

## INDIAN MORAL TRADITIONS AND THINKERS - I

### INTRODUCTION:

Ethics is the only moral phenomenon that distinguishes human beings from other animals by guiding them how to behave properly. It teaches the notions of mutual co-operation and understanding without which smooth livelihood can never be even thought of. The most important feature that distinguishes human life from the brute one is that the former desires not only to live, but also to live well with peace and prosperity.

#### ➤ Indian tradition:

Indian ethics is one of the greatest traditions of moral thought in world philosophy. Indian ethics has its origin in its *religious and philosophical thinking*. From time immemorial, various religious faiths have flourished here. Ethics is the core of all the religious and philosophical systems of India.

In the knowledge tradition of India, an intimate relation prevails between ethics and religions. Ethics and religion are so closely related in the Indian counterpart that whatever may be the religion, it prescribes a system of morality comprising rules of conduct for the guidance of its followers. In every religious tradition, good moral conduct is considered essential for a happy and contented life. Without following the path of righteousness no one can attain supreme goal (mokṣha) of life. For this one has to perform good deeds and avoid wrong-doing. In this way, Indian ethics is an inevitable part of Hindu religion as well as other religions of Indian origin.

#### ➤ Meaning of Ethics in Indian Traditions:

The Indian term for morality and ethics is '*dharma*'. The word 'Dharma' comes from the Sanskrit root 'Dhr' meaning "to hold together". As such the function of Dharma is to hold together the human society so that it remains stable and undergoes growth and development. Dharma in Hinduism is co-extensive with morality.

### SOURCES OF MORAL IDEALS IN INDIA

To lead a moral life, human needs certain guidelines and principles of morality to do certain deeds and to abstain from certain deeds. What is the primary source of morality in India? The answer could be:

1. **Śrutis ("that which is heard"/ Vedic Literature):** They are considered to be authorless, and directly revealed by the **God**. It includes the **Four Vedas** including its **four** types of embedded texts—
  - a. Samhitas
  - b. Brahmanas
  - c. Aranyakas
  - d. Upanishads (Vedānta)
2. **Smṛtis ("that which is remembered"):** They are a body of Hindu texts usually *attributed to an author*, traditionally written down and were transmitted verbally across the generations.
  - a. The Dharmasāstras of Manu
  - b. The Mahābhārata (including *Bhagavad Gītā*)
  - c. The Rāmāyana
  - d. Arthasāstras,
  - e. Purānas
  - f. Bhasyas (reviews and commentaries on *Śrutis* and non-Śruti texts)

- g. Nitisastras/ Ethics Text
- 3. Hindu Orthodox Traditions and concepts
  - a. Theory of karma
  - b. Purushartha
  - c. Varna dharma
  - d. Ashram dharma
- 4. Other Important Traditions:
  - a. Buddhism
  - b. Jainism
  - c. Carvaka
- 5. Conduct of Good People

**\* Before discussing about the sources of ethics (in detail) and their teachings, we need to discuss key concepts/terms used by different sects, traditions and religions.**

## 1. ETHICAL TERMS & CONCEPTS WITHIN INDIAN TRADITION

### 1.1 PURUSARTHA

- Purusartha is a Sanskrit word- '*Purusa*' means *self or soul* and '*Artha*' means *aim or goal* which signifies completely the effort to attain the spiritual goal.
- The ancient Hindu recognized four supreme ends of life which are known as Purusarthas. The primary aim of this four-fold value system is to attain the spiritual goal. These Purusarthas are-
  - Dharma (Virtue),
  - Artha (Wealth),
  - Kama (Happiness) and
  - Moksa (Liberation).
- Every man ought to pursue these Purusarthas in order to attain his complete well-being.
- Out of these four grand objects of human aspirations, Dharma is given the foremost rank in the scriptures.

#### Dharma

- Dharma alone is regarded as the path to Moksa, to immortality, infinite bliss, supreme peace and highest knowledge. Dharma alone is the *primary Purushartha*.
- The concept of Dharma comes to mean 'what holds together' and it is the basis of all order, both social and moral. Dharma is the higher principle which universally binds everything together.
- It is associated with the Vedic notion of *Rna and Rta* which are the internal and external expression of right activities of mankind and world-process.
- It is also associated with the religious rituals as the means to secure something morally good. It is not a doctrine in the scheme of Purusartha, it is man's personal and social outlook on life.
- *Varnasramadhharma*: It includes *Varnadharmas* as well as *AshramDharma*. It is the Vedic social organization. It is the main form of Dharma which refers to the duties of persons according to the **social class and the stages of life**.

#### Artha

- **Artha** generally means accumulation of wealth and rich. Wealth satisfies man's *material, biological and economic* needs.
- Lack of wealth leads a man to adopt *illegal and immoral ways* for obtaining satisfaction.
- Indian ethical system permits to accumulate wealth by right means.

#### Kama

- **Kama** means *happiness or satisfaction of desire*.

- It satisfies man's mental and emotional needs. Every man has certain physical and emotional desires and their fulfilment gives happiness.
- Indian ethics permits man to satisfy their desires, both *physical and emotional*, living within the moral boundary.

### Moksha

- **Moksha** is the highest value of human life-the *Parama Purusartha*.
- Moksa or liberation is self-realization i.e realization of man's real nature, which is spiritual.

In Indian philosophy, *Dharma, Artha and Kama* are treated as *instrumental values* promoting directly or indirectly *Moksa, the highest value* of human life. A man who lives a virtuous life and earns his livelihood by right means and use those means for his physical and emotional satisfaction can hope for attaining liberation.

## 1.2 VARNA DHARMA

- The Indian society is categorised into four Varnas or social classes—
  - i. Brahmanas (intellectual or priestly people),
  - ii. Kshatriyas (pliticians, administrators and warriors),
  - iii. Vaisyas (farmers, merchants or economists) and
  - iv. Sudras (labourers and artisans).
- The three qualities- *Sattva, Rajas and Tamas*- determine the nature of these four Varnas and their duties are assigned accordingly.
- The *Bhagavad Gita* has prescribed Varnas specific duties. The Varnadharmas are
  - The duty of the *Brahmanas* is to cultivate the virtues of sense-control, control of the mind, tranquillity, austerities, purity, forgiveness, straight-forwardness, wisdom, knowledge and faith.
  - Duty of the *Kshatriyas* is to cultivate the virtues of heroism, spiritedness, firmness, dexterity, not flying away from the battle, generosity, and sovereignty. They ought to fight a just battle.
  - *Vaisyas* should tend cattle and carry on agriculture, trade and commerce.
  - *Sudras* should serve the higher caste.
- The four Varnas have to perform these specific duties allotted to them. They can realize their highest personal good and social good by performing their specific duties. This is called '*Svadharm*' as per Bhagavad-Gita.

## 1.3 ASHRAM-DHARMA

There are four Ashrams or stages of life through which everyone, irrespective of Varna, has to pass.

- i. *Brahmacharya*: It is the first stage or the stage of study and *strict discipline*.

- ii. **Garhasthya:** It is the second stage or the stage of the *house-holder*. After the completion of education at Guru's Ashrama, the student has to come back home and enter into the householder's life.
- iii. **Vanaprastha:** It is the third stage or the stage of the forest dweller or hermit. In this stage, husband and wife leave their family voluntarily. They retire to the forest and live a life of meditation and prayer.
- iv. **Sannyasa:** The last stage is Sannyasa or the stage of renunciation. He is quite indifferent to sensual pleasures and is free from likes and dislikes, desires, egoism, lust, anger, greed and pride. He has attained perfection and freedom and become a liberated sage.

In the Vedas and Dharmasastras, Dharma is very much understood as the Vedic sacrifices and other rituals. So, *Dharma* within the Vedic phenomena is *duty par-excellence*.

Dharma is also understood as one's duties according to one's own caste and stage of life. It is known as Varnasramadharmas.

#### Varnasramadharmas

- **Varna-Dharma** and **Ashram-Dharma** together are called **Varnasramadharmas**.
- According to the *Varnasramadharmas* scheme, as every man is born in a particular class or section or Varna of society and he has also to pass through certain Ashrams or stages of life, so he has to perform duties relative to his Varna and particular Ashram.
- It prescribes the duties relative to one's Varna or social class and one's Ashram or specific stages in spiritual discipline. The code of life enunciated in the Varnasramadharmas includes both the paths of enjoyment and renunciation.

### 1.4 SVADHARMA

- By this term we mean each individual has to grow to his best according to his own *dharma*, that is to say the principle of individual growth is called *Svadharmas*.
- *Svadharmas* is in relation to an individual's temperament and stage and duties in life, based on *varna* and *asrama*.
- It is explained with help of three *gunas*, the *sattva* (purity), *rajas* (virility), and '*tamas*' (darkness). These three qualities are found in each individual in varying proportions and thus this varying proportion of qualities is regarded as the basis of different types of actions and of four castes.
- The concept of *Svadharmas* is well promoted by Indian ethical code that if the society is to function smoothly there should certainly be a hierarchical arrangement of functions and duties in it.

### 1.5 DOCTRINE OF KARMA

- The *law of karma* implies that all actions whether good or bad, produce their proper consequences in the life of the individual who acts.
- According to it, Human Being suffers or enjoys due to the fruit of his previous deeds.
- Good actions produce happiness whereas bad actions produce suffering, misery.
- Man is asked to perform action as a matter of duty keeping in view one's essential human nature (*Svabhava*) and one's position in life.

- The law of karma is responsible for *Birth-Rebirth cycle*. Only good actions lead to Moksha or liberation. Thus, it is up to man what types of action he will perform in order to attain happiness or Liberation.
- *Karma* is of **three** categories:
  - i. **Sanchita Karma (Stored Karma)**: It means the accumulated past actions.
  - ii. **Prarabdha Karma (Matured Karma)**: It means the part of *Sanchita Karma*, whose consequences started in the present birth itself. This is also called predestination.
  - iii. **Agami or Kriyamana Karma (Forthcoming Karma)**: It is that Karma which is now being made for the future.

#### **Types of Karma: Explained through Analogy**

- The Archer has already shot an arrow and it has left his hands. He cannot recall it. He is about to shoot another arrow. The bundle of arrows in the quiver on his back is the **Sanchita**; the arrow he has shot is **Prarabdha**; and the arrow which he is about to shoot from his bow is **Agami**.
- Of these, he has perfect control over the **Sanchita** and the **Agami**, but he must surely work out his **Prarabdha**. The past which has begun to take effect he has to experience.
- There is another beautiful analogy also. The granary represents the *Sanchita Karma*; that portion taken from the granary and put in the shop for future daily sale corresponds to *Agami*; that which is sold daily represents *Prarabdha*.

## **2 VEDIC ETHICS**

Vedic ethics is primarily god-oriented ethics. Rigveda is considered to be the very beginning of Indian ethics.

- A central ethical concept of the Rig Veda is that of **Rta**. Rig Veda describes it as “*power or force which is the controller of the forces of nature and of moral values*”.
- Features of **Rta**:
  - It is the universal moral law pervading all things.
  - It is the all-pervading cosmic order standing for harmony and balance in nature and in human society.
- The concept of **Rta** has given rise to **two other concepts**-
  - All pervading **Dharma**
  - **Law of karma**.

### **2.1 ETHICAL PRACTICES AS PER VEDIC TRADITIONS**

- Love and sacrifice offered to the gods in complete submission occupies a very important place.
- Right performance of sacrifice is considered as the reflection of the moral law and those who perform in this manner would be awarded with eternal happiness in heaven.
- Sacrifice is equated with living for the sake of others.
- The whole universe is regarded as an act of sacrifice by God.
- From the Vedic ethical standpoint, all good actions are a kind of *yajna* or sacrifice rising above pretty self-interest.

### 3. ETHICS OF UPANISADS

The Upanisads are the concluding parts of the Vedas and as such called 'Vedanta'. The word '*Upanisad*' literally means sitting down of the disciple devotedly near his teacher to receive instruction about the ultimate reality which loosens all doubts and destroys all ignorance of the disciple.

#### 3.1 OBJECTIVE UPNISADIC ETHICS

Upanisadic ethics is primarily *Atman-centric* and *Intellectualistic*. The Vedic emphasis upon the performance of sacrifices as means to **Moksa** is declared as *irrelevant* by the Upanisads.

- As per Upanisad, the highest goal of human life is the liberation of the self from bondage as well as the re-attainment of the essential nature of the self.
- Upanisads believe in the reality of Brahman and the realization of the identity of Atman with Brahman is considered as the highest goal of human life.
- The realization of the essential unity of Atman or Self and Brahman is the attainment of Moksa or liberation in the Upanisads.

#### 3.2 ETHICAL PRACTICES AS PER UPNISHADIC TRADITIONS

As per Upanisads, the *identification as well as realization* of the *self with Brahman* is very important and for this a man has to be free from evil, he has to be pure; otherwise he is born again and again and fails to reach the highest goal.

- Good conduct is very much necessary for identification of self with Brahman.
- It puts emphasis upon the necessity of self-restraint and love for all beings besides the spirit of self-sacrifice as moral pre-requisite for spiritual perfection.
- It emphasizes the importance of morality as means for the realization of the Brahman.
- *Brahma-realization* is reserved for those who cultivate moral values and tranquility of mind (*Sama*), self-control (*Dama*), freedom from compulsive activity (*Uparati*), fortitude (*Titiksa*), faith in the ideal (*Sraddha*) and power of constant concentration of the mind (*Samadhana*).
- Those whose conducts are not good and devoid of self-control are unable to realize the ultimate reality.
- It teaches man to be charitable and compassionate.
- The Upanisadic teachers teach their disciples "*to speak truth, practice righteousness, do not neglect sacred duty. Practice only noble deeds.*"

### 4. ETHICS OF MAHABHARATA AND RAMAYANA

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata have greatly emphasized the importance of ethics and ethical values. These are the epics of life-giving detailed exposition of practical ethics through the lives and deeds of godly men.

#### Ramayana:

- The Ramayana, primarily *duty-based* society, is all about the deeds of great men and women.
- Ramayana reflects values like - *humanness, brotherhood, obedience to moral law, firmness of character, honesty, sacrifice and boundless good* for the entire mankind.

#### Mahabharata

- In case of the Mahabharata, the concept of right and wrong is its core.

- It puts primary importance upon the performance of *righteous duties or Dharma* for the attainment of the highest good.
- Dharma alone is the giver of prosperity and the supreme spiritual good.
- It has laid down the basis of practical morality.

To sum up, both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata--the two great epics in the history of Indian literature put emphasis upon *human well-being or spiritual salvation* through the practice of one's Dharma and the cultivation of ethical values and norms.

## 5. ETHICS OF BHAGVAT GITA

### 5.1 TENETS OF BHAGVAT GITA

- The Bhagavad Gita is considered as one of the principal sources of Indian ethics.
- Ethics of the Bhagavad Gita can be characterised as the ethics of **Karmayoga** and **Niskama Karma**.
- **Nishkam Karma and Moksha**: The Gita prescribes renunciation of the fruits of one's actions. Desire for fruits leads to *bondage*, whereas renunciation of desire for fruits leads to eternal peace or Moksa.
- It identifies **inaction** with death.
- **Svadharm** : By performing his specific duties, one can realize one's highest personal good and social good.
- To sum up, the ethics of the Gita enjoins the performance of disinterested, selfless actions for the realization of God and for the welfare of humanity. It entertains the ethics of activism as it emphasizes primary importance upon action. It states that no one can remain inactive for a single moment. It proposes "*renunciation in actions, but not renunciation of actions*".

### 5.2 GITA AND ADMINISTRATION

The principle of *world-welfare* provides the basis for assessing the administrator's action, when faced with competing duties as in the case of moral dilemmas. Important teachings from Gita which can impact administration are:

- **Niskam Karma**: It concerns with a self-less duty towards the rest. Discharge of duty without favour or fervour.
- An administrator to be a combination of a *raja* and a *rishi* i.e. synthesis of selflessness and saintliness.
- One has the *right to work*, but never to the fruit of work.
- **Loka-samgraha**, which could etymologically be analyzed as 'holding'(Grah) 'together' (Sam) 'the world' (Loka), i.e. *selfless action done for public good*.

## 6. ETHICS OF BUDDHISM

### 6.1 BASIS OF BUDDHIST ETHICS

Four Noble Truths (**Arya Satya**) are essence and genesis of all Buddhist teachings.

- the truth of suffering,
- the truth of the cause of suffering,
- the truth of the end of suffering,
- the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering



## 6.2 ETHICAL TEACHINGS AND PRACTICES

- **Morality in Actions:** Buddhist judges an action as moral or immoral on the basis of *intention or motivation* from which it originates.
- Concept of “*the three Good Roots*”: *Love, Charity and Wisdom* are known as the three good roots and action performed out of these are considered to be virtuous and moral.
- However, if a person performs an action out of *greed, hatred, delusion*, his action is considered to be bad and immoral.
- “*Metta*” or **Universal Love:** The Lord Buddha proposes to cultivate Kindness and boundless love towards all beings.
- “*Dana*” or **Charity:** A real charity must proceed in a holistic way i.e. act of charity should be in consonance with one’s *body, heart and mind*. The act of true charity leaves both the giver and the recipient free. It reduces one’s craving and his selfishness.
- **Adherence to five precepts (Pancasila) in daily life:** In day to day living one need to observe five principles. These five refrains are called as *Pancasila*. As per Buddhist ethics one should refrain:-
  - from Killing living creatures,
  - Taking which is not given,
  - Sexual misconduct,
  - False speech, and
  - Taking intoxicating drugs and liquor
- Extension of “*Metta*” for **Animals:** They propose to extend love for all living beings without restricting only to Human beings. Since every living being has a right to exist so it is not right for us to take away the life of any living being.

## 7. ETHICS OF JAINISM

Jainism is an atheistic religion which rejects Vedic sacrifice and ceremonialism.

- **Basis of Jainas Ethics:** Ahimsa or non-violence is the cornerstone of Jainas ethics
- **Ethical Teachings and Practices:**
  - i. **Triratna (Three Jewels):** It includes *Right Faith, Right Knowledge and Right Conduct*.
    - *Right faith* means having a sense of respect and regard towards the principles taught by the Jaina Tirthankaras. The faith is a first step in direction of liberation.
    - *Right knowledge* refers to the proper knowledge about the real nature of things. Removal of ignorance about reality is necessary to align one conduct.
    - *Right conduct* is the third indispensable condition for the attainment of liberation. Right faith and right knowledge become useless unless they are followed by rigorous practice.
  - ii. **Panchamahavratas : (Constitute the basics of right conduct)**

The discipline of right conduct is prescribed by Jainism which consists in refraining from what is harmful and doing what is good. The Panchamahavratas which are the five vows prescribed for every Jaina follower. The five vows are-

    - Ahimsa (Nonviolence)
    - Satya (Truth)
    - Asteya (Non-stealing)
    - Brahmacharya (Chastity)

- Aparigraha (Non-Possession)

## 8. CHARVAKA ETHICS

Charvaka school of philosophy is heterodox, and against established religion. Their ethics is a crude individual hedonism recognizing the gratification of the senses of the individual as the sole end of human life. According to it, there is no other world; there is no soul surviving death; religion is nothing but the inventions of the priests for their livelihood.

- **Basis of Charvaka Ethics:** Hedonism i.e sensual pleasure is the highest goal or summum bonum of human life.
- **Ethical Teaching of Charvaka:**
  - **Goal of life:** The goal of human life is to enjoy the maximum amount of pleasure in this life and to avoid pain as far as possible.
  - **Rationality of Kama and Artha:** Out of four strands of Purushartha - Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha- they recognizes *only Kama and Artha*.
  - **Equated cessation of suffering with Death:** Charvaka rejected the concept of liberation/Moksha altogether. Also, Charvaka does not believe in a life after death.
  - **Morality in Action:** A good action is that which brings about more pleasure than pain whereas a bad action is that which produces more pain than pleasure.