in our day-to-day lives.

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\* Extract from Abe Solomon's Introduction to Winwood Reade's book 'Religion in History'.

## EDITORIAL

### Humanists and the Trap of Atheism



It is perhaps not surprising that the worldwide rise in religious antipathies - particularly among the Abrahamic religions: Zionism and evangelical Christianity versus radical Islam - is now being reflected in a growing stridency in the West among atheists and rationalists. On 5 November 2006, what is regarded as the first New Atheist conference, 'Beyond Belief: Science, Religion, Reason and Survival', was held at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in California. In April 2007, possibly as a counterpoint to the conference in California, a New Humanism Conference was held at Harvard. According to Doug Muder, who reported on the conference (*Does humanism need to be new?*, *UU World Magazine*, 6 Apr 2007), New Humanism sought to project itself as different from the new atheism: "Positive. Friendlier. Less threatening." "New atheism, of course, is its own new product." he says "It rejects the meekness and tolerance of old atheism, which was content to let the advance of science whittle God down to size. Having witnessed the rise of fundamentalism, new atheists see religion as a dragon to be slain, not a senile giant they can allow to die in peace. In old atheist books, the quintessence of religion was the superstitious peasant or the charlatan cleric. In new atheist books it's the suicide bomber." Writers like Richard Dawkins ("The God Delusion"), Daniel Dennett of Tufts University ("Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon"), and Sam Harris ("The End of Faith" and "Letter to a Christian Nation") are popularising a provocative and militant form of anti-theism and potraying religion as an unmitigated evil.

#### Humanist position on atheism

Although it is perhaps true that a large proportion of humanists would describe themselves as atheists, the Humanist movement has never considered atheism (construed as a rejection of *all* concepts of God) as a necessary part of the humanist outlook. According to the Minimum Statement adopted by the IHEU: "*Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape tho their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free enquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic. It does not accept a supernatural view of reality.*" The sentence "It is not theistic." needs elaboration, and it has been suggested that it should be recast thus: "*It is not theistic, in the sense that it ignores the various claims about the existence of God as having no relevance to the practical conduct of human affairs, except that it categorically rejects the idea of a rewarding and punishing God who intervenes in human affairs.*" In other words, the Humanist movement, *as such*, rejects the God of the moralists, while it ignores the God of

of the philosophers as having no relevance to the conduct of human affairs. As declared in the Manifesto of the Indian Humanist Union in 1966, "*Belief in an anthropomorphic God, who listens to prayers, grants boons and gives rewards and punishments; and belief in revelation, prophets and incarnations are inconsistent with the Humanist outlook. Theism not accompanied by such beliefs, as well as atheism and agnosticism, are consistent with Humanism.*"

### **Hermann Bondi's advice**

In an interview in 2002, Bondi cautioned against making atheism a central issue: "*I think in this country we are too impressed by the concept of God. Many religions, like Buddhism and Confucianism, don't have a God at all. On the other hand, Communism in its heyday had a 'sacred text' which were the writings of Marx and Lenin, and you justified an argument by referring to these writings. So it seems to me that the important thing is not the concept of God - indeed we cannot quarrel with an undefined God, for how can we disagree with a concept that is undefined. No, what makes a religion is a "revelation". And it is the belief in a revealed truth that is the source of religious problems - that the Koran is the word of God, or the Holy Bible is the judge of everything. So in arguments with Christians, when you come to the word God you have already lost the battle. You must stress the revelation, that's where the real disagreement lies, because if you are driven to a position where you have to deny the existence of an undefined quantity you are in a logical absurdity.*" (Sir Hermann Bondi, talking to BHA News in Spring 2002. Emphasis added.) Surprisingly this sensible advice has largely been ignored.

Some advocates of atheism have devised elaborate arguments and definitions to avoid (perhaps not deliberately) falling into the trap mentioned by Bondi. For example, Ramendra quotes Hiorth as saying: "*Atheism is characterized by a deliberate (that is, chosen) absence of belief in the existence of gods. Some atheists go further, and believe that particular gods, or all gods, do not exist. Lacking belief in Gods is often referred to as the "weak atheist" position. Believing that gods do not (or cannot) exist is known as "strong atheism".*" (See page 263) The distinction here is clearly between the *absence* of belief and the *denial* (or rejection) of a belief. There can be no question of a logical inconsistency where the absence of belief is involved; and what has been described as 'weak atheism' is better described as non-theism. The so-called 'strong atheism' which involves the proposition: "I do not know, or care, what your concept of God is, I hold it to be false.", apart from getting into the logical absurdity against which Bondi had warned us, smacks of a dogmatism quite alien to the humanist ethos. As Williams wrote in Wired magazine: "*Unfortunately, the New Atheism seems to illustrate the adage that we are in danger of becoming what we hate, with an attention-grabbing rhetorical*

*superstructure that far outstrips the scholarship and philosophical substance of its intellectual foundations.*” This can perhaps best be described as aggressive atheism.

### **Pragmatic approach**

It is perhaps true that the most influential thinkers in the Humanist movement are also modernist philosophers; making it difficult for them not to take issue with the God of the philosophers. There is an element of truth in Roger Scruton’s observation: *“Modern people are frequently puzzled by the idea of God; and for the modernist this puzzlement becomes a god. (Hence the barely-concealed passion of the modernist when he addresses those questions which were once pre-empted by religion. It is this cryptoreligious passion that draws people to modernism: let us at least believe in our unbelief!)”*

Pragmatic Humanism is concerned with only those beliefs and attitudes which have a bearing on the conduct of human affairs. Belief in the existence of an anthropomorphic God who rewards and punishes, and responds to prayers, strikes at the very roots of the Humanist worldview, which is based on the autonomous nature of morality. The God of Spinoza, Whitehead or Einstein is of no interest to Humanists qua humanists. A total rejection of all concepts of God, being advocated so fervently by the ‘new atheists’, is not only logically untenable, but also *unnecessary - and essentially counter-productive -* from the humanist point of view.

*“Rejecting rejection and denouncing denunciation are necessary steps, but will something bloom in this freshly plowed garden?”* asks Doug Muder as he eloquently closes his report on the Harvard Conference. *“Inside the encrustations of hostility, pride, and other generic human weaknesses, humanism’s positive core presents the same challenge as ever: to combine sophisticated reason with naïve goodness, to celebrate the world as it stands before us, and to (gently and lovingly) coax it to be better than it ever has been. The what of humanism isn’t new and doesn’t need to be. But the how is something we have never gotten right. How do we unite communities without enemies? How do we organize without coercion? How do we love what is and yet strive for what can be? How do we dream without giving our loyalty to fantasy worlds and betraying the only world we can live in? And if a few people here or there manage to answer those questions in their own lives, how do we capture those answers in words and stories and images that anyone can understand? Maybe soon we’ll start seeing new answers to those questions. That would really be a new humanism.”*

But Humanism is not a matter of fluctuating fashions. Perhaps what we need is to go back to the large and tolerant vision of its founders.

Vir Narain

## RATIONALISM, HUMANISM, AND ATHEISM

Ramendra

**The publication of the e-book ‘ Rationalism, Humanism and Atheism in Twentieth Century Indian Thought’, written by Dr. Ramendra in collaboration with Dr. Kawaljeet, marks an important step in the development of Humanist literature in India. Various strands of Humanist thinking have been presented with clarity, and analysed from a Rationalist/Atheistic perspective. This book is an excellent introduction to the subject for those who are not already in the Humanist fraternity. To Humanists it provides excellent background material for further study and discussion. This is the introductory chapter of the book.**

In this book I have tried to bring into focus the philosophical ideas of some rationalist, humanist and atheist thinkers of twentieth century India, namely, Periyar, M.N.Roy, Ambedkar, Gora, Kovoov, A.B.Shah, Narsingh Narain and Ramswaroop Verma.

However, in this introductory chapter, the approach is conceptual, and the concepts of “rationalism”, “humanism” and “atheism” have been discussed in a general way. Let me clarify at the outset that in analysing these terms it is not my intention to give my own meaning of these terms or, in other words, to stipulate a meaning from my side. On the contrary, I am interested in finding out the sense or the senses in which the words are actually used in our language. As, in fact, these words are being used in more than one sense, I will also be indicating the sense in which I will be using them this book.

### **Rationalism**

The word rationalism has been used in more than one sense. For example, it has been used in philosophy to describe the epistemological position of the seventeenth century French philosopher Rene Descartes as well as to characterise the ethical position of the eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Besides, we have the popular sense in which the word has been mainly used in twentieth century. If we look into details, these three meanings are different from one another, but still there is a common thread among them. There is no doubt about the fact that rationalism is linked to reason. Rationalists emphasize reason in one way or another, either in the sphere of knowledge or in the sphere of ethics.

The popular or the lexical meaning of rationalism can be ascertained from popular and standard dictionaries of the English language. Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary of Current English, for instance defines rationalism as the practice of treating reason as the ultimate authority in religion as in other subjects of study. The same dictionary defines rationalist as a person who accepts reason as the ultimate authority in religion, ethics, etc.

Similarly, Webster's New World Dictionary defines rationalism as the principle or practice of accepting reason as an only source of knowledge and as the only basis for forming one's opinion, beliefs, or course of action.

The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, on the other hand, has this to say about rationalism: The term rationalism (from the Latin ratio reason) has been used to refer to several different outlooks and movements of ideas. By far the most important of these is the philosophical outlook or program which stresses the power of a priori reason to grasp substantial truths about the world and correspondingly tends to regard natural science as a basically a priori enterprise.

Thus, in philosophy, even now, the word rationalism is mainly used for the epistemological position of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. In this sense, rationalism treats a priori reason or reason independent of sense-experience as the source of knowledge. Rationalism, in this sense, is often opposed to and contrasted with empiricism, which regards sense-experience as the main source of knowledge.

However, whether some academic philosophers are aware of this or not, in the popular sense, rationalism is not opposed to empiricism, but includes it, or is rather synonymous with it. Rationalism in the popular sense regards reason, that is, sense perception and inference, as the ultimate source of knowledge. Rationalists are supporters of logic and scientific method. They reject faith, intuition, revelation, authority and other alleged extra-rational sources of knowledge. In this book, I am concerned with rationalism in the popular and broader sense of the term. From now onwards, I will be using the word rationalism in this book in this sense only. There are several organizations and individuals all over the world, including India, which have used rationalism in this sense and have given to themselves the label of rationalist.

For example, the Rationalist Press Association, a London based organization, defined rationalism in 1899 as the mental attitude which unreservedly accepts the supremacy of reason and aims at establishing a system of philosophy and ethics verifiable by experience and independent of all arbitrary assumptions or authority.  
(emphasis mine)

Kaz Dziemka, editor of the American Rationalist, has defined rationalism as a practical, pragmatic and operational philosophy of life which includes science but rejects mysticism and all kinds of religious and other superstition. (emphasis mine) Rationalist Association of India (founded in 1930 as the Anti-Priestcraft Association) had the following object, as described by 3 Dr. Avoine, editor of its official organ Reason:

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To combat the superstitious beliefs and practices of the masses in this country and rescue them from the baneful influence of priest-craft to encourage people to educate themselves so as to cultivate a scientific habit of mind, or, at any rate, an inquiring habit so that nothing should be accepted which cannot stand the test of reason and commonsense. To reject all arbitrary authorities in matters of belief however hoary and venerable they may appear. (emphasis mine)

Thus, it is more than clear from the above references that popular rationalism in twentieth century is not opposed to sense experience and scientific method. It does not regard a priori reason, or reason independent of experience, as a source of knowledge. On the contrary, the rationalists have strongly supported the scientific method, which is based on observation and experimentation. Another feature, which comes out clearly, is that rationalists have been opposed to superstitions, dogma, faith, authority, revelation and mysticism. A rationalist is a free-thinker or, in other words, a person not accepting traditional religious teaching, but basing his ideas on reason.

According to Finngeir Hiorth, since nineteenth century the word rationalist has served as a synonym of freethinker, and since the nineteenth century on most of those who have called themselves rationalists have been atheists.

In short, rationalists are largely non-religious. This is not surprising because the rationalists emphasize reason as a source of knowledge whereas religions mostly emphasise faith, or in other words, strong belief even in the absence of evidence.

Even if some or most of the professional philosophers are not aware of the popular meaning of rationalism, there are, on the other hand, some professional philosophers who have given to themselves the label of rationalist in this sense. Bertrand Russell, for example, who is normally described as an empiricist in philosophical circles, has called himself a rationalist. As he says in his "*Am I an Atheist or an Agnostic?*":

*I speak as one who was intended by my father to be brought up as a Rationalist. He was quite as much of a Rationalist as I am... Since I became a Rationalist I have found that there is still considerable scope in the world for the practical importance of a rationalist outlook... Defining "rationalism" in the same essay, Russell says:*

*The question of how to define Rationalism is not altogether an easy one... The question is how to arrive at your opinions and not what your opinions are. The thing in which we believe is the supremacy of reason. If*



*reason should lead you to orthodox conclusions, well and good; you are still a Rationalist. To my mind the essential thing is that one should base one's arguments upon the kind of grounds that are accepted in science, and one should not regard anything that one accepts as quite certain, but only as probable in a greater or a less degree. Not to be absolutely certain is, I think, one of the essential things in rationality.*

Similarly, in his book *Understanding Rationalism*, Indian philosopher D.D. Bandiste has described himself as a rationalist. According to Bandiste, rationalism is a philosophy of life based on the human faculty of reasoning. Bandiste regards empirical knowledge as the foundation of rationalism. The central message of rationalism, says Bandiste, is that we should keep on examining our beliefs in the light of the empirical evidence.

Bandiste has not given much importance to the conflict between empiricism and rationalism in the European philosophy of 17th and 18th century. He maintains that this antagonism is now a matter of historical interest only. He asserts that the foundation for rationalism is now provided by empiricism. As he says, The older rationalism was against empiricism. The present rationalism is against irrationalism.

In my own *Buddhiwadi Ghoshna-patra (Rationalist Manifesto)*, I have formulated rationalism in the following manner:

*Rationalism is not a closed set of conclusions, but a method of arriving at conclusions. As a mental attitude, rationalism gives supreme importance to reason for understanding and solving the problems of life. Rationalism rejects faith, intuition, authority and revelation as sources of knowledge. A rationalist uses reason for testing all conclusions, and accepts only those which are coherent and which correspond with the reality. A rationalist believes in the truth of a conclusion only to the extent of the evidence in support of its truth. If in any sphere of knowledge, sufficient evidence is not available for arriving at any conclusion, a rationalist suspends his or her judgment. In other words, a rationalist uses logic and scientific method for understanding this world. Similarly, a rationalist also rejects the rigid and divisive morality based on blind faith in religious scriptures and on unreasonable and unscientific beliefs like god, heaven, hell and rebirth. He or she uses reasoning in the sphere of ethics as well, and accepts a rational morality based on human desires and needs. In short, the rationalist philosophy of life is based on reason.*

I believe that this formulation of rationalism is in consonance with the popular meaning of the word.

## **Atheism**

Atheism is probably the most unambiguous among the terms being discussed in this chapter. Yet, subtle distinctions have been made regarding different meanings of the term by some atheist thinkers.

Both the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English and Webster's New World Dictionary define atheism as the belief that there is no God. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English defines atheist as a person who believes that there is no God.

The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, on the other hand, gives the following definitions of atheism: "1. the doctrine or belief that there is no God, 2. disbelief in the existence of God or gods." The same dictionary defines "atheist" as "one who denies or disbelieves the existence of God or gods."

The Encyclopedia of Philosophy contains an article on Atheism by Paul Edwards. Edwards has this to say about the definition of atheist:

*According to the most usual definition, an atheist is a person who maintains that there is no God, that is, that the sentence God exists expresses a false proposition. In contrast, an agnostic maintains that it is not known or cannot be known whether there is a God, that is, whether the sentence God exists expresses a true proposition. On our definition, an atheist is a person who rejects belief in God, regardless of whether or not his reason for the rejection is the claim that God exists expresses a false proposition.*

In his *Atheism: The Case Against God*, George Smith has explained atheism in the following manner:

*The prefix 'a' means 'without,' so the term 'a-theism' literally means 'without theism,' or without belief in a God or Gods. Atheism, therefore, is the absence of theistic belief. One who does not believe in the existence of a God or supernatural being is properly designated as an atheist.*

Smith grants that atheism is sometimes defined as "the belief that there is no God of any kind," or the claim that a God cannot exist. However, according to him, while these are categories of atheism, they do not exhaust the meaning of atheism - and they are somewhat misleading with respect to the basic nature of atheism. As he says:

*Atheism, in its basic form, is not a belief; it is the absence of belief. An atheist is not primarily a person who believes that a God does not exist; rather he does not believe in the existence of a God.*

Thus, according to Smith, “theism” and “atheism” are descriptive terms: they specify the presence or absence of a belief in God. *“If a person is designated as a theist, this tells us that he believes in a God, not why he believes. If a person is designated as an atheist, this tells us that he does not believe in a God, not why he does not believe.”*

In his Introduction to Atheism, Finngier Hiorth has discussed various concepts of atheism, and has made an important distinction between “theoretical atheism” and “non-theism”. The belief “that there is no god” has been called “theoretical atheism” by Hiorth. Hiorth has pointed out that contemporary atheists are not always happy with the concept of theoretical atheism. Some of them prefer to define “atheist” as “a person who is without belief in god or gods.” This latter kind of “atheism” has been called “non-theism” by Hiorth.

In his article “An Introduction to Atheism” posted on The Atheist Web, the author of the article, Mathew, has drawn attention to a similar distinction, which corresponds to the distinction between “theoretical atheism” and “non-theism” made by Hiorth. As he says:

*Atheism is characterised by a deliberate (that is, chosen) absence of belief in the existence of gods. Some atheists go further, and believe that particular gods, or all gods, do not exist. Lacking belief in Gods is often referred to as the “weak atheist” position. Believing that gods do not (or cannot) exist is known as “strong atheism”.*

Thus, “weak atheism” is simple skepticism; disbelief in the existence of god. “Strong atheism”, on the other hand, is a positive belief that god does not exist.

In short, a person who denies the existence of god is a theoretical atheist or a strong atheist whereas a person who is without belief in god is a non-theist or weak atheist. It is obvious that in this sense “non-theism” is a wider term than “theoretical atheism”, because a person who denies the existence of god is bound to be without belief in god. However, the converse is not true. A person could be without belief in god owing to several different reasons. One reason, of course, is that he or she may believe, that god does not exist (theoretical atheism). Besides, there could be other reasons as well. For instance, he could be an atheist because he may believe that there are no good reasons for believing in the existence of god. Such an atheist may believe that the burden of proving the existence of god is on the theist, and that it is rational not to believe in existence of god until his (or her?) existence has been proved. Thirdly, he may believe that it is not possible to know whether god exists or not (agnosticism). Alternatively, he may believe that though theoretically it is

possible to know about the existence or non-existence of god, but at present, sufficient evidence does not exist to draw a conclusion either way. Fourthly, an atheist may believe that the term “god” is meaningless and all sentences containing the term “god” are senseless. There could be other reasons, too, for being without belief in god. A person may not have ever encountered the idea of god. (However, opinions differ on whether a person who has not been ever exposed to the idea of god should be called an atheist or not). In any case, in this book I will be using the word “atheism” in the wider sense. In this sense, a person who does not believe in the existence of god is an “atheist”, irrespective of his reasons for not believing.

### **Rationalism and Atheism**

In this section, I wish to explore the logical relationship between rationalism and atheism as opposed to the empirical relationship. In other words, I am not concerned here with the question whether most of those who call themselves “rationalist” are, in fact, atheists or not and vice versa. I am concerned here with the question whether atheism follows logically from rationalism and vice versa.

It appears to me that atheism does follow logically from rationalism. There are no good reasons for believing in the existence of god. Besides, the idea of god as found in the major religions of the world does not square up with the presence of evil in this world. Thus, I maintain that if a person is a consistent rationalist, he or she is bound to be an atheist as well. However, the converse is not true, because rationalism does not follow logically from atheism. The argument “god does not exist, therefore, reason alone is a source of knowledge” or the argument “I do not believe in the existence of god, therefore, reason alone is a source of knowledge” is not a valid argument. Thus, it is logically possible for a person to be an atheist without being a rationalist.

### **Humanism**

The word “humanism” has been used in different senses. It is probably the most ambiguous of all the three concepts being discussed in this chapter. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English gives the following meanings of “humanism”: 1. devotion to human interests; system that is concerned with ethical standards (but not with theology), and with the study of mankind. 2. literary culture (of about the 14th to 16 cc) based on Greek and Roman learning.

The same dictionary gives the following three meanings of “humanist”:  
1. student of human nature or human affairs (as opposed to theological subjects).  
2. supporter of humanism.  
3. (esp in 14th to 16th cc) student of Greek and Roman literature and antiquities.

*The Webster's New World Dictionary has given the following four meanings of "humanism": 1. the quality of being human; human nature. 2 any system of thought or action based on the nature, dignity, and ideals of man; specific., a rationalist movement that holds that man can be ethical, find self-fulfillment, etc. without recourse to supernaturalism. 3. the study of humanities. 4. the intellectual and cultural secular movement that stemmed from the study of classical Greek and Roman culture in the Middle Ages and helped give rise to Renaissance. (emphasis mine)*

The Encyclopedia of Philosophy has this to say about "humanism":  
*Humanism is the philosophical and literary movement, which originated in Italy in the second half of the 14th century and diffused into the other countries of Europe, coming to constitute one of the factors of modern culture. Humanism is also any philosophy, which recognizes the value or dignity of man and makes him the measure of all things or somehow takes human nature, its limits, or its interests as its theme. (emphasis mine)*

In this book, we are concerned with "humanism" as a life-stance or a philosophy of life. Even in this sense, some people have talked about, and some are still talking about "religious humanism". Yet, it cannot be denied that in 20th century there has been an increasing tendency to use the term "humanism" in the sense of secular humanism, or in other words, non-religious and this-worldly humanism. In this sense, humanism is closely related to rationalism, and to the rejection of supernaturalism. For example, the Little Oxford Dictionary 1995 edition says: "*humanism, non-religious philosophy, based on liberal human values.*" Similarly, Collins Concise Dictionary, 1995 says: "*humanism, the rejection of religion in favor of the advancement of humanity by its own efforts.*" The Chambers Dictionary, 1994: "*humanism, any system which puts human interest and the mind of man paramount, rejecting the supernatural belief in God, etc.*" A mini-edition of Chambers has only ten words about humanism: "*seeking, without religion, the best in, and for human beings.*"

Let us see how some of the leading organizations of humanists define and explain humanism. According to the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU): *Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethics based on human and other natural values in a spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.*

The American Humanist Association defines "humanism" in the following manner:

*Humanism is a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by*  
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*art, and motivated by compassion. Affirming the dignity of each human being, it supports the maximization of individual liberty and opportunity consonant with social and planetary responsibility. It advocates the extension of participatory democracy and the expansion of the open society, standing for human rights and social justice. Free of supernaturalism, it recognizes human beings as a part of nature and holds that values - be they religious, ethical, social, or political - have their source in human experience and culture. Humanism thus derives the goals of life from human need and interest rather than from theological or ideological abstractions, and asserts that humanity must take responsibility for its own destiny.*

It is obvious from the foregoing discussion that the word “humanism” without any prefix is now increasingly being used for secular and rationalistic humanism. Humanism in this sense is non-religious and this worldly. It is based on reason and free inquiry, and it accepts the scientific method and the results of science. Besides, humanism rejects supernaturalism and is atheistic, at least in the non-theistic sense of the term. Humanism emphasizes human freedom and responsibility as well as a secular ethics based on human needs. Politically, humanism supports human rights, democracy and a secular state based on separation of state and religion.

In this book from now onwards, I will be using the word “humanism” without prefix in this sense only. Humanism in this sense accepts or is closely related to rationalism. In fact, at times, “humanism” and “rationalism” are used almost as synonyms. According to Finngeir Hiorth, nowadays the word “rationalist” is often used more or less synonymously with “freethinker”, “secularist” or “secular humanist”.

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## RECONCILING COUNTRYSIDE DREAMS

Sanjiv J Phansalkar & Amrita Sharma

*Exploring the possibilities and limits of growth with modern aspirations in rural India. Can farming be made attractive to the present day rural youth?*

The seemingly amorphous combination of words in 'growth with modern aspirations' emerges from an email received from Deep Joshi in connection with some work we are doing about India's North Eastern regions. The background needed to grasp the meaning of the phrase is familiar to those who live in and are familiar with rural India.

On one hand, the rapid economic growth experienced in the economy in last seven years - caused on the back of foreign direct investment, rapid growth in telecommunications, huge surge in services sector, and more recently, a large acceleration in industrial growth - has largely bypassed rural India in general and the rural poor in particular.

This was the import of the message President Narayanan gave to the nation on Independence Day 2002. This underlying reality is why the campaign of 'India Shining' left the BJP whining! This is precisely the reason why the current UPA government is trying its best - such as it is - to devise ways of including rural India in the breathtaking growth of the economy.

On the other hand, we have the very explosive situation in which rural youth no longer are content to tie their knot to the plough and the harrow for life, have little to offer by way of saleable skills, services or products, yet simultaneously want to approximate the pleasures of the modern day India - symbolised perhaps by fast bikes, mobile phones, junk food and a 'cool' image as portrayed in Bollywood potboilers.

Such facile journalese apart, we need to get a handle on the meaning of 'growth with modern aspirations'. We try to do that here in our limited understanding. This article is provisional, based on our application of mind, not rigorous sociological research. We recognise that after a while the article may be repeating the somewhat hackneyed words current in the Indian social sciences, but we consider that as a part of our limitation rather than an inevitable consequence of the situation. This article is preparatory to an exercise that we may undertake to evolve possible options for achieving such a growth in the northeastern region.

*Source: News Reach, December 2006. Reprinted by permission.*

### **Conceptualising Modern Aspirations**

To us, modern aspirations of the rural people comprise the following components. This is our guess and not a result of any survey.

A desire to minimise arduous and unglamorous work connected with soil, dung, animals and pesticides: Recent publications of the NSSO (National Sample Survey Organisation) as well as research at ITP (IWMI-Tata Programme) have shown that there is a strong trend towards withdrawal from agriculture.

In fact my colleague Amrita believes that India is at the 'tipping point' in the demographic transition of its agricultural workforce. Not only do young people seek salvation from hard work in trying conditions on farm and dirty work connected with animals, soil, dung and night soil, they see agriculture as essentially not providing them the sort of social status they seek.

There possibly is a subtle undertone to this desire. A certain school believes that in the notorious caste system, status is inversely related to direct relation to organic matter in the routine tasks of a group. Women, condemned by reproductive biology to having perpetual contact with organic matter, are ascribed low status irrespective of the community in India (note Manu's infamous statement *na stree swatantryam arhati*, woman does not deserve freedom).

Those who deal with dead organic matter or human wastes are ascribed the lowest status, those who clean clothes or utensils or shave people, etc. are slightly better, and so on till we reach the exalted Brahmin male who is not (traditionally speaking and excepting such people like Pathak of Sulabh International), expected to in any way deal with organic matter. I believe that in attempting to break free of the shackles of the plough and the harrow, the rural youth subconsciously seeks to get rid of the low ascribed status as well.

**A desire for occupational mobility:** Clearly, if one no longer wants to continue with an existing traditional occupation and yet must eat every day, one needs an occupation. The rural youth seeks mobility in his occupation. This involves both change in locale and the flexibility of being at different and new places.

As to which occupations he can and try to get would depend on his own perceived comparative advantage, the opportunities for upgrading skills, social network and such other things. But the desire exists.

**A desire for social mobility:** Occupational mobility can, but need not, bring in social mobility so long as the person remains in the same social milieu.



But migration to urban areas may allow him to 'lose' his ascribed status in the facelessness of the city. From then on he may start afresh as it were, seeking to rise in the social strata over time.

Even those who are stuck in the old rural rut can perceive a slight rise in social status once their dealing with organic matter reduces or ceases altogether. In fact, among the first signs of claims to higher status may be statements like 'our women do not go out and work on others' farms' or 'we do not engage in earthwork in the government relief programmes'.

**A desire for change in the consumption basket:** The poor rural folk no longer wish to remain confined to 'teen rotian, ek langoti; baki sab bakwas hai' as sung in a Hindi film song. Their dress is changing, their food habits are changing, their entertainment sources are changing, and with deeper penetration of the electronic media, their expectations for 'luxury goods', gadgets and non-durables are rising. This in effect is the 'crisis of expectations' argument.

**Erosion or evaporation of the force of fatalism of the 'karmic destiny':** Allegedly, about fifty years ago people sort of resigned to their fate. The son of a Harijan labourer never thought it even remotely possible that he would rub shoulders with the son of the Zamindar in a medical college and the resignation was born out of the oft-reinforced faith in karmic destiny. To what extent this force operated in reality on people's mind and to what extent it existed only in the minds of academicians one does not really know.

But there is a strong school which believes that Indian people had in general a very high 'external locus of control'; 'otherworldly asceticism'; 'acceptance of the current situation under the belief that it was their immutable destiny', to lift a few recurrent phrases out of scholarly texts. The point is that the force of this fatalistic resignation to one's immutable destiny has substantially evaporated and eroded. People do seem to believe that they can shape their future and do not have to be stuck in their rut.

**A desire for higher and stable income:** The operative implication of all the above is that people want both a higher and a more stable income. Farm incomes are hopelessly unreliable dependent as they are on weather, market prices and so on. They are constrained by productivity of soil and timely access of good inputs. Incomes in non-farm sectors are considered perhaps more stable and also having a potential for increases not to be found in farming. This desire then forces people to seek occupations outside the farm.

### **The Problematique**

Possibility of income growth of households with modern aspirations,

as conceptualised above is mired in a complex problematique. The elements of the problematique appear to be the following.

Labour absorption hopelessly out of tune with GDP composition: We see that while the structure of GDP has sharply moved against agriculture and in favour of services, the structure of labour absorption has not shown any such trend. In effect, incomes of farm households are about a fourth on an average compared to their service sector brothers!

Population pressure: The per capita arable land availability has fallen as population has climbed the charts and no extra land is available. The NSA has remained frozen around 140 million hectare (ha). In 1981, with the population at 84 crore and with about 68% of them engaged in agriculture, the arable land availability per capita was about 0.23 ha, which has come down to 0.2 ha.

Falling public investments in agriculture: The proportion in total public investments as well as absolute amounts of investment in agriculture are not keeping pace with the needs of the sectors, leading to emergence of bottlenecks and constraints in the sector.

Terms of trade going against agriculture: Relative prices of primary goods are declining when compared with manufactures and services. This has always been the case in India and is a reflection of a clear urban, middle class organised sector bias of the state policy.

Inadequate and skewed opportunities for upgrading skills: Rural youth have insufficient opportunities of developing their own saleability in the open market. This has come about because the state has found it increasingly burdensome to expand the HRD infrastructure owing to financial strains experienced by the state governments. It has as such partially privatised training and education and the private sector providers tend to be relatively high cost. Mired in the positive discrimination debate though the public sector education system is, the basic point about good English language training, availability of sound and well-connected vocational institutes and above all functional links with potential employers are all the important things that seem to be beyond the reach of rural youth.

Erosion of safety nets and decline in risk taking ability: Inequitable and unfair though the traditional systems in rural areas was, it provided certain kind of social safety nets. A man could live, quite probably at the edge of subsistence, with the help of such assurances. With increasing monetisation, this kinship bond is weakening and the reliability of the social assurances is eroding. With erosion in such social safety nets, the risk taking ability of the

rural poor is falling. This makes for reduced ability to try out new livelihoods options.

### **State or the Market?**

This may appear to be an abrupt transition from the earlier set of issues. The question is whether the growth with modern aspirations can be achieved led by state or by the market. What are the specific issues involved in the two options?

To put matters in perspective, we quickly trace the economic history pertaining to agriculture in the country. There is no question that the country took great strides in agriculture under state leadership that ushered in the green revolution. The state took the initiative in supply of inputs such as seeds and fertilisers and set up the FCI (Food Corporation of India) to procure the food grain produced.

The huge gains to economy and farmer households were caused by the state intervention. The same model was replicated in dairying. In fact, between 1950 and 1980, the general philosophy was one of state or public sector led economic growth, summed up in the 'commanding heights' rhetoric of 1973 of Kumamangalam and Indira Gandhi. The basic strands of justification of this argument were as follows:

- Private sector is unreliable and untrustworthy
- Private sector will exploit market imperfections for rent seeking opportunities
- The state needs to intervene to ensure equitable benefit to all the people and regions.
- The state has the financial strength as well as information about which sectors need investment more. Hence state action will ensure more optimal allocation of scarce capital resources.

The socialistic ideology held its sway and this was compatible with that ideology. Over time it was discovered that the public sector led growth models had three principal problems in the Indian context:

**Incentives:** the public sector managers lacked incentives for efficient performance

**Political interference:** politicians interfered in public sector units and action for reasons that would have peripheral relevance to their core business

**Corruption:** the leakage, rent seeking and corruption in public sector was reducing the effectiveness of state action

With the withering away of the Soviet regime, the intellectual dominance of the socialist ideology became untenable. Rational expectation

economics, Thatcherite state policies and the never-ending push by the World Bank saw the victory of the free market pundits.

Aside from all that, the increasing bankruptcy or debilitating financial mismanagement in state governments meant that there was no money with the state to initiate any more action. Thus, we went from market to State out of distrust of the market and from State to markets out of the penury of the State. The CSO (Civil Society Organisation) world has played three roles. The first is relief, the second development and the third, 'revolutionary paradigm shift'. Relief is meant as the action that is taken to alleviate pain caused by some natural or human-made events. When crops have failed and people are starving, give them food and set up cattle camps.

Development refers to both sustained action for obviating the need for relief as well as stable relief operations. Development in this context means helping rural people avoid situations of complete crop failure as well as setting up things like grain golas (granaries) to ensure stable relief.

The 'revolutionary paradigm shift' refers to efforts at changing the rules of the game or devising solutions that render existing rules irrelevant. This is the arena of the activists, the jhandavalas (flag bearers) and at times of people who discover very effective things such as rural microfinance institutions. Somewhere in between development and 'paradigm shift' lies the new school of 'rights' activists, who want to organise the community and use the legitimate instruments of a well-governed society to make the state perform better.

The CSO world in some sense must cope with and gets squeezed between the welfare state and the ruthless market when it comes to activities of a clear economic nature. It may neither enjoy the muscle and the legitimacy of the state nor have the guile and flexibility of the market and may be burdened with social ideology on top of that. Its chief advantage is in being able to reach out and know the current, real needs of the really needy, the liberty of being able to try new things and the possibility of exerting a more positive and salutary distributive, empowering influence on grassroots people and their associations. To return to our issue: what do we expect? Do we want growth with modern aspirations to be ushered in by the state, by the market or by the CSO?

### **Market led Growth with Modern Aspirations?**

Much hype is created by the enthusiastic IFPRI (International Food Policy Research Institute) led institutions in terms of 'market-led' transformation of rural areas. The key arguments of this position are:

- For any transformation to be sustained and sustainable, the activities must become financially self-supporting and without perpetual explicit or implicit

state subsidies.

- Start-up costs for such transformation including costs involved in R&D, retrofitting new technologies in current ethos, training, capacity building, market creation, etc. are genuine 'one-time capital costs', which can be supported through state or donors.
- For this sustainable transformation, rural producers must learn to integrate themselves to the markets.
- Markets move on the twin principles of 'customer is king' and 'profit incentive for everyone'.
- The mechanisms for growth must thus create arrangements which enable the rural poor to learn to cater to the king in such a manner that all the intermediaries have a profit incentive and they themselves, too, benefit
- No one is an untouchable in this endeavour, distrust of private sector is passe and opposition to MNCs is an outdated orthodoxy
- All transformations must therefore have an inherent revenue model.

Translating this argument in practical action is not simple. The poor are dispersed, their production is fragmented, their current technology is antiquated, the quality of their produce indifferent, their life situation too complex to enable them to adjust to the market, their lifestyles too varied to be aligned with the discipline needed for the market, their access to information, materials and finance too inadequate to work and so on. Work on lines that address each of these issues is necessary.

For produce from primary market, the problem translates into the following aspects:

**Achieving** assembly and aggregation of the produce effectively and efficiently

**Instituting** discipline as to time, quality and form.

**Absorbing** and dealing with variable, strict and fickle market demands.

**Ensuring** quality norms irrespective of the production practices.

**Achieving** diversity, variety, and traceability.

**Reducing** non-value adding transactions costs, etc.

**Learning** to manage in a financially disciplined manner.

This whole thing can be done painstakingly and slowly by first building capacities so far as basic production is concerned, then building capacities for handling the produce and then building capacities for dealing with the informational and financial issues.

To some extent the role of professionals who do not come from the stratum of the rural poor is inevitable. Three issues: creating incentives for these professionals without causing disempowerment of the poor, creating sustainable market responsive institutions of the poor and managing the environment become critical in this task.

### **A Long Haul?**

The CSO can play an important role in this process as catalysts and bridges between the market and the poor. This is possible with three provisos:

They need to get over the distrust of the private sector.

- They need to look at the growing urban market as an opportunity and contain their enthusiasm for the 'good old days' of a self-sufficient but stagnant community.
- They need to learn the skills of dealing with the cruel markets and financial world.

Integrating the poor in markets will raise the eventual realised value for the producers and hence strengthen their incomes. Yet, we must realise that in relative terms for the rural poor, many more livelihoods will continue to be created in the basic production arena, relatively smaller in assembly and primary processing, even fewer, if any at all, in secondary processing and the least in actually dealing with the rich urban markets.

In effect, the bulk of the rural poor will have to contend with dealing with the green sectors and can hope to escape the drudgery of the plough, sickle and dung only over generations. The overall impetus to the economy of a region can be substantial and this does lead to a huge boost to secondary and tertiary sector locally and that is where some of the livelihoods will be created. If any region such as the tribal central Indian region or northeastern region has little local enterprise, are remote from markets, have poor infrastructure and paucity of resources that can be invested, it is inevitable that the opportunities of growth in the first instance are bound to be in the green sector. By implication therefore, there are very limited opportunities for growth with modern aspirations for these regions, a reality we need to contend with.

### **Some Yellow Hat Thinking**

This appears as a classic case where exposure to the high-income economies stimulates withdrawal from agriculture even in case of low-income economies at a supposedly premature stage (substantiating Zhou's criticism of Schultz, 2003). However, the problem here is much more complex than what Zhou or Schultz talked about. While their concern was more in terms of withdrawal of labour from agriculture and its possible consequences on the farm economy, the situation we face now is multifarious.

It's more human and has more to do with accommodating human aspirations with what is possible on the ground (existing opportunities of growth and employment creation). It's making growth possible and simultaneously making it enticing enough for people to create a buy-in.

It's much more than creating employment. The demand is not economic, it's human! In some ways, it is equivalent to searching for an 'ideal bride' for the modern Indian man - a mix of Meena Kumari and Marilyn Monroe - traditional and demure so that the institution of marriage is safe and modern so that she can be carried to parties. The challenge is undoubtedly immense.

Unfortunately, there is no running away from the issue. It's a demand that has been thrust into the face of development gurus, it's a demand, which is unique, relevant and has no precedent and thus requires complete ingenuity. If we make headway, it might qualify to be an entry into the 21st century development theories!

Let us explore if the possibility exists. To confess, I have a series of doubts. If one were able to deliver such a growth it would possibly fall in non-farm sector (large scale employment opportunity in retail sector where the skill-requirement is not that high, facilitation of migration, etc.), which will not lie in ITP's purview. I have some apprehensions regarding to what extent this can be engineered.

I have always believed that people find out the optimal solution themselves. Migration of a youth from the decadent state of Bihar to the enticing prosperity of Punjab and Delhi, which offers him higher income along with exposure and access to modern means of living, is one such example.

A number of youth have been sailing in two boats for long - working on farm and also exploring opportunities elsewhere. While scholars may keep arguing on what is ideal and what is not and why, the actors in the thick of situation generally do what is possible (given the endowments and the constraints). What we can do best is to understand the swayambhoo (the un-engineered) solutions, understand the context of their emergence and then add on wherever possible. At least this can be the starting point.

An examination of behaviour of young men is indicative. In terms of their involvement with farms, they can be put in sort of a continuum. At the lower extreme are the youth occupied on farming fully (cultivator and agricultural labour) - most of them by default (only son in the family, not educated, not skilled, no other opportunity given their assets, including human capabilities and capital). The large farmers or farmers doing modern farming may be an exception. During fieldwork I came across an insightful remark. When asked

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who would be farming 50 years from now, most of the villagers answered 'large farmers'. There seems to be a certain positive correlation between farm size and involvement in farming.

In the middle lie the so-called part-time farmers who keep exploring better opportunities while maintaining their ties with farming as a fallback as the alternatives are not secure enough. At the other end are the likes of schoolteachers, bus conductors (and a myriad other such salaried people in public and private institutions) who have been able to make a move out happily and are treated with high regard by their fellow villagers. This scenario appears intuitive and cannot be treated as a great finding.

What is noticeable is that the above continuum is in a stage of turbulent flux and is volatile. The lower extreme is densely populated, the top end is too thin and the middle is swelling up and swelling up bad. If it grows out of size, and the top end fails to generate enough opportunities to accommodate the growing balloon in the middle, it will burst and many would fall again on the farm (are the reverse migration figures relevant?). Probably, that would be worse and needs to be avoided.

To add onto the problem, the phenomenon is more pronounced in regions where the value of agricultural production per capita is low. An ITP study showed that tendency towards withdrawal from farming was high in places such as Baramulla district of Kashmir, districts from north Bihar, Orissa, etc. (all of them characterised by sluggish overall growth) where the secondary and tertiary sectors are far from developing.

Thus, in one way we can say that this problem is more of the sluggish economies. Or to rephrase, the problem is more 'worrying' in case of such economies that exhibit a state of unbalanced growth. While disenchantment with 'soil and dung jobs' is universal, the regions with sufficient agricultural surplus (and thus better scope of secondary and tertiary sector development) are more balanced and can cope with the phenomenon much better. The disequilibrium is worrying in regions that have taken a fascination to glamorised jobs without laying a good foundation in terms of a sufficiently exploited farm sector. It may also be called a problem of the primarily agrarian economies such as Bihar whose mainstay has been agriculture. Escaping from agriculture in these regions will produce the most unwanted of situations.

With all this, one kind of arrives at this thought that there is no running

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**THE HUMAN CONDITION**  
**Eleven Eminent Thinkers Speak**

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*Review Article*

**THE HUMAN CONDITION\***  
Anand Sarup

This is a compilation of eleven lectures delivered by some of the most eminent contemporary thinkers, on the state of society, clarifying how the common people are being affected by the changes occurring in the world around them. Seen together, these provide an overview of new tensions brought about, inter alia, by the globalisation of economic initiatives, the hold of the media and the subversion of old values without the substitution of a new value system, geared to deal with the ubiquitous greed for power fuelled by the new technologies.

The speakers have looked holistically at the evolving perspective and expressed their disquiet at the progressive attenuation of freedom of individuals, regional cultures and even the nation states to decide what they want. The media controlled by international finance have created a situation in which the rich and the powerful can decide what the people would think and how they would interact with each other.

The collection of lectures represents a plurality of view points, in keeping with the celebration of plurality by the first speaker, P.N.Haksar, who with his inimitable irreverence, looks at everything, from the emergence of imperialism, Principia Mathematica as well as Magi Noodles but ends his sojourn, emphasising that today more and more individuals are asking the questions: 'Why am I poor, why am I deprived, why is my identity not respected....Is it an inevitable part of God's Will or its it a creation of human beings?' Following him, Dileep Patgaonkar, carries his questioning further by irreverently, referring to the mumblings of a Polish Philosopher about who he was, where did he come from, and where he was going? He too goes on from here to reflect on how the world is being shaped by Global forces, bringing about implacable political and socio-economic changes all over the world. This theme is very cogently reiterated by Deepak Nayyar who also reflects the disquiet of the poorer societies in their being robbed of the economic and socio-cultural space they had before distance and national autonomy were wiped out by cyber revolution at the command of the new and all powerful economic imperialism.

The reader will find Habib Tanvir's expose of the socio-cultural environment delightfully engaging in spite of its disquieting stories of intolerance and deliberate misrepresentations by the cultural commissars as

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Edited by Prakash Narain

Pages 168 Price 295.00

well as the media. Irfan Habib too has conveyed the same message in his review of the events over the first fifty years of India's freedom. He has shown that there has been a progress regression in values and we have lost some of the ideological underpinnings Nehru had created and moved instead towards cultural intolerance.

'The Human Condition' is a document which would engage the reader in serious reflection on what is going on around us and also on whether we, as individuals, need to intervene to buttress the humanist viewpoint. The final message it carries is that though there is a lot that is threatening the spirit of humanism, all is not lost. There are many things, like education, democracy and plurality which, hopefully, would continue to sustain human desire for freedom and social emancipation.

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away from the primary sector. The challenge is to sell it to the youth. I apologise for the meandering thoughts. I am sure this observation would qualify for a sarcastic 'Eureka' but I still continue, hoping that I may find some light at the end of the tunnel.

If one wants an answer to 'what kinds of interventions are needed to make growth with modern aspirations possible?' let us explore what is it that the youth looks at when taking up a profession. Can we do a market research type survey looking at the attributes of a job that entices the youth (like the attributes that people look for in a product), a kind of product development exercise? Or can we just use our judgment or do a focussed group discussion with facilitation? The product here is the intervention. Shall we look at some previous (government) interventions in this regard? Can TRYSEM (Training Rural Youth for Self-Employment) be considered an initiative to fulfil such an objective? I am not sure.

*Sanjiv and Amrita are with the IWMI-TATA programme and are based in Anand, Gujarat. This article was published in the December 2006 issue of NewsReach*

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## MY SEARCH FOR A VEHICLE

R C Mody

It was January of 1948. I was living in Alwar, now a part of Rajasthan, which at that time was a quasi-independent Princely State, not integrated with Indian Union till then. Alwar had more than its normal share of the post-Partition riots and unrest which, for months, had disrupted rail travel to and from Delhi, a distance of about one hundred miles. I needed to go to Delhi urgently, but had to wait until I could get a seat in a state government vehicle going there – the only safe way to travel. I managed to get to Delhi on January 28<sup>th</sup>.

While in Delhi, I took time off to attend Mahatma Gandhi's prayer meeting at the Birla House on the evening of January 29<sup>th</sup>. I left my autograph book there for the Mahatma's signature, for which I deposited the prescribed fee of Rs. 5 for his Harijan Fund. Next morning, on January 30<sup>th</sup>, I went again to Birla House to collect my book, which now had his valuable signature.

My work in Delhi was over during the course of that day, and now I faced the problem of getting a ride back to Alwar. The focal point of Government vehicles to and from Alwar was an MP's quarter on Canning Road in New Delhi, allotted to Dr N. B. Khare, who was then the Prime Minister of Alwar State and the Maharaja's nominee to the Constituent Assembly (which was also functioning as the nation's provisional Parliament).

I reached Dr Khare's residence shortly after 5.00 pm to find out if I could get a lift back to Alwar the next day. While there, willy-nilly, I got pushed into the room in which he, just back from Parliament House, was lecturing to a group of visitors. I realised that they were all his "Yes men", listening reverentially to whatever their VIP host had to say. That evening, as on many other occasions, Dr Khare was virulently attacking Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, India's Prime Minister, because he felt that they and their policies had betrayed Hindus.

Some time after I entered the room, the phone rang, and the caller insisted on talking to Dr Khare himself. He went up to the phone reluctantly, and looked worried by the message he heard. Hearing his agitated voice, one of the visitors mustered up courage, and asked, "What is the matter, Sir?" "Well, some one has killed Gandhi," Dr Khare replied tersely. The gathering was dumbfounded. The people present there became nervous, and the meeting broke up within minutes. (People got nervous because they intuitively felt that Dr Khare would be suspected of having played some role in Gandhiji's assassination; in fact, he was placed under house arrest a few days later and though exonerated ultimately of the suspicion of complicity in murder, he was never

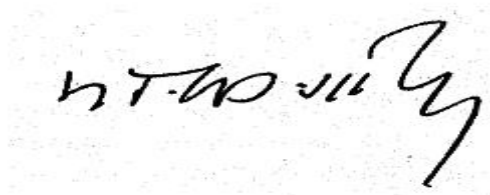
Prime Minister of Alwar, and Member of Parliament., again)

I forgot all about searching for a vehicle to return to Alwar, and started walking, pushed by an unknown force, towards Birla House, where Gandhiji had been shot on way to his evening prayer meeting. I was not alone. Groups of tens and twenties, though not thousands, were walking speechlessly, in a single direction, and I kept on following them. By then, it was pitch dark on a winter evening. The distance to Birla House was perhaps two miles - after crossing the India Gate lawns, go along King's Way (now Rajpath) and then onto the Great Place (now Vijay Chowk). Within half an hour, I found myself at the wooden gate of Birla House.

Just as I tried to enter, I saw someone being helped to ascend the gate. I looked up and realised that it was none other than Jawaharlal Nehru. He started speaking in Hindi, haltingly, sobbing in between, and wiping his tears with the sleeve of his sherwani. As I can recollect, the gist of what he said was, "A mad man has killed Bapu a short while ago, orphaning us all. It is time for us to preserve calm in face of a great national calamity and not give credence to any rumours. Tomorrow morning we shall start from here for 'Jamunaji' for Bapu's last journey and would return in the evening, without him. I strongly advise you all not to come to Birla House in large numbers. Instead you should try to spread yourselves as thinly as possible, along the funeral procession route (which will be announced) to have Bapu's last darshan (*glimpse*)."

After he finished, I rushed back to my Delhi residence, and heard Nehru again, this time on the radio and in English. This was his now-famous speech that he began with, "Friends and comrades, the light has gone out of our lives and there is darkness everywhere."

The next day, I was among millions who watched the greatest funeral India has ever had. Many vehicles had come from Alwar for this event, and returning on February 1st was no problem. All through the return journey, I kept thinking about the drama and events of the past thirtysix hours; how in between my search for a vehicle, history had taken a turn.. There was one question in my mind then, and it is still there with me now. *Is the autograph that I have the last one that the Mahatma signed?*



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## NEWS AND NOTES

### **Book Release: The Human Condition**

A compilation of eleven Narsingh Narain Memorial lectures, edited by Shri Prakash Narain and published by Har-Anand Publications, was released at the India International Centre on 3rd May 2007 by the eminent scholar and activists Prof. Rajni Kothari. Present on the occasion were two of the eminent speakers: Mr. Habib Tanvir and Dr. Deepak Nayyar. Prakash Narain read out excerpts from the book, after which Mr. Habib Tanvir and Dr. Nayyar spoke on the general theme of the Human Condition. This was followed by a discussion and concluding remarks by the Chief Guest, Prof Rajni Kothari.

### **Ex-Muslims Organise**

The Iranian women's rights and human rights activist Mina Ahadi, who founded the Central Committee of ex-Muslims in Germany, seems to have started a trend. Following her valiant example, activists in the Netherlands have set about founding their own organization of ex-Muslims.

Ehsan Jami, 22, from Iran and Lobna Berada from Morocco were joined by Mina Ahadi to be interviewed by the Dutch media about their aims. Since then, the Dutch Committee has received 600 inquiries and almost a hundred people have registered an interest in membership and are actively working together. Next week there will be a press conference in the Hague, which Mina Ahadi will also attend.

That the German example has been followed so quickly in the Netherlands indicates the possibility of an international movement forming to protect the universality of human rights and to oppose both political Islam and cultural relativity.

The Central Committee of Ex-Muslims hailed the founding of a sister organization in the Netherlands and called for the formation of similar groups in other countries.

*Source: NSS News 11 May 2007*

### **Majority of Americans Wouldn't Vote for an Atheist**

USA Today and Gallup conducted a poll among Americans to see who percent were OK with a woman; 72 percent said a Mormon would be fine with them; three-times married, 67 percent yes; a 72-year old, 57 percent yes; a the they would and would not vote for on the basis of the candidate's beliefs, race and sexual orientation. Asking "If your party nominated a generally well-qualified person for president who happened to be...would you vote for that person?" Ninety-five percent said they would vote for a Catholic; 95 percent said they would vote for a Black person; 92 percent would be happy with a Jew; 88homosexual 55 percent yes; an atheist only 45 percent yes.

When measured on where the respondent was on the political scale,

result for those willing to vote for an atheist candidate were: Liberals 67%; Moderate 48% and Conservatives 29%.

*Source: Humanist Network News, 7 March 2007.*

### **250 Animals Sacrificed at Kendrapada Temple**

The “*holy altar*” of Panchubaraha temple at Satabhaya village in Kendrapada’s Rajnagar block turned into a virtual pool of blood as about 250 animals were sacrificed on the occasion of Chaitya Purnima on Monday.

Hundreds of devotees watched the “*sacred spectacle*” of “*slaughter*”, which is a custom here for years. The animals, including goats, lambs and a buffalo, were lined up near the sacrificial pole before the mighty stroke of Babaji Dalel’s sword did it all, one after other. But he remained unperturbed. “*It’s a divine duty which was passed on to me after my father’s death 20 years ago*”, he said.

*Source: Times of India, 3 April, 2007*

### **Malaysian 'apostasy' case puts innocent woman in danger of jail**

Malaysia's top secular court rejected a woman's appeal to have her conversion from Islam to Christianity legally recognised. She has been told that this can only be approved by an Islamic sharia court. But she argues that she should not be bound by sharia law as she is a Christian. The case is seen as a landmark test for religious freedom in what is regarded as a moderate Muslim country. Lina Joy, who was born Azlina Jailani, had applied for a name change on her government identity card. The National Registration Department obliged but refused to drop Muslim from the religion column. Judge Richard Malanjum, the only non-Muslim on the panel, sided with Ms. Joy, saying it was “unreasonable” to ask her to turn to the sharia court because she could face criminal prosecution there. Apostasy is a crime punishable by fines and jail sentences. Offenders are often sent to prison-like rehabilitation centres.

About 60 per cent of Malaysia's 26 million people are Malay Muslims, whose civil, family, marriage and personal rights are decided by sharia courts. The minorities - the ethnic Chinese, Indians and other smaller communities - are governed by civil courts. But the constitution does not say who has the final say in cases such as this, when Islam confronts Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism or other religions. The founding fathers of Malaysia left the constitution deliberately vague, unwilling to upset any of the three ethnic groups dominant at the time of independence from Britain 50 years ago, when building a peaceful multi-racial nation was more important. The situation was muddied further with the constitution describing Malaysia as a secular state but recognising Islam as the official religion. Ms. Joy's case inevitably sparked angry street protests by Muslim groups and led to death threats against a Muslim lawyer supporting her

*Source: NSS Newsline 1 Jun 2007 <admin@secularism.org.uk>*

□

*Comment*

**ON A HUMANIST ALTERNATIVE FOR DALITS**

AP Saxena

This refers to “A Humanist Alternative for the dalits” in *Humanist Outlook*, Spring 2007. As an avid reader of your esteemed journal, I am shocked by its theme and misinterpretation of humanist principles.

The core of humanism, indeed its message, enshrined in its international and national declarations, is essentially integrative with stress on the unity of man. ‘The spirit of man is part of the commonwealth of humanity’. If humanism eschews religion (and that includes caste), it is because religion tends to be divisive and weakens the spirit of man and makes the mind ‘un free’.

The approach to humanism vis-à-vis religion cannot be construed as an alternative brand option, a cafeteria approach as suggested in the article, e.g. Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism “was really a political conversion...”. and “we do not wish dalits to ‘convert’ to humanism but we will have to create a humanist alternative for the Dalits - this is what Dr Ambedkar did when he accepted Buddhism as an option for Dalits.”

According to noted scholars, ‘more than a mass conversion of dalits to Buddhism in 1956 and afterwards as well to Islam, Christianity and other religions in subsequent years, there is also a conversion to full citizenship with the abolition of untouchability, institution of Universal Adult Franchise, extension of practical and legal rights to all sectors of people with special safeguards for disadvantaged groups’. It also denotes ‘a conversion to the modern, a renewed faith and the rules of social and political engagement’.

Activists in search of instances of violations and violence arising out of alleged caste tensions only activate the political engines of caste-based politics with a declared, pure caste agenda. What often emerges is an imperium, even a predatory partnership, with more than one unhappy consequence. Firstly, by selectively highlighting violence it strengthens the divisive forces and secondly, more importantly, it encourages the political agenda of ‘self-glorifying’ caste politicians, which hardly helps the alleged sufferers. That numerous Indians from the depressed caste stream have risen to highest positions is ignored by a selective amnesia. But truth has to be recalled. A recent Indian President belonging to a caste listed in village records in deep south, entered the country’s foreign service by direct entry, enjoying an unbroken innings of prestigious public offices. Further, that his two daughters, brought up in ambassadorial mansions, too entered the diplomatic service invoking the caste umbrella is not even mentioned.



It has to be reiterated that the Indian leadership during the long years of freedom struggle, constantly decried, even denounced caste and stressed the spirit of man. In 1928, Jawaharlal Nehru during his repeated trips in and out of British jails declared; “*Two things are dear to me ... independence for India and equality between man and man.*” UNESCO, while instituting the Gandhi medal during the centenary celebrations, recalled his lifelong crusade against untouchability and noted his book, ‘*All Men are Brothers*’ as a unique testament of human thought in spirit and action.

Today, some emerging facts cannot be ignored. India is becoming an acknowledged, major player in the global economy pushed by growth of its caste-free scientific and industrial infrastructure. The Indian state functions as a democracy - the largest in the world - under a legal canopy and an alert judiciary sworn to safeguard the Constitution, justice and human rights. There is a National Human Rights Commission in place, presided over by a former Chief Justice of India. International agencies, from United Nations onwards, recognise and applaud the forward movement of the social system as part of the Indian development story. There is inter-alia marked increase in the life span, remarkable nation-wide connectivity due to IT revolution, and above all a massive increase in the number of women in the work force. Caste and gender are disappearing as an objective factor in national development.

The author is connected with a voluntary organisation studying the urban migration from economically backward areas in eastern U.P and Bihar. A leading question posed to the migrants asked their ‘Single, most memorable experience in their new physical urban locations’. Invariably the answer was; ‘No one asked us, or is even aware of, our caste’. The surveys further clarify their disgust with the unnecessary, irrelevant caste politics back home.

Of course, there often are overblown noises about violent incidents – undoubtedly unfortunate and indefensible – in a vast country of millions. But the Indian democratic state is on track, pledged to ensure equality without any discrimination on grounds of caste, creed, religion or gender.

The faith in the spirit of man, not caste, shall carry us forward.

□

## LETTERS

### Thomas Mann: Humanist

Nobel Laureate Thomas Mann was a humanist par excellence. In his novel, 'The Magic Mountain', he sums up his credo in these stirring words: "Yes, certainly, I am a humanist. . . I affirm, honour, love, form, beauty, freedom, gaiety and enjoyment of life. I represent the world, the interest of this life, against sentimental withdrawal and negation, classicism against romanticism... I am a humanist because I am a friend of mankind like Prometheus, a lover of humanity and human nobility".

Need we say more?

K. K. Joshi  
4, Windsor Place,  
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### Humanism and God

"Reject RAP Morality and RAP God", the editorial in the latest issue of Humanist Outlook is a piece of commendable effort to bridge the seeming gulf between the humanist outlook and impersonal "Trans-Natural reality" – for want of a better expression. There should be little dispute that Reward and Punishment syndrome in relation to morality and God in fact robs both of their intrinsic value

Morality is an easy day-to-day concept but God is not. The latter is trapped between innumerable layers, and often-conflicting webs, of human thought and expression. It is not perceivable by our sense organs and we can not honestly say whether He does or does not exist. Thomas H. Huxley's agnosticism does not dispute the possible reality of consciousness or Super-Consciousness. Being a self-taught naturalist, he rightly condemns religious orthodoxy. Anything against 'reason' – a term almost synonymous with 'science' - cannot be sustained; but reason is not simply logic. Informed belief is not a part of reason.

Our basic understanding of quantum physics recognises the principle of uncertainty. So we cannot totally reject the idea of a 'possible reality' beyond the natural perceptible reality. It may warrant an in-depth study, and research in the realm of the metaphysical concept of reality.

My sincere thanks to the editor for bringing out brilliantly the distinction between 'RAP GOD' on the one hand and logical theism or agnosticism on the other in the context of Humanist Outlook.

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