

Philosophy of Life in Contemporary India and Society

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Abstract

The studies of Philosophy of life in contemporary India and society require a multidimensional approach. A value being a desirable behavior of individual that is acceptable to society immediately catches the attention for its implicit and explicit character. For qualitative understand values may be broadly divided into two type i.e. positive values and negative values. Positive values highly receive rewards and praised in the society whereas negative values deserve punishment and subjected to humiliation. Modern India nation state has a past colonial legacy that has reflected in Indian society in the various phases of social transformation and socio- cultural value changes. This paper is an attempt to know about changes of traditional, modern, postmodern, and globalized values and its impact on in Indian society. Indian society has moved from ancient primitive barbaric society to medieval feudal monarchy and modern democratic society. Each stages of social transformation has brought its unique and newness in the society in the form of culture and value changes.

Index - Cultural Values, Tradition, Modern, Post Modern, Globalization

Introduction

Study of Philosophy of life in contemporary India and society is a different subject differs from individual to individual, group to group and society to society. The socio-cultural value as a preferred course of action is somewhat considered as an institution and defended. The term value may have multiple meaning varies from subject to subject. The value study is also done in Management, Economics, Commerce, Anthropology and Sociology. The study of sociology reflects that, socio-cultural values acquire a central place in any human society and while studying values it is important to know about norms. Culture with its guidelines always directs conduct in a particular situation. The guidelines of culture are known as norms a specific direction to human action in the form of acceptable behaviour in a given condition. There are several classifications of values, while discussing values one may refer to cardinal values, ordinal values, socio-cultural values, political values, economic values, humanistic values, democratic values, etc. When we discuss about culture change, values being an integral part of culture initially change occurs with the instrumental values like economy, technology, production and consumption that influence the living styles. The value changes may takes place due to internal and external sources and at micro and macro level. The education, legislation, uses of technology, religion, reforms and people's disagreements to reformation are some of the internal sources of value change. The enculturation, international trade and business, war and aggression, natural calamities, science and technology, etc. are some of the external sources of value changes. New roles,

migration, urbanization, industrialization etc. are however, contextual or micro changes. The economic, political, legal, cultural, and physical / geographical factors may be an instrumental to bring internal and external source of value change.

Academic bioethics and environmental ethics were imported from the United States and Europe to Japan in the 1980s. At that time I was a graduate student. I started studying the English literature on those disciplines, but I soon developed a huge frustration with them.

The first reason for this was that bioethics at that time lacked deep philosophical investigations on the concept of life and the concept of death, and without having undertaken such investigations they were trying to figure out sound guidelines on difficult ethical issues surrounding advanced medicine. Of course, consensus building is very important, but it seemed to me that pursuing consensus without a deep philosophical understanding of life and death was senseless and fruitless.

For example, in the 1970s and 80s there was a worldwide debate on whether or not brain death is human death, and many advanced nations concluded that a human being that has lost the integrated function of the whole body should be considered dead, and that when the function of the whole brain is irreversibly lost the integrated function of the human being should be considered to disappear permanently. However, in the debate about brain death, the fundamental question of “what is death?” has rarely been investigated from a philosophical point of view. Philosophically speaking, the reason that a human being that has irreversibly lost the function of the whole brain should be considered dead is not so crystal clear. It should also be noted that this question was heavily discussed in the Japanese debate on brain death in the 1980s and 90s.

The second reason for my frustration derived from the fact that bioethics in the 1980s was established in the disciplines of medicine and biotechnology even though the term “bioethics” had been first defined by V. R. Potter in 1970 as the science of survival in the age of global environmental crisis. At its inception, therefore, bioethics was conceived as a kind of “environmental ethics”, and this aspect was stripped away from the concept of bioethics later in the 1980s. I was frustrated because I had the intuition that our moral attitude toward human life should be deeply connected with our moral attitude toward nature and the environment. I believed that bioethics and environmental ethics should never be separated from each other.

On the other hand, I cannot help having a strange feeling when I turn my eyes to the discipline of contemporary philosophy; that is to say, while we have “philosophy of language,” “philosophy of religion,” “philosophy of law”, and so on, we do not have “philosophy of life” as an independent philosophical discipline. This is a very strange phenomenon. Of course we have “philosophies de la vie” and “Lebensphilosophie,” but these terms only mean a series of philosophical theories that appeared in 19th and 20th century Europe, for example, those of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson, and other philosophers. It is clear beyond doubt that philosophies motivated by a keen interest in the phenomenon and concept of life had appeared in the age of ancient Greece, and other parts of the ancient world such as India and China. In Japan, we have many philosophers who contemplated the philosophy of life from the 9th century to the modern period. We have to broaden our eyes to include different traditions, continents and centuries when talking about the philosophy of life.

Globalization and Values

India has witnessed rapid socio-economic changes since the implementation of liberalization policy. Cities in India are now developing unevenly with rural migration, industrial workers, inequality etc. Unemployment, poverty, caste and communal conflicts, manmade pollution and public disorder have increased the urgency in the area of urban policy. Malpractices have been adopted to possess higher status in the society. Corruption

has grown phenomenally and no area of life is free from it. Prof. Srinivas opines there has been tremendous increase in all kinds of violence including organized violence against the state, inter group violence, intra-familial violence etc.

In the conditions of globalization process, the flow of capital has been observed in the form of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and strengthens India's economy and this FDI flow help to reduce financial burden and internal problems. Linkages of trade and commerce relation with India and other countries are observed even in ancient and medieval periods. Since 1990s there has been increased in inflow of capital and goods and help India's economic growth. There has been the economic growth but it does not fulfill India's expectation. There is a sharp rise in India's external debt. The process of globalization does not contribute to social, cultural and economic integration of people in the society through equitable access to the fruits of developments available out of it that facilitating better quality of life.

Though there is a breakthrough in IT sector, which recognize skills of Indian professional all over the world but yet to boost Indian economy. Globalization along with privatization is affecting Indian women in many ways. It has reduced employment opportunities due to the introduction of sophisticated technology both in agriculture and industry. Indian women are gainfully employed in handicrafts and household industries. These are mainly concentrated in unorganized private sector and this sector is gradually losing its ground due to entry of mechanized products and mass producers of these products in the local markets. The process of globalization brought outstanding changes in the field of science, technology, economy, polity and social institutions in India, which ultimately brought about changes in traditional cultural styles, rituals and religious practices. The structure of society has changed many ways and new trends are being observed in areas concerning the family nexus, the nature and the extent of unemployment and social inequality.

Image of Life

In the late 1980s, I conducted a questionnaire study on the image of life in contemporary Japan. I asked ordinary people and children to write freely about what kind of image they would have when hearing the word "life" ("inochi" in Japanese). I collected more than 1,000 responses from them. In 1991, I published the paper "The Concept of Inochi", which was republished under the title "The Concept of Life in Contemporary Japan" in 2012. While there were many books on Japanese view of life, what were discussed in those books was the views of life held by famous scholars or religious figures in the past. I could not discover any ideas of life currently held among ordinary people just by reading such books. This was the main reason I conducted the above questionnaire research.

I will show you an example of the image of life found among ordinary citizens. The following is the response from a female Christian in her 30s. I feel that life means something which embraces one's whole life, one's mind, one's way of life, love, and whole human existence. And I think one's life is something that is entirely given. I think life is irreplaceable because we cannot get it at all by our own will, or with effort, or with money. If my life is irreplaceable, then others' life must be the same. Others' lives are connected to mine, and all these are in the stream of a large life. Life is, on the one hand, each individual being, unique and irreplaceable. On the other hand, however, it is one large life of the whole human race. Aren't such formless reminders of a deceased person, such as influence, impression, his/her way of life, thought, and religious belief a part of life? In this sense, I think lives could be taken over, be connected, and meet each other beyond space and time. She says she is Christian, but I do not find any special Christian ideas on life in her response. This is a very well written image of life that is frequently expressed by ordinary Japanese people, and I suppose many people in the world would be able to share her view of life. This might show that the basic views of life are shared by people in various cultures and traditions around the world. The difference is in the way they express their ideas.

By analyzing their responses, I found two key terms: “irreplaceability” and “interrelatedness.” Many respondents use these two words dialectically when thinking about life. I made the hypothesis that there is a metaphysical position among people that “Life is irreplaceable because it is interrelated. Life is interrelated because it is irreplaceable.” I called this “the metaphysical structure of life.”

Another interesting thing found in the replies is that many respondents were thinking about life in connection with nature and the environment. They talked about the life and death of a human being against the backdrop of nature: the rising sun, flowing rivers, singing birds, and breathing wind. They seemed to think that human life and nature are closely connected on a deeper level.

Proposal of “Philosophy of Life” as a Philosophical Discipline

I gradually began to think that “philosophy of life” should be a discipline of academic philosophy. In today’s academic philosophy, we have “philosophy of biology,” which deals with creatures’ biological phenomena, “philosophy of death,” which concentrates on the concept of human death, and “philosophy of meaning of life,” which investigates difficult problems concerning the meaning of life and living. However, we do not have “philosophy of life,” which deals with philosophical problems concerning human life and the life of non-human creatures. Hence, I proposed to establish “philosophy of life” as an academic discipline, and started publishing a peer-reviewed open access journal entitled *Journal of Philosophy of Life* in 2011.

The journal defines “philosophy of life” as follows:

We define philosophy of life as an academic research field that encompasses the following activities:

- 1) Cross-cultural, comparative, or historical research on philosophies of life, death, and nature.
- 2) Philosophical and ethical analysis of contemporary issues concerning human and non-human life in the age of modern technology.
- 3) Philosophical analysis of the concepts surrounding life, death, and nature.

We have published papers and essays on a variety of subjects such as “the ethics of human extinction,” “death and the meaning of life,” “Fukushima nuclear disaster,” “whether or not God is our benefactor,” “Hans Jonas and Japan,” “Heidegger and biotechnology,” and “feminism and disability.” All these topics are considered to be examples of philosophical approaches to life, death, and nature. Some of them are topics in the field of applied philosophy or applied ethics, and others are meta-philosophical and metaphysical ones.

In recent issues of the journal, we have particularly concentrated on the issue of philosophical approaches to “meaning of/in life.” The question of “meaning of/in life” is a central axis of philosophy of life in contemporary society. In 2015, we published a special issue entitled *Reconsidering Meaning in Life: A Philosophical Dialogue with Thaddeus Metz*, in which philosophers around the world intensely discussed Thaddeus Metz’s book *Meaning in Life* (Oxford University Press, 2013). And in 2017, we might be able to witness the emergence of a philosophy of life that bridges the East Asian traditions and analytic philosophy.

The following is a list of the topics in the field of philosophy of life in which I am strongly interested.

(1) Meaning in life in a secular society

Thaddeus Metz classifies philosophical approaches to meaning in/of life into three categories: a) supernaturalism, b) subjectivism, and c) objectivism. Supernaturalism thinks that meaning of life is given by

a supernatural being such as God. Subjectivism thinks that meaning in life differs from one person to another. Objectivism thinks that we can judge which one is more meaningful, A's life or B's life. Metz himself argues that objectivism is the best approach to the question of meaning in life, but I do not think so. I have argued that there is a layer in the meaning in life that cannot be compared with anything, and I have called it "the heart of the meaning in life." And my approach is different even from subjectivism in that I argue that the heart of meaning in life cannot be legitimately applied to another person's subjective meaning in life. This can be called a "solipsistic" approach to the meaning in life.

(2) From anti-natalism to birth affirmation

From Sophocles to Schopenhauer, there has been a line of powerful arguments insisting that human beings should not have been born at all. One of the recent advocators of this thought is David Benatar. In his book *Better Never to Have Been: the Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford University Press, 2006), Benatar argues that having been born is always wrong. I think his argument is flawed; however, I highly appreciate that he has reintroduced one of the most important issues in philosophy of life into analytic philosophy. Contrary to Benatar, I have long proposed the concept of "birth affirmation," which means "the state of being able to say "yes" to the fact that I have been born," and I think this concept should be placed at the center of philosophical discussions of human life. Which should be the basis of our lives, a negative attitude to one's life or an affirmative attitude to it? And how can we advocate the latter philosophically?

(3) The problem of life extension

"Life extension" and "age-retardation" have been among the most ardently pursued goals in human history. Today, some scientists argue that using future technologies we will be able to live indefinitely without aging. Although many people would welcome life extension and age-retardation technologies, some philosophers suspect that those technologies will not bring true happiness and meaning of life to humans. For example, Hans Jonas and Leon Kass argue that in the age of super life extension our lives will become superficial ones, and we will lose meaning of life because our lives can become meaningful only when they are limited and not indefinite in this world. This topic is closely connected to the question of how we can accept our own death in a secular society.

(4) The connection of the living and the deceased

In Japan, as well as other countries in East Asia and many other areas of the world, there are ordinary people who do not think that a deceased family member completely disappears from this world. They are inclined to think that a deceased family member continues to exist somewhere in this world and sometimes comes back to the place she died or lived, and that they can meet the deceased family member's spirit there. Some people say that our society is composed not only by the living but also by the deceased. The topic of "the deceased as an indispensable piece of our society" has not been fully discussed in the field of philosophy.

After the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, local people have said that they sometimes can feel the presence of a missing/dead family member, for example, in the midst of the breeze of the wind at the seashore near their home. Philosophers should think deeply about what those local people were experiencing when they had such unusual experiences. By doing this, we can shed a new light on the concept of personhood from a very different angle.

(5) The dignity of the human body

In the debate of brain death in Japan, not a few scholars and journalists argued that the body of a brain-dead patient has its own preciousness although the patient is considered to have lost her self-consciousness. In modern European philosophy, dignity has been considered to be found in a person's rationality, not a person's body, and this idea created the personhood argument in bioethics, which insists that only the person who has self-consciousness and rationality has the right to life. I have long argued that the body of a human being has its own dignity that is different from the dignity of the mind of a human person. Interestingly, the French law on bioethics states that the human body is inviolable which can be interpreted to mean that the human body has dignity. The value or preciousness of the human body is an important theme of philosophy of life in the age of biotechnology.

(6) The connection and difference between biological life and human life

Our intuition tells us that biological life is completely different from human life because while the existence of self-consciousness is the essence of the latter, the former lacks this. But if that is correct, why do we apply the same word "life" to biological life and human life? Don't we see the same essence both in biological life and human life, and call that essence "life"? This is a fundamental question in philosophy of life. Hans Jonas tried to connect these two dimensions. He wrote in his *The Phenomenon of Life* that "[a] philosophy of life comprises the philosophy of the organism and the philosophy of mind. This is itself a first proposition of the philosophy of life, in fact its hypothesis, which it must make good in the course of its execution." Jonas also writes that a philosophy of life "must deal with the organic facts of life, and also with the self-interpretation of life in man." This is the point where philosophy of life parts company with philosophy of biology. Philosophy of life deals with a biological aspect of life, an existential aspect of human life, and the connection between these two dimensions of life.

(7) The history of ideas in philosophy of life

As I have said earlier, philosophical thoughts on life, death, and nature can be found in every philosophical tradition and in every area of the world. Philosophy of life should not be equated with *Lebensphilosophie* or *la philosophies de la vie*. In ancient India, we can find very interesting philosophies of life in the texts of Upanishad and Buddha's teachings. In ancient Greece, we find them in the writings of pre-Socratic thinkers and Aristotle. In the 20th century, we find them in philosophy of biology, deep ecology, autopoiesis, biopolitique, and other philosophical thoughts. Of course, bioethics and environmental ethics should be included in this list of thoughts. The most important philosopher in contemporary philosophy of life is Hans Jonas. His books *The Phenomenon of Life* and *The Imperative of Responsibility* are the basic literature for philosophers who are interested in this field. In Japan, to study philosophy has long been considered to study "Western" philosophy. However, in order to study philosophy of life we have to go beyond "Western" philosophy to include every philosophical tradition in the world from ancient times to the current century. This is truly a practice of studying world philosophy.

Conclusion

Over the twentieth century, Indian society has witnessed significant changes through the different phases of social transformation. Technological advancement has led dramatic revolution by interconnecting amongst nation states and people across the culture and territorial boundaries at the backdrop of globalization policies. Accessibility to wider range of places took place through the networking systems of travel and communication, building up our society and brought new set of social values in the processes of globalization.

This became irreversible because of increasing interdependence among the nation states all over the world affecting traditional culture, beliefs, religious and ritual practices.

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