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## **Transcendental Approach of Alfred Korzybski: An Evaluation**

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The world order that came into existence after the European Renaissance period believed in conquering the nature and exploiting its resources to its maximum to fulfill the unending desires of man. To add to it, the success of the Industrial Revolution there generated a culture of consumerism which made man believe that the whole universe was for his consumption only. Secondly, Darwin's theory of Evolution, which was based on two maxims - the 'Struggle for Existence' and the 'Survival of the Fittest'- also convinced humanity of the fundamental tenets of the European civilization of the new order. No doubt, this new order had its roots in the American Independence and the French Revolution which manifested the typical human aspirations for Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. In the course of time, some new ideologies like capitalism, socialism, democracy, nationalism and secularism came into existence to materialize those aspirations. However, none of them could fulfil the human aspirations for an ideal world order and each failed to make man happy and free from crises. Meanwhile, another major change in the world order came after the end of the IInd World War, which added new political aspects into the crises faced by the humanity.

The problems could not be addressed successfully for which the reasons were many, but mainly it was so because the assessment of the problems was based on wrong perception of man and his essential nature. Also, there were political and ideological biases in this assessment. Korzybski could at least diagnose this phenomenon and critique it well through his philosophy of General Semantics. In his works, *Manhood of Humanity: The Science and Art of Human Engineering* (1921), *Selections from Science and Sanity* (1948) and *Time Binding: The General Theory* (1924), Korzybski gives his own evaluation of human problems and their solutions.

Alfred Korzybski (1879-1950) was a Polish-American thinker and writer and also the propounder of the theory called General Semantics which is, according to him, an art and science of Human Engineering. In his paper, "What I Believe", published in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Manhood of Humanity: The Science and Art of Human Engineering* (1950), refers to many significant issues pertaining to humanity. They are: Who is man and what is his essential nature? How to develop a mechanism for the new generation to learn and begin from where the previous generations have left? How can a society create a mechanism to ensure that humans learn positively from the past? Which are the effective means of 'time binding'? How the feelings of responsibility, a sense of duty to others and the future as well as ethical, moral and other socio-cultural values are cultivated by the 'time-binding' tendencies of man? And also, how a healthy human nervous system can be built? In this way, he intended to create a sane society. He also wanted to convert the



‘childhood’ of humanity into its ‘manhood’ i.e. maturity.

Ms. Read has rightly stated in her biographical note on Korzybski that his analysis of the humanly disastrous effects of dictatorship in general, the evaluations of the people of the U.S.S.R. and their leaders in historical perspective, their socio-cultural milieu, some deeper aspects of symbolism as well as his experiences of the two World Wars had nicely and comprehensively problematized the issue of man and his better future through his theory of ‘Human Engineering’.

Unlike other western ideologies and theories, Korzybski’s appears to have come closer to Indian perspective. For instance, he does not accept the established view of the West that the human nature is inherently evil and thereby he goes well with the American transcendentalist like Henry David Thoreau and others. He disapproves of the primitive methods of evaluations also i.e. the conventional methods of assessing the reality and the crises being faced by humanity. He investigated ‘functionally’ and therefore ‘non-elementalistically’, the psychobiological mechanisms of time-binding habits of the humans, in other words, their learning of the lessons from the experiences of the others and past generations.

Further, Korzybski finds the inductive method of human reasoning unreliable, because, in that, more often one derives either sweeping or over-generalizations, which are harmful. For example, in *Ramayana*, King Dashrath inductively concluded that the sound coming from across the river was that of a deer and hence he shot at it accurately. However, he soon faced the dire consequences of killing an innocent human being rather than a deer and inviting a curse on himself. Korzybski prefers to build “a deductive system and verify empirically whether the general applies to the eventual random particular” (MH 3). For example, King Dashrath’s son Shri Ram used the deductive method when he was to decide whether to accept Vibhishana who was a ‘*Rakshas*’ and also the brother of his arch enemy Ravana into his fold. He checked both whether he was like a ‘*Rakshash*’ and also whether he was like his brother Ravana at all and then decided to accept him. This decision helped him a lot in winning the most difficult war against Ravana. Deductive reasoning, according to Korzybski, becomes the foundation for predictability also.

Korzybski goes a step ahead in assessing its importance and states, “I believe that this very point of inductive and deductive scientific methods with regard to humans tangibly marks a sharp difference between the ‘childhood’ and the ‘manhood’ of humanity.” (MH 3) The stated action of the King Dashrath was hasty, common-sensical, immature and wrong and hence representing ‘childhood’; while the action of Shri Ram



represented 'manhood', because his action was uncommon-sensical and based on deductive reasoning.

Korzybski also realizes a need to consider for evaluation the much more complex base i.e. 'organism-as-a-whole-in-an-environment' and includes the neuro-linguistic and neuro-semantic evaluational environments as environments. Moreover, he considers the geographic, physico-chemical, economic, political, ecological and socio-cultural conditions also as the factors responsible for shaping human personalities and even their group behaviors.

He observes that the dogmatists in power, particularly dictators, block this capacity of humans considerably by withholding from them the knowledge of and from the world, or twisting that knowledge to suit their purposes. He perceives them as saboteurs among time-binders and also as socio-cultural burdens to the evolution of humanity.

Korzybski mentions that the expressions of the human search for "security, and so predictability for solace, guidance, feelings of 'belonging', etc., culminating in self-realization through a general 'consciousness of abstracting' is the main aim of his work." (MH 6) He knows that an adequate structure of language was fundamental for human adjustment to the 'silent' levels of happenings, 'feelings', etc. And therefore, as regards the way out from such a problem, Korzybski believes that the consciousness of the differences between the 'silent' and the 'verbal' levels is the key and perhaps the first step for the solution of human problems. It is so, because there is

a tremendous difference between 'thinking' in verbal terms, and 'contemplating', inwardly silent, on non-verbal levels, and then searching for the proper structure of language to fit the supposedly discovered structure of the silent processes that modern science tries to find. If we 'think' verbally, we act as biased observers and project onto the silent levels the structure of the language we use. (MH 5)

Korzybski also does not fail to state that one must first discover oneself and one's 'essential nature' i.e. man and his *modus operandi*. He adds optimistically that the civilizations will pass by peaceful evolutions from their childhood to the manhood of humanity, on the bases of their true understanding of man and his potentialities as well as their scientific use for the development. He quotes Professor Cassius J. Keyser mentioning that he has very aptly stated in this regard that



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It is obvious, once the fact is pointed out, that the character of human history, the character of human conduct, and the character of all our human institutions depend both upon what man is and in equal or greater measure upon what we humans think man is. (MH 7)

The big majority of humanity has so far lived “on the animal biological level of mere subsistence, without the opportunity to realize their potentialities. General Semantics believes that the humans, are time-binders; they are not merely biological but psycho-biological organisms. The complexities raised by this fact is not easy to handle. Only after we realize our potentialities as humans, we may approach the future with some hope. It is worth noting that the Indian thinkers did not stop at the biological and psychological levels only, because that is also not a complete truth. They have gone beyond up to the level of ‘*Atma*’ (soul).

In the “Preface” to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the book, *Manhood of Humanity*, Korzybski has acknowledged this fact and hence stated that,

I repeat once again that this book is not a "materialistic" or a "spiritualistic" book. It is a study of "Man" and therefore does and should include materialistic as well as spiritual phenomena because only the complex of these phenomena constitutes the complex of Man. (MH 8)

Thus, Korzybski is not ruling out the spiritual properties of man. India has, of course, acknowledged the same long back in history.

It is obvious that to be able to speak about the great affairs of Man and his spiritual, moral, physical, economic, social or political status, it must first be ascertained what Man is; in other words, what is his real nature or the basic laws of his nature. If we succeed in finding the laws of human nature, all the rest will be comparatively an easy task. The ethical, social, economic and political status of Man should be in accord with the laws of his nature; then only the civilization will be a human civilization - a permanent and peaceful one. (MH 9)

Humanity must know the natural laws for humans, otherwise humans will not create the conditions and the customs that can regulate their activities for the fullest development in life. This implies the release of the maximum natural or creative energy and its expression in mental, moral, material, spiritual and all the other great fields of human activities, resulting in happiness in life and in work both collectively and individually, because the conditions of the earning of a livelihood influence and shape all our mental processes and activities as well as the quality and the form of human inter-relationships. (MH 13) The Indian maxim



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*arthasya purusho dasah* (Man is truly subservient to money) endorses this view.

Korzybski does not overlook the greatest urge of the human heart called the craving for the spiritual truth or his yearning for the higher potentialities of "mind," "soul" and "spirit". (MH 9)

Korzybski aims at furnishing the required stimulus in the book by showing that Human Engineering will rescue us and enable us to deal with all the problems of life and human society upon a scientific basis. Here, he differs from the American Transcendentalists who emphasized on intuitions. He has advocated for some means also like extensional thinking, deductive reasoning, extensional devices, Eprime language, signal behaviour, delayed reaction, multi-ordinal evaluation etc. to attain the desired result

Korzybski makes another observation that the so-called sciences of ethics, jurisprudence, economics, politics and government had not kept pace with the rapid progress made in the other great affairs of man. He saw the rapid progress of the natural and technological sciences on the one hand and a slow progress of the metaphysical and the social "sciences" on the other hand, disturbing the equilibrium of human affairs. He found their lagging behind causing the world great distress. Further, due to that, they couldn't acquire the wisdom to effect a cure also. He felt that the lagging behind was partly because of the traditions and habits of the bygone world of looking backward rather than forward. He also felt that they lagged behind partly because they had been from time immemorial falsely regarding human beings either as animals or as combinations of animals and supernatural entities.

He strongly felt that if only the three words - good, bad and truth - could have been scientifically defined, philosophy, law, ethics and psychology would have ceased to be "private theories" or verbalism and they would have advanced to the rank and dignity of sciences. In fact, these three terms do not refer to anything materialistic and therefore they are outside the domain of logic to define and describe. They refer to one's subjective, non-material judgement and hence there cannot be just one definition of them. In other words, expecting their so-called scientific definitions is in itself irrational. These three terms are the most complex terms to define. Still, to arrive closest to their definitions, one has to take recourse to Lord Krishna who has given a parameter called '*Dharma*' to evaluate anything including the issues of good, bad and truth.



## II

India has always offered a holistic or integral world view on and for everything. It has always rejected the fragmented, compartmentalized and exclusively materialistic worldviews of the West. In this regard, merely describing humans as a species of 'time-binders' is not sufficient. Rather, how to make a constructive use of that potentiality of the humans is more important. During the great period of freedom movement, different Indian leaders had expressed their models of development as their aspirations. Sri Aurobindo coined the phrase "Integral Humanism", when he was responding to the western models of development which were neither sustainable nor suitable, because they had a very fragmented view of man and his relationship with society, universe and the unfathomable entity called the Almighty.

Deen Dayal Upadhyay also used this phrase i.e. Integral Humanism and popularized it. He mentions in his treatise called Integral Humanism that,

Democracy, equality, national independence and world peace are interrelated concepts. But, in the West these concepts have often clashed with one another. The ideas of socialism and one-world government have stemmed from efforts at resolving this conflict. However, they have not only failed to do so, but have weakened these concepts and created new problems. (9)

He added that the Indian culture offers the philosophical substratum, on the basis of which these concepts can be harmonized and the cherished objectives can be realized. He felt that in the absence of such a base, the vision for development would get stultified. He was sure that the basic truths propounded by Indian culture or philosophies had a validity beyond country and time. Thus, the knowledge of these truths provided a direction not only for the advancement of India, but for the entire world.

All the Indian perspectives emphasize on 'inter-dependence', 'cooperation' and 'concord' rather than 'conflict', 'contradiction' and 'discord'. The Indian perspective of the relationship between the society and the individuals is well expressed through the metaphor of a flower and its petals. This relationship is natural. The identity of the petals is intact till they remain attached with the flower and the identity of the flower also primarily rests on its petals. Both are mutually interdependent for their life and identity. Thus, they are not in a conflicting relationship. The one is not for consuming the other or exploiting the other. In the west, however, they are perceived as in conflict with each other and hence 'social contract' and other theories have come up there.



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The Korzybskian concept of man and his essential nature is not incorrect. At the same time, it is not complete either. Upadhyay differs significantly from the western philosophies including Korzybski's. India considers an individual as an aggregate of four things: body, mind, intellect and soul. The Korzybskian thinking remains silent on mind and soul, because there are no concrete (scientific) evidences about them. Further, the four '*purusharthas*' (driving forces for actions) – '*Dharma*', '*Artha*', '*Kama*' and '*Moksha*' are conceived as the means and guiding principles to achieve individual advancement and social welfare. Addressing the psychosomatic crises is a primary objective and a driving principle for GS.

Like GS, India does not believe that the society is merely an aggregate of individuals. Rather, it perceives the society ('*samashti*') as an entity in itself independent of the individuals ('*vyashti*') in it. Even the Darwinian laws are the laws of jungle and applicable to the animals only, because in the jungle only, the principle of the 'Survival of the Fittest' is valid. They are not true in the case of humans, because the human civilizations have not come up as per the laws given by Darwin, but by seriously considering how the operation of these laws could be reduced to the minimum in social life.

The social institution of 'family' (which exists between the individual and the society) plays the most significant role in inculcating and cultivating the desired values in the individuals. The General Semantics, like other Western philosophies, has also not given importance to family. Secondly, the 'life' sustains itself on the 'principle of cooperation', because, all are inter-dependent. Nature provides many examples of this inter-dependence. This cooperation is best taught to the individuals at the 'family' level itself. The family serves as the training-platform for the smooth living in the society and for imbibing social values for a successful and crises-free life later. Perhaps for this reason, the wise say that the parents are the first teachers for the child and the mother is equal to 100 teachers. The progress of man has to be a simultaneous. In other words, it has to be an overall progress of his body, mind, intellect and soul together.

India believes that the society is self-born and like an individual, it also comes into existence in an organic manner. It is a sovereign unit like the individual and also has its own body, mind, intellect and soul. The recognition of the phenomena like mob-mentality or group-mind or collective-mind by the western psychologists is the recognition of this Indian idea of the sovereign existence of the society. It is a proven fact that an individual as an individual thinks in one way, but as a part of the group, or society or an association, he may think differently. For example, the values of life practiced by American individuals are one, but what they expect from its President as a nation are totally different. (Bill Clinton and Monica





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Lewinski case) Social mentality, social intellectual level, social 'Dharma' (morality, ethics etc.) do exist, and we can realize the same, if we give a serious thought to it. Korzybski has not recognized this, even though his idea of assessing a phenomenon as 'organism-as-a-whole-in-an-environment' is there. We need to realize the individual and the social mentalities as different though existing together simultaneously. Hence, it is necessary to take a note of both for a scientific understanding of the both.

Darwin stated that the organism develops various organs as per the requirements dictated by the circumstances. However, the Indian perception is that the soul using the strength of 'prana', constructs various organs as per the need. Even the society also produces various institutions (which are like its limbs) as per the needs of it. For example, family, marriage, community, property, temples, 'Gurukuls', 'Rishikuls', 'rajya', 'panchayat' etc. are developed by each society (civilization) itself for its sustenance.

'Chiti' (the manifestation of the social consciousness/*chetna*) is the term used for the soul of a society and the term 'virat', for the 'prana' (vibrancy) of the society. When 'virat' is strong, the diversity in society does not lead to conflict, but on the contrary, it paves the way for cooperation, the way in which one limb of the body cooperates with the other ones ('*Angangi bhava*') or like the family members helping one another. (Upadhyay 60) If the society is ailing (turns weak), there would be conflict among the diverse groups of it. The 'prana' gives the sense of identity to the society and it is awakened and organized by 'Chiti' to inspire it for some constructive attainments. Freedom struggle did this by awakening India's 'prana' or vibrancy through various activities like '*prabhatferi*', '*upavas*', '*dharna*', '*maun*', '*yatra*', '*vrat*' etc. Gandhiji could identify these activities as the potential activities for awakening the 'prana' of the nation. When it got awakened, the British had no option but to surrender the power to India.

Chandra Agrawal mentions in "Integral Humanism: A Philosophy for a Humanist Socio-Economic Order" that the phrase Integral Humanism by Sri Aurobindo refers to the sets of philosophical assumptions to achieve a desired level of four things - individual liberty, economic prosperity, social equality and political stability. Human history, primarily of the West, has seen several humanistic movements like Classical Humanism, Marxist Humanism, Existential Humanism and Ecological Humanism. These movements have affected the intellectual climate and life styles of the West and provided new shades to the meaning of humanism. (Agrawal 85) Integral Humanism just does not 'affect', but changes the climate, the meaning of humanity and the world order. Such examples are registered in ancient Indian history also. The way in which the immunity protects the body from all the infections, the culturally rich and healthy people in the



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society also protect the society from all types of societal crises and perversions. Korzybski has missed this aspect in his science of 'Human Engineering'.

There is an inherent threat to the personal and social health of life due to six tendencies of man called 'Shadripu' (Six enemies). The family curtails these six tendencies of the member of the family and makes him rise above them, because his interests clash with those of the other members of the family and later the society. As a result, a number of issues do not rise and even if they rise, they do not become unmanageable. Korzybski has overlooked these potential threats to social well-being and no mechanism to control them is there in his theory. India has placed a lot of emphasis on family as an important unit between the individual and the society. The humanity, including India too, needs to strengthen this family system to sustain itself.

Institutions are very important and they form the mechanism for sustenance of the individuals and society both. Korzybski's emphasis is on individual and his practicing of GS. It is fine but not sufficient. Humanity needs a mechanism in terms of socio-cultural institutions also to provide sustenance of the healthy life and environment. They strengthen the perceptions, attitudes, values and practices on the part of individuals. What Sri Krishna has meant by '*Dharmasamsthapana*', as one of the three functions of the Incarnation (*avatar*) in *Srimad Bhagwadgeeta*, refers to this only.

Korzybski is right when he says that the language determines the thoughts, attitudes, perspectives and our evaluation of the reality. However, the language is not the only factor. The day humans learn interpreting the so-called Aristotelian languages correctly, they will also overcome the threats posed by them. Language is a tool; it is of course very powerful. A tool can be modified to make it helpful, but if it is not possible to modify it to our satisfaction, we need to learn to use it differently. To have a language devoid of 'isness', is too ambitious. We need to learn more practicable ways of using it for communication as well as interpretation. In fact, the values nourished in the family play the most effective role in cultivating right attitudes, approaches and perspectives in an individual.

Contemplation or 'abstracting' has great impact. It is given high importance by Korzybski. It has always been given great significance in India also. The issue however is that not many people have time and capacity to contemplate. Can it become a part of a mechanism to avail the benefits of contemplation? The Bhakti path of India with its convention of the Guru is also very important to take the benefits of contemplation to the weakest of the weak in a society, provided it is in ideal condition. The paths carved by the great men are 'the' paths. The guidance of these gurus to their disciples yields good result. The disciples



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can 'bind' time by positively following the teaching of their guides, who have acquired wisdom through contemplation.

Korzybski's concept of man's uniqueness with his ability for time-binding is quite rational and in right direction but incomplete. The strategies for his development can be devised well only after understanding him thoroughly. Knowing man well is knowing his strengths and weaknesses both. The six evil tendencies of man do not let him bind time positively or let him understand the reality correctly. As a result, the ways to overcome the crises are not arrived at and these crises continue. These six weaknesses (*kama, krodha, lobha, Moha, Mada, Matsara*) block the individual's perception and assessment of the reality or prejudice his vision.

GS states that man binds time negatively, because he follows common sense or thinks 'elementalistically' or that he takes recourse to inductive reasoning and 'intensional' thinking. Korzybski does suggest a mechanism for binding time correctly by delaying reactions, avoiding elemental thinking, using Eprime languages and employing extensional devices for evaluation of the reality among a few other things. However, a mechanism to impart these devices need to be developed. Formal education system can be one of the ways.

Moreover, this fact has also been ignored by GS that man is a storehouse of desires which are unlimited and unending. Do we have a mechanism in GS to curtail this? (Korzybski does not bring this point in his assessment of man) Further, man is not governed by nature, in the same way as other species are governed by nature (*'prakriti'*). This very peculiarity of him enables man to elevate himself (move towards *'sanskriti'*) and also degenerate (move towards *'vikruti'*). This does not happen with animals, and hence, they neither improve nor degenerate in their status. They have remained same for millennia, but humanity has been constantly changing. Buddha has talked of the minimization of the desires to be happy. None of the western ideology speaks of it and therefore there is no mechanism to curtail the desires on their part.

Unlike other Western ideologies, Korzybski has discussed with rational analysis how to address the crises better, but like all other Western philosophies, he too has not given a thought to develop a mechanism to prevent the crises from occurring. Prevention is always better than cure. India has always thought of prevention everywhere. Unfortunately, human society fails to practice prevention. Secondly, it is a fact that the deterioration occurs on its own, while for the betterment, one has to strive actively on regular basis



through traditions or socio-cultural institutions, because it is an ever-going practice.

Thus, Korzybski does strive for a better quality of life in society, but his philosophy needs to be updated. Korzybski remains confined to what can come under the purview of science, as he was interested in developing the art and science of human engineering. Indian philosophies, on the other hand, go beyond reason and take into account other entities which cannot be proved empirically. Korzybski's perception of the human crises is largely having an external existence. However, this is an important fact that the external phenomena of the reality construct the internal potentiality of man; the six adversaries of an individual are internal weaknesses of man and they obstruct his perception, colour his vision and influence negatively his actions. Hence, we need to put a check upon them through some powerful social mechanism. That would certainly help us make the human society self-sustainable. Korzybski's philosophy certainly has all the potentialities of a transcendental approach to life.

## Notes-cum-Glossary

**Angangi bhava:** The mechanism of coordination among all the limbs of the body which is considered to be the best manifestation and a model for cooperation among the different sections of the society to keep it healthy.

**Arth:** Economy. Money. Finance.

**Atma:** Soul.

**Chiti:** The soul of the society. Indian Philosophy believes that the society also has its own soul.

**Dharma:** The fundamental human code of conduct that sustains life, both personal and social.

**Dharmasamsthapana:** An act of restoring the socio-cultural institutes for the healthy functioning of the human world/society. Lord Krishna describes it as one of three functions of God when he takes incarnation.

**Dharna:** The collective act of posing resistance by sitting peacefully at a place.

**Gurukuls:** Educational institutions keeping the students aloof of the societal interactions in the daily routine. In ancient time, they used to be in forests.

**Kama:** Human desires, aspirations or the acts of biological gratification.



**Kamdhenu:** The mythological cow given to the sage Vashishtha by Indra, the King of Heaven. This cow has the unique capacity to offer instantly whatever one desires from it.

**Maun:** A deliberate act of observing silence or voluntary abstinence from oral communication.

**Moksha:** The fourth *purusharth*. Also, salvation or liberation from all material desires.

**Panchayat:** A Council for Governance or Administration and Justice. Since there used to be five representatives in it, it is named thus.

**Prabhatferi :** An activity of a group of people walking through the streets of the village singing Devotional/patriotic songs in mornings. During the freedom struggle, this was a major practice for awakening people for independence under Gandhi's leadership.

**Prakriti:** Nature. It is believed that animals are governed by *prakriti* i.e. they generally don't act unlike themselves.

**Prana:** Breadth, life-sustaining element.

**Purusharthas:** The Driving Forces of life for an individual. India believes that the four *Purusharthas* i.e. *dharma, artha, kama and moksha* drive humans for various actions in life and man must learn the ideal manifestation of all the four.

**Rajya :** The political unit called the State.

**Rakshas:** A mythological race of humans normally following a highly materialistic lifestyle of enjoying all the luxuries of life without following any moral or ethical code in their behaviour and interactions. They were also barbaric.

**Rishikul:** The hermitage or a sort of academy, where the sages conduct studies and perform *yajnas* i.e. research on various issues pertaining to the betterment of humanity.

**Samashiti:** Society as an entity.

**Sanskriti:** Civilized or cultural tendencies or practices. Humans are not governed strictly by nature (*prakriti*) and hence all humans are unique unlike the animals. They can elevate themselves and also can degenerate. When humans move toward an ideal order, they are said to have progressed or made upward journey



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towards *sanskriti*.

**Shadripu:** Six basic evil tendencies of man or his weaknesses capable of bringing his downfall.

**Upavas :** Fasting, which was also a way of doing satyagraha under Gandhi for freedom.

**Vikruti:** Humans are not governed strictly by nature and hence all humans are unique unlike the animals. They can elevate themselves and also can degenerate. When they degenerate, they can be said to have fallen victim to *vikruti*.

**Virat:** The spirit that keeps society survive and sustain itself.

**Vrat:** Observing certain difficult and hard practices usually for penance.

**Vyashiti:** An individual as an entity.

**Yatra:** Journey, Pilgrimage.

**Abbreviation Used:** MH – *Manhood of Humanity*



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