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The Foundations of India Ethics

Right from the Rg-vedic times to the present times, the evolution of Indian ethical values is a continuous process which forms a grand uniform tradition, despite local variations in customs.

Rg-veda is the fountain head of many of the fundamental moral ideas which took theoretical form in the later literature. Rta is one of such foundational concept. It denotes a universal order, both cosmic and moral. Varuna is the chief deity who guards Rta and punishes the transgressers.

Rta and Varuna are the most prominent in the earlier portions of the Rig-veda which depict harmonious communal living of Āryans. The sacrificial rituals, which were primarily aimed at fostering Rta, came to be identified with Rta. As the cosmic and moral order, Rta is identified with Truth. Thus whatever is false is called anrta. Rta is ensured by certain communal values like harmony, comradeship, equality, brotherhood, cooperation and collective living.

With the increasing warfare with oboriginal Dasyus, Indra the war-god comes into limelight. Indra supersedes Varuna and, along with Varuna, Rta goes into oblivion. Inclusion of Dasyus as the fourth Varna into the Aryan society witnessed a radical shift in the Aryan religion, economy and world-view. End of warfare and rise of new social order brought creator gods and sustainer gods into prominence. Puruṣa, Prajāpathi, Brahman etc were projected as creators and sustainers.

In the Brahmana period, priestly class engaged in fabricating detailed and complex rituals. Along with rituals certain moral precepts, principles of social organization, and theosophical speculations were developed. The notion of three debts, the concept
of *Dharma* as religious duty, *Brahman* as the origin of all that is, castes and caste duties were all developed in this period. The *Brahmana* period marks a vital transition from naturalistic religion to theosophical speculation. This intermediary stage witnessed rampant ritualism.

In the *Aranyakas* we find the beginning of theosophical speculations along with some genuinely philosophical questions. These rudimentary speculations find their culmination in the *Upaniṣads*. Theories of *Atman, Brahman*, their identity, *Karma*, transmigration and liberation are some of the most important theories of *Upaniṣads*.

The *Upaniṣadic* theories of *Karma*, transmigration, *Atman* and liberation are the foundational theories which occur in different ways in the Indian schools of thought. These are central to the whole spectrum of Indian ethical thought with varied treatment by the philosophical schools. Thus a proper articulation and development of ethical thought in India owes much to the *Upaniṣads*. Apart from the intellectual exercises, the *Upaniṣads* developed a moral perspective on life. They condemn formal ritualism and insist on knowledge. The *Upaniṣads* crystalized the moral concepts by making them part of their idealist world-view.

The *Sūtra*-period, which can be considered as the most productive period in the history of Indian philosophical literature, made creative use of the fundamental ethical concepts available in the vedic texts. This is the time various philosophical systems arose independent of the vedic influence. Heterodox religions such as Jainism and Buddhism too arose in this period. This period thus witnessed prolific flow of contending theories and views.

The philosophical systems borrowed certain foundational theories like *Karma, Atman*, transmigration etc. and used them in their own ways to suit their metaphysical and epistemological purposes. However, the original meaning and significance of these ethical concepts is not lost but enriched. This is called *Darsana* period in which the
original Sūtra literature is expanded and commented upon by eminent expoents of each system.

The most important contribution is made by Sṛṇṭis and Itihasas in making the original vedic morality and customs popular among Indian masses. They moulded the moral conscience of Indian people by controlling their social and political conduct, and by imbibing the traditional moral ideals deep into their minds.

The Dharma Sastras were comprehensive their character in touching the Indian social, legal political, economic and spiritual life of the people. They claimed their authority in all matters. They derived this authority from that of the vedas.

The social codes gave room for change and variation according to the times. They also accommodated local customs and other traditional variations. However, they are mainly responsible for some of the institutions which had adverse impact on Hindu society throughout the ages. They, however, helped in bringing stability and peaceful order to the society. They played an important role in establishing and administrating great empires.

The medical, astronomical, metallurgical and other scientific treatises, which were developed in the Gupta period, though enhanced scientific temperament, could not sustain it for various reasons. The Hindu society fell a victim to formalism again.

The Muslim invasions on India and establishment of Mughal empire created new history in development of arts, architecture and influenced Hindu ethos too. Both Islam and Hinduism were influenced and benefitted by each other. Religious toleration and co-existence became superior values. But the cloud of ritualism and superstitions was growing big. The earlier humanistic values were slowly occupied by excessive formalism.

This was the time when Sufis and Hindu poet seers tried to inject human values into the Indian social life. In the place of ritualism and pomp, devotion and simplicity were preached. The fellow men are considered as representatives or manifestations of
god. Love and devotion are eulogized. Brotherhood of men and the mercy of god are sought after.

The humanistic values and ethos are revived in the nineteenth century when India was again caught in ritualistic excesses. This marks the Indian Renaissance, father of which is Rājā Ram Mohan Roy.

The eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed traditional degeneration. Formalism, superstitions and cruel practices were having their sway. Social evils like Sati, child marriage, neglect of women were awfully frequent. The general degeneration in the Indian morale due to British rule and loss of identity were reflected in social life.

Though British rule had adverse influence on India in all the spheres, it also had certain accidental benefits. Through British education many of the Indian youth came into contact with the west and the modern western thought. Liberalism, fraternity, equality and freedom were the new ideals which gave a fresh breath to the educated youth of India.

Rājā Rām Mohan Roy was one of those who had advantage of English education and also had strong traditional roots. He reinterpreted the Hindu scriptures and showed that the real spirit of these scriptures does not entail brutal superstitious practices. By this time even British government was also taking interest in Indian social practices and made appropriate laws to curb inhuman practices.

Rājā Rām Mohan Roy established Brahmo Samaj which preached "brotherhood of men and fatherhood of god". His theological monism made him a religious cosmopolitan and resurrected the religious toleration. He fought against idolatry and abandoned all pompous rituals and festivities.

Many of the youth were attracted by Roy and joined Brahmo Samaj. He also influenced two of great personalities in modern Indian history — Vivekananda and
Gândhi.

Rationalising Hindu culture and reading sense into ancient scriptures began with Roy and was continued. Swámi Vivekananda, desciple of Rama Kṛṣṇa Paramahamsa, made Védānta a source of universal religion, equality, and national rejuvenation. He awakened the youth and the nation in general, with his influencing and thought provoking messages.

Tilak carried the torch of nationalism by revoking the grand Indian traditional ethos. Gandhi later took up the mission and brought India freedom. He made “Truth and Non-violence”, the age old Hindu virtues, two powerful weapons in acquiring independence from the British. For the first time in the history of mankind was there a peaceful national revolt of grandscale on the lines of non-violent moral indignation and suffering.

Kālidās Bhattachārya preached ‘Swarāj’in ideas. Aurobindo, who is exposed to both western and Indian thought, revitalised Indian spiritual tradition on rational grounds.

The contemporary Indian life, though influenced by the west, still has not lost its identity. The ancient texts are still viewed with reverence and ancient moral virtues are still having their influence on moral life of the people. Religious tolerance and liberal ideas of freedom, equality and fraternity are finding stronger roots.

As the largest democracy of the world, India has its cultural and ethical roots so strong that Indian moral life has peculiar characteristics of its own. The popular morality and ethical beliefs have their sources in ancient humanistic ethos.

Today, the ancient virtues are still cherished as a part of cultural heritage. Throughout the long history, India sustained its ethical and traditional identity despite occassional relapses.

There are certain fundamental notions which run throughout the history as ‘the
foundations of Indian ethics'. These foundations give Indian ethics an identity of its own. They are common to all the systems of Indian thought and serve as the launching pads for further creative development of theories in the field of ethics.

These foundations are not merely part of intellectual or ethical speculations but form the nucleus of a living tradition. Despite variations in geographical and climatic settings, despite differences in local customs and forms of life, despite changes in material ways of living, the foundational ethical concepts are still meaningful in the lives of Indian people.

The following can be identified, in the light of analysis undertaken in the thesis, as the foundations of Indian Ethics:

Ordered moral universe
Retributive moral action
Eternal moral agent
Transmigratory moral career
Possibility of Emancipation
Authority of the Veda
Immutable moral virtues
Fusion of Ethics and Metaphysics
Religion as a vehicle of change
Secular life.

Indian mind conceived an ordered moral universe in which everything material and non-material has its place. \( \textit{Rta} \) as cosmic and moral order expresses itself through the workings of natural phenomena and the conduct of men. What is really noteworthy here is that there is no dichotomy between 'fact and value' or 'is and ought'. There is only one order which sustains, 'is' and promulgates 'ought'.

The western paradigm of 'fact-value' dichotomy not only deprives all values of
their cognitive content but also deprives facts of their inherent value. This is a double tragedy.

The logical positivist, taking 'is-ought' distinction to its heights, stripped the world of all values and made all values mere matters of taste or arbitrary choice. Values are thus made non-cognitive and of no justification. Hence the ethical world is rendered impossible. Emotivism conceives no ethical world but offers a mere possibility of choice of taste. This impossibility of an ordered ethical universe is due to its astrangement from cognitive world. Thus, the fact-value dichotomy deprives us of an ordered moral world.

On the other hand, this dichotomy deprives us of even the physical world. The theory of value-neutral world made up of atomic facts denies Nature any regard for it. Nature is a mere mechanistic soul-less automation. According to the new creed of scientism, human and social development depends on how effectively we can manipulate the natural laws and exploit it. We achieved tremendous industrial development but at the cost of environmental and ecological balance. The scientistic inductionist world-view which puts man outside Nature as its master, considers Nature as devoid of reason and intelligence. The culmination of this world-view can be seen in the environmental crisis the world is facing today.

Any world-view which undermines the organic relationship between man and Nature and fails to see the meaningful order in Nature is bound to miss the essential ethical significance of the nature. Our relation to the nature is not mechanical nor one of master and slave, but an ethically organic one.

In this context of loss of both moral and physical worlds, Rta is still relevant as an alternative model of man-nature relationship. Man and Nature form part of a greaer order which expresses itself on and through nature in the physical realm and man in the moral realm. Indeed, there are no two separate realms but a unified physically moral or morally physical realm.
The notion of ordered universe finds its later expression in Dharma which replaced Rta. Dharma is a much more sophisticated rational ethical order which included man-action-destiny in its fold. Dharma as the ethical order rationally explains man's condition — past, present and future — in terms of his own actions and character. Theories of Karma and transmigration constitute the ethical nucleus of Dharma. Dharma as the essential quality of a things beings refer to ordered physical realm and as the duty of man or as object of human pursuit has moral ramifications. Dharma is the order of not only material but also social and ethical reality.

Though Indian systems differed as to the nature of action, its mode of fruition and process of transmigration, they accepted Dharma as an inviolable ethical order. Dharma is more comprehensive than Rta in its appeal and covers all the spheres -- social, religious and spiritual — of human life.

What is common to both Rta and Dharma is their autonomy. In the case of Rta, it is not guided by gods, rather it guides them. Rta is not born of gods but gods are born of Rta. The gods are only guardians or functionaries of Rta which is an eternal autonomous order. If we substitute gods with natural phenomena (gods are only deified natural phenomena), or if we strip the natural phenomena off deification, we have a quite naturalistic autonomous order.

Again, Dharma too does not require a theistic agency for appropriation of results to actions. As Mimamsakas show, actions generate a new quality (apurva) in the subject which leads to future consequences. Or as the Samkhya hold, every action brings about change in the three gunas which give objective results at a later time. The Buddhist notion of every moment giving thrust to a new moment and the theory that the new-moment contains all that is there in the past moment reject the need of any personal god for an action to accrue its consequences. Thus, even Dharma can be well conceived as an autonomous order without any need for external interference. In this sense Dharma
is a secular universe of moral action.

The idea of an autonomous, rational and objective moral order which meaningfully explains human condition and destiny, is the strongest foundation of Indian ethics. At no point of time, Indian mind could conceive a chaotic or arbitrary moral realm. The ordered moral universe is the hallmark and surest foundation of Indian ethics.

Moral retribution or fitting consequences to every action is another ethical idea on which the Indian ethical theories build their systems. It constitutes the core of Dharma, the objective ethical order. The theory of Karma conceives a morally fitting consequence or atonement for every action. No action goes without consequence this is the inviolable law of Karma.

There are certain older beliefs which contend the law of Karma. One of such is the belief that father's sin passes down to son. This older belief in heritage of sin or transfer of sin appears to be founded on equating sin with material liability or property. The belief that son is only extension of father also seems to support this view. However, this does not seriously hinder later theories based on Karma. This view is not supported by philosophical systems.

Another exception is expiatory rights. Certain expiatory rituals are prescribed to avoid the consequences of certain actions. This appears to be not in tune with Karma. However, as rites are also actions they can be viewed to counter balance the consequences of the original action. Again, repentence as suffering atones the suffering to be experienced as consequence of a sin. Repentence as suffering substitutes future suffering. The subjective intention or will always characterizes an action and thus repentence and expiation can said to be effective.

The third belief which goes against Karma is divine grace. The theistic understanding of God as merciful and benevolent leads to the notion of saving grace. However, the atheistic schools did not approve such notions and thus this belief is not universal.
The knowledge of Brahman is supposed to burn one's action and affect final release. This view also appears to swerve the law of Karma. However, given the role of intention in an action, one who identifies one's self with the universal self ceases to be the agent of action. Thus one is not bound by present and future actions. However, the past actions sanchita Karma have to be get fruition and thus one has to experience the world till one's Sanchita Karma gets exhausted.

Two ways or paths of action are given: Pravrtti and Nivrtti Maiya. In Pravrtti Marga one involves oneself in all material actions and physical life and takes responsibility thereof. One strives for active life within the moral framework. Nivrtti Marga is renouncing active life by avoiding Kāmya Karmas or desired actions. The Bhagavad-gītā offers a middle path of disinterested actions. In this path, one undertakes or performs an action but only as a duty. One is not interested in the consequences and thus not bound by them. So he accrues neither merit nor sin. This leads to freedom or Mokṣa.

As to the causal efficacy of an action and as to how an action leads to consequences in the future, being separated by time. To this question Mimamsakas offer the theory of apurva, the potency which comes out of performing an action. This potency resides in self and attracts fitting results at a future time.

Sometimes, adṛṣṭa or unseen force is assumed (by some Naiyayikas) to discharge results for an action in the future. Buddhists conceive that every moment thrusts another moment and the new moment carries all that is there in the previous moment. Hence, an action performed is not extinguished but is carried til its fruition. Actions also leave dispositions which go long way and determine one's character.

Sāṃkhya too have an explanation that an action brings change in the combination of gunas according to the nature of the action. The disturbance or imbalance caused by an action continues till the consequences are accrued.

The theists interfere god's role as one who accords results according to the nature
of action. But this devine interference is not accepted by many systems. *Dharma* is viewed as an autonomous moral order and action is independently efficacious.

Another foundational concept in Indian ethical tradition is an eternal moral agent. The individual self or soul is considered as agent and this agent is eternal. The self only changes bodies but continues to exist to recap the fruits of past actions.

Hence, the self as an eternal moral agent has eternal moral career with possibility of regeneration or degeneration or absolute freedom.

The self is conditioned by its own actions and takes up new bodies according the nature of its earlier actions. The self, though cannot transgress the law of *Karma*, however, has freedom to change dispositions through intentional efforts and can improve upon its moral career.

Soul's bondage to action and its results is due to its taking responsibility as the doer and enjoyer. This constitutes agency of action. *Moksha* consists in soul realising its own nature and abandoning the responsibility as an agent. This is not moral irresponsibility but being relieved from egocentric activity. This is neither negative indifference but positive self-denial in action.

The philosophical systems differ as to nature of self but all of them accept role of self as an agent in action.

The repeated births and cycles of life is considered as the moral career of the soul. Thus retributive action and eternal soul lead to transmigratory life of the soul. This is called samsara or bondage from which liberation is sought, In liberation the individual self ceases only in the sense of its undifferentiated identity or merger with the universal self.

Transmigratory moral career appears to be a vicious circle that each life invariably leads to another. In order to explain actions in a single life, an eternal series of lives is assumed both in the past and the future. There appears to be no beginning for this.
transmigratory life or Samsāra. If there was a beginning, what caused that beginning? How the self came to be associated with bodies?

As knowledge causes release from bondage, the cause of bondage should be its opposite. Of course, yes. Nescience or Avidya is the root cause of this bondage. Due to ignorance, the soul gets bound to body. This is accepted by almost all the systems of thought. Each school claims that knowledge of their own system releases the self from bondage. This claim exhibits the emancipatory zeal of Indian thought. Sometimes the ideal of Mōkṣa is grafted an systems whether it suits them or not.

Whether the eternality of soul and its transmigratory life can be metaphysically justified or not, they have immense significance in moral explanation and endorse ethical discipline. Their practical use is, beyond doubt, worthy of appreciation.

Even Buddhism accepts transmigration though it does not accept an enduring self. This fact lays bear the ethical significance of the concept in moral explanation.

What is more interesting is that the theory entails drastic social consequences. The Upaniṣads and Smṛtis conceive that one’s birth in a particular caste is due to one’s actions in past life. Thus, transmigration has its social ramifications. Smṛtis endorse specific duties and restrictions for each caste. The institutions for each caste. The institution of caste allows lesser social mobility and one has to endure throughout life the miseries entailed by one’s accidental birth in a particular caste.

The theory of transmigration is thus used to justify the institution of caste morally. However, scope is given for moral regeneration. The exercise of free will and intentional development of faculties brought upliftment in caste heirarchy. At different places, different castes dominate the social structure.

The theory of transmigration does not preclude the exercise of freewill and moral development. Though caste system was stringent, we final many movements against this institution. Right from Buddhism and Jainism to Viraśaivism and Brahmo Samaj, the
anti-caste element played a pivotal role.

Another foundation of Indian ethics is possibility of liberation or emancipation, whether it is called Mokṣa, Kaivalya or Nirvāna. This idea of Mokṣa has theosophical and mystical moorings but influenced the Indian ethical thought as the highest ideal.

The ultimate ideal of Mokṣa is supposed to be achieved through Vairdgya and Sanydsa. However, Gita offers multitude of paths to this ultimate good of Hindu moral life. One can follow a method which is suitable to one. Karma Maiya— the path of action, Bhakti Marga— the path of devotion and Jñana Marga—the path of knowledge are the three main paths to reach the ultimate goal. The peculiarity of Gita lies in its merging Pravṛtī and Nivṛtī margas and in its positively active view of life.

Despite its mystical leanings, Mokṣa served as an ethical ideal which entails moral perfection as a prime prerequisite. The prescribed practical side of Mokṣa includes Vairagya (disinterest) Sama (equanimity), Dama (restraint), Uparati (rejection of formalism), Titikṣa (endurance), Śraddha (faith) and Samddhi (concentration). One has to cultivate these qualities or attitudes through Śravaṇa (hearing) Manana (cogitation) and Nidhidhyāsana (contemplation) of the emancipatory message of scriptures and master.

One has to practice Yamas and Niyamas to make oneself fit for the end. Yamas include Ahimsa (non-injury), Satya (truth), Aṣṭeya (non-stealing), Brahmacharya (continence), Aparigraha (obstinance from avarice). Niyamas include Saucha (cleanliness), Santosa (contentment), Tapas (penance), Svddhyāya (study) and Iśvara Pranidhāna (devotion to God). Apart from this, Asana (posture) and Prāṇyādhyāna (breath) are prescribed to gain control over mind and body.

Imagine what kind of a moral being is made if one strictly practices the requisite discipline of Mokṣa. Such an individual can never act immorally and he is free from evil. What else need any ideal achieve than this? Thus, irrespective of its origin and development an its theoretical justification, Mokṣa held sway over Indian conscience as
the ideal the way to which is itself moral excellence. Even if one fails to achieve Mokṣa, one would certainly achieve higher moral discipline by just making Mokṣa as one's end.

Dharma, Artha, Kama and Mokṣa are universally accepted as four objects of human pursuit. Except Carvakas who accept only Artha and Kama as human goals, the whole Indian ethical thought is unanimous about the fourfold objects of human endeavours.

These four Purusārthas make one's life an integrated whole and commendable. Dharma is the fundamental Purusārtha which should run throughout the other pursuits. Wealth and pleasures have to be achieved within the limits of morality and as we have seen Dharma is a prerequisite for Mokṣa. If other pursuits are attained without Dharma, they fail to be acceptable.

For example, corruption political or economical is bad because wealth is pursued outside Dharma. Corruption is pursuit of a secondary goal without adhering to the primary goal of morality. It is transgression of bounds of duty.

Similarly, prostitution is bad because Kama is pursued outside the legitimate social institution for sex i.e., family. Dharma thus includes the attitudes, institutions and actions to which conformity is sought in pursuit of the rest of human goals.

To those who criticise India ethics as pessimistic, it should be reminded that we have not only Dharma and Mokṣa Šāstras but also Artha and Kama Šāstras. The Indian aesthetics, architecture, sculpture, dance and other art forms show that sensuality is never undermined but is an integral part of Indian life. Even temples depict sensuous life and literature is abound with it. Manu Smṛti says that the four pursuits have to be accomplished for a meaningfully complete life. Reclusion is not common order but is limited to a small renounced group.

The Śuddharana Dharma or universal moral principles form the ahsis of society
and they are always regarded high. The discriminative caste duties have become redundant in modern India except their informal relics in the rural areas. Still, negative caste discrimination is being fought out by the liberal youth of India. The virtues of non-violence, truth, self-control, contentment, etc. are valued high even today.

Another hallmark of Indian thought is the fusion between metaphysics and ethics. This is true even from the ancient times. The metaphysical and ethical ideas are fused together to form a unified system of the universe. "Truth" is both metaphysical and ethical for Indian mind. Real, ethical and rational are always considered as one and any diversity is not acceptable. Nothing can be rational if it is not, ethical. Similarly anything non-ethical cannot be "true". This unity of ethical, real and rational is a rare phenomenon in the west where ethical concerns are viewed apart.

Another major mark of Indian ethics is its association with religious practices. Many of the ethical insights are put, to practice in the form of religious customs. However, some of them became superstitions when their original meaning is lost. Through universal literacy programmes and adult education, the superstitions are being fought.

It is more peculiar that instead of religious being advocates of conservatism and formalism, religions in India are vehicles of change. Buddhism and Jainism gained ground mainly due to their opposition to excessive ritualism, violence, caste and other forms of social oppression. Not only aristocrats but common men and women strengthened these religions.

Akbar's Din-E-Lahi is introduced with the fundamental objective of religious brotherhood and tolerance. The sufi saints and devotional poets used religion for propagation of humanistic ideals, love and sacrifice.

Vaiṣṇavism rejected ritualism and insisted on devotional self-denial and spread the message of love for all. Vīraśaivism fought against caste system and universalisation of religious privileges.
Brahmo-Samaj and Arya-Samaj disseminated the ideals of overcoming superstitious beliefs and abberations in Hindu system. New ideals of secularism and nationalism are promoted through these religious sects. Humanism is advocated in the place of ritualism and universal faith is sought to replace religious fanaticism.

Gandhi further strengthened humanism as a religion with truth and non-violence as its foundations. The ancient values and true spirit of religion are resurrected into Indian society. Religious harmony, cooperative development of all, secular education and opportunities, equality.

Socio-economic freedom, popular welfare, etc., are the modern values which have their roots in the ethical tradition. Safe-guarding these democratic values is a fundamental ethical responsibility everyone today. Every thing that goes against these grand ethical and traditional virtues has to be opposed.

The study of Indian ethical thought offers us a proper understanding of our present and to formulate our future goals. The values and virtues cherished in our tradition give us an identity and the cultural heritage should not be lost at any cost.

The ethical categories and concepts, when understood in their origin and evolution provide us with better abilities to understand our present moral predicament. To understand and analyse our present form of life, these ethical categories should be creatively employed.

The 'Swaraj' in ideas can be achieved if we try to understand our life in terms of our own concepts and ideas than borrowing intellectual frameworks from outside.

We can always critically evaluate our notions and concepts with a view to develop them to suit our times and purposes. One does not become conservative by using native concepts and categories nor does one become modern by borrowing foreign ideas. What matters most is how rational and critical we are in understanding our reality and how can we foster the quality of our throught and life without courting contradictions and
paradoxes.

It is sincerely hoped that this humble effort to explicate the fundamental notions in Indian thought would help, to whatever extent, further studies in the field and open up new debates for critical development of Indian ethical tradition.