



# Notion of Values as Represented in Amritlal Vegad's Travelogues

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**Abstract:** In this paper, notions of values have been discussed with reference to literature and human culture. Values constitute the core of human civilization. In the second part of the paper, configuration of values in the travel narratives of Amritlal Vegad has been discussed.

**Index Terms** - Values, Culture, Civilization

I

Living in an era of unprecedented materialism and consequent depletion of natural resources; when hedonism has been almost officially declared a badge of honour; when our lust for consumption has acquired monstrous proportions; when falsehood has donned the robe of truth; when humans' insensitivity towards one another has touched the zenith; the discussion of values, though seemingly out of place, is at the same time highly relevant. All cultures and religions have referred to values in one form or the other.

From ancient times, literature, whether oral or written, is replete with expressions of our concerns about establishment and conservation of values. After the onset of industrialization, most writers gave expression to their frustration about the loss of values. Erosion of values has been a repeated concern of most of the writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century including Yeats, T.S.Elliot and so on. In this era of consumer culture, values are being constantly obliterated leading to widespread frustration and loss of happiness.

But values have to be placed in a proper context before any meaningful discussion can take place. The institutionalization of the concept of 'values' might itself be the reason of these being treated as something of 'academic interest' only. Being a part of the capitalist agenda, institutionalization of concepts also leads to their disappearance from practice.

Here, term value is being used without the adjective 'human'. In most of the available studies, Values are generally defined in terms of what 'ought to be the human condition'. In this sense, values reflect human aspirations. Values are largely understood only with reference to human beings because it is presumed that our possession of language gives us a unique position on this planet; although such an assumption is itself liable to interrogation from various perspectives. Human beings act as the locus of all discussions on values.

In a larger sense, every phenomenon on this planet possesses a language of its own. Therefore, the priority being accorded to human beings while speaking of 'values' is fraught with dangers of gross reduction. A holistic view would mandate a treatment of values that goes beyond the 'human' aspect. Although language seems to be the only medium available with us for discussing values (and everything else); but at the same time, we must be vigilant towards an inordinate focus on only the human aspect of values. Such a line of argument leads to values being subsumed under the larger rubric of 'progress' as defined under 'capitalism'. It is assumed that human beings are always engaged in trying to make things better. But in reality, we see that we end up making things worse. Values should not necessarily have a 'human' context. In this time of incessant urbanization, human beings are fast losing their contact with animals and nature, leading to various psychological diseases and health issues. Slowly but surely, the natural resources are being depleted to cater to the ever-increasing and never-ending human greed for consumption. Human civilization seems to have forgotten the golden value of happy co-existence with nature. The consequence is that we are facing one disaster after the other.

Human civilization has followed some basic values from times immemorial. Almost all religions of the world refer to values albeit in different terms. The point is that values have existed even before their adoption into institutionalized religion, myth and scriptures. The practices developed by sages, saints and seers, based on their experience, have placed vital importance on values. Different people belonging to different cultures and religions have given different names to these values but the spirit has always been the same. In a deeper sense, values exist on their own. We, as human beings strive to realize these values through our existence. In this sense, values are constant and unchanging and human civilizations strive to realize these values.

Values are the conditions of existence on this planet. These conditions have been understood in different ways in various religions and cultures. In Hinduism, *tyaaga* (renunciation) is considered to be the foundation of all values. Gandhiji accorded a lot of significance to a hymn from *Ishopnaishad* 'Ten tyaktena bhunjithaa maa gridhah kasyaswiddhanam'. It means that in this world, God has created everything. So, we must enjoy this (world) with *tyaagabhaava* (a sense of renunciation), without being consumed by greed, and act without any attachment.

Hinduism considers *karma* as the foundation of human life in this world. The concepts of *tyaaga* (renunciation) and *bhoga* (consumption), though seemingly contradictory, are actually not so. Consumption (*Bhoga*) with a sense of renunciation (*tyaga*) is the core value of dharma.

Literature has always grappled with the issue of values. Most of the writers of the modern era have rued the continuous erosion of values. Values are embedded in cultural expressions. Values are universal. They guide human beings in their day-to-day life. They are the reference points to bank on. One has to speak of the universal values in spite of the risk of being theoretically incorrect. Western theories seem to lay too much emphasis on the impossibility of the existence of 'finalities'. But research need not confine itself to the Eurocentric tools. The Eurocentric tools are themselves a product of a distinct approach towards life.

In term of its focus on mobility, travel literature can be a good source of investigating human values. The questions to be asked are: Why travel?. If one travels to know, then what does one want to know? And why write about it? If the traveler is a seeker, what does s/he seek? Literature is replete with instances of actual and imagined travels to seek happiness. Yeats would yearn to journey back to *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* in search of happiness the lap of nature, Henry Vaughan, in his poem *The Retreat*, would yearn to re-visit his childhood when he was innocent and happy:

Happy those early days! when I  
Shined in my angel infancy.  
Before I understood this place  
Appointed for my second race. . .

## II

In this section, the notions values are analyzed as represented in the selected travelogues on rivers. Being the repository of values, rivers and their representations in travelogues may indeed be a good arena for interpreting the values embedded in human civilizations.

Ten days later, we saw a road, electricity poles and wires. There was no footpath from here; the road was laid along the riverbank. The smooth-surfaced road had replaced the winding, meandering, rough and rugged footpath. The challenge of the footpath had been replaced by the convenience of the road. (13)

Most of the modern poets have rued the fact that the onset of modernity has led to loneliness and boredom making human life full of misery. As a society we have no concern for others' misery. Everyone is engrossed in one's own life. One has no time for others. These days, we seem to be having no time for ourselves. Desperate to earn and spend; we have snapped the chords that used to bind us to one another. Against this backdrop, the people that Vegad meets on his way present an interesting contrast. People are forthcoming and eager to help:

We took off our sandals, climbed up to them and sat down. They were happy to hear about our journey. Both said: 'Do stay here today.' I explained: 'We have to get to Amarkantak by Diwali. The further we go the better.' 'In that case,' the man said, 'stop in Bakachera. My brother-in-law Mansukh lives there. Stay at his house. It's Dussehra today. My wife is going to Mandla to see the Dussehra procession. You can go along with her; it's the same road half the way, she'll tell you the path forward.' (18)

The person that they meet is ready to trust the unknown travelers. What can be the source of this trust. A sense of happy co-existence with nature is one of the fundamental values of this planet. A loss of this sense has led to unlimited devastation during the recent times. We are in an era of incessant consumerism and the resultant mutilation of the planet in the form of pollution of all kinds. On the other hand, the societies which uphold the basic values of living on this planet approach nature, not as a blind consumer of its resources, but in a manner of friendly co-existence:

Finding them friendly, I asked the woman, 'Why did you tell us to take off our shoes?' 'This is our threshing ground, sir. Our fields and threshing grounds are Lakshmi for us. It is not right to come here with shoes on.' Reverence for land runs deep in rural India. To this woman, her field was not a lifeless plot of earth but the embodiment of a goddess. (18)

'But what if you didn't get anything?' 'Then Mother's milk'

I was impressed by the man's pure faith. For him the water of the Narmada was as sacred as mother's milk. (21)

There is a secret storehouse of energy in every person, which is kept in reserve for special occasions. The long walk today had drawn on this reserve fund of strength. (31)

Vegad doesn't approach Narmada with an inquisitive sense of a scientist. He doesn't seek any material progress for himself. He wants to barter the 'diya' which he offers to Narmada for inner illumination. He is not an investigator who wants to unravel the mystery of Indian culture through Narmada. Instead, he sees his travel as an opportunity to remove the inner darkness. He is humble and well-aware of his limitations. Such lack of arrogance is the only way to achieve Knowledge and all knowledge should begin from the self:

I couldn't resist. I asked a woman for a diya, lit it and set it afloat on the spring. Then, from the depths of my heart, I exclaimed, 'Mother Narmada, I have lit a diya in your honour. In exchange, please light a diya in my heart. There is immense darkness within, and no way to dispel it. Only you can make it go away. This is all I beg of you, Mother. (34)

As a value truth is also subject to relativity. It might be impossible to define 'truth'. But in some cases, a lie may effectively serve the path of dharma. Values can't be understood in straightjacketed, absolute terms. The nature of an action, therefore, should be understood in its context. It depends on the intention and purpose of the doer. Values inform the consciousness which in turn triggers the action. (Ashwatthama)

Vegad refers to an incident where chicken is offered to him which he politely declines but at the same time he has no objection to his co-traveler Shyamlal joining the party. Giving space to all kinds of ways of life is also part of the value system. Vegad displays the typical Indian attitude of indifference bordering on amusement in the face of alternative perspective on food-habits and ways of life. This tolerance is the soul of Indian culture. (102)

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