



Solitude and Self-Realisation: Exploring Indian Thoughts

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Abstract:

Actually, A crisis whether it plays out at the level of a whole world at a larger scale, or whether it is more localized to just society or a single person, affects the emotions and psyche in a quite similar way. With this premise, our essay starts and discuss that when a crisis leads to a rapid and extensive change in the patterns of our life it is quite disorganised which causes panic, traumas and conflicts and analyse how solitude and self-realisation can help us tackle such situation. As Michael Mahoney explains: "It is not easy to maintain a coherent sense of identity, self-worth, or competence in the face of multiple and chronic challenges to old patterns."²ⁱ During a world-wide crisis, a mass will tend to fear most the threats that precipitated the catastrophe, but depending on the nature of these fears and predicament, it is this existential crisis to our sense of self that may prove most dangerous. Fortunately, with some wisdom of the process that leads to a breakdown, we can find some steps and ways to fortify our psyche and can retain the world and its progress on the path. Present sense of isolation which emerged due to Covid-19 pandemic and all-around shock which it gave us a good opportunity to re-think and reflect on the whole purpose of Isolation and detachment in the psycho-philosophical paradigm to help the humanity and to prevent any future pandemic. The present essay is focused upon the Indian philosophical exposition of solitude and self-realisation resonating to the contemporary scenario and how the virtue of solitude can help us to overcome so many problems throughout the world

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² Mahoney, Michael .*Human Change Processes*, Basic Books, 1991,preface

There is a blind notion in society and has become conformity that Human beings are intrinsically social by nature and isolation is a cause to many mental illnesses in him. If they are kept alone for too long their mental faculties can get disturbed, leading to states of traumas and despair. The use of solitary confinement and exile are practised with ancient roots such as Indian and Greek thoughts, suggest that our saint and sages have long grasped how deeply the fear and anxiety of isolation runs through the veins of humans ...so they sought some ways to fight this fear and came up with a solution that solitude is something which helps us to heal ourselves and connect to our deepest self .it help us to realise our true nature ... as Anthony Storr while writing about the solitude stressed over the need for interpersonal relationships in the maturing of personality and character. He wrote "... I still believe this; but I want to add a rider to the effect that maturation and integration can take place within the isolated individual to a greater extent than I had

allowed for...introverted creators can define identity and achieve self-realization by self-reference, that is, by interacting with their work rather than by interacting with other people."³

When we try to introspect (*manan*) the lesson of solitude from Indian philosophical perspective we find that the Solitude is way to holistic self-change and rebirth of psyche and spirit as it sets a way for us to free ourselves from the needs and false expectations of other and which turns our attention inward which can be a better way to learn who we are. And as the concept note of this essay competition suggests that - "'solitude' is not a novel concept for Indian philosophical and religious traditions. Conversations about 'solitude', 'detachment' or 'separation' were a central theme for liberation. It is also known as '*Kaivalya*' in various religious systems. According to *Yogasutra*, it is the separation of *purusha* from *prakriti* which provides liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Even in Buddhist and *Jaina* thoughts isolation and detachment are the central pillars to attain Moksha Current state of

³ Storr, Anthony. *Solitude: A Return to the Self*, Simon and Schuster, (2005), p. 147

isolation emerged due to Covid-19 pandemic gave us time and opportunity to re-think and reflect on the whole purpose of Isolation and detachment in the philosophical paradigm.”⁴ Can be a beautiful idea or approach to explore to strengthen the self with solitude.

Solitude is not only an ideal state as well as a way to perfection of self as suggested by Indian sages such as mahatma Buddha and Patanjali but also play a constructive role in our reflective faculties and it is our philosophical reflections that introduces us to the infinite possibilities and which opens up the way to what we could become or what we destined to become. This is not just a utopian idea rather an affirmed idea successfully accepted by science and another practical discipline which shows that if the path of solitude is used constructively then it not only promote personal growth abut also manifest a more meaningful life. Anthony Storr put it “The capacity to be alone is a valuable resource when

changes in mental attitude are required. After major alterations in circumstances, the fundamental reappraisal of the significance and meaning of existence may be needed. In a culture in which interpersonal relationships are generally considered to provide the answer to every form of distress, it is sometimes difficult to persuade well-meaning helpers that solitude can be as therapeutic as emotional support.”⁵

The tradition of Ashramas and a way to solitude

The notion of in ancient Indian thoughts played a very crucial role in the different stages of life which provide training and environment for realising the true -self and its potentiality. The Four *ashramas* which are *Brahmacharya* (the learner’s life), *Garhasthya* (family life), *Vanaprastha* (retirement from domestic things), and *Sannyasa* (renunciation). Indian thoughts show a beautiful balance of *Pravrtti Marg* and *Nivrtti Marg* and even though holds the space for solitude. The first and foundational or

⁴ Concept **note of** “Concept of ‘ISOLATION/ *Kaivalya* ’ in Indian Thought”, <https://philosophytoday.in/index.php/1st-philosophy-today-essay-competition-2020/>

⁵ Storrs, Anthony. *Solitude: A Return to the Self*, Simon and Schuster, (2005),p-29

the *Brahmacari-ashram* aims for fostering moral and spiritual values and prepare the learner for the later part of life so that he/she can hold the weight of responsibility without hesitations. This ashrama helps an individual in character formation and self-realisation. Cleanliness, Celibacy, discipline, simple living and high thinking, purity of thought, humility, love, Self-Free from lusty pleasures and any other social conformity and mediocrity etc. are the main teaching of this *Ashrama* which deeply imbibe the notion of solitude.

Similarly, the philosophy of solitude can be traced in other *ashramas* also. *Vanaprastha*, the third *ashrama*, its etymological means suggest "forest-dweller." in which an individual gradually retire from domestic and social life and begin to meditate his or her mind on philosophical questions such what is the highest aim of life, what is our position in the world, who we are or who am I and many other moral and spiritual introspections. Thus we can see a glimpse of solitude in this ashrama also in which a devotee spends more time to austerity and penance and spiritual matters that

concern to solitude or the individual self ...after the *Vanaprastha ashrama* this process of self-seeking ends in the Sannyasa (renunciation) in which an individual whole renounce oneself from the worldly things and affairs and fully devote himself or herself to the Supreme. The beauty of Indian thought is that the notion of supreme is quite liberal and can be interpreted in numerous ways hermeneutically ... Vedas and Upanishads eloquently suggest that the reality is one and that one reality has been called by many names- "*Ekam Sat Vipra Bahuda Vadanti*" As various rivers head towards to one ocean in the same way the end of all schools, faiths and religions is the same. All lead to salvation or liberation or solitude (*Samadhi*). Thus if all school and approaches lead to the same truth and they are just the different pathways to that their remains no reason for the disparity.

The reason behind this holistic balance in Indian thought is its philosophical beauty where everything has been speculated with enough logic and epistemology so that there may not preside any lacuna of confusions and

disturbance... as R.K Mukherjee
 "...Learning in India through the ages
 had been prized and pursued not for its
 own sake, if we may so put it, but for
 the sake, and as a part, of religion. It
 was sought as the means of self-
 realization, as the means to the highest
 end of life viz. Mukti or Emancipation"

⁶. Ancient Indian insight lies in the fact
 that it considers that reflection and
 imagination must contribute in this
 self-development and fulfilment, and
 not in the acquisition of mere objective
 knowledge which is nothing more than
 intellectual mediocrity. Here every
sastra (Text) has got its *pryojana*
 (purpose) that is to lead an individual
 to the highest aim of life which is self-
 realisation and called by different-
 different names *Moxa, Nirvana, Apvarga*
 and so on by different -different
 schools. It is to be noted that every
 approach in Indian thought imbibes the
 idea of solitude ...*Karma, Gyana, Bhakti,*
Ashramas, Purushartha, Varna all have
 hidden notion of solitude which aims
 to self-realisation. The notion of
Nishkama Karma, Gyana in its highest
 form that is *Atmangyana*, and *Bhakti* in
 itself is way to solitude in which an

individual connect himself to one
 consciousness or to one thing ...a total
 absorption. Similarly, as we discussed
 above the path of *Ashramas* and
Purshrtha is also philosophical
 preparedness to solitude and
 ultimately in the liberation of self or
 birth-death cycle.

Know Thyself (Atmagyan) and Solitude

After the above discussion, it has get
 cleared that the self-knowledge is the
 highest aim of Indian thought and it
 has been also the purpose of solitude.
 This notion of self -knowledge is not
 limited to the spiritual and
 philosophical domain only rather
 expands more and covers the Modern
 psychology and many psychological
 theory or therapies that have adopted
 this philosophical legacy (the concept
 of knowing thyself) and consider self -
 knowledge to be one of the essential
 elements of a happy, tranquil and
 fulfilled life. Faculty this thing can be
 traced in the philosophy of antiquity
 such as Greco-Roman philosophy
 emphasized over the know thyself,
 from Socrates to stoic philosophers

⁶ Mukherjee, R.K., Hindu Civilization Longman,
 Green and Co. London, 1936,p. 111

every one concern about the self-knowledge and in Indian philosophy it is one of the essential paths for liberation and freedom of the self .almost every Indian school have come up with that notion of self-knowledge as a way to liberation. Now the question is genuine to philosophical mind what does it mean to know thyself or *Atma Gyan*? What sort of state it is? Etc. The historical study of cultures, thoughts and analysis of this concept can give us a sense of progress towards this idea of 'know thyself' or '*Atma-Gyan*'.

The notion of Know thyself or *Atma-Gyan* has been understood as a moral epistemological and self-actualised injunction in which an individual is truly aware of oneself. It is the position of Buddhist *atmadipobhav*, Advata's *Aham Brahmasmi and so on*. The modernity of this approach is that we don't have to look for it outside rather this self- Knowledge is inherent in man, not outside it is one of the primary condition or presupposition for this path or goal. It is not a hallucination, mesmerisation or anything, this knowledge of oneself can be achieved through the philosophical approaches,

that is to say, the dialogue between the soul and itself ... means it holds a philosophy of solitude. An individual who is in the quest of this goal needs to be in the role of questioner, as an attendant emotional, psychological, spiritual and intellectual etc. this method of the philosophy of the antiquity is very ancient and pristine as well. Quest for the goal and keeping the notion that solitude can help its followers to discover the truths they have in them.

Along with instigating and motivating a transformation of self and seeing the world with new philosophical insight, the ancient philosopher or the philosophy of antiquity suggested becoming an autonomous individual, meaning an individual who is a "law unto himself", a state of full self - knowledge or awareness. This thing has very applied strength which can help an individual to become what one truly is and can be easily formulated from the philosophy of antiquity where the concept of knowing thyself or *Atmagyan* is broadly discussed. The modern psychological theory known as emotional intelligence that focuses upon this fact of knowing thyself and

concerns about being aware of oneself (all mental states), reflects upon one's emotions, and to handle every situation judiciously and empathetically. Not even emotional intelligence rather this holistic approach or solitude and self-realisation have a great reach to other approaches too such as psychoanalysis, Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud who explored and analysed the factors that promote human flourishing, are the personality who chose the path of solitude. "It is surely remarkable that, when they came to write their autobiographies, the two most original analysts of the 20th century devoted scarcely any space to their wives and families, or indeed anything save the development of their respective ideas. Both Freud's *An Autobiographical Study* and Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* are exceptionally uninformative about their authors' relations with others. We may applaud their discretion, and sympathize with their desire for privacy, but we may also justly conclude that their accounts of themselves demonstrate where their hearts were centred."⁷

The utility of this concept is very applied as well as important too for the flourishing of the world and humanity. Ethical crisis or issues like environmental ethics, humanitarianism, social and political issues like religious pluralism and multiculturalism etc. type of burning issue can easily be tackled if an individual can attain this self-realized state of solitude. The golden principle of morality, *Atmadipobhava*, *sarvadharmasambhava*, etc. type of social and moral values which have been an integral part of Indian thought culminates the conception of *Atmagyan* or self-realization. If we are not aware of true self then due to false knowledge (*Avidhya*) we will guide ourselves with false convictions and notions which is proposed or motivated by the immoral acts and desires and do not take others and anything into consideration, which results into evil acts...thus this thing also needs to remember that this approach of solitude and self-realization is not life-negating or otherworldly rather affirms all area of life ... affirms the holistic formula

⁷ Storrs, Anthony. *Solitude: A Return to the Self*, Simon and Schuster, (2005),p-75

Satyam, Shivam and Sundaram (Truth, Beauty And Goodness) which can help the whole world live happily and peacefully... but in the whole process of solitude, practice and some other virtues such as self-control, moral life and pure conscience is prerequisite ... as Patanjali put it in yoga sutra - *abhyāsa-vairāgya-ābhyāsm tan-nirodhaḥ* //

The state of yoga (includes moral restraints) is attained via a balance between practise (*abhyasa*) and imperturbability (*Vairagya*).⁸ In a

similar sense lord, Krishna tells to Arjuna the importance of self-control and practice for the sake of well-being and positivity, lord Krishna advocates - “...*abhyāsenā tu kaunteya vairāgyeṇa ca gr̥hyate. //*⁹”

So it is for sure that whole Indian traditions are rich enough in the teaching of those values and phenomenon which modern science also affirms and advocates for the well-being and positivity of individual solitude and self-realisation.

⁸ TAIMNI, I. K. (1961), *The Science Of Yoga*, The Theosophical Publishing House, *sadhan pada*

⁹ Bhagavad-gītā -6.35