VALUES AND ETHICS IN HINDUISM

Religion which plays an important role in the life of people is looked upon as a link between life in this world and in the next life. As such many religious activities are undertaken keeping in view our life in the next world. The ‘All Souls Day’ ceremony (Sarvapitri Amāvāsyā) according to Hindu tradition, performed in memory of those who are no more among us, is one such instance. Almost all religions prescribe goals whose realization transcends the material world. These goals are variously known as salvation, transmigration, rebirth, etc.

In the Hindu religion these goals are elevated to a still higher pedestal. Hinduism prescribes that; pursuit of goals whose realization is beyond our existence in the palpable world around us should be made an organic part of our activities while we are still living. Further, that each and every thing that we do here (Karma) is accounted for by the celestial accountant (chitragupta) and has implications on our next life as per the theory of re-birth (punarjanma). The Hindu is guided by rules and regulations prescribed by his religion. There is nothing that has to do with the whole life of a Hindu, and every possible detail thereof, from his cradle to his grave, which is not regulated by such rules.

According to Padfield:
“Many of these directions were originally the outcome of circumstances bearing upon the welfare of the individual or community. But they have gradually become absorbed in the religious administration and, at length, appear as sections of a divine code that must be observed, on pain of severe physical and spiritual penalties.”

Traditionally, a devout Hindu elevates in the eyes of co-religionists if pursues activities of charity (dāna), penance, renunciation, etc., with an eye on a goal whose realisation is possible when the person concerned is no more. This is the goal of release from the cycle of re-birth and is termed mokṣa - popularly called mukti. Cromwell Crawford writes:

“Hinduism does not have a science of morals fashioned after some Aristotelian or Thomistic model. However, it does have a moral philosophy which postulates a Summum Bonum and specifies the proper means for achieving it. This highest ideal is the state of Liberation or mokṣa. In it a man finds his self-fulfillment and deepest bliss. It is founded on the metaphysical conviction of the oneness of Reality which is attainable through direct experience.”

One may wonder as to how this idea which aims to at regulating the activities of mortal human beings with a promise of reward after death could have come into being. While many conflicting philosophical doctrines exist for explaining and justifying the concept of mokṣa, a student of this subject would sense the answer in the intimate link

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34 Padfield, J.E., *The Hindu At Home*, p. 1
between the idea of *mokṣa* and that of *Karma*. It can be seen that the origin of these ecclesiastical doctrines is embedded in real life.

Cromwell Crawford further writes:

“*Mokṣa* serves as the ultimate standard of right conduct. It measures the value or disvalue of an act by the extent to which it either helps or hinders the attainment of freedom. Actions most distinctively oriented to *mokṣa* are those characterized by truth, non-violence, sacrifice and renunciation.”

The idea of attaining *mokṣa* i.e. release from the cycle of re-birth has in varying degrees been based on the premise that if a person faithfully carries out the duties decreed to him by birth (in a particular caste) he is rewarded by a more nobler life by being torn in a higher caste and vice-versa. After reaching the highest caste if he continues to perform the duties decreed upon him he can obtain *mokṣa* and his soul (*ātman*) does not have to be re-born.

In theory this doctrine was made applicable not only to human being but to all living creatures. Thus even a dog could be re-born in a higher form of life, e.g. he could be born as a man as member of a particular caste and thus through noble behaviour continue his upward journey till he finally obtained *mokṣa*.

But it is clear that this mode of thinking was meant to influence humans and was a tool to impose self discipline among members of

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36 Ibid.
various castes to stick to their vocation and station in life as decided by birth. The carrot of re-birth in a higher caste and finally release from the cycle of re-birth ensured observance of the caste order and discipline in society with minimum need for physical coercion.

The doctrines of *karma* and *mokṣa* represented a clear integration of religion into the social structure. This integration was never so perfect in other civilizations. Its existence in India helped to strengthen the immobility between different castes, because according to these doctrines a person could move into a higher caste only in his next life and that also was possible provided he faithfully carried out the duties assigned to the caste in which he had been born in his life. Hence the doctrines precluded any outside chance of a person trying to infiltrate into another caste by dint of hard work, enterprise or coercion.

**The Ethics of the Vedic Period:**

Hindu ethics goes back to ancient times with Aryan invasions of North India which were chronologically parallel to the Hellenic invasions of Greece (c. 2000-100). The Aryans were tall, fair people of Indo-European stock. These pastoral nomads had migrated from the steppes of Eastern Europe, finally making their new home on the upper branches of the Indus River in the Northwestern region of India. The culture of these conquering tribes was in sharp contrast to that of the declining Indus civilization. Not long after their occupation of the land,
the Aryans commenced their speculative activities which issued in the formation of the *Vedas*.\(^37\)

The name ‘*Veda*’ (knowledge) stands for the *Mantras* and the *Brāhmaṇas* compiled by ancient Indians. *Mantra* means a hymn addressed to some god or goddess. The collection of the *mantras* is called ‘*Samhitā*’. There are four *Samhitās*, Ṛk, Sāma, Yajuh and Atharva. These are said to be compiled for the smooth performance of the *Vedic* Sacrifices. The *Brāhmaṇas*, unlike the *Mantras*, are written in prose. They are the elaboration of the complicated ritualism of the *Vedas*. They deal with the rules and regulations laid down for the performance of the rites and the sacrifices. Their name ‘*Brāhmaṇa*’ is derived from the word ‘*Brahmari*’ which originally means a prayer. The appendages to these *Brāhmaṇas* are called *Āraṇyakas* mainly because they were composed in the calmness of the forests. The *Āraṇyakas* mark the transition from the ritualistic to the philosophic thought. The concluding portions of the *Āraṇyakas* are called the *Upaniṣads*. The *Upaniṣads* are also known as ‘*Vedānta*’ or ‘the end of the *Veda*’. Firstly, because they are literally the concluding portion, the end of the *Vedas*, and secondly because they are the essence, the cream, the height, of the *Vedic* philosophy.\(^38\)

H. Zimmer observes that:

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“The Vedic hymns are the oldest extant literary and religious monument of the so-called Indo-European family of languages.”

**Ethical Thought in the Mantras:**

The ancient Indian seers recognized a cosmic order which served as the foundation of their ethics. They called it Ṛta, a concept which Macdonell, an eminent historian, has described as: “The highest flight of Rg-Vedic thought.”

Originally Ṛta was a concept pertaining to the physical universe, denoting the Law of Nature operative in the movement of the planets, the success in of night and day, and the rotation of the seasons. As the principle of order in the universe, it endowed all of the natural phenomena with symmetry and aesthetic form. The beauty and uniformity of heaven and earth were looked upon as proceeding from their unalterable observance of cosmic law. Gradually the cosmic sense of Ṛta as natural law developed into the social sense of Ṛta as moral law. The nature of this development was crucial for the status of morality. It meant that virtue was given the same immanent position in the social world.

The idea of Ṛta as moral law became a salient feature of Vedic thought. It is the sense of value based on this idea which accounts for the remarkable unity of thought among the poets. They are all agreed:

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41 Cromwell Crawford, S., *The Evolution of Hindu Ethical Ideals*, p.3.
“A man should think on wealth, and strive to win it by adoration the path of Order, Counsel himself with his own mental insight, and grasp still nobler vigour with his spirit.”\textsuperscript{42}

Exhortations of this kind are numerous. They point to the fact that \textit{Ṛta} was the \textit{summum bonum} around which the whole of \textit{Vedic} religion and society was modeled. So great was its influence that in later time its principles were perpetuated through the characteristic Hindu concepts of \textit{dharma} and the law of \textit{karma}. The hymns not only present us with a universal standard of morality represented by \textit{Ṛta}, they also lay down certain duties as the concrete manifestation of \textit{Ṛta}. The first set of duties is religious, consisting of prayers and sacrifices to the gods. Without going into the specific nature of these duties, we shall enquire into their hearing on the moral life.\textsuperscript{43}

The \textit{Upaniṣads} are rightly regarded as the fountain-head of all Indian philosophy.

R.D. Rande points out:

“\textit{The Upaniṣads} constitute that lofty eminence of philosophy, which from its various sides gives birth to rivulets of thought, which, as they progress onwards towards the sea of life, gather strength by the inflow of innumerable tributaries of speculation which intermittently join these rivulets, so as to make a huge expanse of waters at the place where they meet the ocean of life.”\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{43}Cromwell Crawford, S., \textit{The Evolution of Hindu Ethical Ideals}, p.4-5.
\textsuperscript{44}Ranade. R.D., \textit{A Constructive Survey of Upaniṣadic Philosophy}, p.9.
The entire body of philosophy has been given the scriptural, logical and ethical base through the Prasthanathrayi - the Upaniṣads, Brahmaṇaṭras and the Gītā on which the great Acāryas, Śankara, Rāmānuja and Madhwa gave comprehensive commentaries. According to Ramakrishna Rao:

“After deep study of their works and the further commentaries following the methods of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, we can safely conclude that Active Peace is the ultimate goal. The various prescriptions (vidhi) and prohibitions (niṣedha) found in Vedas and subsequent treatises aim at this objective of establishing peace within and without.”

Laws of Manu or "Mānava Dharma Śāstra:

The Dharma Śāstra of Manu is known as the Manu-smṛti having 2,694 stanzas divided into 12 chapters. It deals with topics such as cosmogony, the definition of dharma, the sacraments, initiation and Vedic study, the eight forms of marriage, hospitality and funerary rites, dietary laws, pollution and purification, rules for women and wives, royal law, juridical matters, pious donations, rites of reparation, the doctrine of karma, the soul, and punishment in hell. Law in the juridical sense is thus completely embedded in religious law and practice. The framework is provided by the model of the four-class society.

The influence of the Dharma Śāstras of Manu has been enormous, as they provided Hindu society with the basis for its practical

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morality. But, for most of the Indian subcontinent, it is the commentaries on these texts (such as Medhatithi’s 9th-century commentary on Manu) and, even more, the local case law traditions arising out of the commentaries that have been the law. Second to Manu is Dharma Śāstra of Yajnavalkya; its 1,013 stanzas are distributed under the three headings of good conduct, law, and expiation. The Mitaksara, the commentary on it by Vijnaneshvara (11th century), has extended the influence of Yajnavalkya’s work. It is later than Manu, probably belonging to the early Gupta Period when there was a renaissance of Brahmanical culture.46

The ancient Vedic society had a structured social order where the Brahmins were esteemed as a highest and the most revered sect and assigned the holy task of acquiring ancient knowledge and learning. The teachers of each Vedic schools composed manuals in Sanskrit, known as ‘sūtras’, pertaining to their respective schools for the guidance of their pupils, which were highly venerated by the Brahmins and memorized by each Brahmin student.

The most common of these were the ‘Gṛhya-sūtras’, dealing with domestic ceremonies, and the ‘Dharma-sūtras’, treating of the sacred customs and laws. These extremely complicated bulks of ancient rules and regulations, customs, laws and rites were gradually enlarged in

46 Cromwell, Crawford, S., The Evolution of Hindu Ethical Ideals, pp.77-78.
scope, written aphoristically and set to musical cadence and systematically arranged to constitute the 'Dharma-śāstras'. Of these, the most ancient and most famous is the 'Laws of Manu', the 'Mānava Dharma-śāstra', a 'Dharma-sūtra' belonging to the ancient Mānava Vedic school. ⁴⁷

The Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa:

During the centuries immediately preceding and following the beginning of the Christian Era, the recension of the two great Sanskrit epics, the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa, took shape out of existing heroic epic stories, mythology, philosophy, and above all the discussion of the problem of dharma. Much of the material in the epics dates far back into the Vedic period, while the rest continued to be added until well into the medieval period. It is conventional, however, to date the recension of the Sanskrit texts to the period from 300 B.C to 300 A.D for the Mahābhārata and to the period from 200 BC to 200 AD for the Rāmāyaṇa.

Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa are the two most cherished works of popular Hinduism. The epics are splendid illustrations of the evolutionary character of Hindu thought, having undergone successive accretions and transformations over a period of four to five centuries. V. Raghavan writes:

⁴⁷ Roy, S.B., Indian Religions, p.90
“There is hardly a Hindu who has not heard the stories and teachings of these epics from childhood, imbibing them as it were with his mother’s milk.”

The *Mahābhārata* is a history of conflicts between two royal houses, the *Pandavas* and *Kauravas*. Its present form was substantially completed by the second century B.C. The heart of *Mahābhārata* is the *Bhagvad-Gītā* which is the heart of Hinduism itself. The song of the Lord was developed out of the philosophical matrix of the Upanishads, but unlike the metaphysical preoccupation of the *Upaniṣads*, the spirit of the *Bhagvad-Gītā* is practical. It emphasizes *Bhakti* (religious devotion) and *Dharma* (righteousness), moral law. The *Rāmāyaṇa* is more secular and smaller than the *Mahābhārata*. It imparts the kinds of ideals that most characterize the personal, domestic, social, and public life of the Hindus. The *Rāmāyaṇa* gradually developed into a textbook of *Dharma*. Valmiki, the author, probably gave poetic form to the *Rāma*-legends he had collected approximately during the third century B.C. The story is about The *Rāma* who is an incarnation of Viṣṇu. As the embodiment of *Dharma*, he defeats Rāvaṇa the king of the Demons.

**Message of the *Bhagvad-Gītā*:**

If *Rama* was an embodiment of virtue supremely dedicated to *Dharma* in every action he performed, *Krśṇa* was a teacher par excellence imparting supreme wisdom in every word he uttered. Both

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were so enchanting and charming to look upon, contemplate and meditate. Their captivating beauty is varied and limitless. With even a little sincerity and imagination one can develop the awareness of their divinity followed by the thirst to drink the joy of transcendence.\textsuperscript{50}

\textit{Bhagvad-Gītā} literally means ‘The Lord’s Song’, i.e., the philosophical discourse of Lord \textit{Kṛṣṇa} to persuade the reluctant \textit{Arjuna} to fight. It is the most popular and sacred book of the Hindus and is contained in the \textit{Bhiṣma-Parva} of the \textit{Mahābhārata}.\textsuperscript{51}

The principal religious injunction that is quoted is the one attributed to Kṛṣṇa who we are told said in the \textit{Bhagvad-Gītā} that a mortal should go about performing his duty without any expectation of its fruits. Most Indians see in this proclamation an argument for renunciation. But renunciation only means ‘to give up’ something, it does not imply that one should dutifully go about the function assigned but not expect the fruits in return. While the proclamation in the \textit{Bhagvad-Gītā} amounts to saying 'give (and obey) but do not expect anything in return', renunciation simply means to give up whatever one has. This differentiation could be likened to hair splitting, but it is essential to realise that there is a difference between renunciation as is practised by sages and hermits and the injunction in the \textit{Bhagvad-Gītā} which is applicable to all human beings in the normal course of living. Thus, this

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p.31.
\textsuperscript{51} Chandradhar Sharma., \textit{A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy}, p.32.
message of the *Bhagvad-Gītā* which is meant to have a social appeal must have been relevant in the context of the then existing social structure.

The *Bhagvad-Gītā* is not meant for Arjuna alone whose vacillation in fighting his relatives in the *Mahābhārata* war is supposed to have been the reason why Kṛṣṇa recited the *Gītā*. Mahatma Gandhi calls it:

> “The universal mother whose door is wide open to anyone who knocks and a true votary of the *Gītā* does not know what disappointment is. He ever dwells in perennial joy and peace that passeth understanding. The *Gītā* deals with metaphysics, religion and ethics and has been rightly called the ‘Gospel of Humanity’.\(^{52}\)

But all this apart, it is inconceivable that a deeply philosophical document such as the *Bhagvad-Gītā* could have been recited on a battlefield, and that too just before the beginning of a battle. Even a person who has memorised the *Gītā* takes about two hours to recite it. If one applies human standards, then it would be unrealistic to presume that this text was recited on a battlefield. The *Bhagvad-Gītā* must have been composed in a quite corner by different persons possibly at different periods. It reflects doctrines that are necessary to sustain social structures that have existed in India in historic times. By representing it to have been recited by Lord Kṛṣṇa the messages of the *Bhagvad-Gītā* could be ensured of divine inviolability. The same can be said of all

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\(^{52}\) Gandhi, M.K., *Hindu Dharma*, p.133.
other religious texts like the Bible and the *Koran* if their message is interpreted in the context of the socio-economic set-up of the societies in which these texts were composed.

‘Krṣṇa knows every one’s innermost thoughts and he saw through the temporary infatuation of Arjuna. Gandhi further says:

“If a passenger going in a Scotch Express gets suddenly sick of traveling and jumps out of it, he is guilty of suicide. He has not learnt the futility of traveling or traveling by a railway train. Similarly was the case with Arjuna. Non-violent Krṣṇa could give Arjuna no other advice. But to say that the *Gītā* teaches violence or justifies war, because advice to kill was given on a particular occasion, is as wrong as to say that *hiṃsā* is the law of life, because a certain amount of it is inevitable in daily life. To one who reads the spirit of the *Gītā*, it teaches the secret of non-violence, the secret of realizing the self through the physical body.”

The above injunction of carrying out duties without expecting the fruits of labour cannot be reconciled with Krṣṇa’s telling Arjuna that he need not face any dilemma while battling his relatives because if he wins the battle he would obtain the kingdom of earth but even if he loses and is killed he would still gain the kingdom of heaven Thus Arjuna has to be motivated to fight by making him aware of the fruits of his deeds. This is one instance of a contradiction within a philosophy which in one way or the other commends performance of duties decreed upon us (by birth - in the context of the social structure that existed in ancient India).

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This is the interpretation when the message of the *Bhagvad-Gītā* is applied at the societal level and is viewed in one particular social context. There is another and more universal interpretation of the *Bhagvad-Gītā* when one applies its message at the individual and personal level.

**The Universal Appeal of the *Bhagvad-Gītā*.**

The *Bhagvad-Gītā* says "Work of any kind should not be given up. Work has to be performed. But it should be done with surrender of all attachment for the fruits. This does not mean that one should renounce duty. It should be performed and only the fruits and attachment should be renounced. The doer who is free from attachment, who had no feeling of it, who is steady and zealous, who is unmoved by success or failure, whose mind is unattached everywhere, who has subdued his self and has no desires is worthy of becoming one with God."\(^{54}\)

The *Bhagvad-Gītā* also says "Once attachment for the objects of the senses is given a place in the mind it will be disastrous. Because attachment gives rise to desire and desire breeds anger. The next step is delusion and the mind gets confused and understanding is lost. Destruction follows in its wake. So, the senses should be controlled, and

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the man into whom all desires enter as the waters enter the sea, attains peace." 55

“There are two pathways to approach that state. One is knowledge by meditation, and the other is work for men of action. Remember, no man can be still, even for a moment. He has to do work. It is the law of nature that man should work. You may find a man who sits without doing anything. But his mind is still engaged in the world of the senses. He is a hypocrite. There is then the other type of man, the Stithaprajña I spoke about. He has controlled his senses along with the mind, and when he works he does so without attachment. He is infinitely superior to any other kind of man. You must do your duty. By not working you cannot live. Even the bodily functions need work to sustain them.”

“Give up your attachments and work as though you are performing a sacrifice for the general good. That is the secret of work well done. Work should be done so that others benefit from it and not you.” 56

Renunciation is selfless work. True renunciation is renunciation of desire and nothing else. The narration indicates how close the Bhagvad-Gītā is to Gautama Buddha’s teachings. Work is the only means to

55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
attain the *yoga* of renunciation. Once it is attained, serenity comes to the mind of its own accord."\(^{57}\)

In an excellent and powerful commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Swami Vivekananda has said:

"He works best who works without any motive, neither for money, nor for fame, nor for anything else; and when a man can do that, he will become a Buddha, and out of him will come the power to work in such a manner as will transform the world. This man represents the very highest ideal of *karma-Yoga*."\(^{58}\)

Thus we can see that these ideas have a profound implication when applied in the context of an individual's approach to life and another implication when interpreted in the context of the social structure of the society and times in which they were composed. Needless to add here that be it the *Bible* or the *Koran* or any other religious text the implications at a social level and at the personal level would be more or less similar.

In present-day India, the social structure in the context of which the *Bhagavad-Gītā* had a social relevance is disappearing, but the universal appeal of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* remains relevant and will always remain relevant for all time to come, as will that of all other religious texts. Chandradhar Sharma emphasizes:

\(^{57}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{58}\) Swami Vivekananda., *Karma Yoga*, p.131.
“Bhagvad-Gītā represents a unique synthesis of action, devotion, and knowledge. Man is complex of intellect, will and emotion; he is a being who thinks wills and feels. Intellect has given rise to the philosophy of knowledge; will to the philosophy of action; and emotion to the philosophy of devotion.”  

There is no denying the fact that in Hinduism the philosophical ideal does indeed transcend the ethical ideal, but, like the rungs of a ladder, the higher and lower are intrinsically connected so that you cannot get to the one without the other. The philosophical ideal is higher than the ethical, but the ethical is the staging-ground for the philosophical, and, as such, cannot be underestimated. Thus, while Hinduism draws a sharp distinction between the spiritual and material, the eternal and temporal, these dimensions of existence are not polarized but correlated within the concept of dharma.

According R.N. Dandekar:

“Dharma is a unique joint product of the speculative and practical wisdom of the Hindus.”

The unity between philosophical wisdom and ethical excellence is clearly illustrated in the doctrine of adhikāra. This doctrine teaches that before a disciple can aspire after knowledge, he must first be morally qualified. The Upaniṣads are replete with references correlating prajnāna or saving knowledge with moral practice.

59 Chandradhar Sharma, A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy, p.33.
60 Dandekar, R.N., The Role of Man in Hinduism, p.134.
“Who has not ceased from evil ways, who is untranquil, unprepared, or whose mind is not at peace, by knowledge cannot win to him.”

Commenting on this verse, Rāmānuja explains:

“It teaches that meditation, which should become more perfect day by day, cannot be accomplished without the devotee having broken with all evil. This is the indispensable condition of pleasing the Lord and winning His grace.”

The truth of the *adhikāra* doctrine lies in the fact that rationality cannot be divorced from morality. Just as a sound mind requires a sound body, a sound philosophy requires a sound ethics. S.K. Saksena points out:

“If we analyze the behaviour of a truly rational man, we are sure to find a number of qualities in him which will prove to moral. To be rational, for instance, is not to be partisan, or to have prejudices, or to be swayed by passions or self-interest, or to falsify truth, or to have double standards, but it is to stand for truth under all conditions, etc. These are moral qualities. In fact, to be rational is to be moral, and to be completely rational is to be completely moral. The moral and spiritual qualification of a philosopher is, therefore, a condition of his philosophizing properly. Passion or ethical failings cannot but distort the vision of even a philosopher. In fact, what is called intuition is not so much an independent faculty as a purity of

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61 The *Katha Upaniṣad*, 11.24
the moral being of the knower which itself constitutes enlightenment."\textsuperscript{63}

The moral discipline which Hinduism enjoins upon the seeker after philosophical truth springs from a comprehensive ethic. Hindu ethics is a systematic progression from the objective level to the subjective level, culminating on the super ethical level. The first is the stage of social ethics; the second that of personal ethics; and the third is the ultimate end which is ‘the life absolute and transcendental.’\textsuperscript{64}

**Hindu Diet (Āhāra):**

The Institutes of *Manu*, clearly show that, with various restrictions, there was, practically, as much freedom in the choice of food to the good Hindu of those days as there is to men of the most civilized nations in these modern times. The ancient law-giver mentions various kinds of vegetables and animals that may not lawfully be eaten. According to *Manu Dharma-śāstra*:

“For the sustenance of the vital spirit, Brahma created all this animal and vegetable system; and all that is moveable and immoveable, that spirit devours.”\textsuperscript{65}

At the present day, all the higher classes abstain from animal food in every form and are rigid vegetarians. The lower classes are not so restricted in their diet. Indeed, as we go lower down in the scale of caste we find the restrictions lessen, and the dietary scale expand, until it

\textsuperscript{63} Saksena, S.K., *Philosophical Theories and the Affairs of Men*, pp. 33-34.

\textsuperscript{64} Maitra, S.K., *The Ethics of the Hindu*, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{65} *Manu*, v.28.
comes to include things considered by even the least fastidious of Europeans as altogether abominable. Animal food is largely consumed by the lowest classes, when they can get it, in any shape or form; but even in their case, it is a question whether without it they could not equally well endure the physical strain of labour, if they could afford to procure the good vegetable food of their betters.

There is amongst all classes, the lowest outcasts expected, the greatest doubt, what is now a deeply rooted idea was originally a merely economical arising out of the exigencies of the people but, in true accordance with Hindu things generally, what first arose as a necessary custom became petrified into a religious law, a law, the wisdom of which it is not difficult to see, and for the breach of which there does not seem in India any necessity. Monier Williams says:

“Happily for the Hindus, the cow which supplies them with their only animal food, milk and butter and the ox which helps to till their ground were declared sacred at an early period. Had it not been so, this useful animal might have been exterminated in times of famine. What is now a superstition had its origin, like some other superstitions, in a wise fore thought.”

The Hindu law-giver, to over-indulgence, and also, perhaps, being personally acquainted with the highly spiced, appetizing dishes of the East is careful to say:

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66 Monier Williams, *Hinduism*, p. 156.
“Excessive eating is prejudicial to health, to fame, and to future bliss in heaven; it is injurious to virtue and odious among men; he must for these reasons, avoid it.”

Upavāsa:

*Upavāsa* i.e. fasting is a social practice that can be taken on certain holy days. Fasting on festivals and other days of religious significance is not new to Indians. We have also observed that on certain occasions like thread ceremony, marriage or death in the family, an Indian shaves (tonsures) his head. This is even done while visiting an important shrine normally in fulfillment of a boon e.g. at the *Tirupati* shrine in Southern India. It may even surprise to see people walking over hot coals, puncturing cheeks, ears and tongue, etc on festive occasions and cults. That could be the origin of such strange practices which are a part of worship.

*Upavāsa* is another name for fasting. *Upa* means near and *vāsa* mean to stay. Hindus believe that it takes people to the proximity of God. On the days of fasting, people do not spend time and energy on cooking the food and related work as the mind is comparatively alert and pure and entertains noble thoughts about God. Also the bodily system gets a break and rest. This does a lot of good to the entire body and particularly the digestive system.

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67 Manu, ii. 57.
69 Ibid.
Food (in Sanskrit, *anna*) plays a very important role in the social and ritual life of the Hindus. Food is mentioned in the early Hindu sacred writings known as the *Vedas*. In the *Taittiriya Upaniṣad* it is written, "Food is life, therefore one should give food; eating is the supreme sacrifice." Hindus have hundreds of traditional health rules, regarding food and the preparation of meals. A traditional Hindu housewife spends a large amount of time cooking. Religious books, such as the *Dharmaśātras*, the ancient "law books" treat food and all that is related to eating extensively. Caste borders were sharpened by the many rules on eating, or rather not eating, together. In *Vedic* times, people ate every edible thing, including beef, but in later times, probably under the influence of Buddhism, meat eating became a taboo, as was the killing of animals, either for food or for a sacrifice. One could argue that many of these food taboos were instigated by climatic conditions and by ideas about hygiene. Different groups and castes developed their own food rules, although there were regional differences. The *Vaiśṇava* community classifies food according to the three qualities (*guna*) of the *Sāmkhya* philosophy: *sattva* food, which is pure; *rajas* food, which is energetic or exciting; and *tamas* food, which is impure. Only *sattva* food is allowed, which means no meat and fish, onions, garlic, specific fruits, and sharp spices.\(^{70}\)

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\(^{70}\) Ramanarayanan, S., *Hindu Customs*, p.16.
Fasting in Hinduism indicates the denial of the physical needs of the body for the sake of spiritual gains. According to the scriptures, fasting helps to create an attunement with the Absolute by establishing a harmonious relationship between the body and the soul. This is thought to be imperative for the well-being of a human being as it nourishes both his/her physical and spiritual demands.

Fasting in the sense of not eating for a specific time (upavāsa), or abstaining from specific substances during certain periods, is a well-established part of all Hindu spiritual practices. In the early times it was related to tapas, ascetic practices, and it is still a major aspect of the religious practices of many of the sādhus or "holy men" in India. Also, many ordinary Indians fast on specific days during the year, either by taking no food at all or by restricting their diet. For instance, Vaiṣṇavas fast on the eleventh day of each half of the lunar month (ekādaśī), when they are only allowed to eat what has grown below the ground, along with dairy products. Before and during rituals, like sacrifices, but also before going on a pilgrimage, fasting and abstinence from certain food items are part of the practice of Hindus.

Hindus believe that it is not easy to unceasingly pursue the path of spirituality in one's daily life. We are harangued by a lot of considerations, and worldly indulgences do not allow us to concentrate on spiritual attainment. Therefore a worshipper must strive to impose
restrains on him/her to get his mind focused. And one form of restraint is fasting. While appealing to people to fast and pray, Gandhi points out:

“This is a hoary institution. A genuine fast cleanses body, mind and soul. It crucifies the flesh and to that extent sets the soul free. A sincere prayer can work wonders. It is an intense longing of the soul for its even greater purity. Purity thus gained when it is utilized for a noble purpose becomes a prayer.”  

According to Ramakrishna Rao:

The earliest reported Dhārmic or purificatory fasting was by Ranti Deva, the ancestor of Lord Rama, who fasted for 48 days in a spirit of atonement. His sole life principle was giving relief to the suffering people (artināssanam). Swamy Ayyappa Devotees follow some austerities for 40 days. They carry rice, ghee and coconuts on their heads and tread long distances. All such practices have to be directed towards purposeful public service apart from the spiritual merit one may acquire in the process.  

Fasting is not only a part of worship, but a great instrument for self-discipline too. It is a training of the mind and the body to endure and harden up against all hardships, to persevere under difficulties and not give up. According to Hindu philosophy, food means gratification of the senses and to starve the senses is to elevate them to contemplation.  

Penance itself is of two types. Penance which is undertaken before the boon is fulfilled and that which is undertaken after its fulfillment. Penance before a boon is fulfilled is in the nature of a price

paid in advance for something to be received in the future. Penance after fulfillment of a boon asked for an undertaken as a price for something already received.

But in both forms the penance has the nature of a price arising out of a mutual obligation between the devotee and his deity. There is no penance in which the devotee does not seek a boon or a favour and there is no boon that can be had without penance or offerings. These two elements are inseparable in worship. Worship and prayer become purposeless if the aspect of a boon or favour is removed from it. While praying we seek something. This something could be a definite object or it may be mental peace and protection from calamities.

A prayer, without the asking of a favour does not exist. Hence, normally religious activities cannot be considered to have been undertaken with a selfless motive. A conditional exception can be made about hermits and ascetics (sanyāsis) who roam all over or retire to forests or the snow clad Himalayas in search of peace of mind or universal truth. But the fact remains that they also are seeking something and so strictly speaking their activities cannot be termed as self-renouncing.

_Bhakti_ and _Bhikṣa_ are the two essential elements of worship. While _Bhakti_ i.e. invocation is the method of prayer, _Bhikṣa_ i.e. the asking for a boon is the motive behind prayer. Incidentally the Sanskrit word for God is Īśvara, which could be an amalgam of the two words
'iśa' and 'vara'. Iśa means to wish for something and vara means a boon or gift. Hence it may not be accidental that the name for God means to 'wish for a boon'.73

The self and individual oriented nature of any prayer is perceivable in our act of praying. Prayer is normally a link between an individual and the supreme. What an individual asks during a prayer is his or her private affair which is normally not shared with others. Two or more individuals do not pray collectively unless they are meant for a common objective e.g. soldiers praying for victory in war, business partners praying for prosperity of their firm, etc.

A point may be raised about the public prayers during which participants pray for world peace, relief for victims of flood or famines. It can be said that such prayers are for others and not for ourselves, thus the motive is charity. It is true that such prayers have a charitable and selfless character but even here we pray as humans for other humans. We are selfless individually but are not so collectively as the motive for prayer remains that of asking something from the supreme, which we expect it to grant us.

The essence to self motive in worship is visibly demonstrated in our idea of looking upon a particular shrine or deity as more alive to the prayers of devotees (Jagrut Deva) as compared to other shrines or

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deities. This is further demonstrated by our flocking to the shrine of such a Deity to pray for the granting of our innumerable boons.

Hindu *Vrata* and fasting:

The Sanskrit word ‘*vrata*’ denotes ‘religious vow’. It is one of the most widely used words in the Hindu religious and ritualistic literature. Derived from the verbal root ‘*vrni*’ (‘to choose’), it signifies a set of rules and discipline. Hence ‘*Vrata*’ means performance of any ritual voluntarily over a particular period of time. The purpose is to propitiate a deity and secure from it what the *vratī*, the performer wants. This whole process, however, should be undertaken with a *sankalpa* or religious resolve, on an auspicious day.\(^74\)

According to Hindu scriptures, *vratā* assists the person doing the *vrata* to achieve and fulfill his desires as performing *vratas* are supposed to bring the divine grace and blessing. Sometimes, close relatives or family *purohito* may be entrusted with the obligation of performing the *vratā* on behalf of another person. The object of performing *vratā* is as varied as the human desire, and may include gaining back lost health and wealth, begetting offspring, divine help and assistance during difficult period in one’s life. In ancient India, *vratā* played a significant role in the life of individuals, and it continues to be practiced in modern times as well by a number of Hindus.

\(^{74}\) Sharma, V.S., *Hindu Vrata*, p. 3.
All kinds of vows of fasting and asceticism are practiced on the occasion of diverse religious festivals celebrated during the course of the year. These vows can be performed on the occasion of the Hindu rites, which are related to specific stages in life; such as birth, name-giving, first eating of solid food, puberty, the beginning of Vedic studies, marriage, and cremation. Among these, *vratas* are incredibly a striking part of the Hindu religion. Even today, millions of Hindus abide by the rituals and implement all kinds of *vratas*.

In Hinduism, the term *vrata* has been widely known since the early Vedic Period. In the *Rg-veda*, one of the oldest classical texts in Hinduism, the word *vrata* occurs just over two hundred times alone or in combination with other words. This implies that the term itself, effectively, is at least three thousand years old. Furthermore, the word *vrata* is also referred to in other respected groups of texts such as the *Samhitās, Brāhmaṇas, Upaniṣads* and *Sūtras*. The term *vrata* has been mentioned in various literatures for several centuries until today and many still do not understand the true implication of *vrata*.

*Vrata* is viewed uniquely by the distinct castes and regions in the diverse parts of India. Pearson explains that:

“...the concept of *vrata* in the *Rg-veda* is closely connected with the larger metaphysical concept of the cosmic order, righteousness in the Hindu tradition, and with the governed and governing activity of the gods”.

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75 Kane, P.V., *History of Dharmasastra*, p.5.
76 Pearson, Anne., *Ritual fasts in theReligious Llives of Hindu Women*, p. 44.
Vratas throughout the Hindu tradition is contemplated as part of dharma (righteousness) for each individual, placing each of the gods to their highest level. Moreover vrata as a rite that is performed on a regular basis to achieve particular objectives, following respective rules that have been transmitted from one generation to the next. Vratas have been an important feature of Hindu religious life for a long while.

Vrata or spiritual vow has three main branches:

1. Nitya vrata (A vow which is Permanent):

   The first one is called nitya, which means permanent or always. Persons undertaking this type of vow are usually seeking the grace and blessing of a particular divinity toward a particular wish or desire (such as a good job, success at exams or business, or a good marriage). Hindus sometimes abstain from certain foods permanently. Or, they fast completely during one day of the week or month.

2. Naimittika vrata (A vow occasioned by a cause):

   The second form of vrata is called naimittika, which means occasioned by some particular cause. It pertains to people who experience remorse or repentance in connection with a sin they have committed. They practice a vow in order to be relieved from the karmic consequences of their sin.
3. *Kāmya vrata* (A vow for what one desires):

The third type of vow is called *kāmya vrata*, which means a vow for what one desires. This form of vow is performed in order to achieve property, popularity, wealth, or health. An example of this kind of vow is called *somavrata*, which involves complete abstention from food on Mondays.\(^7\)

Vows follow many diverse patterns, depending on which deity is beseeched for blessing, the nature of the objective, or the wish that the devotee wants to see fulfilled. Such vows can require not eating, eating less, eating only certain substances, or avoiding certain substances altogether. The choice of the days on which or the periods during which the vow is performed is regulated by the ritual calendar.

The days of the week are ruled by the planetary deities and are also indirectly related to the main deities of Hinduism. People may choose to fast, or abstain from certain substances like meat or fish, or also from onions and garlic, on the day dedicated to the deity they are addressing with their vow. Sunday, *Ravīvāra*, is ruled by *Sūrya*, the sun, and is dedicated to the achievement of victory, as in the case of disputes and court cases, but also when starting Vedic studies or a journey. Monday, *Somavāra*, is dedicated to Candra, the moon, and to *Śiva*. Fasting on Monday is directed to all general spiritual purposes.

\(^7\) Narayanan, Ch. V., *The Hindu Religious Vows*, p.15.
Tuesday, *Mangalavāra*, is dedicated to Mars, and *Kārttikeya*, Śiva’s son and the god of war. Fasting on Tuesday is directed toward victory, childbirth, and good health. Wednesday, *Budhavāra*, belongs to Mercury. It is said that fasting on this day has twice the value of other days. It is mostly dedicated toward education and success in business. Thursday, *Brhaspativāra*, is dedicated to Jupiter, ruler over education and scholarship. Friday, *Śiukravāra*, is ruled by Venus. Fasting on this day is dedicated to prosperity, marriage, and a harmonious family life. Saturday, *Śianivāra*, is ruled by Śiāni or Saturn. Fasting on Saturday will give the blessing of Saturn and longevity.\(^{79}\)

Another aspect that is important to the ritual calendar is the phases of the moon. One pattern of fasting and abstinence, which relates to the phases of the moon, starts on new moon day, when the practitioner eats fourteen hands full of food. Then every next day one eats one handful less, until on the day of the full moon one eats nothing at all. During the waning moon one eats again one handful more each day, until the vow is completed on the next new moon day, when again fourteen hands full of food are eaten.

Generally, all kinds of vows of fasting and abstinence are practiced on the occasion of many religious festivals celebrated during the course of the year, and also on the occasion of the Hindu rites,

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which are related to specific stages in life, such as birth, name-giving, first eating of solid food, puberty, the beginning of Vedic studies, marriage, and cremation.

On the other hand, certain foods are especially dedicated to certain deities. Such foods are regularly prepared at home and offered to the deity as part of certain festivals or during home worship, after which they are enjoyed by those present, and often also sent to relatives and friends. These special foods are also prepared and offered as part of the daily temple worship. After being offered to the deity, they are distributed as *prasāda* or sanctified food among the worshipers and visitors. Examples of such special food are rice prepared with black pepper and cumin fried in clarified butter or ghee, which is dedicated to Śiva; *laddu* or sweet balls for Kṛṣṇa and Gaṇeśa; or rice prepared with tamarind, which is specially offered to Viṣṇu. A person can also make a vow in connection with a certain deity to eat only the deity's special food for a period of time.  

Some examples of this kind of *vrata* include twenty-one days of drinking only milk, or eating only the leaves of the bilva and banyan trees, after dipping them in water, a vow dedicated to Śiva. A fasting vow that is dedicated to Ganeśa is practiced from the day after the new moon in the month of *Kārtika* (October-November), through the sixth day

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of the waxing moon in the month of Mārgaśīrṣa (November-December), which means complete fasting for three weeks. Those who follow this vow are given a yellow thread bound around their wrist, a rakṣabandha, worn on the right wrist for men and on the left for women. On the concluding day they give a donation of money to a priest as well as food, and then they eat again. A vow for the goddess Devī involves complete fasting on the Friday in the month of Caitra (March-April). During the day the practitioner meditates on the goddess. The person concludes by offering jagāri, which is raw sugar from sugarcane. After this worship one eats again. A vow dedicated to Viṣṇu is called Vaikuntha caturdaśī and involves complete fasting on the fourteenth day of the waxing and waning moon.⁸¹

The control of the physical body as well as of emotions and the mind, which may lead eventually to the ultimate goal of unconditioned consciousness or liberation from the cycle of rebirth, in union with the transcendent (either considered personal or impersonal). According to V.S. Sharma:

“In the context of Hinduism and Hindu mythology, the term vrata denotes a religious practice to carry out certain obligations with a view to achieve divine blessing for fulfillment of one or more than one desire. Etymologically, vrata, a Sanskrit word (and also used in several

⁸¹ Sharma, V.S., Hindu Vrata, p. 10.
Indo-European languages), means to vow or to promise.\textsuperscript{82}

A \textit{vrata} may consist of one or more of several actions. Such actions may include complete or partial fasting on certain specific days; a pilgrimage (\textit{thirtha}) to a particular place or more than one place; a visit and \textit{darśan} and \textit{puja} at a particular temple or more than one temple; recitation of mantras and prayers; performing \textit{puja} and \textit{havens}.

According to Hindu scriptures, \textit{vrata} assists the person doing the \textit{vrata} to achieve and fulfill his desires as performing \textit{vratas} are supposed to bring the divine grace and blessing. Sometimes, close relatives or family \textit{purohits} (\textit{Brahmin pundits}) may be entrusted with the obligation of performing the \textit{vrata} on behalf of another person. The object of performing \textit{vrata} is as varied as the human desire, and may include gaining back lost health and wealth, begetting offspring, divine help and assistance during difficult period in one’s life. In Ancient India, \textit{vrata} played a significant role in the life of individuals, and it continues to be practiced in modern times as well by a number of Hindus. Pearson says:

“Some \textit{Vratas} seem to be related to individual status and primary roles—so that one god’s \textit{Vrata} may be quite different from another’s, or the \textit{Vrata} of a male cowherd different from that of a female teacher.”\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{82} Sharma, V.S., \textit{Hindu Vrata}, p. 2.
Vratas are also undertaken to venerate the birth of a deity; for example, Janmāṣṭami (the birth of Lord Kṛṣṇa), which is held yearly. Furthermore, vratas may also be performed on a certain day of the week for the deity associated with that day which may serve a specific purpose. In India some of the most common such vratas include: Monday Vratas sacred to Lord Śiva and Friday’s Santoṣi Mā Vrata conducted for making wishes come true. In Hinduism, the days of the week are ruled by the planetary deities and are also indirectly related to the main deities of Hinduism.84 Fellow devotees may choose to fast, or also abstain from certain substances like fish, meat, or even onion and garlic on the day dedicated to the deity they are addressing with their vow. For example, Somavāra (Monday) is dedicated to Candra (the moon) and to Lord Śiva. Fasting on Monday is directed to all general spiritual purposes. On this day, when one performs vrata, the Somavāra Vrata Katha (story) is also heard or narrated. As part of the ritual, milk and honey may be poured to the linga (embodiment of Śiva). Also meat, onion, and garlic are avoided for consumption on this day.85

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85 Subramuniyaswami, Satguru Sivaya Living with Siva: Hinduism’s Contemporary Culture. P.111.