

Humanism : Definition and Development

Humanism has played an important part in the history of civilization. It is the basic aspect of the Renaissance literary cult. The term 'humanism' was chiefly originated in Italy in the second half of the 14th century. Later on, it spread into other European countries.

The term 'humanism' is derived from the word "humanista or teacher (Italian) of the studies humanitatis or humanism."¹

The term 'humanism' contains many important ideals. Humanism recognizes the importance and dignity of man. It places man at the centre of all things. It gives man the supremacy and the great power of measuring things in life. Tolerance, freedom and liberalism are the outstanding characteristics of humanism. It tries to bring a sort of harmony and unity in society along with goodness, love and reverence. Here man seeks to identify himself with human beings in society. Thus, humanism primarily gives importance to man and to his unique qualities and faculties. As Radhakamal Mukherjee says, "All-Being is the true philosophy of humanism that can give science, ethics, aesthetics and religion, their proper

1. The Encyclopaedia of Americana, International Edition, Vol. 14 (New York), p. 553.

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meaning, aim and direction. True humanism is not only contemplative, but also practical and ethical."²

So, humanism can be described as "an integrated system of human meanings, goals and values and harmonious programme of human fulfilment, individual and collective. It seeks to clarify and enrich man's goals, values and ideals and achieve his full humanness, through bringing him in ever deeper and more intimate kinship and harmony with the surrounding life, society and cosmos."³

The term humanism has undergone many changes in its meaning as the development and civilization took place in human life. At first humanism was regarded as the characteristic attitude of the Renaissance in Europe. Then medieval Christianity considered man's life in connection with God's mercy. They valued man's greatness on the basis of his qualities.

The 14th century Italian humanists, who had meticulously studied various phases of humanism, gave a new outlook of 'humanism'. They agreed on the basic idea of man's power of reason, freedom and ethical sense. In addition to that they took into consideration man's normal follies, weaknesses, and

2. Radhakamal Mukherjee, The Way of Humanism East and West, (New Delhi), Pub. 1968, pp. 112-113.

3. Ibid, p. 1.

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the limitations. So they endeavoured to reconcile the opposite views. in order to bring harmony in various currents of human life on the equal level of ethics and humanity.

Later, in the 18th century the 'Philosophy of Enlightenment' gave new dimensions to humanism and included in it a philosophical and scientific outlook.

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The 19th century scientific researches in western countries made a remarkable influence upon human life. The material prosperity and the changed values of life put man at the very centre of all activities in the world. Thus his creative power added again, a new dimension to the term 'humanism'.

There are different types of humanism in the history of humanity and culture. Broadly speaking, humanism can be divided into two major types, viz., Eastern Humanism and Western Humanism. Along with these two major types, some other minor types of humanism can also be taken into account as follows :

First, 'Classical Humanism' means Greek and Roman humanism, which values the rationality and the dignity of man. It also gives importance to love and security. Its chief aim is to bring order and harmony in society.

'Cosmic Humanism' is a product of transcendentalism. It discovers true meaning of human life in connection with God. Love and reverence are the bedrock of this kind of humanism. The cosmic humanism combines the two fundamental ideas, viz., "the idea of the unity of man, mankind and cosmos or the I - Thou, and All, and belief in man's transcendent potentialities....."⁴ This triologue 'I - Thou and All is purely Indian and Chinese. It is also well expressed in the Vedas. It will become one with mankind's universal love and compassion. To be human is to have for man a feeling of love and pity. Every being loves God and has faith in 'Divinity' and its significance. It means that humanism did not have an anti-religious character.

The 'Religious Humanism' gives much more importance to 'the spirit of tolerance'. According to its sponsors, there is a fundamental unity of all the religious beliefs of mankind. This unity will bring a sort of harmony and peace.

For these humanists, "humanism makes for toleration, compassion, love and sympathy."⁵ Thus it values the intuitive qualities in all human beings.

The new scientific exploration and discovery introduced a new outlook. It found a new type of humanism

4. Ibid, p.117.

5. Paul Edwards, The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Vol. 4, (New York), p. 71.

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which can be called 'Scientific Humanism'. Scientific humanism gives consideration only to the material progress of man. It never takes into account the relation of man and his self as well as that of his fellow-men and cosmos. But this type of humanism cannot be universally accepted as it gives no weightage to the spiritual aspect of man.

The other types of humanism, like 'Liberal Humanism', 'Marxist Humanism' and 'Evolutionary Humanism' could not fully flourish due to certain limitations and ambivalences.

Thus it can be assumed that both, Western and Eastern, types of humanism show profound ambivalences. They have gone through great changes in attitudes, goals and values. The new thoughts and experiences played a very dynamic role in bringing great and remarkable changes in the concept of humanism. Even the word 'humanism' becomes the watch-word for all the ages together for its unique qualities. It has become the significant idea, because humanists have dealt with life in all its changing forms. To conclude, it may be said that what began as an educational programme gradually turned into a major literary movement.

There is no attempt at placing Whitman in the context of 19th-century American literature with special reference to humanism. The references in the last chapter are too brief and sketchy.