

**CHAPTER - I**  
**Introduction**

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### Introduction

The object of the doctoral thesis is to analyse some of the foundational concepts of Indian ethics, in their evolution, with a special reference to the *Manu Smṛti*, *Jaimini Sūtras* and *Bhagavad-gīta*. Before further explanation of the object, it is incumbent on us to counter an important view which cuts at the root of our objective. It is concerning the very possibility of Indian ethics. Our object i.e., to examine the foundations of Indian ethics presupposes that there is something ostensibly called Indian ethics. However, there are some western scholars who seriously doubt whether there is anything worth named 'ethics' in Indian thought. According to them, there is a conspicuous absence of systematic ethical theory in Indian philosophy. They claim that Indian thought itself is non-moral in the sense that its essential features are not congenial to the development of a proper ethical system. This claim is not altogether groundless. However, on a closer examination, we find that the claim is infested with a considerable degree of astigmatism concerning the nature of Indian philosophy.

The so called ethical lacuna is often attributed to the very nature of Indian modes of thinking. Critics of Indian thought claim that Indian speculations are non-moral, and sometimes anti-moral, in character. To quote a few, professor A.B.Keith observes that "... it is beyond possibility of doubt in India from the first philosophy is intellectual, not moral, in interest and outlook".<sup>1</sup> Karl Potter says that "... for better or worse, the ultimate value recognized by classical Hinduism in its most sophisticated sources is not morality but freedom, not rational self-control in the interests of the community's welfare but complete control over one's own environment...." <sup>2</sup> According to Max Weber, "the social theory of Hinduism, however, furnished no principles for ethical Universalism which

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<sup>1</sup>The Religion and philosophy of the Vēda and *Upaniṣads* P.434

<sup>2</sup>The Presuppositions of India's Philosophies, P.3.

would raise general demands for life in the world".<sup>3</sup> The above views of the celebrated western scholars pertain to the general features of Indian thought which, according to them, defy the possibility of systematic ethics.

Following the Indian philosophical tradition, let us take up the case of the *Pūrvapakṣin* (the opponent) first. Indian ethics is impossible because Indian thought in general is extremely spiritualistic. *Mokṣa* or absolute liberation, the ultimate ideal in all Indian systems, is a spiritualistic ideal which seeks freedom from the world. It suggests not only withdrawal from the world but also denies substantial reality to the world. Hence, Indian thought in general is world-denying. Further, human life is viewed as a suffering and this view leads to a pessimistic attitude towards the material world. In India the place of morality is occupied by ritualism or at least Indian moral practices are thoroughly ritualistic.

Further, reason as such is denied a place in ethical inquiries. The law-books which decisively moulded the Indian moral conscience refuse to accept reason as a source of morality. The Vēdas are accepted by all the systems as manuals for ethical conduct from which the law-books derive their authority. Again, the morality is extremely individualistic and Indian philosophy hardly recognizes Morality as a social value. *Mokṣa* is an individualistic ideal which does not suggest any social appeal. There are no universal principles of morality with wider application except the individualistic morality with a limited field of moral exertion. Lastly, morality is not viewed as independent of religion and metaphysics and no Indian thinker has attempted to assert his moral ideas independent of his metaphysics or religion. Hence, ethics has not acquired an independent character. The *Pūrvapakṣin* argues that the above mentioned grounds are more than enough to show that there cannot be Indian ethics in the real sense of the word.

On the face of it, the above argument brings out some of the important features of

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<sup>3</sup>The Religion of India P. 147

Indian thought, and these features seem to resist the development of systematic ethics. However, the argument is unwarranted **for** it involves extreme generalization of Indian philosophy and thus neglects its rich variety and diversity. The reasons adduced by the *Pūrvapakṣin* do not apply to all the systems of Indian thought, but each criticism applies to a specific system or a limited number **of** systems. For example, extreme spiritualism and denial of the material world cannot be shown as the general characteristic of Indian philosophy, because majority of Indian systems are in fact materialistic or realistic.

Except Advaita Vedanta and Yogachara Buddhism, all the Indian philosophical schools accept reality of the material world. Carvaka theory of material elements (*Bhūtavāda*), Samkhya theory of primordial matter (*Pradhānavāda*), atomism (*Anuvāda*) of Nyaya, Jaina theory of material substance (*Pudgala* or *A jiva*) are some of the most impressive alternatives for explaining the physical world. Vaisesikas dedicate themselves chiefly to explaining the physical manifestations in terms of material categories (*Viśēṣa*). The orthodox Mimamsakas ardently argue for the reality of the material world and Kumarila Bhatta advances some of the strongest anti-idealistic arguments in his *Slokavarttika*. Sautrantika Buddhists expressly admit the reality of the world. Even the Advaitins cannot right away make the so palpable empirical reality wither away. So, they ascribe some pragmatic truth (*Vydvahdrikasatya*) to it. How consistent the theory of two realities i.e., *Pdramdrthika* and *Vyavaharika* is another issue.

It is true that all the Indian systems except Carvaka and Buddhism accept the reality of soul or spirit. But a simple acceptance of soul does not make them thorough-going idealists. So, the attribution of extreme idealism as a general character to the Indian thought as such involves the fallacies of over simplification and unwarranted generalization.

Again, Advaita Vedanta, Samkhya and Buddhism portray human life as a fact of suffering. The pessimism is more than apparent. However, this pessimism is not common to all the systems. Indian philosophy in general does not undermine the value of worldly

life. Human life is nowhere said to be an evil in itself. Rather, it is man and man alone can strive for better values and can attain freedom. Even the so-called pessimistic schools are not altogether pessimistic, as liberation from suffering is always considered as teleologically certain and as potentially achievable. Again, the apparent pessimism did not deny ethical possibilities, but emphasized on them as necessary preconditions for freedom.

It is Buddhism which preached that liberation is not individual but collective. Through its concept of *Mahdkaruna* or universal compassion, it showed that liberation of the other people as a necessary condition for one's own freedom. Again, Advaita Vedanta, irrespective of its mysticism and orthodoxy, aims at liberation of all human beings and spread the message of freedom throughout the country. This is vouched by the fact that even the people in remote parts of the country are aware of *Mokṣa* as the final liberation. To speak more positively, Buddhism and Advaita constructively insist on the evil of excessive indulgence in material pleasures. In fact this is a positive ground for moral consciousness because strict hedonism or clinging on to worldly pleasures mars or limits the moral vision of an individual. Moral vision has to be expanded beyond the material interests, and only such a vision can be truly human.

Again the ritualistic morality seems to be an impediment in the development of theoretical ethics independent of religion. The ritualism bears a strong mark of religious fervour and sometimes is devoid of any moral justification. This is true to an extent as most of the moral activity is intricately interwoven into collective religious practices. But if we pay a little more attention to go into the depths of ritualism, we find that it is not totally devoid of ethical prudence or rationale. The problem with most of the western scholars is that they limit themselves to a superficial understanding of the ritual, and therefore regard as barren activity meant to serve the interests of priestly class and continuation of orthodoxy. It is true that priestly class plays an important role

in promulgation of ritualism and is in turn materially benefitted. This fact cannot be denied. However, this is not the end of the tunnel. An unprejudiced philosopher has a responsibility to dig into the sub layers of the crest of ritualism in order to estimate their moral worth. This is not to say that orthodoxy and ritualism are absolutely impeccable. The suggestion is only that they should not be disposed off as barren, without a proper examination.

As to the theism and its influence on the Indian way of ethical cognition, we cannot claim that theism had an overwhelming support from all systems. Most of the systems are non-theistic. Carvaka, Samkhya, Mimamsa, original Nyaya-Visesika, Buddhistic philosophy (contrary to the later religion) are certainly non-theistic. Theism was smacked into Nyaya mainly for non-ethical reasons. The primary objective in admitting the idea of god by the later Naiyayikas was to explain the primordeal conjunction of atoms. The ethical views of Nyaya are least affected by this epigonal god in the system. Again, one can question - what is wrong with religion as far as the moral worth of a principle is concerned? A moral idea cannot be rejected outright because of its religious origin or justification. What one has to find out, on the other hand, is whether there is any rationale or ethical character in a precept in question beyond its reference to the authority of god.

This brings us to an important problem of the place of reason in ethical inquiry. Ethics as a branch of philosophy is certainly a rational discipline and it differs from sophistry precisely in its being so. Our *Pūrvapakṣin* may argue that Indian moral principles are more or less authoritarian in as much as they fall back on the Vēda or on idea of god justification. He often shows the negative attitude of Indian law givers towards reason as a proof for his argument. He further shows how sabda or testimony, one of the valid sources of knowledge (pramana), has come to mean the *Vēda* exclusively.

This argument of the *Pūrvapakṣin* has real significance concerning the evolution

of Indian philosophy in general and ethics in particular. It is true, Manu's denial of reason as a source of morality had far-reaching impact or influence on the intellectual atmosphere in India. Manu's censure on application of reason to the Vēda or critical analysis of its doctrines curbed free thinking to a great extent. No philosopher, except Carvakas, had ever attempted to condemn the vedic doctrines and the Carvakas were treated as vulgar hedonists. Manu's distinction between astika. and nastika in terms of reverence for the *Vēda*, made the so called orthodox systems to express their veneration for the *Vēda*, even though it is not necessary for the coherence of their systems. Due to their superficial acceptance of the *Vēda*, Nyaya, Visesika and Samkhya are considered as orthodox systems even though they oppose some of the prominent vedic doctrines. Their philosophy is hardly affected even if they give up acceptance of the *Vēda* as a *pramaṇa*. The acceptance of the Veda by some philosophical schools was, as Debi Prasad Chattopadhyaya puts it, a technique of '*evading censure*'.

On the other hand, those Indian systems were not really supporters of the vedic authority. Samkhya explicitly states that vedic rituals are fruitless concerning the ultimate emancipation. Nyaya ascribes the validity of the *Veda* to the trustworthy character of its authors and thus denies its absolute authority. Buddhism and Jainism openly criticise the vedic orthodoxy and oppose its doctrines. Even Advaita, if not explicitly, treats the vedic rituals as irrelevant to the ultimate goal of liberation. The rituals are assigned a nominal value in as much as they are said to be serving the purpose of preparatory purification of mind to attain liberation. The real emancipation comes only through knowledge of the soul. Still Advaita half heartedly supports the vedic rituals only for the reason that the *Upaniṣads* are a part of the Veda which enjoins those rituals.

Again, we find no system of Indian philosophy denying the validity of reason. Reason is said to be the light which guides the human activity as a whole. Except Carvakas, who claim that reason is included in perception, all other systems accept reason as a

distinct mode of cognition and accord to it its deserved place in their epistemologies. Even Advaita accepts it as an independent *pramāṇa* but says that the knowledge of the soul is not available to it. No system blindly accepts the vedic authority as given. Even Mimamsakas, whose fundamental interest was to establish absolute authority of the *Veda* and through it the ritual practice, try to do so on rational grounds. Kumarila Bhatta, one of the giants among Indian philosophers, puts forward astonishingly rational arguments in support of his thesis. Further, no system presupposes the Vedic authority in its treatment of moral reality. However, all the Indian systems including the heterodox systems like Buddhism and Jainism are thoroughly influenced by the vedic tradition. Getting influenced by a tradition does not make a system subservient to the tradition. We cannot say that Berkley is not a philosopher because his thought was thoroughly influenced by Christianity.

The above description of deep commitment of Indian systems to reason or inference and their nominal acceptance of the vedic authoritarianism proves contrary to the argument that Indian ethics is not rational. Indian systems, which are rational, defend their ethical thought in the light of their epistemological commitment to reason and other *pramāṇas* rather than on the basis of external authority.

Even Manu, despite his explicit commitment to the authority of the *Veda*, attempts to put his legal maxims on a rational footing. He tries to explain the efficacy of the vedic *yajña* in terms of its natural consequences rather than simply imposing it as given by the *Veda*. Manu arranges his legal precepts within a comprehensive perspective or framework which is amazingly coherent. He presents his code with a proper metaphysical and epistemological frame work. Though he accepts idealism, he does not deny the reality of the world in favour of it. We shall see more of this in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

It may not be out of place here to say a few words concerning rationality in general and its place in ethics in particular. Most of the scholars, whenever they analyse a system,

are prone to pass a quick judgement concerning **its** rationality. In most of the cases the idea of rationality, which they apply as a paradigm to the system in hand, is mostly a product of the modern scientific world-view. They think of rationality as a standard with which we can measure and judge whether a system is valid or not. If it falls short of the standard, it is superstitious and if it comes near to our standard, it is acceptable. Therefore when we look at any system, especially an ancient one, with this attitude, we make a fundamental mistake. We forget that rationality is a social product and that it depends for its validity on the cultural backdrop in which we operate. Again, reason is not a free floating phenomenon but relative to a system. It is not absolutely system-free so that we can have a universal standard of rationality. It is conditioned by the social epoch. This position should not be mistaken as denying any foundal value for reason. The point intended, however, is that a system should not be out rightly rejected, by branding it irrational, without judging its intrinsic merit in terms of its own coherence.

Coming to Indian ethics we find that the *smṛti* literature and the *Mīmāṃsā Sūtras* are made victims of such indiscriminate use of modern paradigm of rationality. Their study is neglected even by the Indian scholars as irrelevant orthodox literature. So is also the case with *Bhagavad-gīta*. Most of the modern works on Indian ethics hardly allocate a few pages to these texts. Thus modern scholarship makes us feel that *smṛti* literature and orthodox systems like Mimamsa are philosophically irrelevant.

Now, going back to the problem of the possibility of Indian ethics, our *Pūrvapakṣin* blames that Indian philosophers indulge excessively in metaphysical speculations that they did not care to develop systematic ethical theories. Here, we have to accept our friend that as far as independent systematic ethical theories are concerned we have a lacuna. At the same time we have to remind him that the whole Indian philosophy is concerned with the problem of life and freedom. The fundamental objective of philosophical inquiry in India was not exclusively abstract theoretisation but to find out how

best human life can be lived.

Buddha's silence over abstract metaphysical questions is the prime example of the concern of Indian thinkers for problem of life and freedom rather than for intellectual gratification. All the Indian systems which indulge in theoretical endeavours recognize the real problems of life as the object of their philosophical activity. Precisely for this reason, the idea of liberation, with its different appellations, looms large in all the systems.

For Indian philosophers problem of life is not a material problem but a spiritual one. Ancient India, with its rich natural and human resources, was not troubled by material living and therefore could afford a dedicated intelligentsia which could speculate on the deeper problems of life. Indians developed Mathematics, Astronomy, Temple Architecture, Nature Cure Medicine to name a few positive sciences. The people of India are more concerned about their religious and spiritual life through enrichment of culture and morality. They prefer to lead a moral life by limiting their desires than for gratifying their desires by exploiting or mending the ways of Nature.

Since the whole intellectual activity in India is aimed at problem of worthy human life, it is essentially ethical. Thus we often find moral concepts are entangled with metaphysical and epistemological concerns of a system. As the intellectual enterprise itself is essentially ethical, Indian thinkers hardly felt any need for separate or distinct ethical theories. For an ancient thinker this could be as funny as asking for a tumbler full of water when we are standing in a lake. So, independence of ethics is nothing short of a misnomer in Indian intellectual activity which itself is essentially ethical. Want of the so called systematisation thus cannot be shown as impossibility of ethics.

If our opponent means by ethics a linguistic analysis of the words 'good', 'bad' 'right' etc., we certainly do not have Indian ethics in this sense. The classical systems of Indian philosophy are not concerned with superfluous semantic analysis of words but are concerned more with practical purpose of ethical ideas. Indian philosophy has developed

thories of language, it was not indulged in mere verbal trifles. On the other hand, it is concerned more with practical insights into moral conduct. This is the strength of Indian ethics in contrast to the western tradition which stops at the level of theoretical explanation of concepts. In Indian tradition, a philosopher is expected to guide the people with his moral insights. The society looks at sages and philosophers not for theoretical excellence but for practical moral guidance.

Even the so called mystical idea of liberation, whether it is called *Mokṣa*, *Nirvāṇa*, *Kaivalya* or *Apavarga*, has a moral significance for the people. We find all the systems of Indian philosophy enunciate their own theories of liberation in their peculiar ways, but all of them recognize the ethical aspect of it. Indian classical systems are unanimous in their recognition of good conduct as the necessary condition for liberation. There is no short cut to human freedom except through proper moral exertion and observance of moral virtues like compassion, non-violence, equality etc.

It is true that there are certain theoretical lapses in adopting liberation as the *sum-mum bonum* by the Indian systems. Some of the Indian systems risk theoretical inconsistency in adopting the idea of final liberation. But they have not given it up for the sake of theoretical rigour. The reason for this is the fact that the urge behind the idea of liberation is ethical rather than theoretical.

In the light of the above discussion, it is clear that the arguments of those who undermine Indian ethics for reasons of systematization etc. are loosely grounded, if not groundless. The Indian moral vision is so comprehensive that a grand encompassing system of ethics is embedded in it for modern scholarship to work on. However, except a few distinguished scholars, most of the writers on Indian ethics are content with the description of moral principles and categorising them. The object of the present work, however, is not to enumerate the moral principles but to look into the fundamental considerations

which justify those principles. The thesis is not concerned with the description of morality but with finding out the ethical foundations of the moral vision. It therefore brings into relief the social and cultural precedents which reflect the moral precepts. It thus involves a study of the fundamental ethical concepts in their origin and development.

In this context, two questions arise. The first, what is meant by foundations of Indian ethics? Then, why special reference to the *Manusmṛti*, *Mīmāṃsā Sūtras* and *Bhagavad-gīta*? In answering these questions, an attempt is made to further elucidate the theme of the work.

As to the first question, by 'foundations' we mean the fundamental considerations, philosophical, religious, economic or simply prudential, which have gone into the origin of the dominant ethical concepts and influenced their development. In this sense, the thesis is partially a historical study of Indian ethics. A proper historical understanding of ethical concepts is necessary for an effective systematisation of Indian ethics. Hence, this study may pave way for a systematic understanding of Indian ethics.

One major problem with this objective is to identify the fundamental ethical concepts common to the Indian philosophical systems. Given the rich variety of ethical ideas available and the widely differed treatment of those ideas, it is really difficult to identify the common features of Indian ethics among the classical systems. However, viewed from the seminal importance of certain ideas in all the systems, irrespective of their differences in treatment, we can distinguish a few ethical motifs as the nucleus of the Indian ethical vision. A brief note on these motifs is presented below.

Any study on Indian ethics should start with the *Rg-vēdic* concept of *ṛta*, the vedic notion of 'order', both cosmic and moral. The study of *ṛta* is indispensable for it is in this concept we find the earliest traces of Indian ethical thought. Viewed from the comprehensive character of this concept, probably *ṛta* is the most wholistic ethical paradigm which influenced the Indian ethical thinking. In the first chapter, a detailed discussion

is undertaken dealing with the antiquity of *ṛta*, its relation to vedic gods and *yajña*. the chief moral features of the vedic society in the light, of *ṛta* and finally the conditions which caused withering away of the grand ethical order entailed by *ṛta*. In the final chapter, an account of the relevance of antient *ṛta* to the modern problem of ecological conservation is given.

The chapter on *Dharma* briefly records the ethical transition from *ṛta* to *Dharma*. The origin of Monotheism, the doctrine of the theory of human action (*karma*) and the speculations on the nature of soul which moulded the concept of *Dharma* in its history are dealt with. It is also shown how these concepts are structurally interdependent. The notion of *Dharma* which is common to both orthodox and heterodox systems is the chief general feature of Indian ethics. Despite the differed treatment in various schools, the idea of *Dharma* constitutes the soul of Indian ethics. It is such a comprehensive or all absorbing ethical concept that it includes even *Mokṣa* or liberation in its fold in the sense that it is man's duty to strive for liberation. It is the chief among human pursuits (*puruṣārtha*).

What is really surprising is to see that the idea of metempsychosis enters all the philosophical systems, both orthodox and heterodox, without distinction. The theory of transmigration is adopted by even Buddhism which does not accept the existence of soul as a distinct reality. The supernaturalism involved in transmigration is invariably connected with the concepts of bondage and liberation which are again common to all the systems. Though Indian schools of thought uncompromisingly differ as to the nature of bondage and liberation, they are unanimous in realising the study of those two as an important theme of intellectual activity. There are only two exceptions to this. The Carvakkas and Mimamsakas. The Carvakas never recognise liberation as a human end while the Mimamsakas emphasize more on *Dharma* as religious duty and hardly care for *Mokṣa*, though they do not deny it.

Given these general features or central concepts of Indian ethics, an attempt is made to see what are the considerations which lead to these concepts and how the contemporary social conditions influenced their conception. An allusion to the possible social factors is made wherever there is such an occasion but the analysis of the ethical concepts is not carried out solely in terms of those conditions. It is, in fact, not possible always to do so. For we cannot trace one to one correspondence between social facts and moral ideas. So, within the reasonable limits, an attempt is made to take into account the historical social reality in relation to the ethical speculations.

Now, as to the special reference to the three ancient texts, there are sound reasons in selecting the three texts for a detailed study. *Dharma*, the nucleus of Indian ethics is a multifaceted concept. It has a social aspect, a religious aspect and spiritual aspect. *Dharma* as duty is dealt by Manu in its social realm, in its religious sphere by Jaimini in his *Mīmāṃsā Sūtras* and the *Bhagavad-gīta* shows how *Dharma* is connected with the spiritual end of human life. These three texts together offer us a comprehensive and complete picture of *Dharma*, as the three aspects are mutually complementary to each other. Again, each text by itself is a complete 'system in itself.

There are certain common features among these three texts. First of all, the reality of world which is a basic condition for moral operation : these three texts equally put forth the reality of the physical world in unambiguous terms. The efficacy of human action is the second major foundation for ethics, and the three texts insist on the importance and value of human action in their respective fields. They also commonly accept the theory of transmigration to explain their respective subjects. Further they are the most resourceful texts in terms of their practical ethical purport. It is in these texts that we find a central place for moral action and a direct insistence on practical life than the philosophical systems which go for them in an indirect way. As our object is to understand the central ethical concepts in their origin and development, we have to take recourse to these texts

**primarily** because it is in these texts that we find the fundamental ethical concepts in **their** basic form. Again, it is these texts that throw a focal light on the concepts.

Besides these reasons for preferring these texts, there is another equally important reason. While law-books and *Bhagavad-gīta* are more or less neglected as *smṛti* literature, Mimamsa is denied a proper place in Indian philosophical systems which it deserves. The modern scholars have not evinced much interest on this system because of its obvious connection with vedic rituals. The Mimamsa is generally viewed as nothing more than a quasi-philosophical attempt to account for or justify vedic orthodoxy. This is unwarranted. We should not forget that it is the Mimamsakas who took up *Svataḥprāmāṇyavāda* or theory of inherent validity as a sound alternative for Nyaya epistemology. The anti-theistic arguments of Kumarila Bhatta against God and creation are show pieces of excellent scholarship. The unfortunate disregard for these texts results in losing their valuable contribution to Indian thought in general and ethics in particular. Further, while *Manu Dharma Sastra* represents *smṛti* literature, *Mimamsa Sūtras* represents *darsanas*, the *Gīta* is a part of an *itihāsa*. Thus the thesis incidentally deals with the three categories of literature which enriched the Indian tradition.

The thesis ends with a discussion on how to understand and evaluate the key concepts of Indian philosophy in the light of analysis undertaken in the thesis. Here, an attempt is made to show that Indian ethics has a great scope for further development through creative understanding of our modern problems.