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AHIMSA, THE BASIC SOCIAL ETHIC

All thoughtful people in the world today are thinking more and more in terms of Ahimsa (Non-violence) as the only real solvent of world conflicts. Occasionally they do so without actually employing the term 'Ahimsa'. The great English philosopher Bertrand Russell has, for instance, in his book entitled 'New Hopes for a Changing World' spoken about the perplexities which torment mankind at present and tried to build up courage by pointing out that the rebuilding of 'all the impulses that are creative and expansive' would save men from moral perplexity and from remorse and the condemantion of others. This is the new ethic which Russell offers to the world as a remedy of its difficulties ; and it is nothing other than Ahimsa as preached by the leaders of religion in the East from quite immemorial times.

This new ethic, says Bertrand Russell in his book, 'depends upon harmony with other men'. With its help 'it will be easy to live in a way that brings happiness equally to ourselves and to others'. If man, says Russell could feel in the way indicated by this new ethic, not only his personal problems but also all the problems of world politics, even the most abstruse and difficult, will melt away. Suddenly, as when the mist dissolves from a mountain top, will the landscape be visible and the way be clear.

Bertrand Russell has acquired great reputation as a clear-headed philosopher. His reasoning is at once penetrating and satisfying. It is therefore a matter for some surprise that he should have failed to clearly mention that the new ethic described by him is only Ahimsa, which had been preached in India by the great savants Mahavira and the Buddha. These religious teachers had made Ahimsa the basic idea of their thouhgt structure.

That the acceptance of this ethic by the people will help man to solve his many conflicts, Bertrand Russell is quite clear and even rather dogmatic about. In his book he has made anelaborate argument that it is in the nature of man to be in conflict with something and that there are three kinds of conflict in particular which pursue mankind, (1) the conflict of man and nature, (2) the conflict of man and man. and (3) the conflict of man and himself, and in a statement which is full of learning and historical details he has reasoned out his optimistic conclusion that in our society which would be recreated consequent upon the acceptance of this new ethic not only shall we secure 'the happy man' but we shall also be in sight of 'the happy world'. The happy man, according to Russell, would be a man without fear, and the happy world would be the world in which the three conflicts spoken of above have been effectually conquered, the conflict of man and nature by the establishment of an international authority controlling the production and distribution of food and raw materials and also tackling the population problem by the enforcement of a universal system of family planning, the conflict of man and man by

the concentration of all really serious weapons of war in the hands of the international authority so created, and the conflict of man with himself by organising a world-wide system of public education which would provide for the protection of the individual against at once the hostility of the herd and his own fears.

Not only does Beftrand Russell give no name to this new ethic, he even feels that it can scarcely be called an ethic at all, as it primarily depends upon harmony between man and man. To this basic social ethic, of which the characteristic feature is harmony between man and man, the name that was given by the teachers of religion in the East was Ahimsa.

It is important to know that when some representatives of the major religions of the world met in Delhi in 1957 in a World conference of Religions and when they felt that it was high time for religions to give up their mutual bickerings and to strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and harmony in the world, they could not think of a better way of doing it other than by establishing an institute of research in the potentiality of Ahimsa. Their reasoned faith was that as knowledge is power, the mere bringing out the power of Ahimsa by an objective study of humanities and the great spiritual movements of the world through succeeding ages would act as an impelling force to foster love and brotherhood among men, races and the nations.

Ahimsa is in reality the basic social ethic. It takes its birth in sociality in human nature, and it builds its whole edifice on that principle. It emphasises all those qualities which would inexorably lead to the fortification of the social life of mankind by the ending of all conflicts based upon differences of race, religion or creeds. These conflicts, so say the psychologists, are born of human narrowness, selfishness, greed, suspicion, hatred and self-assertiveness. Ahimsa therefore aims at the eradication of all these proclivities of men. It forswears prejudice, ignorance and short-sightedness. Only by the preaching and practice of Ahimsa has the sway of civilisation shown itself in the history of human social evolution. Of all the forces which have functioned in human history as solvents of conflict, Ahimsa has naturally been by far the strongest and the most powerful. Ahimsa alone has stood for integration and emotional understanding as distinguished from the superimposition of one specific belief or habit of life upon another.

Conflicts of one kind or another have tormented the world only when the force of Ahimsa as a dominant factor in total human affairs has been allowed to grow weak. Bertrand Russell in his book has pointed his accusing finger to the fact that man's gregariousness is a limited instinct and that beyond a certain degree it is a product rather of self-interest than of instinct. His argument runs as follows : Ants and bees instinctively serve the purposes of their group, they have no need for morals and decalogues and apparently never feel any impulse to sin. Gregarious mammals are not so completely dominated by the herd instinct as ants and bees are, but have less tendency to individualism than human beings have. In human beings there is a constant conflict between the individual and the herd instinct, a conflict which as a rule is subjective and waged in the mind of the individual but occasionally it breaks out into open disagreement. Russell further says that the forms taken by this disagreement depend upon the size and character of the herd.

That naturally leads Bertrand Russell to the tracing of the evolution of social grouping from the family to the tribe and thence to the national group. There, however, he stops, we think

quite improperly and unjustifiably. Even his view of the psychological make up of man is not quite adequate, as he has related it to the prevailing social system today. Human evolution has no doubt followed the line of social grouping from the family to the tribe and thence to the national group, but it does not end with the national group. Trends are already noticeable, especially in America and Africa, towards the extension of the social ethos to a continental level. The United Nations represents an international ethos which, even if it is not very strong today, is clearly indicative of the further line of development in the evolution of social grouping. In consequence of man's space flights and inter-planentary travels, the horizons of the social units existing in the world at present would be further widened.

Quite apart from any inadequacies in Bertrand Russell's argument as developed in this book, however, it is clearly evident that a world view of Ahimsa is fast developing. Thinking people on all the continents are devoting their attention to this basic social ethos, and masses of people are anxiously waiting for its propagation. In India, consequent upon the decision of the World Conference of Religions held in 1957, a research institute on Ahimsa, designated Ahimsa Shodh-Peeth, has been set up in Delhi; and the world is looking forward to a proper and successful flowering of its work. It is a happy augury that this Institute has taken steps to seek the co-operation of thinkers and workers of all countries by enlisting them as Corresponding Members of the Ahimsa Shodh-Peeth. Research on this basic social ethic may therefore be expected to be conducted with international co-operation from the very beginning.