_____

AN ATTEMPT TO UNDERSTAND MORALITY FROM INDIAN STANDPOINT

Dr. Bhaskar Jha
Associate Professor, Dept. of Philosophy, Raiganj University,
Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal.

_____

ABSTRACT :
   It is a fact that we cannot define the term 'morality' easily because it has multiple associations. Morality is connected only with human behavior. Morality is different from non-morality and immorality. Morality tries to raise questions that are connected with human conduct and character and also tries to solve them. Animals' character and conduct is not the subject matter of ethics. Human beings are called moral agents as only their acts are to be determined as right or wrong. Sometimes the term 'morality' is accepted as synonymous with 'moral goodness' or 'moral rightness'. In this sense, when we say that an act is moral, we want to mean that it is right. Generally the western philosophers think that there is no specific discussion about ethics in Indian philosophy. I think that this view is not correct. We find a lot of references of ethical discussion in Indian philosophy. In the present paper I shall explain Indian standpoint about morality.

KEYWORDS : morality, puruṣārtha, śreya, preya, dharma, mokṣa, ātman.

INTRODUCTION

   Classical Indian philosophy accepts morality is an institution of life. Here importance is given on the distinction between 'what is' and 'what ought to be'? In human beings, we find continuous conflict between the animality and rationality. Other animals are only conscious, but man is also self-conscious. Man is conscious about the external world as well as about his inner beings i.e. about his thinking, feeling, emotion etc. Man has the special quality of rationality which makes him different from other animals. Man feels the distinction between his real position and ideal position or what he is and what he ought to be. Man realizes that he should not always fulfill the demands of sense organs, rather he should follow the direction of his higher faculties.

Explanation: Western philosophers think that due to the presence of reason man is able to distinguish himself from other animals. But Indian philosophers think that such distinction is possible due to the presence of soul or *ātman* in man. The soul is a "surplus" of man and it constitutes the essence of man. Traditional Indian philosophy is spiritual in nature. Generally Indian philosophers believe that man has within him an immortal soul which is a flake of the Divine. This soul has determined the highest goal of man which is far from the physical world. Man should follow a view or path through which he may attain this highest goal. This view or path is moral which makes man a moral agent. Man is able to distinguish between the desired and desirable, between higher and lower, between right and wrong as he is a moral agent. *Veda*s and *Upanisada*s tried to input such kind of consciousness in man.

   Western philosophers think that morality has a social reference. The question of morality does not arise outside the society. "The attempt to study the moral life of mankind without explicit reference to its social relations is necessarily somewhat futile." **1** A person's behavior can be determined as morally good or bad only

_____

_____

in respect of other persons. Frankena accepts morality as a social enterprise. He says, "Morality, of course, is social in this sense to a considerable extent; however, it is also largely social in its origins, sanctions, and functions." **2** Moral rules are social rules and are equally applicable to all individuals who live in a society and who have some obligations towards others. "Moral point of view always refers to an individual in relation to a society and never to an individual in relation to himself." **3**

Indian standpoint about morality is different. Indian philosophers think that morality may be personal as well as social. But here emphasis has given on personal morality. Vedas recognized morality as an institution of life. Morality was accepted here as the basic element of human life. In the Vedic period, morality was not accepted as a social enterprise. At that time, morality was not used as an instrument of the society through which the behavior of social human beings can be guided. "Hindu ethics prescribes the disciplines for a spiritual life, which are to be observed consciously or unconsciously as long as man lives." **4**

Indians accept the divine or scriptural origin of morality. Indians believe that the behavior of a person may be moral or immoral towards other members of the society as well as towards himself. A person will face the questions of morality as he is a human being and secondly as he is a member of the society. A lonely man also is bound to follow some moral obligations. We find the references of both individual and social morality in Indian ethics. Social morality may be called objective ethics which deals with the questions of morality in relation to other members of the society. On the other hand, individual morality may be called subjective ethics which deals with the questions of morality in relation to oneself.

In the Vedas we find the concept of *Ṛta* which may be accepted as the foundation of morality in India. The concept of *Ṛta* indicates that man is bound to adopt a moral point of view. It is believed that the whole universe is guided and regulated by an eternal moral law. This eternal moral law was accepted in the Ṛg Veda as *Ṛta*. In Indian mind, the idea of morality was at first originated from the concept of *Ṛta*. So, it may be said that in India, moral point of view or morality was not originated from social contract or from society. Rather it had a divine origin.

Generally, *Ṛta* was accepted as an impersonal principle which transcends the authority of Gods. Sometimes God Varuṇa was accepted as the custodian of *Ṛta*. "This Ṛta is a cosmic moral order and Varuṇa keeps spies so that his Ṛta may be observed by all." **5** Thus the divine origin of morality was established in India. In the scriptures, we find references of its divine origin. Again it may be said that the senses of 'right' and 'wrong' or the sense of 'morality' was originated in India from the Vedic concepts of '*Ṛju*' or straight and '*Vṛjan*' or crooked. The Upanisadic concepts '*Śreyaḥ*' or desirable and '*Preyaḥ*' or pleasurable also helped to originate the senses of right and wrong.

In India, the concept of '*dharma*' also helped for the origination of the sense of morality. From the root '*dhṛ*' the term 'dharma' came and the root '*dhṛ*' means uploads. It is believed that *dharma* upholds the universe from within. In Indian tradition, *dharma* represents the moral law of the universe. The moral life of man is regulated by this moral law. Most of the Indians accept that we are bound to adopt the life of morality because *dharma* as moral law upholds the universe.

It is believed that the life of every man is worthy. All man has some duties. They should follow some traits of character. Man should control his sense- organs and mind so that he can attain the higher values of life. Through the proper understanding of our inner nature and following some disciplines, we can transform our lower impulses into the higher ones. Indian philosophers think that under the domain of morality man can do these. The moral life of man is constituted by the subjective process of discipline which is called the subjective morality. *Cittasuddhi* or purification of mind is the practical side of Indian ethics.

The uniqueness of Indian morality lies on the fact that in India, we find both the morality of doing and morality of being. Indians think that morality has two parts- objective part and subjective part. The morality of doing prescribes us to do certain acts and not to do certain other acts. On the other hand, morality of being teaches us about virtues and sins. Social and individual moralities are instances of morality of doing and being respectively. The inner being or character of a person is formed through the actions which he performs continuously, whether these actions may be virtuous or sinful. Social morality is concerned with the actions that are performed by an individual in reference to the other members of the society. The root of individual morality is the sense of inculcating inner virtue and the sense of duty towards other members of the society is the root of social morality.

It is not easy to know the precise nature of morality. The more we want to know it, the more we fall into problems. We do not find any serious attempt to understand the exact nature of morality in Indian tradition though there we find a lot of references about virtues, duties, obligations etc. A man may be called

_____

_____

moral if he engrains certain virtues and performs certain duties. Here Indian thinkers take recourse to authority. Which actions are prescribed by the *Śāstras* to perform are moral and which actions are determined by the *Śāstras* not to perform are non-moral. So, in Indian context, morality means to follow the dictates of *Śāstra*. Sankara said that in the scriptures we find the distinction between right and wrong and scriptures had determined the morality and immorality of action. "The holy writ is the ground of discriminating between right and wrong. 'This is duty', 'this is immortality' - all this can be known only by means of scriptures....... Śāstras alone constitute our basis for moral knowledge." **6**

In broader sense, *dharma* was accepted as equivalent with morality in Indian tradition. Here the word '*dharma*' was understood in the sense of duties which man ought to perform. But all the duties as prescribed by the scriptures may not be regarded as moral. Manu told,

"*Dhṛṛtiḥ kṣamā damohsteyaṁ śaucamindriyanigrahaḥ* I
Dhī rvidyā satyamakrodho dasakaṁ dharmalakṣaṇam II" **7**

Here we find ten features of *sādhāraṇa dharma* of man and among these *śauca* or duty related with health and *vidyā* or intellectual duty cannot be generally accepted as moral duties. But we should remember the fact that in Indian tradition morality was understood in the senses of both social and individual morality. An individual can purify himself with the help of the above two. So, it can be said that though *dharma* and morality are not synonymous, yet we can form an idea about Indian sense of morality from their idea of *dharma*.

To define *dharma* Jaimini said, "*Codanālakṣaṇoartho dharmaḥ*". **8** The meaning of the *sūtra* is: *Dharma* is that which is indicated by injunctive text and which leads to the good. The Vedic texts indicate both *artha* and *anartha*. For Example, *Agnihotra* sacrifice, *Śyena* sacrifice etc. In Jaimini's *sūtra,* we find two criteria to determine morality or *dharmatva* of an action: (i) the action must be enjoined by the Vedas, and (ii) the action must be conducive to good.

In the Vedas we find both injunctions and prohibitions. Prohibitions lead to evil consequences. *Anartha* is produced if one performs the acts which are indicated by the Vedas as prohibitions. So, it can be said that *artha* is the result of injunctions and *anartha* is the result of prohibitions. Both Sabara and Kumarila accept that the morality of an action or *dharmatva* depends on the above two conditions. Here Prabhakara's standpoint is different. That which is enjoined by the Vedas was accepted by him as *dharma*. He thought that to determine *dharmatva* or morality of an action, we should not depend on the consequences of that action.
Kanada in his *Vaiśeṣikasūtra* said, "*Yato abhudaya niḥśreyasasiddhiḥ sa dharmaḥ.*" **9** It means, *dharma* is that which helps us to achieve both material prosperity and highest good. So we can say that the Vaiśeṣikas' *dharma* or morality was teleological as they determined the morality or immorality of an action through teleos or results. They said that the actions which are prescribed by the Vedas and the *Śāstras* lead to happiness and *niḥśreyasa*. Vaiśeṣikas said that Vedas, *Dharmsūtras* and *Dharmaśāstras* are the sources of morality. Here the Vaiśeṣikas took seperate standpoint from the Mīmāṁsakas as the later defined morality only with reference of the Vedas.

Classical Indian philosophy accepts the scriptures, the paths shown by the great people, our conscience and reason as our moral guides. Let us discuss these one after another.

The *Vedas*, the *Upanisadas*, the *Smṛtis*, the *Rāmāyana*, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhagvadgītā* etc. are accepted as the primary sources of the moral ideas and beliefs of Indians. In Indian tradition, generally it is believed that our duties will be regarded as moral if these are performed by following the *Vedas* and the *Smṛtis*. Otherwise our actions will be regarded as immoral. In the *Bhagvadgītā*, Srikrishna said that the person who acts by avoiding the *Śāstras*, can never be happy. **10** As the *Śāstras* present before us the essence of right and wrong, so they should be regarded as sources of morality. But if conflicts arise between the views of the Vedas and the *Śāstras*, we have to accept the views of the former.

In the *Vana Parva* of *Mahābhārata,* it is said that we should follow the path of great man in cases of conflicts among the *Śāstras*. A man may be regarded as 'great man' if he is well aware about the Vedas and the *Śāstras*, if he has a morally good character and if he possesses a refined soul. A great man is able to control his passions and desires. He is *kāma*-less. He has no interest about the result of his action. Manu said that such type of man is free from all types of attachment and is well known about the Vedas. He said,
"*Vidvadbhiḥ sevitaḥ sadvirnityamadvesarāgibhiḥ* I *Hridayenābhyanujñāto yo dharmastannibodhata* II" **11**

_____

_____

In case of morality, conscience also plays significant role. Manu accepted the "dictates of the heart" or conscience to decide right and wrong action. Yajnavalka said that conscience is a source of morality. He said, "*Śrutiḥ smṛtiḥ sadācāraḥ svasya ca priyamātmanaḥ* I *Samyak saṁkalpajaḥ kāmo dharmamūlamidaṁ smṛtam* II*" **12** Here Yijnavalka has noted that the desire which arises from right will is a source of morality. Generally the will of religious people is called good will. Again the desire which is approved by our conscience may be called as right will. Conscience plays a vital role if different paths claim equally as right.

In the *Śānti Parva* of *Mahābhārata*, it is said that sanction of the heart is an important factor in deciding morality. Modern Indian thinker *Ṛṣi* Aurobindo accepted that in cases of morality and immorality, conscience gives the final verdict. Gandhi thought that voice of inner conscience is an important factor in determining morality. But he said that if a person is able to overcome his selfish desires, then his voice of inner conscience may be accepted.

As authority is the basis of Indian concept of morality, so it does not give much importance on reasoning. *Manusaṁhitā* does not allow us to judge the opinions of the *Vedas* and *Smṛties* by reasoning. Such efforts are despised by him. Manu said, "*Yohavamanyet te mūle hetuśāstrāśrayād dvijaḥ* I *Sa sādhubhirvahiṣkāryo nāstiko vedanindakaḥ* II*" **13** Prabhakara said that as the Vedic injunctions are self-valid and self-authoritative, so there is no necessity to judge them by reasoning. In the Santi Parva of Mahabharata, faith has given importance than reason.

The Buddhists and the Jainas also gave more importance on authority than reason. Jainas believe that obey the commands of Mahāvira is *dharma*. We know that right faith takes the first place among the three jewels of Jainism. Buddha advised to his disciple Ānanda to follow his path strictly to reach *nirvāna*. Buddha said that whatever he taught is moral. One should obey the four noble truth and should follow the eight fold path strictly and nobody was allowed to discuss on them.

Modern Indian thinkers gave reason comparatively better place. Here we may mention the names of Swami Vivekānanda and Gandhi. Gandhiji said that he was not ready to give the scriptures higher place than reason. He has mentioned that the scriptures suffer from a process of double distillation. "Firstly, they come through a human prophet, and then through the commentaries of interpreters. Nothing in them comes from God directly...." **14**

We find Vivekānanda's attitude about reason in his lectures on Practical Vedānta. He said that though most of the Indians are habituated to follow the authority of the scriptures strictly, yet we find innumerable evil occurrences in our society. That is why he said that it is better to follow reason rather than authority.

CONCLUSION:

Indians are used to lead a moral life as they think that the ultimate end of human life is liberation. Critics think that morality is worthful as it teaches self-sacrifice for others. If one acts only for his own salvation, as Indians do, then it cannot be an example of morality. It can be called as prudence. It may be called individual morality. Social morality gives emphasis on the duties and obligations towards others. It tells us to sacrifice our own interests for the benefit of others. Individual morality speaks about the purification of an individual so that his path of salvation becomes clear. The critics say that as non-violence or *ahiṁsā*, *asteya*, *dāna* and compassion for others are concerned with one's fellow beings, so these have social implications. But *āsana, prāṇāyām, indriyanigraha* etc. have no value in response to others. So, these can neither be called moral, nor immoral.

But such type of criticism against Indian sense of morality is not correct. It is wrong to accept the concept of morality in general sense and the concept of self- sacrifice in the particular sense. The basic concern of morality is that man will regulate his lower inclinations and promote these into the higher. Here we find a transition from 'is' to 'ought'. Generally man is egoistic in nature, but morality instructs him to think, feel and work for others. We should sacrifice our lower sensuous interests for the sake of higher, spiritual interests and also give up our own interests for the sake of others. So, morality is not only concerned with social morality, rather it is also concerned with individual or subjective morality.

Here it may be said that form Indian standpoint one has taken a moral point of view if he judges things normatively and wills to universalize them. A person may adopt the moral point of view when he judges some actions normatively though at that time his reason may not contain what types of good or bad consequences of the action brings for the other members of the society. That means, in Indian tradition, social implication is not necessary factor to determine whether an action is moral or immoral.

_____

_____

We find that the *Vaiśeṣika*s defined morality of an action through the end or teleos. But traditional Indian philosophy speaks about deontological type of morality. In the *Vana Parva* of *Mahābhārata,* Yudhisthira told to Draupadi that the person who acts to achieve fruits, can never be a virtuous man, rather such type of man may be called a trader in virtue.

In Indian tradition morality was understood in terms of the mandates of the authority. Here the term 'authority' includes the *Veda*s, the *Smṛti*s and sometimes wise people also. Though the Buddhists and the Jainas do not accept the authority of the *Vedas* and the *Smṛtis,* yet they accept the authority of Buddha and the Tirthankaras'. The action of a person will be regarded as moral if he acts following authority. Otherwise his action will be regarded as immoral. Following authority if a person leads a regulated life, then his life will be designated as moral. Actions done with love, compassion, charity, *asteya* etc. are moral in respect of society and actions related with self-control, self-purification etc. are references of personal morality. *Śauca, āsana, tapas, prāṇāyām* etc. are acts which lead to self-purification.

Thus we can say that Indian ethics is evolutionary in nature. From time to time the concept of morality was revised here. Here morality means both social and personal obligations. We find two distinguishing features of Indian concept of morality. Here authority has given the prime importance to determine what is moral or immoral.

It is clear to us that to determine morality, Indian thinkers prescribe to follow the path of great people, one's conscience, intuition and reason. Here *Śāstra*s are accepted as the primary sources of morality. Intuition and reason may vary from person to person. So these cannot be accepted as the primary sources of morality. It is not easy to identify the good people also. Mahabharata declares that the nature of morality is mysterious. As the principles of morality are very complex and complicated, so people should follow the authority of *Śruti, Smṛti* and *Purāna*s unquestioningly.

In the *Mahābhārata*, questions arise about the final word regarding morality. Mahabharata was aware about the fact that various complications and difficulties may arise from the *Vedas* and the *Śāstra*s to determine the exact duty of a person. It is said that in cases of contradiction between *Śruti* and *Smṛti*, the opinions of the *Śruti* are final. But here it may be said that as the *Smṛti*s were originated from the *Śruti*s, so their authority also is not negligible.

REFERENCES

1. Mackenzie, John S. A MANUAL OF ETHICS, First Indian impression 1973, P. 241, Published by Oxford University Press, Faraday House, Calcutta13.

2. William K. Frankena, ETHICS, Second Edition, 1989, p. 6, Published by Prentice- Hall of India Private Limited, M-97, Connaught Circus, New Delhi-110001.

3. Tiwari Kedar Nath, CLASSICAL INDIAN ETHICAL THOUGHT, Second Edition, 2014, p. 6, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi.

4. Swami Nikhilananda, HINDUISM Its meaning for the Liberation of the Spirit, P. 68, Published by The President, Sri Ramkrishna Math, Mylapore, Chennai-4, 1968.

5. Masih, Y. , THE HINDU RELIGIOUS THOUGHT, P.29, Published by Motilal Banarsidass, 1983.

6. Tiwari Kedar Nath, CLASSICAL INDIAN ETHICAL THOUGHT, Second Edition, 2014, p. 14, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi.

7. Bandyopadhyay Manavendu, Manusamhita, 6th Chapter, Verse no.92, p.434, Published by Sanskrit Pustak Bhander,38 Bidhan Sarani, First Edition, 2004, Kolkata- 700006.

8. Jaimini, *Mīmāṁsā sūtra*, 1-1-2.

9. Kanada, *Vaiśesika-Sūtra*, 1.2.

10. *Yah sastravidhimutsrjya vartate kamakaratah* I
   Na sa siddhim avapnoti na sukham na param gatim II
   Bhagvadgita, Chapter XVI, Verse no. 23.

11. Bandyopadhyay Manavendu, Manusamhita, 2nd Chapter, Verse no. 1, p. 53, Published by Sanskrit Pustak Bhander, 38 Bidhan Sarani, First Edition, 2004, Kolkata- 700006.

12. Yājñavalka, *Yājñavalka Smṛti*, 1. 7.

13. Bandyopadhyay Manavendu, Manusamhita, 2nd Chapter, Verse no. 11, p. 65, Published by Sanskrit Pustak Bhander,38 Bidhan Sarani, First Edition, 2004, Kolkata- 700006.

14. Gandhi, *Harijan,* December, 1936

_____

_____

Dr. Bhaskar Jha

Associate Professor, Dept. of Philosophy, Raiganj University, Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal.