3

Human Nature : Indian Perspectives

3.1 Introduction

Over the years, as we grow up, we often wonder about the purpose or reason of our existence. Is life simply a matter of obtaining food and shelter? In fact, animals are mostly occupied in activities related to survival. But surely human existence must have a greater purpose. This has been the basic concern in the Indian perspective on human nature. The Indian approaches tell us that many of the problems that we face in life are due to faulty ways of thinking and understanding the world. Therefore, the concern in the Indian perspective is on removal of faulty knowledge which keeps us in a state of ignorance (avidya). Once we have realized this, it is possible to live life with a new kind of freedom. In this state we come to experience a deep and complete joy. This happiness or state of bliss is present in each of us. We only have to unfold and experience it. Such a state enlarges the human consciousness in such a manner that a person’s goal becomes recovering the experience of beingness or existence that is common to everybody.

3.2 Objectives

After reading this lesson you will be able to:

• appreciate some of the key Indian approaches to human nature;
• describe the main ideas of Vedantic, Jain, Buddhist and Sufi perspectives on human nature;
• to understand the relevance of Indian perspectives to the human problems.
3.3 The Vedantic View

The Indian approaches to human nature focuses on the larger reality of which each person, is a part. These approaches emphasise that the problems which we face are because we do not realize our true self. According to these approaches our awareness of who we are often remains faulty and very narrow. Because of this we live in a state of ignorance. It is possible to get out of this state of ignorance by following certain practices, including meditation. There are many approaches to human nature but in this lesson we will focus on the four approaches- Vedantic, Buddhist, Jain and Sufi.

The main concern in the Indian perspectives is on understanding the nature of self - who we are, and the nature of reality as a whole. These two topics constitute the main focus in the Upanishads, the last part of the Vedas. The Vedantic view is derived from the Upanishads. The learned saints and seers who contributed to the Upanishads considered reality in terms of one ultimate principle which they called Brahman.

It is held that the Brahman is present in the entire world and is the reason for the existence of all things. You will notice that all the suffering we experience in life is because we develop attachments, likings, dislikings and preferences for external objects around us like fancy clothes, and other objects of material comfort. Since all these factors provide temporary satisfaction only, we end up only desiring more and more with lesser and lesser satisfaction. We are not in touch with the real center of our life’s true self so we cannot experience true happiness.

The Vedantic view on human nature, or who we really are, emphasizes that the core of each person is one with Brahman or the consciousness. It can be understood with the help of the three terms sat, chit, and anand. Sat means existence, chit refers to awareness or consciousness and anand as you must be knowing means happiness or joy which is the state of bliss or delight. Thus the experience of Brahman comes from the realization that behind all existence including human beings lies Brahman which is pure consciousness and which is inherently blissful.

In Vedanta, the term Jiva is used to refer to the human being. The Vedantic jiva or human being had been described as a 5-layered entity, one layer upon another like the sheaths of an onion. (see fig. 1). The outermost layer refers to the body and is termed as annamaya kosha which literally means ‘unreal or food sheath’. The second inner layer is the pranamaya kosha or ‘sheath of vital breath’ and refers to breathing as well as others processes of the body which ensure the functioning of the organs.

The annamaya kosha is the third inner sheath and refers to the process of the senses and is also considered to be the basis of awareness of ‘me’ or ‘mine’or what is called ego-awareness. The fourth inner layer is called the vijnanamaya kosha and refers to the
working intelligence of the mind - thinking, reasoning etc. The anandmaya kosha or ‘bliss sheath’ is the fifth and innermost layer of the jiva and is thus seat or place of the true self, identical with Brahman. Since the true self or Brahman is at the center of each and every person the experience of bliss is a basic part of our nature.

In day-to-day life, most of us are ignorant of the real core of our self, the source of true happiness. For this reason we suffer and face many unnecessary problems in life. The goal of Vedanta is the removal of this ignorance through a systematic procedure which restores our self-awareness to its original state of the true self with Brahman, characterized by sat, chit and anand. Vedanta thus promises, freedom from ignorance toward liberation (moksa) which a person gets from self-knowledge (Atma Gyan). This takes us to a state or condition where we experience happiness and joy. The Vedantic system aims at a total transformation of a person’s life. This transformation is possible by first becoming aware of defects in oneself, then to withdraw from the distractions in the outer world with the help of teaching and meditation. This finally results in self-realization, in other words, we become aware of the larger reality of which we are a part.

**INTEXT QUESTIONS 3.1**

Each question has 4 choices. Choose the correct one.

1. The Vedantic view is derived from:
   (a) Puranas  (b) Upanisads  (c) Bhagwagita  (d) Ramayana

2. Brahman is:
   (a) a God  (b) final understanding  (c) the one ultimate principle of reality  
   (d) an illusion.

3. The terms for human being in Vedanta is:
   (a) Manushya  (b) prana  (c) yogi  (d) jiva

4. Anandmayakosa is:
   (a) a place of happiness  (b) the food health  (c) the seat of the true self  
   (d) an illusion

5. Liberation in Vedantic view refers to:
   (a) moksa  (b) self-knowledge  (c) transformation  (d) bliss

**3.4 The Jain Perspective**

The Jain perspective considers that the world is made up of two kinds of reality, living and non-living. Every living being has a spirit or a soul (jiva). For this reason the Jains avoid causing injury to life in any form. They practice non violence (ahimsa). Another important belief in Jainism is the respect for the opinion of others because they hold that reality is
many faceted (anekantavada). In the Jain view of existence, consciousness is the basic or essential nature of every soul.

An ordinary human being faces all kinds of suffering in day-to-day life. S/he is a jiva, or a living conscious substance called the soul. This soul is inherently perfect. It has infinite potentiality within. Infinite knowledge, infinite faith, infinite power and infinite bliss, all can be obtained by the soul. But there are certain obstacles which prevent the soul from attaining that state. Therefore, they have first to be removed. Just like the shining sun lights up the whole world as soon as the atmosphere is free from clouds and fog, the soul too can attain omniscience and other perfections, once the obstacles are removed.

These obstacles, according to Jainism, consist of matter-particles (pudgala) which infect the soul and reduce its natural powers. The shortcomings which are present in any individual soul are due to the material body which the soul has entered into. The body is made up of matter-particles which are arranged in specific ways for the creation of a specific kind of body. The main guiding force in the creation of a body is one’s passion (or desire-force) of the soul. Each soul acquired a body which is suitable for it based on karma.

The karma is the sum total of the previous life of the soul, including action, thought and speech. It causes certain strong desires and attractions which crave for satisfaction. These cravings of the soul lead to the creation of a specific body with a specific organization of matter particles. The body that we get through our parents is not by chance. The family we are born in depends on our past karma. The nature of body - its skin complexion, shape, height, life-span etc. are all dependent on past Karma.

The passions which prevent the soul from realizing its true nature of infinite knowledge, infinite faith, infinite power and infinite bliss, and keep it in bondage are: anger, pride, infatuation and greed (krodha, mana, maya, lobha). These are called kasaya (sticky substances) because the presence of these in the soul make matter particles stick to it. The karma determines the nature and number of particles attracted by the soul and these are therefore, called karma-matter (karma-pudgala) or simply karma. The flow of such karma-matter into the soul is called influx (asrava) of karma.

The soul remains in bondage due to its association with matter. In order to attain freedom or liberation, the soul has to completely separate or dissociate itself from the matter. This is possible by preventing the flow of new matter in the soul and in addition, the complete elimination of the matter which at present sticks to the soul. The first process is called samvara - the stoppage of influx) and the second nirjara (exhaustion or wearing out of karma in the soul.)

As noted earlier, it is passions or cravings of the soul which lead to the sticking of matter to it. The passions prevail in due to ignorance about the true nature of the soul, and this leads to anger, pride, infatuation and greed. It is through right knowledge (samyag-jnana) that ignorance can be removed. It is by studying carefully the teachings of the omniscient tirthankaras like Mahavira who have already attained liberation that one can get knowledge.
It is first necessary to have a general understanding of the teachings of the Jinas and to develop faith in the ability of the teachers (samyag-darsana), which creates the way for the right knowledge. But knowledge by itself is useless, unless it is put into practice. For this reason right conduct (samyak-caritra) is the third essential step for attaining liberation. In right conduct, a person has to control his passions, senses, through, speech and action, guided by right knowledge. This stops the influx of new karma and the removal of old karma which slowly removes the matter which has trapped the soul in ignorance and bodage.

In Jainism, right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct are known as the three gems (triratna) which shine or glow in a good life. These three are closely tied and progress or regress (going forward or backward) within any one has a direct effect on the other two. Perfection of conduct accompanies perfection of knowledge and faith. When the triratnas are developed harmoniously, the forces of passions and karmas are overcome, and the soul becomes free from its bondage to matter and attains liberation. The soul then realizes its true potential: the fourfold perfection (anantacatustaya) - infinite knowledge, infinite faith, infinite power and infinite bliss.

In summary the Jain view proposes the absolute law of karma the effect of which can only be removed by producing in the soul powerful forces of right thought, right speech and right action. Each one of us has to work towards our own freedom through individual effort. The teachers of the past help only as guides. The Jain path is, therefore, a path of self help. For this reason the liberated soul is called a victor or winner (jina) and a hero (vira).

**INTEXT QUESTIONS 3.2**

Fill in the blanks with appropriate words:

1. The obstacles which come in the way of the soul realizing its true nature are made up of ___________.
2. The passions which keep the soul in bondage are anger, ____________, infatuation and greed.
3. ____________ and nirjara are the two processes which help the soul to attain liberation.
4. In Jainism right faith, right knowledge and right conduct are known as _________.

**3.5 The Buddhist View**

Based on his experience, Gautam Buddha offered the middle path to life: finding meaning in life by neither denying oneself from sense gratification, nor over indulgence in one’s desires and cravings. Buddha focused on the important questions of sorrow, its cause, the
stopping of suffering and the path through which sorrow can be stopped. The answers to these questions form the basis of Buddha’s enlightenment and are known as the four noble truths (catvari arya satyani). These are as follows:

(i) **Life is full of suffering (duhkha):** The first truth is the existence of suffering. Normally, the inner state of people is such that dissatisfaction becomes unavoidable.

(ii) **There is a cause for all suffering (duhkha-samudaya):** The second truth is that suffering is the result of desire. Most people have an attachment to positive and pleasurable objects and a repulsion toward negative and painful objects. If our desires are unsatisfied, we have a need to change our present situation. On the other hand, if we are satisfied, we are afraid of change and this causes frustration and suffering. Since all things have a temporary existence, our enjoyment of the present is reduced because of the realization that it will soon pass. For this reason, we always want the situation to be other than what it is.

(iii) **It is possible to put an end to suffering (duhkha - nirodha):** The third truth is that it is possible to stop suffering by removing craving. According to Buddhism, it is possible to learn to accept the world as it is without experiencing dissatisfaction. If our happiness depends on the satisfaction of certain needs, or if we are controlled by our desires, then they have become unhealthy cravings which should be removed. Some desire like those for food and sleep - are necessary for survival. Acceptance of the world as it is, means we should develop an even-minded attitude of enjoying desires which are fulfilled, without fear of those periods when our dreams don’t become a reality. In this way we slowly learn to accept things as they are, but at the same time, by acting in the right way, we can make things better for the future.

(iv) **There is a path which lead to the end of sufferering (dukha - nirodha - marga):** The fourth truth is that there is a way to remove suffering, i.e., craving and dissatisfaction. This way is called the Eight-fold Path, (astang marg) which consists of right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, right thought, and right understanding. The basic idea here is that certain ways of thinking and acting can harm others as well as injure oneself. In Buddhist training, three aspects are essential: moral conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom. The Eightfold path falls under these three categories. Moral or ethical conduct is based on the fundamental Buddhist teachings of universal love and compassion for all living beings. Ethical conduct includes right speech, right action and right livelihood. Let us examine them in some detail.

**Right speech** means that one must not engage in (1) lies; (2) gossip or talk which causes disunity or disharmony, (3) harsh, rude, or abusive language; and (4) useless and foolish talk. Instead, we should speak the truth and use words which are friendly and useful. We should not speak in a careless way and should always keep in mind what is appropriate for the time and place.
**Right action** refers to moral and peaceful conduct. For this we must not take part in the following - (1) destruction of life, (2) stealing, (3) dishonesty, (4) illegitimate sexual acts, and (5) use of drugs or alcohol. In addition, we should help other in leading a right and peaceful life. Right livelihood is possible if we do not live in a way which causes harm to anyone or anything.

Mental discipline includes right efforts, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Right efforts refer to using our will to (1) present unhealthy states of mind to occur, (2) remove them states if they arise, (3) produce good and healthy states of mind, and (4) develop and perfect the good, healthy states already present.

**Right mindfulness** means to be aware of and attentive to (1) the working of the body, (2) feelings, (3) activities of the mind, and (4) specific ideas and views. Different types of meditation have been developed in Buddhism to bring about right type of mindfulness. Right concentration refers to the development of mental focus, which helps achieving the other goals of the path.

**Wisdom** is made up of right thought and right understanding. Right thought includes selfless detachment, love and nonviolence. Right understanding is the understanding of things as they are, which is attained by working sincerely on all aspects of the Four Noble Truths.

The result of sincere concentration on truth is the attainment of wisdom. The cause for dissatisfaction and suffering is revealed once for all. Ignorance and desire are cut at their roots and the source of all unhappiness disappears. In this way perfect wisdom, perfect goodness and perfect equanimity are all achieved. Thus one attains freedom from suffering and, therefore, reaches finally the state of nirvana.

**INTEXT QUESTIONS 3.3**

Each statement is followed by four choices. Choose the correct one.

1. The third noble truth is:
   (a) suffering is an illusion  (b) suffering has no cause
   (c) to search for food  (d) it is possible to put an end to suffering.

2. The Eightfold path falls under:
   (a) nirvana  (b) the Bodhi tree  (c) Right action (d) dukha-nirodha marga

3. Freedom from suffering brings us to the state of:
   (a) moksa  (b) samadhi  (c) nirvana  (d) Sachidananda

**3.6 The Sufi View**

Sufism is the spiritual, mystical core or inner aspect of Islam. For centuries Sufism has offered a path which if followed can lead to progress toward self realization - the emergence
of the true purpose of our existence. The goal of Sufism is to help a person in having a
direct experience of God or ultimate truth by going beyond ordinary personal experiences
This goal is attained with the help of teachings in different forms which have to be practiced
in one’s life.

Sufism has been described as a way of knowledge, a way of devotion and a way of love.
It is an approach which helps us go beyond mental and emotional obstacles which come in
the way of spiritual growth. In the Sufi view, certain teachers know what is really important
in life, how to help individuals to become real and complete human beings and realize
one’s true nature. These teachers help in transmitting useful knowledge - knowledge that
helps in the understanding of one’s own self and which allows us to experience the Divine
spark which exists within each one of us. A person who follows the path of Sufism is called
by different names. Apart from that of a Sufi they are referred to as a faqir, and also a
dervish.

The following four points are considered as important tenets of Sufism.

(1) There are as many ways to reach truth (or God) as there are individuals. All ways
involve transformation of the ego and service to creation.

(2) We can live in harmony with others only if we develop an inner sense of justice. This
occurs only when we have reduced our selfishness and arrogance.

(3) Love is one of the underlying principles of morality. Love springs from self-work and
expresses itself in the service to others.

(4) The cardinal truth is self-knowledge. Knowledge of self ripens into knowledge of
God.

Sufism has been described as a way of knowledge and also as a way of love. Similar to the
goal of other spiritual traditions, Sufism helps in making us experience a deeper reality
beyond our limited waking state. This experience leads to knowing and direct contact with truth. There are four stages of Sufi practice: Sharia (religious law), tariq (spiritual path), haqiqat (truth) and marifa (gnosis). Let us understand them briefly.

(i) Sharia : It forms the basis for the other three stages, and deals with teaching of right
and wrong and the proper way to live in the world. Just as a house cannot be built
without a foundation, Sufism cannot be practiced without first following the Sharia,
which in Arabic mean ‘road’. It is not possible to develop spiritually without following
the moral rules of right conduct.

(ii) Tariqa : It refers to actual Sufi practice leading to the spiritual or inner path to truth.
This path is not marked in a clear and precise manner. The inner practice of Sufism has
to be approached with the help of a guide or teacher who is familiar with the path. This
teacher is called Sheikh. The Sharia helps in making the external clean and ordered,
and the tariqa makes us clean and pure from inside.
(iii) **Haqiqa**: It means truth. This is concerned with the true understanding, without which we will only blindly copy the teachers who have attained haqiqa or truth. In the first two stages there is only imitation of those who know, but in this stage the practice of the earlier stages becomes a truth and is internalized.

(iv) **Marifa**: It is gnosis, which is a deep realization or an inner knowing. This is knowledge of the true reality which only very few people attain, such as the prophets and Messengers of God, and great sages.

These four stages and the personal experience which one goes through have been described as follows: At the stage of sharia, there is division of ‘your and mine’. In other words, sharia ensures individual rights and proper relations between people. Upon reaching the level of tariqa ‘mine is your and yours is mine’. The Sufis consider each other as brother and sisters. They open their hearts, their homes and their purses to each other. At the stage of haqiqa, there is ‘no mine and no yours’. The person realizes that all things from God, and we are only caretakers of all our possessions or belongings. We are supposed to use the gifts God had given us to help all of God’s relations. Those who have successfully reached the level of haqiqa are no longer attached to material objects and external things including status and recognition. The last and final stage is marifa. At this level there is ‘no me and no you’. At this final stage the person realizes that all is God, and that nothing and non one is separate from God. This is the final goal of Sufism.

**INTEXT QUESTIONS 3.4**

Fill in the blanks with correct alternative

1. Sufism is a __________
   (a) religion (b) a way to directly experience God (c) Story about love (d) superstitions belief

2. Sufi wisdom is transmitted through __________
   (a) stories (b) poetry (c) Shrines (d) all of the above

3. In Sufism the cardinal truth is __________
   (a) God (b) Self-knowledge (c) moral conduct (d) right speech

4. __________ is not stage of Sufi practice.
   (a) Sharia (b) Fagin (c) marifa (d) tariqa

5. The final stage of awareness on the Sufi path is __________
   (a) Fana (b) nadir (c) Marifa (d) Baqa
3.7 What you have learnt

In this lesson you have learnt about four different Indian perspectives on the nature of human being. You must have noticed that all four views - Vedantic, Jain, Buddhist and Sufi - tell us that normally we live in a state of ignorance. We do not have knowledge of who we really are and therefore, we are dissatisfied and we suffer. In order to realize our true nature, different methods are given in these systems of thought but the goal is similar. The goal is to directly experience a higher truth behind our existence. Once we have an experience of this, our true nature, our approach towards life changes. We see ourselves, the whole world as a big family. The day-to-day suffering and problems come to an end and we are then able to live meaningful and fulfilled lives.

3.8 Terminal Exercises

1. What are the main concerns in Indian perspective based on the Upanisads?
2. Describe the notion of soul according to the Jain view.
3. Describe the passions which prevent the soul from realizing its true nature.
4. Describe the major goal of Sufism. How are Sufi teachings transmitted?
5. List the four points which are important tenets of Sufism.

3.9 Key to Intext Questions

3.1  
1) b  
2) c  
3) d  
4) a  
5) a

3.2  
1) matter particles  
2) pride  
3) samwara  
4) triratna

3.3  
1) c  
2) d  
3) c

3.4  
1) b  
2) d  
3) b  
4) b  
5) c