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The Intellectual Evolution: Towards A New Phenomenology Of Ethics

Somnath Chakraborti

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Lalgola College, Lalgola, Murshidabad, West Bengal, India.

Abstract:

Human civilization, today, is the offshoot of millions of years of an evolutionary process. Nature has provided us with all the necessary sources of sustenance. But the human beings have jeopardised their existence when they became greedy to the point of over-exploiting nature. Capitalism, with its ideological corollary, 'individualism' fuels consumerism, leading to ecological endangerment. The present essay proposes the birth of the 'Decent Man/ Woman', who is spiritually strong so as to differentiate between need and greed, being reasonable enough to judge that many a human project brings disaster to us in the name of 'development'. The present piece puts stress on 'behavioural modification' through the 'principle of reinforcement' following the ideas of B.F. Skinner, who speaks of 'organised conditioning'.

Keywords:

Evolution, Capitalism, Globalisation, Economic Liberalisation, Social Darwinism, organised conditioning.

Introduction :

Today's human beings have resulted from millions of years of what we call 'evolution' through a process of 'natural selection' as stated by Charles Darwin. We have learnt how to adapt ourselves to the changing environment, taking help of science and technology, trying to make our environment comfortably habitable. It is the 'Cognitive Revolution'⁽¹⁾ some 70,000 years back that helped the development of a kind of ability that taught us not to remain passive in the acceptance of the world around us, but it taught us to be an active shaper of our destiny. The 'Agricultural Revolution' (12,000 years ago) taught us to produce food for ourselves, ceasing to be 'hunter gatherers', being dependent upon what nature and the general situation provide us with. Completing the circle of development came 'The Scientific Revolution', some 500 years ago, that led to the effective scientific methods to bring about drastic changes of our condition. The problem occurred when our need gave way to greed, when we could hardly remain satisfied with our basic needs, but

went on beyond, to the point of exploitation and over-exploitation of nature. The 'Industrial Revolution'(1760) in England started a new phase of human history, spreading rapidly all across the globe the devastating 'Capitalism' in the form of 'Colonialism'. In recent times, the world has witnessed the unbridled development of 'Capitalism', involving the over-exploitation of man and nature both. The result is the gradual ecological jeopardy. Now the situation has taken such sorry turns that we have almost reached a point of ecological collapse.

All across the world today, the excessive stress on 'Individualism' is nothing but mindlessness and selfishness, being completely oblivious of the fact that all human beings, along with other animals and nature, are supposed to form a single unit of existence. But man has taken himself away to the exclusion of nature and other animals, being self-centred to the utmost degrees. The idea of having maximum freedom on behalf of an individual, as advocated by Adam Smith or Bentham or Tocqueville, is getting misinterpreted and is used by individuals to such degrees as might be designated utter selfishness. 'Individualism' has taught us, wrongly though, to be heedless to the consideration of the environment so much so that there have been drastic climate changes, as we are all aware. If we put focus on the environmental jeopardy, which is the result of over-exploitation of nature by human beings, we see that global warming is alarmingly on the rise, many many places on the earth facing water scarcity, problem in production, increase in atmospheric particulate matter, leading to the unprecedented air-pollution. A report by 'New York Times News Service', published in 'The Telegraph'⁽²⁾ says that the "Earth is likely to cross a critical threshold for global warming within the next decade...", because of the overuse of coal, oil and natural gases. The 'Intergovernmental Panel' on climate change, a body of experts, convened by the UN, while offering a comprehensive understanding of the environment today, states that average temperatures of the globe are estimated to rise 1.5Celsius above the pre-industrial levels sometime around the first half of 2030s. If it happens, the report says, "the impacts of catastrophic heatwaves, flooding, draughts, crop failures and species extinction become significantly harder for humanity to handle". So it is high time already that we stopped behaving so mindlessly and our wise and ethical behaviour to nature will save us from the imminent disaster.

The reason behind the acquisition of wealth and such mindlessness:

According to some political sociologists(Lewis H. Morgan, Karl Marx), the hunter-gatherers would share among the members all the resources they gathered according to the need of the individuals. It was the idea of common ownership of the resources and it is called 'primitive communism'. It was a time of cooperation among members, belonging to a particular community. Every able-bodied individual would have a share of resources from nature or land equally and as 'primitive communism' would encourage no surplus, there would be no private property. But at a later time, after the 'Agricultural Revolution', when human beings became the active agents in producing food, as well as domesticating animals, society drifted from 'primitive communism', giving way to a class-ridden society, encouraging private property. And the 'Industrial Revolution' witnessed the growth of 'capitalism' in the truest sense in the era of 'globalisation' and 'economic liberalisation'.

'Primitive communism' was matriarchal, women working together, feeling strong solidarity among themselves, taking necessary actions against men, when found non-cooperative. Women could take husbands from other clans, but established her own order. A young son could leave his mother, joining another woman's clan. Society moved towards patriarchy when the power shifted from women to men with the beginning of farming, when the concept of 'pairing family'(when husband has one primary wife) was emphasised in order to secure wealth(the excess of corn) to a particular clan, not sharing that among a large number of individuals. One psychological factor, we believe, may lead to the accumulation of wealth, that is 'fear'. Psychological fear is imprinted in the unconscious of the human being as the primitive man used to be

attacked by the ferocious animals. With the passage of time, attack of men from the other clans for food was a regular occurrence. And the lack of food during the time of flood or drought strengthened that fear. The fear of loss of what they had might add fuel to the accumulation of more food-grains (and wealth) and once there was surplus, greed for more acquisition was born and capitalism is the result of that greed, giving its climactic form. Now a kind of 'ego' or 'false consciousness' is created in the mind of the capitalist (the owner of the surplus) as he starts believing that he is the master of the situation as he can manipulate a machinery, a system to serve his purposes, which is actually a form of great psychological crisis, a kind of epistemological poverty that hinders the right observation of the world around, giving birth to all sorts of unethical behaviour, such as, exploitation of man and nature.

'Social Darwinism' and its negative impact:

As capitalism, right from its beginning in the eighteenth century, in the truest sense, put its focus on maximum profit-making, it is based on the exploitation of labour, being heedless to the environmental causes. It involves selfishness and mindlessness and what matters is nothing but profit-making. The world picture, it involves, is essentially bad. But capitalism will not do anything so unprofessional as that so as to invite unguarded criticism. In order to legitimise its workings, it takes the help of the ideological framework of 'Individualism', for example, as it has been already mentioned. Another such ideological framework is what goes by the name of 'Social Darwinism', stating that human beings are essentially competitive. Therefore, competition among human beings is very natural and altruism or social feeling is not possible among us. What we call 'selfishness' is normal and common among human beings and it is essential to survive. The best one in the competitive world will survive in the 3 best way, thus bringing in the Darwinian concept of 'survival of the fittest', thus nullifying the idea of love and cooperation among individuals. This, in other words, is how 'Social Darwinism' legitimises unethical practices, giving fuel to mindless competition. M.T. Ghiselin blatantly argues that the Darwinian paradigm of the 'survival of the fittest' is in cooperation greatly with reference to our modern civilization. He says:

...The economy of nature is competitive from beginning to end... There are means by which one organism gains some advantage to the detriment of another. No hint of genuine charity ameliorates our vision of society once sentimentalism has been laid aside. What passes for cooperation turns out to be a mixture of opportunism and exploitation...⁽³⁾

Thus, it is seen that any feeling for others or any altruism as human beings are capable of, is set aside as hypocritical. It is true that there is the instinct of selfishness and barbarism in human beings. But that we are capable of any love or any selfless concern for others is simply made null and void. This value system based on such an idea as 'Social Darwinism' may and indeed it often does, lead to unethical practices, when selfishness and mindless exploitation of man and nature may appear normal and common among us. Such ideas are pushed to the fore that no matter however unethical some social practices or behaviour may be, society must not raise its eyebrows regarding its heinousness, but it tries to legitimise a common response that it is scarcely unethical, but it is normal. This is why in today's world, so many things run, which are morally incorrect, but we do not question their moral wrongness. That we are capable of changing ourselves to the ones, better and nobler, is hardly accepted by many of us. I would refer to another book, "The Selfish Gene" by Richard Dawkins, that leads to the terrible misinterpretation of human nature and human behaviour and in many places, the book may lead us to conclude that altruism is a myth and we are ruthlessly selfish and nothing more. The famous socio-biologist is of the opinion:

...Like successful Chicago gangsters, our genes have survived, in some cases for millions of years, in a highly competitive world... that a predominant quality to be expected in a successful gene is ruthless selfishness. This gene selfishness will usually give rise to selfishness in individual behaviour...⁽⁴⁾

Though, not long afterwards, Dawkins accepts that if only selfishness prevails in society, it will be a very nasty society to live in. But the advocates of behavioural selfishness would not cite that. On the contrary, all mindlessness will be practised, referring to such a volume as stated just now, focussing on how ruthlessly selfish we are and that is extremely what is necessary for our survival.

What have we to do?

The above picture, concerning the present state of the world, regarding human beings with relation to others and nature, is dismal. Our so-called development in scientific and technological fields, entangle lots of threats with reference to our existence, let alone our ideological framework. The advent of any new technology or the development of some new software involves an immensity of menaces. At times, it appears that certain things would have been best avoided, but in most of the cases, we, the 'rational' creatures, would choose to behave in the most stupid or the most unethical way possible. But the very idea that we are social beings involves the notion of rationality, and therefore, it requires that we must be sufficiently moral to maintain balance among ourselves to have a peaceful existence. It does not require the wisdom of a Nobel Laureate that mutual love and respect and sufficient amounts of decency help us achieve harmony among ourselves. After witnessing a bleak situation around, what seems very essential to be developed is a great sense of morality and we should put focus on the cultivation of it. If we are not sufficiently ethical, we will precipitate our destruction. Peter Singer, in his famous article, 'Famine, Affluence and Morality' (1972) categorically stated that since we are social beings, it is obligatory that we must behave in an ethical way, and it must not depend on our choice to be moral or as something 'supererogatory'.

In spite of repeated warnings and cautions from great thinkers to behave reasonably and decently, human beings have moved in a different direction, taking refuge in waywardness, mindlessness, jeopardising our own existence. It is high time that we develop and cultivate morality, restraining our greed, being more decent and moderate with regard to the consumption of our resources.

It is the conscious cultivation of our ethical part, which is most urgently required. Now, the skeptical one may question if human beings can be that moral, because he has known about the genetic determination of selfishness from Richard Dawkins', 'The Selfish Gene'. In order to answer that, we may say that any organism may change if a particular kind of cultivation goes on for generations and its clue is to be found in Darwin. He says:

...When the organism has once begun to vary, it generally continues varying for many generations. No case is on record of a variable organism ceasing to vary under cultivation...⁽⁵⁾

The final phrase, 'to vary under cultivation', is interesting and important; interesting in a sense that it may generate hope among sceptics and important, because it tells us of what we have to do immediately, that is, conscious cultivation of ethics to save ourselves and our environment from imminent destruction. What is required now is that we have to direct our consciousness to the world around, being forgetful of our greed, prejudices and selfishness in order to have a 'phenomenological' view of the world, following the theory of Edmund Husserl and only then, we would be able to describe our world truly. And, only the right description will help us behave sufficiently ethically, because whenever any prejudice (or selfishness or greed) has

intervened, the real description has not been possible. Therefore the 'New Ethics' today should be the conscious cultivation of morality, that we behave with the entire world with decency, where we uphold the virtue of moderation. Out of conscious cultivation, the birth of the moderate and decent human beings will take place.

The Birth of the 'Decent Man':

A drastic change in our perspective of the world will give birth to the 'Decent Man', which is the main preposition of this essay. We shall begin with small changes in our behaviour and small changes will bring about great changes and it will be of great importance for us in future. Behavioural changes, ethically sound, are sure to come with small applications of morality in our day-to-day life. Therefore, let our new religion be the development of the 'Decent One' out of each one of us, who would be, mentally and spiritually sound, reasonable enough to feel that indiscriminate use of anything will jeopardise our life and how important it is to have love and respect for others. Previously, we have seen that great epics created great heroes, fighting against all odds with superhuman power and courage, God-like creatures or philosophers giving concepts of 'Superman' (advocated so much by Nietzsche) or the glorification of the 'Alpha Male' on a common level. All the epic heroes and the tendency of hero-worship in us have been there because of the profound inadequacy of human existence. The epic heroes (or the concept of the 'superman') are nothing but consolation to the profound inadequacy of our existence. Camus advocated that we require a sense of understanding things and not consolation⁽⁶⁾. Therefore, no such consolation that nothing bad is going to happen, however wasteful or indiscriminate we are regarding our use of natural resources, will save us. Reasonably enough, what we need today are 'Decent human beings', who are aware that we do not need a lot actually and it is better to behave decently and wisely (the birth of the 'Decent Man' as opposed to the advent of the 'Superman', which is a kind of consolation).

Modification of Behaviour through the Principle of Reinforcement:

We behave greedily and selfishly because we see people around us behave greedily and selfishly and it will not take time to change our behaviour if we meet people around us behaving decently. Therefore, a kind of 'behavioural modification' as advocated by B.F. Skinner is required. Skinner⁽⁷⁾ speaks of a kind of 'organised conditioning'. If human beings, today, decide that our motto is to save ourselves from ecological jeopardy and the problems regarding the profound spiritual crisis we are undergoing all over the world, and if we decide to behave decently and moderately, eschewing selfishness and greed, we may condition ourselves to be 'decent human beings' and things may go on through behavioural reinforcement by doing the same kind of behaviour for years to come. Behavioural modification or change or evolution is possible when we make a 'phenomenological' description and an intellectual perception of what leads to the limitless and unbridled accumulation of money or wealth, nullifying mutual love and respect among human beings. The reason is threefold. First, it has been stated already that 'psychological fear' is responsible behind the accumulation of wealth (that one may lose what one has). Secondly, a profound inadequacy of our human existence (that our power is limited, that we will die one day and so on) may lead to limitless acquisition of money, when one considers himself like a superman or some hero of some epic or may think himself or herself as a messiah, when one thinks that wealth solves all inadequacies. And thirdly, it is the blind imitation of such wealthy persons that may force one to behave like that, when one considers the behaviour of a very wealthy person to be the only standard. All the above problems may be overcome by a simple 'phenomenological' description that we, the human beings, do not need a lot actually, along with an intellectual perception of how we tried to explain the reason behind accumulation of wealth in the above passage. The tendency of worshipping such people having limitless amounts of wealth or accepting a world, characterised by cut-throat competition or the veneration of selfishness in the name of 'individualism' happens only when we are aware of our actual

needs. We can call ourselves evolved only when we free ourselves from greed, violence, false consciousness of superiority, mindlessness and competitiveness. The situation demands collective behaviour, characterised by moderation and decency. The right behaviour, today, would determine our peaceful existence on this planet for centuries to come. The common people may think of sacrificing certain things, but the satisfaction of being and doing good may be considered a wonderful takeaway. And once the reasons for decency and moderation develops, we would realise that these are ends in themselves, ensuring tremendous joy in human existence per se.

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