

Role of Ethical Values in Modern Society: A Critical Study

Dr. Nasiruddin Mondal

Department of Philosophy, Kandi Raj College, Kandi, Murshidabad, PIN: 742137 India

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*Corresponding Author

Email: dr.n.mondal@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In the 21st Century in India as well as in the western countries an affinity toward materialistic activities and glorify humanity over and above Divinity are noticed everywhere. We have to keep it in our mind that there is a Divinity in the form of humanity. In this context ethical values and morality come to our discussion. Actually in this second decade of 21st century we are also facing the problems of indetermination, inquietude and moral crisis. But man has the potency to create his values (Sreya) which reveals him as Truth, Good, and Beauty (*Satyam Shivam Sundaram*) which is called transcendental unity of Consciousness by Kant. Creative man or the man in surplus (*Udbritya*) and the man with ethical values always makes a harmony among all diversity and plurality with the help of his inner creative power and overcome all kinds of narrowness and selfishness within him. In this paper an effort will be made to show that humanity and moral values are the two sides of the same coin, because in absence of one the other will not only be incomplete but imperfect. So the **Summum Bonum** or ultimate goal of Indian philosophy (except Charvaka) is the stage of Immorality and it is the conception of Moksha, or liberation. If any single conception which can be taken to distinguish Indian philosophy from the western, it is the conception of Moksa, the highest value which is translated in English as Liberation. The concept of four-fold Values will be discussed in this context and will be shown how the Moksha, the highest value of human aspiration may help a man to become a good human being.

Introduction

The novelist of Victorian period Charles Dickens described his time through his famous story, ***A Tale of Two cities*** in this way – “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to the heaven, we were all going direct to the other way.”¹ Really we are passing through a time where everything is predictable. In this hedonistic society we cannot say clearly that we are satisfied with the things which we are possessing. Teachers can't say whether they are happy with their status or not. Students don't know what for they are and what their actual goal is. That is why educational institution sometimes turns into battle field. We are passing through a peculiar time and suffering from the crisis of ethical and moral values. Most of the people of our societies are suffering from ethical and moral crisis. People who sacrifice for their fellow citizens even at the cost of their lives or time are also rare in our society. Anything cannot make a man moral until and unless there is a proper awakening of the felling of generosity, kindness, compassion and benevolence from within. The prayer of Indians are – ‘*Asatoma Sat-Gamaya Tamaso Maa Jyotir-Gamaya Mrytyor - Maa Amritam Gamaya...*’ it means Oh God! Led us from unreal to reality, from darkness to light, from death to immortality. So the Summum Bonum or ultimate goal of Indian philosophy (except Charvaka) is the stage of Immorality and it is the conception of Moksha or liberation. If any single conception which can be taken to distinguish Indian philosophy from the

western, it is the conception of Moksa, the highest value which is translated in English as Liberation. “The special feature of Indian thought which distinguish it from the western philosophy is that realization of moral values is not regarded as ultimate goal to Indian sages. Western thinkers have confined themselves only to humanity and morality. Indian sages did not stop here. According to them our ideal is super moralism, - in this stage moral activity becomes spontaneous and also instinctive. This stage is called liberation or Moksa.”²

The word ‘ethics’ comes from Greek word ‘ethos’, which means custom, habit, character or disposition. Ethics is the branches of knowledge that deals with moral principles. In Western Philosophy several thinkers define ethics in various ways and among them the famous Author of the ever renowned Book ‘Ethics’, William k. Frankena, define ethics as - “Ethics is a branch of philosophy; it is moral philosophy or philosophical thinking about morality, moral problems and moral judgements”³

On the other hand I.C. Sharma in his ‘Ethical Philosophies of India’ says “Indian Ethics means the theory of good and Evil and of right and wrong as found in the Indian Philosophical literature, and as practiced and preached by the great thinkers of India from the Vedic period of the present day.”⁴ Now we need to discuss about the possibility of the ethical or moral side in Vedic theology and how much it is deeply rooted in Indian society. We know the Vedic or Hindu theology is based on few beliefs or principles and these are 1. *Karmabad*, 2. *Janmantarbad*, 3. *Purusarthabad* and 4. *Adhikarived*. The *Karmabad* means every body of this world has to enjoy the fruits of action what he/she has done. No embodied person can completely renounce Karma or actions. Karma is the link which binds the soul with the body due to the

worldly desire. We have four kinds of ignorance of truth or passion i.e. anger (krodha), greed (lobha), pride (maana) and delusion (maya) and these are sticky objects which bind the soul with body and is the cause of bondage. "The perfect man also has to work for the benefit of humanity (loka-sangraha) in the spirit of perfect detachment, disinterest, selflessness, with no desire to reap the fruit. He alone is capable of doing so. The liberated 'cave-dweller' in Plato goes again in to the cave to free others."⁵ If we cannot escape from the chain of bondage and its consequences of our immoral and unethical actions and if it is not possible to stop the flow of action by the practice of right faith, knowledge and right conduct in this life then people has to take rebirth for enjoy the fruit of actions and this process is known as *Janmantarbad* (reincarnation) in Indian traditional and religious believe. Here the concept of *Purusaartha* comes to our discussion and we have four kinds of *Purusaarthas* or Values in our Indian religious scriptures. These four kinds of *Purusaarthas* or values are considered as desirable things for every body of our society and these are Artha, Kama, Dharma and Moksa. Though Dharma is considered as first and most important because Dharma or right actions in terms of virtue helps us to achieve Artha and Kama and even without right way or Dharma we cannot reach or achieve Moksha. It is relevant to say that Spiritual Values are considered as the highest one in Religious scriptures and it is called Moksha or liberation. Among the four Purusaartha the Dharma, Artha, Kama are called *Prabitti Marg* as these three helps to fulfill the worldly desire or needs (*Prabitti*) of human being and these are only for the *Bhogi* (people of sensual enjoyment). On the other hand *Nibritti Marg* (the path of Renunciation) is only for those who wish to get *Moksha*. If the path of enjoyment is not ended up nobody is entitled (Adhikari) to reach of the path of Moksha. Here in this context we come into the discussion of *Adhikarivedh* or Deserve quality. People possess various natural qualities and it varies person to person. The people who engaged with worldly objects or belongs to *Prabitti Marg*, and they are lacking the quality for *Nibritti Marg*. But in future life he/she may achieve the quality of *Nibritti Marg* and may get Moksha. As per Veda there are four kinds of Varna or cast system i.e. *Brahmin*, *Khatriya*, *Baishya* and *Shudra* and there are some prescribed norms for the people of each cast. The people of one cast are not entitled to perform the duty which are prescribed for other cast because of the the *Adhikaribodh*. It is also specially mentioned that as per Hindu Scriptures (Vedas) human lives are classified into four stages i.e. *Brahmacharya*, *Garhastha*, *Banaprastha*, and *Sanyas* and people have to perform their duties as prescribed for each stage of life. All these are mandatory for the people who want to get liberated or reach Moksha. These duties are strictly related with moral or ethical values and should perform in a proper way. These moral duties or *Dharmas* are related with Virtues which is related with Justice too. In this context we can remember Socrates, the wisest person of the world, as follows – Having virtue just means doing the right thing, at right time, in the right way, in the right amount, toward the right people. So *Adhikari Bodh* is strictly followed here. Though it is different from the *Adhikari Bodh* as prescribed in Indian Scripture but the duties of every person in both the cases should perform in a proper and balanced way.

Objective morality of duties is the base of Hindu ethics and we should keep it in our mind that objective meaning of

duty is Dharma in Hindu Shastras (The Ethics of the Hindus, Sunil Kumar Mitra). The Dharma or Duty plays an important role in human social and spiritual life, so the sequence of four Purusaarthas are arranged as 1. *Dharma* 2. *Artha* 3. *Kama* and 4. *Moksha*. In other way the four Values are described and arranged as 1. *Artha*, 2. *Kama*, 3. *Dharma*, and 4. *Moksa*. Among the four kinds of values the *Artha* (economic value) and *Dharma* (moral and ethical value) are considered as means to reach the End or get *Kama* (physical value) and *Moksa* (spiritual value). In the Vedic society the three fold values i.e. Kama, Artha and Dharma these three Purusaartha were followed by common people. The Kama means pleasure and the Artha means to achieve this kama or worldly pleasure and Dharma means work as per laws. Among these three Purusaartha Dharma is the highest and supreme one but *Prabritti* (desire) for the fulfillment of Kamana and Artha are not hatred or looked down in our country. The attraction of worldly objects and for this people run behind money are the natural instinct of the common people of our society. But we have to keep in our mind that we should not live only for the worldly happiness or *Preya* (desired objects). Our ultimate goal is *Sreya* (Good) which is known as highest moral value.

In the Religious scripture two paths are described for every human being i.e. *Preya* and *Sreya*. *Preya* (desired objects) and *Sreya* (Good or Value). In this context Rabindranath Tagore says in his *Manuser Dharma* that – Manusher sovabe Sreya o aache, preyo o aache. Dhir byakti duike prithok koren. Jini preyo ke grohon koren tini purushartha theke hino hon."⁶ It can be said in this way – Man generally deals with the pleasant and good. The balanced people realize this distinction. Those who accepted *Sreya* is known as noble person and they are always appreciated in the society but the people who are engaged in getting pleasant are always degraded and divided. In the *Katha Upanisad* also only these two paths are shown i.e. *Preya and Sreyas* and these are stated in this Sloka as follows -

*"anyak chreyo anyad utaiva pryaste ubhe nanarthe purusam sinitah:
Tayoh sreya adanasya sadhu bhavati, hiyate'rthad ya u preyo vrnite."*⁷

The first path is called the path of pleasant or worldly enjoyment which is known as *Kama* and the second path is called the path of good or *Moksa*. So *Moksa* is considered here the highest Value on realizing which nothing remains to be realized. But most people choose the path of pleasant which apparently gives us worldly enjoyment but passing and ends in pain. Whereas the good need not necessarily be pleasant, and most of the cases the pleasant is not good. Plato says in his several Dialogues about the beauty, good, love, justice etc. and he opines these perfect concept of beauty, good, love, justice etc. actually belong to the ideal state and our phenomenal world is the reflection of ideal world. So the value entities really do not reside here and the shadow of good, beauty, love and justice is felt here in this world. These value entities are virtue to Plato and he says - "is there any true coin for which all things ought to exchange? - and that is wisdom; and in exchange for this, and in company with this, is anything truly bought or sold, whether courage or temperance or justice. And is not all true Virtue the companion of wisdom, no matter what fears or

pleasure or other similar goods or evils may not attend her? But the Virtue which is made up of these goods, when they are severed from wisdom and exchanged with one another, is a shadow of virtue only.”⁸

It is very important to explain the *Thrust area* of our discussion and restore the Ethical Values which is slowly disappearing from the so called modern materialistic society. In Indian context Value Means *Purusartha* and it is qualified by the term ethics. So among the four values which are considered in Indian cultural tradition, *Dharma* (moral and ethical values) is the main area of our discussion. Ethics and morality are applicable in a society and our voluntary activities not only affect us but also affect the people we are surrounded by. It is told that ethics bears two types of meaning, the first is character and the second is custom or nature of the people. So the character of a person should be affected in such a manner that it would not badly affect on other people of a society. Secondly ethics is applicable to a person as because we should transcend or uplift ourselves to a true human being, the real nature of a man.

Our cultural and philosophical traditions have accept four types of values but *Dharma* or ethical value is given more importance. We know that man works for pleasure or happiness. The Karma or activity which gives more pleasure and makes him happier, he prefers to do those kinds of works. *Artha* is required to get more pleasure in life. It is called *Preya* in *Katha Upanisad*. In the materialistic world most of the people are engaged in getting more pleasure in life, and run behind *Artha* and *Kama*. Hedonistic school like Charvaka and materialistic westernized society are busy with worldly pleasure. They don't have any time to think for the fellow people of the society or their parents and relatives. Moral and ethical values are less or not important to them. We engage ourselves with materialistic gain. Physical enjoyment is most concern and to fulfill we need to earn more and more money (*Artha*). In this present materialistic world human beings are used as commodities which are not sanctioned by our tradition and spiritual & ethical section of human being. Excessive greed and lust has made a human being beast, which is evidenced from the incidents of murder, adultery and sexual abusing, dowry, bribe and child abusing which are increasing day by day. Such human beings are called by Bhartrhari as Devil-Men (Manavaraksasah)⁹

The sense of differentiation makes a man egocentric or narrow which close the door of immanent ideas. If man is not isolated from the society, he starts looking other as his own self which generates the feeling for his neighbours, relatives as his own and nobody is excluded from himself. These kinds of feeling helps him to stop the desire of exploitation, desire to seize others property, hatred and untouchability, cheating and fobbing other people etc. in *Isopanisad* these are explained very nicely as follows –

**“Isavasyamidam sarvam yat kinca jogatyam jagat
Tena tyaktena bhunjithah ma gradha kasya-
avidhanam”¹⁰**

It means whatever remains in this universe is covered by the self, so we should enjoy through our sacrifice and not showing any temptation of other things. If a man does not having the sense of owing , he can't understand the

significance of inherent inclusion in the tradition leading him to the path of exclusion resulting in the exploitation of human being, as well as exploitation of the environment as a whole.

It is the *Dharma* or ethical values that can save the distress people from the sinful activities. The pleasure (*Kama*) which we get through *Artha* or money is temporary and will be destroyed immediately. The permanent bliss or pleasure is possible and it can be obtained through the proper exercise of *Dharma* or ethical or moral activities. It can lead us to the stage of *Moksa*, the world of **immortality, light and the reality**. It is the permanent stage of pleasure and the possible way to reach this covetable stage through spiritual, moral and ethical practices.

Now it is mandatory to us to save the distressed human being of our materialistic society and restore peace for the coming generation. But the question may be raised how do we restore ethical values and make them applicable to the modern materialistic society? We have to do it and it is very urgent tusk to the educated people and young generation to restore the values like *Dharma* which can leads us to ultimate stage of life i.e. *Maksa*.

Here our discussion starts with the *Upanisadic* thought –*Matribath pardareshu, Parodravaya nastabath, Atmabath sarvabhuteshu Ja Pashati Sa Pandito*. If we can grasp the true meaning of the Upanisadic verse and the message of the first phrase then there will be no rape, torture, sexual harassment on women in our society. If we follow the second phase of the verse, we will fill happy with the things which do we possess ourselves and we then curve down our desire to make our life delightful, as we know that desire and delusion is the main cause of sorrow. The third phase of the verse teaches us to behave with other people (living and non living things) as we behave with ourselves. We should show respect other people, younger or elder and make sure that our words or deeds should not hurt other's sentiment as we possess the same Atman as other do possess and individual self or *Atman* is the part of *Brahman (Jiva Brahman napanah)*. The same teaching in other way is found in the mantra of *Yajurveda* (38/18) as follows –

**“Mitrasya ma caksusa sarvani
Bhutani samiksantam/
Mitrasyaham caksusa sarvani
Bhutani samikse
Mitrasya caksusa samiksamahe.”¹¹**

It means all other beings look upon me with the eyes of a friend; and also I look upon all beings with the eyes of a friend; and we may look upon one another with the eye of a friend too. In this way the teaching of *Upanisad* is not the particular religious people of a particular country. But it seems to us that it is the message to all the human being of past, present and future. Now the question may be raised, how do we realize the true meaning of above mentioned *Upanisadic* Verse? To answer this we keep our mind that in our country we got nine philosophical schools and except Charvaka all the schools believe that *Moksa* is the ultimate value of our life and *Dharma* is the means to achieve this ultimate value. Among them Mahayana sects of Buddhism and Sankarachariya's concept of liberation or value is superior because they believe on Jivanmukti or embodied liberation. They said - so long they

do not attain Nirvana, I will not attain it myself. A **Bodhisattva** efforts for Nirvana for all living being.

Another concept of value considered as the landmark in Sankara's **Advaita Vedanta**. In the eight century, the great Sankara gave a commentary on Vedanta, is known as **Brahma sutra Bhasya**. In those sutras he has emphasized that liberation is possible and embodied being can attain in his life. Sankaracharya also thinks for all living being. So we can say his theory of **Moksa**, (Sammum Bonum) is known as cosmic. Through the exercise of ethical and moral teaching (**Dharma**), one can realize the ultimate reality of the self and the world and enjoy the eternal bliss with **Brahma**.

The above discussion is made from the Indian rooted religious and cultural philosophical point of view. But it is not true that these are the only way to perform **Dharma** and attain **Moksha** (Liberation). If somebody practices the **Dharma** or ethical and moral teaching in other way like Islamic or Christianity, etc. then they can also make this world peaceful as well as amiable and ultimately enjoy the eternal bliss.

Atheist who do not follow the so called particular religious rituals and don't have any faith on any type of god, what will be with them? The answer is, theist or atheist who will be busy with their material gain and totally neglect the spiritual, ethical or moral values, will be dissatisfied with their life and their life will be painful at the end. An atheist need not worship god who believe in morality and do good for human being and never ever hurt anybody by his word and deed. Immanuel Kant said – you need not to worship god if you are morally rich. Tagore also gives the same message through a Bengali Verse

“Nastik seo pai Bidhatar bar/ Dharmikatar korena arambar/ Sradhakoreya jale buddhir alo/ Shastro manena mane manusherbhalo.”¹²

The atheist may get the blessing of god, though he never shows his religious activities in a superficial way. He may not follow the religious scriptures but he never forget to lit the light of wisdom with respect and do good works for the distress human beings.

Question may be raised if Dharma or ethical values does not work then we have to think for another solution to reconstruct the ruining society i.e. strict rules and immediate punishment which can be imposed on the defaulter to show

other as an instance. Beside ethical and moral practices, rule of laws can only reduce crime rates. During Vedic period Dharma (ethical and moral values) was practiced but immoral incidences were happened. Drapadi was assaulted and harassed in the Court of Kauravas in front of so called learned people. Karna and Ekalavya were not given their due prestige as they were believed to belong to lower cast. So how do we think that Dharma or the teaching of ethics and morality do work in *Kali Yuga* (Modern Age). The country where rules are imposed strictly and immediately, the crime rate like theft, rape and sexual harassment have been reduced. **So it can be said that where Dharma fails strict rules work.**

To discuss the concept of values it seems that all the schools of Indian tradition differ with each other. Other religions, excluding Indian Origin have different views on Dharma or values but the ultimate goal is likely same. It has happened because the concept of Values or Dharma and Moksa are so vast and our life is too long to see from a single angle. So it does not matter which path we are following to perform dharma or ethical and moral practices, as because any one of the paths leads us from unreal to reality, darkness to light and death to immortality if it is performed in proper way.

In the current decade the materialistic outlook and hedonistic attitude of people ruins the society as it gives more importance on Artha and Kama. The main purpose of this article is to highlight the spiritualistic view of our ancient classical thought. Our materialistic activities apparently give us pleasure but ultimately it ends with pain, despondency etc. We are going to forget our heritage, tradition, Vedas, Upanishads, and Gita. In those time the Sages cultivate themselves and said Moksha or liberation would be the original goal in human life and to achieve Moksha we need to execute or perform the activities of our daily lives as per Dharma prescribed in our religious scriptures. In the present scenario we have a great need to study the philosophy of values i.e. **Moksha Sastra**. If we want to save the distress people from the miserable and destructive end of life, we should turn toward **Dharma** or ethical values as well as follow rules of the society and adopt balanced life style which is a proper balance of material with spiritual blend. As we are the citizen of this Global World (*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*), so our duty is to save the earth for our own sake as well for the other fellow people of this society. This is the only way to make our lives amiable and meaningful in view of its purpose and goal.

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