Indian Ethics: Essence, Theory and Praxis

Meenu Aggarwal Gupta* & Kamalpreet Kaur†

Abstract

The paper aims at sculpting out the practice of ethics by comparing and contrasting it with morals, religion, and metaphysics, among others in turn highlighting the praxis of ethics in India. It also aims to differentiate between the western concept of morals and ethics while drawing out an argument in favour of Indian ethics or *Niti*. Though ancient, *Nitishastra* is still as relevant as ever and teaches righteousness by balancing *Karma* with *Dharma* where *Dharma* is the cosmic order that upholds the world. *Nitishastra* inclines more in favour of ethics which are intuitive than morals which are law-bound. Furthermore, Indian ethics come close to values that are innate, inherent and inclusive; thus, possessing spiritual affinity which one attains only by exploring one's self or the Self. The awareness of the Self fortifies one by empowering against the vulnerability of emotions and impulses adding further to the tenets of Indian ethics. The value of the paper lies in the use of Indian Folktales to highlight the uniqueness of Indian Ethics.

Keywords: *Dharma*, Ethics, *Karma*, *Niti*, Indian Folktales

1. Introduction

Indian ethics or *Niti* finds its essence in *rta*, a concept which recognises a cosmic/world order. Etymologically, the word 'rta'

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* Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh India; meenuag38@gmail.com

† PG Department of English, Guru Gobind Singh College for Women, Sector 26, Chandigarh, India; kamalpreetkaur90@gmail.com

stands for 'course,' originally meant to highlight the uniformity of nature or cosmic order to be maintained through righteousness. Progressively, the cosmic sense of 'rta' ['Natural Law'] transformed into the social sense of 'rna' ['Moral Law'], highlighting the systematic progression of Indian ethics from the objective level to the subjective level. Moreover, both of them are not relative but intrinsic, striving for order in this chaotic world, while imparting the feeling of being at peace in the world. Likewise, the term 'Niti' represents the innate response of a person instead of a conditioned one, which is individuated rather than social (though the impact is social). It is found to be experiential, contextual and thus, innovative and creative. The topics concerning *Niti* are found in the ancient texts of *Nitishastra* which have *Dharma* as one of the sub-topics. *Dharma*, in a broad sense, constitutes the ethical laws of the universe which harmonize moral life in a way similar to how the laws of nature regulate the physical world. The universe is moral because it is divine. Since life in the universe is morally structured, an individual is bound to bring all of the competing passions under the principles of righteousness, for their own good as well as the good of society. Nevertheless, Indian ethics is interested in orderliness rather than a fixed, static and absolute order as there is no radical disjointedness between the 'is' and the 'ought.' Furthermore, *Dharma* finds its origins in the term 'dhr' which translates to 'hold or uphold', and signifies that all human beings are borne by *Dharma*. Simultaneously, owing to its continuous dynamic diversity and openness to change, *Dharma* has been able to adapt to all times, in turn acquiring evolutionary characteristics.

The tenets of *Dharma* are listed in the texts of *Dharmashastras* that allow for emergency conditions in which the conventional must be in favour of the prudential. In such cases, the end justifies the means. Thus, making the Indian thought system holistic and inclusive, where the Hindu ethics are not absolutist and unbending but reflective and contextual in their approach to ethical problems. To protect this situational approach from degenerating into privatism, the *smritis* simply pronounce that exceptions are not to be made for one's own private advantage. This can be understood psychologically as the essence of the conscience, which is a collective interiorized voice. It is an advancement from the 'must-consciousness' to the 'ought-consciousness', which is the result of a

deepened self-awareness, allowing Subjective Ethics an edge over Objective Ethics, for 'virtues are superior to duties.' Likewise, there exists a wide difference between ethics and morals. While ethics are subjective in nature, the theory of morals aims to establish an objective set of rules which must be followed absolutely without being dependent on anything outside. For instance, the moral 'one should not steal', when followed, absolutely would not take into consideration the reason behind the stealing of bread by a hungry person. It would declare the act immoral in absolute terms; however, according to ethics, the act of stealing is justified. Thus, highlighting the way in which a moral action decided upon with the help of a moral theory or rule might run in opposition to one's personal intuition (moral) or conscience (ethical). One can conduct rules but not values. While ethics seems to be synonymous with morals, the former has a specialized attachment to it highlighting their difference. Ethics is all about excellence, while moral philosophy is all about how humans should act. Ethics is not a religion, not following the law, not even following culturally accepted norms like the Indian Caste system or polygamy in certain religions. It is an all-inclusive term that includes Human Resource Development, Environment, health, and safety. We can only be successful at the ethical practice when we realise our Self, acknowledge its presence, and work accordingly. Self-management controls one's emotions and impulses where emotions have both value and impact. We can handle emotions through coordination, interaction, communication, relationship building, and personal happiness. Thus, making an ethical concept, an idea/notion which deals with the bases of judgement and decision in matters of morality. Ethics is a reflection; morality, a choice, and the most effective mode of their dissemination is through the assistance of tales and stories, for they present us with individuality and diversity alike without any reductive compliance.

Human life finds a ready synonym in experience which is then shared through the various stories, narratives or tales. Alternately, a story or a tale mirrors life and its lived experiences—also known as *anubhav dhara* in Sanskrit; translated as "experiential flow"—in turn becoming a means of motivation for the listener who can then make their own deduction about the 'moral of the story'. One such tale, known for its profound wisdom, finds a mention in the

Jataka—a compilation of stories pertaining to Lord Buddha's previous births. The tale involves sage Mahosadha arbitrating a custody battle between a mother and a Yakshini [paranormal being] in the form of a woman. On hearing the claims from both sides, the clever sage, with his immense wisdom, suggests a game of tug of war as a final solution: The woman who is able to pull the child from the other's grip would automatically be declared the mother. Consequently, both women attempt to pull the child in their direction, resulting in pain for the child. The mother instantly regrets her decision to participate in the game and releases the child. The sage then turns to all present and inquires if they can now differentiate between the real mother and the poser. Each person present answers in the affirmative, identifying the woman who gave up as the real mother, for only the one who gave birth to the child could take such a decision. On the surface, the tale reflects wisdom on the part of Sage Mahosadha for employing the best [though distressing] way to reach an irrefutable verdict. The decision though morally sound finds itself in muddy waters with regard to ethics. Morally, the sage gave each of the women a fair chance to decide the fate of the child by employing their individual strength. However, ethically speaking, the young child is not a piece of meat or a bundle of sticks, division of which can be allowed based on the strength and agility of the contenders. If the mother had not stopped at the right time, the tug of war could have caused the child's demise. The birth mother preferred to abandon her claim rather than see her child be killed to satisfy their quarrel which was not the case for the other woman [Yakshini]. While sage Mahosadha's first suggestion followed the constructed rationalistic system of moral principles absolutely, his ultimate decision was able to highlight the path of ethical correctness which takes into account the context of the subject and object in the situation. This forms the basis of the Indian ethical system.

The ensuing discussion will take into account the all-encompassing Indian ethical system while focussing specifically on the concept of *Dharma*. According to P.V. Kane (1962), *Dharma* is one such word which does not possess a synonym in the English language. Even though it is often interpreted as 'duty', it can mean much more ranging from good, justice, moral, or right, but none is able to reflect the meaning of *Dharma* absolutely. *Dharma*, simultaneously,

derives essence from the concept of *Karma* which forms another concern of this paper. Tenets of *Dharma* will be further highlighted with the help of an Indian folktale namely, the tale of the 'Crocodile and Monkey', for a tale provides the best medium to understand any concept or situation completely. Though a clear distinction has been made between ethics and morals, their usage follows in a more popular sense. Similarly, the word 'Hinduism' is employed more in its secular form rather than its religious or didactic meaning.

2. Ethics and Hinduism

Hinduism, as a religion, is without a founder and is considered to be eternal and existing since the very beginning. It places great stress on the doctrine of *Dharma*, the eternal law—termed *rta* or the cosmic order by the Vedic seers, where *rta* and the English word 'right' are derived from the same root (Matilal, 2000). While Western philosophy attempts to search for 'the truth,' Indian philosophy experiences it through *darsana* or sight. The former holds in high esteem the search for the ultimate reality through thought, while Indian philosophy focuses on studying truth and reality through immediate spiritual vision. If *Satya* (truth) is the principle underlying *Dharma*, *Dharma* is the practice of virtue, where *rta* is external and *Dharma* internal. Moreover, *rta* is virtue in general, while *Dharma* includes the duties of particular varnas or classes according to their abilities and capacities, often misread as castes. Furthermore, *Dharma* is reflected in the various rituals and ceremonies [*Samskara*] highlighted in the Vedas—*Samskara* has two meanings, the one relating to dispositions within man, though important, is beyond the scope of this paper. The Indian way of life is replete with the enhancement of moral and ethical virtues, which begin at the break of dawn under the routine rituals performed in every Indian household—highlighting their unconscious subservience to *Dharma*. Though Indians fervently believe that a ritualistic life is more fruitful for the morally pure, none is denied the opportunity to improve. This highlights the initial wrung of the spiritual ladder that supports *Ashtang-Yog* or Eight-limbed path towards 'liberation' better known as *moksha*/*nirvana* in the Indian systems of thought. The Sanskrit maxim *Yato dharmah tato jayah*,

meaning success goes hand in hand with righteousness, highlights the core Indian belief regarding life. Even the mighty Ravana, the demon king in the epic of *Ramayana*, had to face defeat, for he had foregone the path of righteousness. He was given an opportunity by Lord Rama to follow the moral and ethical path by accepting defeat and granting freedom to Sita. The conceited Ravana, however, was beyond the moral pale and could not follow the path of righteousness. Ravana reaped the fruits of his *Karma*, for, according to Indian philosophy, the 'law of *Karma*' is essentially ethical and not a 'blind mechanical law' (Hiriyanna, 1967, p. 48).

Indian philosophy essentially promotes two ways of living one's life – one replete with natural inclination or *Karma* and the other immersed in righteousness or *Dharma*. The former is for immediate success, the latter for prosperity. *Dharma* keeps man in consonance with his environment; empowers him to attain his goals in life while giving him a better opportunity to live by what is considered right. *The Bhagavad Gita* (1968) highlights this constant tug of war in an individual through the following couplet—symbolic of the metaphoric crossroads that perplexes individuals in their everyday actions:

Dharmakshetre kurukshetre samveta yuyutsvah

Maamkaah pandvaschaiv kimkurvat sanjayl (1.1)

Moreover, the ensuing rewards and punishments of *Karma* and *Dharma* are not ends in themselves; they are the means to bring about moral growth. With this, man presents himself as a rational being with an awareness and appreciation for moral values, who can also be regarded as a moral agent capable of bringing order to his life. It leads one to acknowledge the double significance of *Karma*—first, as the direct result of pain and pleasure; the other being the establishment of disposition (*samskara*) or propensity to replicate the same action in the future. Even the Vedas in *Pravritti* and *Nivritti*, provide two paths to guide the active life of people, which will lead them to salvation. The former urges one to continue the worldly path and then strive for salvation, while the latter proposes the path of renunciation which takes one away from the worldly aims: 'Both are meant to serve the needs of people born with inherent tendencies to either lead a life of action or of

contemplation' (*The Hindu*, 2019). The *Pravritti* and *Nivritti* types of karma bring the transcendental and immanent facets of *Karma* to the forefront. Until then, the individual suffers *Karma-phala*—a result of an action undertaken in a previous birth—without being liberated from the chains of birth and death. This is also termed *prarabda* or destiny, shaped by the merits or demerits amassed based on the karma (or action) already enacted. In the Indian milieu, the philosophy of karma [action] is all about striving towards the realization of a good life. When one is acting ethically, one should be able to justify their decisions with the justification being reasonably convincing. According to R. M. Hare (1952), if our judgments are to be moral, they must be 'universalizable': '[…] because of their complete universality, moral principles have become so entrenched in our minds—in the ways already described—that they have acquired a quasi-factual character, and are indeed sometimes used non-evaluatively as statements of fact and nothing else' (p. 179). An ethical transformative process can turn the tide of negativity by affecting the 'becoming.' Ethics help us in achieving this awareness, with our limits remaining faithful to our potential. It helps to sustain, unlike unethical behaviour, which diminishes that impetus. One is bound to make an 'ethical compromise' when one falls short of ethics, which then hampers one's character, in turn influencing relationships and creating barriers that strain those relationships. Science attributes rationality to the brain; however, humans tend to follow their hearts when it comes to intangible questions, for it develops sensitivity instead of numbness. Even *The Bhagavad Gita* lays stress on the importance of desire-less work or action [*Nishkāma Karman*], which can arise only from the heart—with a solid foundation in morals and ethics—for the brain only works on the foundation of profit and loss, the base for desire and bondage to action. *Karma* or action is only a cooperative element and is powerless by itself to bring about any result. It is a single wheel that needs *purusa-kara* or self-effort to operate. Man's efforts, if sufficiently great, may overwhelm the influence of this unseen factor. Destiny or *prarabda* is a modifiable influence, and thus, there is no fatalism involved: it neither excludes personal effort nor destroys the sense of responsibility.

Another question beckoned by the doctrine of *Karma* concerns all the theistic systems, their belief in the role of God and the presence

of evil in the world. This question is countered by attributing evil to the freedom of Man instead of the will of God, where 'freedom' is a necessary endowment of man as a spiritual being. Thus, highlighting the two-fold purpose of the doctrine of *Karma*: reformative (humans) and retributive (animals). In terms of *Karma*, an act is considered to be ethical if it refrains from causing harm to others' experience or expectation of happiness while presuming some level of concern for others' well-being. Altruism is one such example where the act not only brings happiness but lessens the accompanying feeling of suffering. One benefits out of their concern for others as they forget about their own suffering for the time being. Empathy (honest) and Reason (practical) form a highly effective combination to draw out compassion, a necessity to improve ethical conduct. While anger is the greatest threat to inner peace, patience is the best means to defend oneself from its destructive effects. One is inclined towards 'imagined' fears in the gloom and darkness of *samsara*, and an escape from the *samsara* can be achieved only by transcending moralistic individualism, making cleansing of the heart (*Cittasuddhi*) essential to all moral culture. The best example of this would be Lord Buddha, who always followed the path of patience—even in the event of being sullied by his enemies—highlighting the role of *Karma*.

3. Ethics and *Dharma*

Indoctrination diminishes freedom and the realm of the ethical by manipulating human reason and feeling or both at the same time. Feelings allow us to gain extensive wisdom while supporting the knowledge of our subconscious minds which, in itself, represents our link to the wisdom of the universe. While our conscious thinking is considered to be finite, our subconscious thinking is absolutely infinite. Moreover, unconscious indoctrination may be more poisonous than conscious propaganda. Indian ethics or *Dharma* is exceptional and vital in this case as it makes both reason and mysticism interact successfully. The mysticism of Indian philosophy should be a practice of everyday living for ordinary people. Vivekananda aimed at this when he wrote:

> The dry abstract Advaita must become living-poetic-in everyday life: out of hopelessly intricate mythology must

> come concrete moral forms: and out of bewildering yogi-
> ism must come to the most scientific and practical
> Psychology – and all this must be put in a form so that a
> child may grasp it. (Vivekananda, 1896)

Ethics, on the one hand, is found to be highly abstract, ahistorical, and meta-critical, widely seen as a meta-narrative pursuit. On the other hand, it can also be a very practical affair, concerned with everyday problems which require close observation in terms of the lived context. So, is it possible to conceive ethics across the boundaries of histories and cultures, including intra-religious development? Is such a grounding of ethics affordable and possible? The answer is accessible in moral realism, where the attainment of the highest well-being of an individual as well as the community is settled by reason and not by faith; modern ethics is now separate from its mystical idealism and theological dimensions. The Indian mind is deeply concerned with values and principles of a moral life which finds mention in ancient Indian texts like the Vedas, dating back to nearly 4,000 years before the common era. They give significant information about the correct way to live life and the value structures one needs to follow. Beginning from the Vedic era, various systems of philosophy have always ascribed these values while imposing moral action (karma). By this, instead of prescribing ethics, Indian philosophy urges individuals to create their codes to guide decisions in work and life, that is, to develop their ethics and take responsibility for them. They need to have a subjective understanding of ethics, where complex principles from both philosophy and behavioural research are translated to give a number of pragmatic aids for making decisions about personal growth and global welfare. Hinduism is, thus, a unique way of life which cannot be constrained in the straitjacket of religion; it is the *Dharma - Sanaatan Dharma*, which is beyond the concept of destruction and is present in all beings.

Dharma, thus represents the way of life comprising of the sum 'total of all aachaaras' (customs and rituals). To understand this, it is necessary, to begin with the primary division of ancient Indian literature into two: *Smriti* and *Sruti*. *Smriti* literature represents a particular class of treatises known as the *Kalpa Sutras*, which came into existence early in the post-Vedic period. The object of these

sutras was to interpret and systematise the entire teaching of the Vedas on its practical side. They tend to deal with rituals as well as common morality. Likewise, Vedas—including mantras, *Brahmanas*, and *Upanishads*—constitute the *Srutis*, which were directly revealed or heard, indicating their origin in divine revelation. Post-Vedic *Kalpa Sutras* have human authors who, through their memory [*smriti*], handed over the tradition from the sages. *Kalpa Sutras* have three classes: voluminous for elaborate rites, ceremonial for the domestic rites, and *Dharmasutras* to oversee the behaviour of an individual. The *Dharmasutras* aim to lay down the standard of *Dharma*. Their aim is threefold: rules of conduct (*achaara* or morality), penances (*prayasutta* or religion), and law (*vyavhara* or civil law). Moreover, morality was never discussed as such in any of the texts of *Dharmasutras*. Nevertheless, the traditional text was very self-conscious about moral values, strife, and dissension, as well as the problems of practical reason or wisdom with the Vedic code of conduct advocating:

i.   doing everything after due consideration of right and wrong—dictates of *dharma*;

ii. giving up falsity and surrendering to truth;

iii. promoting the welfare of mankind: spiritual, physical, and social;

iv. promoting *Vidya* (true knowledge) and dispelling *Avidya* (illusion);

v.   seeking one's own prosperity in the welfare of the whole society; and

vi. following altruistic dictates of society.

These codes can be de-codified according to the demand of a particular situation or relation or incident as and when required. The emphasis on the holistic nature of these practices can be exemplified by traversing to polity and law which form an inherent part of the *Dharmasutras* and need to be studied together with *Dharma*. The most renowned name in terms of polity and law in Indian history is Kautilya, whose masterly analysis of the sources of law, in his *Arthashastra*—a monumental example of his political genius—is well-known. He considered sacred law, custom, civil

law and edicts of the kings as the four legs of law. In the event of a conflict between custom and *Dharma*, or between *Vyavahara* and *Dharma*, *Dharma* always possessed the upper hand. However, when *Dharma* came in conflict with reason, the reason being powerful, made the text invalid. Matilal, who is in consonance with Kautilya, helped in further establishing the supremacy of *Dharma* through his book *The Soul of India: A Collection of Essays*. For him, 'Dharma' is a generic word which denotes all sorts of duties, spiritual, moral, social, and legal, while *Vyavahara* is the word for civil law, which sets forth legal rights and enjoins legal duties.

Thus, highlighting the dependence of morality in India on its innate religious beliefs, in turn allowing 'ethics'—in the original western tradition—the opportunity to denounce the possibility of a rationally grounded ethical tradition in Indian tradition. Saving this from the blame of excessiveness, modern thinker Radhakrishnan writes:

> Any ethical theory must be grounded in metaphysics, in a philosophical concept of the relation between conduct and the ultimate reality to be, so we behave; vision and action go together. (1958, p. 80)

Kant (1998) can be successfully invoked here for protecting the close relationship which exists between the domain of ethics and the study of Hindu metaphysics, for *The Bhagavad Gita* is also a treatise on ethics. Metaphysics is undoubtedly the presupposition of the type of ethical conduct that *The Bhagavad Gita* propounds. However, it cannot be disputed that discussion of the problems of metaphysics comes in only as a prop to the ethical doctrine upheld by its author. The ethical character of *The Bhagavad Gita* is grounded in its metaphysics, whereas secular ethics holds that ethics need not depend upon metaphysics. This leads to moral autonomy, which means that moral values have their autonomy and are not derived from any other source or authority of God, which may sanction moral values. However, the main purpose of *The Bhagavad Gita* is to administer the practice of *Dharma*—represented by concentric circles of beliefs, traditions, duties, and practices, where each circle owes resilience to the impelling forces of its inner circles (Munshi, 1995, p. 4). While religion is bestowed with its various tasks and opportunities by the dictates of social and civic life, *Dharma*

advocates worldly opulence and spiritual deliverance. *The Bhagavad Gita*, too, concerns itself only with man's inner being and accepts duties and relationships of life as an occasion for the attainment of spiritual liberation, for life is an offering in need of complete transfiguration. The questions of metaphysics are, therefore, subordinate to those of ethics. In both *The Bhagavad Gita* and Kant, it is a problem of the norms of conduct that concerns. The ethics in both are similar as they are deontological, i.e., propose the performance of duty for duty's sake with no desire for fruits. *Niskama Karma* and Kantian ethics have no emotional drivers or utilitarian pursuits but they aim at loksangraha (holding people together). But with a contextual difference in framework ethics of *The Bhagavad Gita*, unlike Kantian 'kingdom of ends', are teleological in the sense that they are in service and search of God. Metaphysics comes only subsequently as a support for their ethical doctrine. 'Niti Shastra' is the term often used to refer to ethics in the Indian milieu (Prasad, 2008). Here, 'niti' is representative of a moral policy or code of behaviour, possessing a highly normalizing and essentially moral connotation. 'Niti' can, thus, be considered as something which provides guidance for the accomplishment of the moral ideals of *purusharthas*. *Dharma* is another term which is difficult to translate or even paraphrase due to the complexity associated with its meaning, even when it is discussed at length in most of the major works associated with Hinduism. The most common subjects of discussion are law and history of Indian religion and yet it is almost impossible to constrict the term to even a few basic definitions, for it has been used in disconcerting ways throughout history, in both ancient and modern texts alike (Halbfass, 1988, p. 312).

Initially, 'Dharma' stood for everything from the principle of universal stability to the power which validates the firmly established order, lawfulness, society, nature, equilibrium, individual existence and even cosmic norms. It is not only the foundation of an individual's behaviour but is the ground on which the community is built and is necessary for the regulation of all expressions of reality. A devout follower of *Dharma* is able to perceive the ideal of his character and is also able to express perpetual lawfulness. 'Dharma' simply means following the normal path which is in consonance with a person's routine

behaviour and fate, which allows him individuality and yet keeps him in check and within the confines of the traditional and the familiar. If his actions are found to be in tune with his personality and stature, he is said to be adhering to *Dharma*. The term is as much a representation of natural order and cosmic stability as it is of the correct behaviour in the legal, social and moral sense. Therefore, everything which occurs in nature as well as in the world of humans must follow the dictates of *Dharma*, for it represents decorum and socially recommended conduct towards all beings. This all-encompassing term that holds in it all other aspects of life has further three-fold classification - speech, action, and thought. The ethical standard applies to both the outward activities and the inner disposition of man. Since one's thoughts are known to oneself alone, this signifies an emphasis on the importance of goodwill in conduct. Others pass moral judgments only upon actions done or words uttered, while what needs to be judged is our inner attitude. Indulgence in evil thoughts will bring suffering, although they may not find expression in speech or overt action, while virtuous thoughts are of little avail until translated into action.

The Vedas and *Smriti* literature teach about *Dharma* as the correct, curative behaviour in its social, religious and moral aspects [*achaara*] where *Karma*, *Dharma* and *Samsara* comprise one compound ideological system. The Indian way of thinking originated in the Vedas and has never changed. The apparent diversity is allowed by a single super system to unite into a common viewpoint. Vedas aid in fashioning a superior human being and erecting an ideal society which is excellent and meaningful in itself. According to Indian culture and tradition, the idea of society or community encompasses the entire living world and so, a moral man must consider the entire world (*vasudha*) to be a part of his family (*kutumbha*). This supreme moral ideal of *Dharma* constitutes the model of a good societal life governed by the principles of good behaviour or *sadacharah*. The term 'dharma' is also used in the same context and as a moral code that sustains both humans and society.

The Western tradition has always been at odds with the Indian tradition which can be highlighted by taking into consideration the

example of the sixth sense. According to the Western tradition of scientific 'sensory' perception, 'sixth' in the sixth sense is representative of only an additional sense to the list of the five major sensory organs of perception in humans. In contrast, Indian 'darsanas' or philosophy holds this intangible sensory perception [sixth sense] as the most important one, for it is experiential and links the other five, to create subjectivity. It is necessary to take the journey from subjectivity to subject: beyond that, subject and object become one, drawing upon silence. However, this intuitive energy [sixth sense] has always been there. The process of industrialisation through modernisation might have tried to underrate it, but it has always made its presence felt. Eastern philosophy is in direct contrast to its Western counterpart, especially with regard to its outlook towards an understanding of the universe which is non-mathematical and non-technical in nature. Furthermore, it is impossible to separate a sage of the East from nature, for he experiences all events in the world as an expression of the fundamental Oneness, Wholeness, and as the various aspects of spiritual unity. Modern science has also come to the aid of the mystical East in proving that concepts like past, present, future, physical space, and personality which are often used to describe the world are, in fact, not elemental features of reality. In fact, the universe today is mostly seen through the lens of syncretism, where it is impossible to separate humans and nature, consciousness and matter, as well as subject and object. F. Capra (2010) propounds that our world is a unified whole, which comprises processes instead of things and everything that exists has a direct relationship with each other. Similarly, R. Sheldrake (2009) believes that the world's completeness can be decided only with the assistance of the still untraversed field that unifies the universe into a single information space.

The search for an explanation of the physical universe may have ended in the Cartesian solution where God acted as *dues ex machina* behind all motion in matter. The Indian view, however, avoided shortcomings that accompanied such solutions, which made God, like other physical beings, prone to the processes of origination, development, and decay. It is because, in the Indian thought system, *Karma* characterises all physical things (matter) alike, a law of which universality and necessity are two fundamental features.

Karma thus is the law by reference to which all movement, motion, or activity, as witnessed in the physical universe, can be explained. Matter and *Karma* must coexist and cooperate in order to explain the physical universe in its actual functioning. Whatever happens in the physical universe happens because of force. Hence, *The Bhagavad Gita* defines *Karma* as 'the creative force that brings beings into existence' (Sivananda, 1957). Now, if in the physical universe, the beings necessarily subject themselves to the mechanical necessity of *Karma*, in the spiritual universe, the beings are ever conscious of the determination of their volition by their law. This is the law of *Dharma*, a true mark, and measure of all that is spiritual. The general Indian view is that, while on the personal side, *Dharma* represents the whole truth about the spiritual nature; on the objective side, it constitutes the eternal, moral order of the universe. The most significant contribution that *The Bhagavad Gita* makes to the world of ethical thought is the ethics of moderation, proportion, harmony, and balance and not of negation, oppression, and renunciation. It is in the fulfilment of the requirement of their law that spiritual beings discover their true freedom and full autonomy. It is perhaps in this sense that the *Brhadaranyaka* Upanishad spoke of *Dharma* as that beyond which there is nothing. Kanada's *Vaisheshika* Sutra also begins by inquiring into the nature of *Dharma* and defines it as that which leads to the attainment of spiritual enlightenment and the Supreme Good. *Mimamsa* Sutra also begins with the same enquiry and concludes that *Dharma* is another epithet for the Supreme Good.

Kant was very right when he said that 'it is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will' because he could see that the power of moral determination is lacking' (1998, p. 7). Therefore, most men do possess the power of moral appreciation; what they are often found to be deficient in is the power of moral determination. Although *Dharma* persists as the law characteristic of a perfect spiritual being, under peculiar human conditions, it comes to reinforce itself as the unconditional command, which leaves the will no liberty to choose the opposite. From sheer inner urge, *Dharma* calls forth the need for realisation of itself through the requisite activity to emerge as the sole condition and content of moral goodness. The process of manifestations of

goodness may be slow, but it is sure to find its consummation in the ideal of goodness. The essential requirement of such a consciousness is that *Dharma* is not only acknowledged as the only motive to activity but is also expected to prevail upon the entire volitional mechanism to bring about corresponding goodness. Every such act of volitional determination implies our consciousness of natural inclinations and desires and instead fills it with greater and greater degrees of participation in moral goodness. This means that as *Dharma* finds its fruition through volitional determination, and consequently through activity, ethics becomes the fundamental characteristic of the entire Indian tradition. *Dharma*, thus, is the law of moral goodness, and its claim on us as spiritual beings is absolute. In its execution, we are aware of our finitude because in it is contained the promise and potency of a life of infinite moral worth. Bradley puts it as 'I am finite, I am both finite and infinite, and that is why my moral life is a perpetual progress' (1952, p. 22).

But once we have reached a certain measure of moral stability and strength, we cannot fail to acknowledge and appreciate its authority. This is what the divine teacher in *The Bhagavad Gita* wanted to bring home to Arjuna: 'That which though delusion thou wishest not to do, that thou shalt have to do when forced by their own nature' (Zaehner, 1968). Therefore, it can be clearly stated that what alone could lead us to a truly moral life is the realisation that there is something distinctly spiritual in us which strives to seek its fulfilment in activity but is often held in check by the conditional and contingent forces of our natural self. *Dharma*, in fact, becomes the central theme of an ethical theory propounded by Indians as it is suggestive of the fact that Indians attach due importance to the need for evolving a universal principle as the exterior of ethical conduct. Moreover, *rta*, which sustains the whole universe, is conceived as the law of Self; it is prior to all determination and, therefore, the condition of all that is determinable.

Over time these practices become entrenched in tradition, in comprehensive doctrines, mentioned even in texts, sans a question about their beginnings – historical or conceptual. For instance, certain epics embed a myriad of moral issues successfully articulating a sui generis thesis that is ethics or morality. The best

example has always been Yudhisthira and his role in the Kurukshetra war. Yudhisthira, considered as *Dharma*-personified or *Dharma raj* in the narrative of *Mahabharata*, held *Dharma* dearest—in comparison to even his own life. Nevertheless, he is often believed to have favoured the use of unfair means in winning the righteous war. This is the conception that follows the western doctrine of ethics and morality, in turn branding him an unethical man. However, according to Indian ethical tradition, Yudhisthira is always found to be in consonance with *Dharma*. He did not lie; his *Dharma* required him to force Guru Dronacharya out of the battlefield. This could be achieved only with the news of his son, Ashwatthama's demise. However, this feat could not be achieved by the Pandavas. The only solution suggested and then followed involved the killing of an elephant named Ashwatthama right in front of Yudhisthira. Moreover, *Dharma raj* Yudhisthira always maintained that he saw Ashwatthama die, never directly mentioning whether it was Dronacharya's son or an elephant. Thus, maintaining the sacred boundaries of *Dharma* without putting it into the binaries of black and white or right and wrong, highlighting its broad spectrum.

Yudhisthira's tale constitutes the most famous example to highlight the tenets of *Dharma*, however, it is not the only example which highlights the difference between the western conception of ethics and morality and the Indian doctrine of *Dharma*. Even the following teaching of the *Hitopadesha*, in the context of righteousness, forced King Sudarshana to think about his wealthy yet foolish young sons who would rule his kingdom after him, highlighting the importance attached to *Dharma* in Indian values:

Aahaara-nidra-bhaya-maithunam ca

samanayam etat pashubhir naranam 1

Dharmo hi tesham adhiko viseso

dharmena hinah pashubhih samanah   11

Many more such examples are to be found in the tradition of Indian folktales, which have been an innate part of the lives of the people of India. Each of the bedtime stories passed from grandparents to grandchildren finds a mention in either *Panchatantra,*

Kathasaritsagar, or Jataka tales, to name a few of the folktale collections born in India. Another interesting feature of these tales is the fact that they tend to employ animals as the main characters to put forward the problems of the human world. The narrators of these oral folktales intended to deliver only the message they learned from their personal experiences without identifying the people involved. This led to the construction of moral maxims and rules for ethical conduct in the western sense—conditioned to subjectivity—by imparting anthropomorphic characteristics to animal characters. One such story which can be mentioned here to highlight the importance of Dharma in Indian ethics is the tale of the 'Crocodile and Monkey'.

4. The tale of the 'Crocodile and Monkey' and Indian Ethics

When one thinks of folk tales, the first name that comes to mind is Brother Grimms' collection of tales. However, every civilisation has its folktales and stories to share, which are replete with moral and ethical dogma. Mostly, animals play the central characters in all these stories. One such story which finds its origin in Indian folktales is the story of the 'Crocodile and Monkey'. The moral lesson, mostly attributed to the story, signifies the importance of a wise enemy to a foolish friend. According to the story, a crocodile befriends a monkey who lives on a rose-apple tree. The Crocodile crosses the river every day to meet up with his friend and eat a few rose apples, highlighting the trusting and friendly attitude of both the Monkey and Crocodile. One day, the Monkey gives a few of the rose apples to the Crocodile as a gift for the latter's wife. The wife, who is already jealous of her husband's new friend, finds the gift very appetising and wonders whether the Monkey—who feasts on these apples every day—will taste better than them. She hatches a plan and by emotionally crippling her husband, forces him to lure the Monkey into becoming her food. The trusting and loving husband then asks his friend to visit his home by climbing on his back. On arrival, the Crocodile informs the Monkey that his wife is dying and can only be saved if she eats the heart of a monkey—the real reason behind their trip. The Monkey immediately agrees with the Crocodile and tells him that he would willingly give his heart

for the latter's wife, but unfortunately, he left it back at the tree and needs to go back to retrieve it. The Crocodile believes the excuse and swiftly takes him back. The Monkey then climbs back on the tree and back to safety before the Crocodile is able to realise his mistake.

The Monkey is hailed as a hero for his quick-thinking, alertness, and intelligence while the Crocodile is branded as a dumb, foolish, slow-witted character who is be-fooled by both his wife and friend, making him the only loser. In terms of the western concept of ethics and morals, the Crocodile is in the wrong while the Monkey is in the right. If one follows the black-and-white paradigm associated with ethics on which Yudhisthira's actions on the battlefield are weighed, then the Monkey's actions are also not ethical as he lied even though it was to save his life. According to Indian values, Yudhisthira was the paradigm of *Dharma*, and his actions were justified, for they follow the doctrine of *Dharma*. Similarly, even the actions of both the Monkey and Crocodile are justified as they follow the path of *Dharma*.

According to Indian ethics or the doctrine of *Dharma*, it would be wrong to assume that the Crocodile was foolish; instead, he was trusting as he saw in others his own reflection. His innocence and righteousness can be inferred from his dealing with both his friend and his wife. He truthfully and honestly discussed one with the other. He felt indebted to the Monkey for his hospitality and actions and was loyal to him. However, the wife was his *Dharma-Patni*, meaning that she was bound to him by the tenets of *Dharma*, making her safety his utmost priority. Even Lord Rama crossed the Rama Setu to find his wife in Ravana's Lanka. Similarly, the Crocodile could not deny her the medicine she needed, even if it meant for him to lure his friend towards death. The Crocodile possessed a clean heart [*Cittasuddhi*] which made him believe his wife's words; making his actions ethical in terms of the tenets of *Dharma* towards his wife.

In terms of his friend, the Monkey, the Crocodile could have easily killed him as the former was in a disadvantageous position, from the moment he climbed on the Crocodile's back. Nevertheless, his *Dharma* demanded that he inform his friend of what lies ahead, allowing him the chance to alter the future. The Monkey seemed to

understand his friend's predicament and decides to spare his friend from the future heartache of betraying him and becoming a cause of his death. He can concur that the wife is at fault and not the husband. The apparent lie of 'leaving behind the heart' is not a lie. It symbolises the destruction of his trust and the 'tree with his heart' is symbolic of the memory of their pure and honest friendship. As the Crocodile has a clear heart and a clean conscience, he trusts his friend and takes him back. It is a façade put up by the Crocodile so that he can follow the dictates of *Dharma* towards both—his wife and friend—at the same time. His efforts led to the satisfaction of his wife while saving the precious life of his dear friend. Ultimately, no one is hurt, which is what Yudhisthira had expected when he followed the plan on the battlefield: Dronacharya would give up his position as the general, which would help the Pandavas in turning the tide. He never intended to kill his guru by trickery. Similarly, even though the Crocodile comes out looking like a foolish character yet through his actions, speech, and thought, he is able to maintain the dignity of his *Dharma* both as husband and friend.

Many other such tales can be cited to highlight the essence of Indian ethics and the role played by *Dharma* in it. One such tale, found in the *Jataka* tales, has already been mentioned in the beginning. The storyline of sage Mahosadha's arbitration is believed to mirror that of the story of 'Judgement of Solomon' which is a part of the Hebrew Bible. However, the antiquity of both tales is still debatable; thus, highlighting the unconscious connection which exists between two tales of distinct geographical, cultural and religious values.

5. Conclusion

Indian scholars, like their Western counterparts, recognised morality's pervasiveness through human life and culture. Human lives are shaped by the narratives and the stories that always surround them. They are essential and eternal in influencing them in every way. Indian ethics, thus, did not begin with a discursive critical theory or theoretical reflection; instead, it was built on utilising the practices that were embedded or grounded in all human cognition or the self. Hinduism has always been proud of

its systematic ethics, and the primary difference between Western ethics and Indian ethics is that the former tend to be theoretically oriented while the latter is fully pragmatic—highlighted through the tale (Sharma, 1965, p. 61). Moreover, any ethical theory typically involves two components: a theory of the Right and a theory of the Good which are answers to two fundamental questions: 'What ought we do?' and 'Why ought we to do it?' (Perret, 1998, p. 1). The former theory circumscribes how we relate to each other and our world, and the latter is identified variously in the Western moral theory as happiness (Aristotle), pleasure (Mill), union with God (Aquinas), and goodwill (I. Kant). Indian ethics derive from all these values. They differ only on the contexts of moral codes and methods to be employed in implementing them as exemplified in the analysis of the tale.

The tale is one of many such tales which have been etched into the minds of the Indian people, signifying their everyday struggles [in one way or another] and the resultant subjective codes and methods. Thus, Indian ethics have been rightfully imparted the title of *Dharmakshetra*, that is, they are the field of righteousness, while the material world is the battleground or *Karmakshetra* for a moral struggle where men fight battles hourly and daily. Furthermore, according to Indian Ethics, the self is understood as that identity which equates with other beings and in this, two goals are achieved. One is that equating with others prevents wrongdoings and hence comes close to ethics/morals. The second meaning, however, does not relate to the foundation of ethics, rather it reflects the path which leads to the union with the Absolute. Moreover, Indian ethics in the form of *Dharma* weds the usually separate entities of ethics and morality to be entirely dependent on each other, with the one deriving its meaning from the other which is different from their Western conceptions. Hence, making the range of *Dharma* broader and deeper than any of its Western equivalents. *Dharma* embeds the idea of universal justice involving responsibility in its widest sense, responsibility for the whole cosmos, not in the form of any external compulsion. As an immanent necessity, all that comes into existence produces its specific reaction or effect – the Karmic principle of action and reaction. Human beings are thus not merely the Aristotelian *zoon*

politikon or political animal but *zoon kosmikon* (cosmic being) as well (Bilimoria *et al*, 2008, p. 25).

Arthur Schopenhauer taught that the ethical significance of action depends on a 'penetration of the principium individuationis'; the good man 'recognises directly and without reasoning that the in-itself of his manifestation is also that of others, the will to live, which constitutes the inner nature of everything and lives in all' (Schopenhauer, 1909). This same recognition is expressed in the famous *tat tvam asi* ("that art thou") of the *Chandogya* Upanishad where it occurs nine times. Uddataka explains its meaning to his son, Svetaketu, as the subtle thing which is the essence of the whole world; it is the truth, it is the Self; it is the inclusion of one (S)elf in the substance of the Universal one, which is another definition of *Dharma*.

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