



Re-thinking 'Salvation' at Pandemic

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Abstract

In Indian philosophy, the achievement of mokṣa or salvation is of prime significance. Different schools of Indian philosophy (both Āstika and Nāstika) have spoken about the nature of salvation and elucidated the means to attain it. This has led to the proliferation of knowledge-discourse around the concept of mokṣa but there remains no disagreement over the fact that by unraveling himself/herself from mundane affairs, by adopting a detached mode of living life, is the guaranteed way to mokṣa.

Bearing in mind the present-day pandemonium, we are being forced to stay in a segregated manner, to reduce physical proximity with others. At this juncture, one may enquire whether in the current situation living in isolation is a necessary condition to salvation, or is there any necessity to modify the traditional way of conceiving the concept of salvation? The present article would try to reflect on this issue by deliberating on mainly the Buddhist school of thought.

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Indian systems of thought proposes that human beings remain entangled in the cycle of birth and death due to karma. To end this cycle, one needs to carry out certain actions or duties towards others. This is the only means to salvation or liberation or mokṣa. Different philosophers have prescribed various ways to attain it. Hinduism recommends three paths, following which one may achieve mokṣa. They are Karma Mārga, the way of action; Bhakti Mārga, the way of devotion; and Jñāna Mārga, the way of knowledge. For example, in Advaita philosophy, Śaṅkara articulates about the significance of the Jñāna Mārga. In his view, the right knowledge of the Absolute would ultimately lead to supreme bliss, that is, mokṣa. Śaṅkara holds that attaining such kind of knowledge is the only means to erase our sorrows or miseries. Along with Advaita philosophy, Jainism also talks about liberation or mokṣa. They opine that to achieve liberation, it is an imperative of human beings to take care of the monks. The only means to accomplish this is by building various temples for them. Besides performing such actions, one also needs to perform some charitable works. The



Sāṅkhya system has categorically talked about three kinds of sorrows, namely, Ādhyātmika (physical or mental pain caused by diseases), Ādhibhautika (pain caused by rebirth, other fellow human beings or animals), and Ādhidaivika (pain caused by thunder, cold, heat, rain, etc.). These sorrows lead to suffering and create obstacles in the path of liberation. By attaining the true knowledge of the 'nature' of Puruṣa and Prakṛti, the two fundamental principles of Sāṅkhya philosophy, would help one to attain the tattvajñāna, a path to salvation. The other schools of Indian philosophy have also proposed the significance of the stage of liberation where they have mentioned to isolate oneself from any kind influence of materialism. Seclusion is the only way to be liberated. Hence, based on various explanations offered by different philosophical schools, it is clear that one needs to free himself/herself from any sufferings. This would be accomplished when one would comprehend the real nature of ourselves and the world.

Apart from realizing the true essence of oneself on relation to the cosmos, Indian philosophy also addresses the noteworthiness of carrying out one's duty. Being dutiful towards others helps one get salvation in this life. In this context, the concept of ṛṇa plays a vital role. We are not only obliged to carry out our duties but at the same time, we are indebted to others, like to our parents (pitṛ-ṛṇa), to Gods (deva-ṛṇa), and the sages (rishi-ṛṇa). This is the dharma of any individual and one needs to perform it, that is, to repay one's debt unquestionably. A devoted way of executing one's duty can help one to relish the fruits of liberation. Any failure would again entrap an individual into the web of karma, thus, leading one to get trapped into the vicious cycle of birth and death.

Undertaking one's duty in this life is vital but doing it mechanically is always not possible. Now, the question is - is it possible to do one's duty if he/she is not abreast of others' sorrows? If the claim is that we need to be dutiful, then it is essential to feel related or connected to others. In this scenario, doing one's duty becomes meaningful when it is intrinsically related to making others contented, becoming trustworthy to others. This is possible when effective communication takes place between individuals. Humans are by nature social and building bonds with people are imperative. This becomes relevant in today's time when people are going through a severe crisis worldwide. In the west, the usual belief is that one is born only with rights and as a social being, he enjoys them. Unfortunately, the western culture lacks the concept of responsibility in a way that is being enunciated within the Indian



context, where a man is born both with rights and responsibilities and more primacy is given on responsibilities towards others.

Considering the present time, feelings like compassionate, empathetic, caring, etc., need to be nurtured among individuals. Salvation is a process; it is a way of life that cannot come to a standstill amidst any adverse situations. Being dynamic, the process of 'salvation' continues. Rather than staying in a segregated manner, treating others with care at this moment of crisis may aid one to alleviate his/her pain and such an accomplishment may usher in salvation. Consequently, there arises the prerequisite to realize the notion of salvation in an altered light. To further clarify this particular point, Buddhist principles and their way of perceiving life may be deployed. The next segment would attempt to deal with this specific matter.

Buddhist Salvation

Of all the Indian philosophical schools, Buddhism is quite popular for its simplistic approach towards life. It talks about the preponderance of *duḥkha* or sufferings in this cosmic world. The tenets of Buddhism are easy to follow and one can bring an end to his/her miseries. By adhering to the middle path or *madhyam-mārga*, any individual can get respite from the chain of birth and death. Buddhist call this state as *nirvāna* - the state of complete rest and peace. Buddhism proposes that once the state of *nirvāna* is achieved, he or she can undergo sufferings to help others in distress. It is with love and kind-heartedness towards others that a person will finally attain a state of pure bliss. This is when one is called *Bodhisattva*, that is, a person who sacrifices his/her interests to free the world from grief.

Buddhism does not deny the presence of human desires but it interprets this word otherwise. The word 'desire' does not mean self-gratification. Instead, it stands for the yearning to help mankind; a sacrificial service to assist others in the process of liberation. In Buddhism, 'desire' is inherently related to the well-being of all, helping others to have freedom from material pleasures. Buddhism does not preach an egoistic, isolated, or self-centered concept of liberation. On the contrary, a closer look at this school would show that as a concept, 'mokṣa' has a social dimension. By fostering an empathetic attitude, Buddhism says to focus upon others. To liberate mankind, it is essential to transcend the 'individualistic' idea of liberation. Lord Buddha not only achieved *nirvāna* for himself but he has undertaken steps to put an end to all distresses of this whole world. He has talked about the eight-fold path which



comprises the right view, right determination, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and, lastly, right concentration. This path acts as a guide that needs to be essentially followed by those who aim for liberation in this very life. And this is only achievable by overcoming everyone's causes of suffering. The way to mokṣa is not a personal effort but a collective per se, where everyone has to strive towards ending the miseries of each other and also of this world. Hence, Buddhism recommends a practical mode of spirituality that ultimately leads to salvation.

Philosophy is intrinsically associated with our everyday life. Its beliefs, its ideologies need to be actualized in our day to day thinking, practice. As a discipline, philosophy would be a complete failure if humans cannot relate to it. So, its principles need to be implemented in actual life. Talking in terms of abstraction would not help one to realize the worth of philosophy. Else, our existence would become meaningless. Salvation is a kind of self-restoration in this present life- the expulsion of pain and embracing of life. And this requires a communal existence, a group of people bonded together with shared beliefs and expectations, intending to be liberated. It is not the cessation of the suffering of a single individual per se but every human beings who are embedded in a web of relationships. No religious doctrines teach us to thrive as isolated beings. Rather, it preaches to serve humanity as a whole that is supposed to be a way of paying one's devotion to God. The present catastrophic situation has incessantly reinforced the truth that human beings are social beings and are connected. Any effort to end this cause of pain individually cannot lead to a 'greater good' and to achieve this 'good', a collective accomplishment of things is required, so as salvation. This is not a new way of seeing the notion of salvation and can be proved from its reference in the great epic of Mahābhārata. In Ādiparva, it mentions about ānṛṣaiṅsya, which means that in this world we can live only by the goodwill of others. This re-establishes the fact that there lies a prerequisite to rethink and reconceptualize the notion of 'salvation' in its true form where we need to highlight its social dimension.