

Society and Ethics in Ancient Literature

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Abstract—Amidst various changes along the path of Earth, the form we have today contributes to the ever-evolving nature of the universe. Similarly, the creatures inhabiting this planet have also played their part. Day by day, it becomes evident that humans are the finest beings on this Earth. Although no one has officially granted us this certificate, we have, through our own efforts, acquired the ability to tread the path of progress. While individual perspectives on morality vary, it is undeniable that humans, since ancient times, have contemplated rules and laws for the safety of both humanity and the animal and plant kingdoms. Although the grand protection of the universe remains elusive, we have long been concerned with safeguarding society and its framework. Among the people of India, a land with ancient roots, there exists a thoughtful group of individuals who have crafted various rules and principles for the well-being of weaker beings. The fruits of this contemplation are evident in the Vedas, the repository of knowledge that originated in ancient India. Not only the Vedas, but we have also accumulated diverse literary treasures. Within ancient literature, we find a wealth of knowledge that empowers us to protect the vulnerable. Additionally, through methods like brainwashing, we have influenced human minds regarding concepts of good and evil. Thus, let us now delve into how ancient literature explained morality and how it shaped our understanding of ethics.

Keywords: Ancient Human Society, Continuous Exploration, Creating Humanity, Ethical Principals, Rigveda to Atharvaveda, Creating Knowledge.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of human society, there has been a continuous exploration of how individuals can coexist beautifully and harmoniously. Despite facing various challenges and conflicts, the outcome has been the development of policies by humans. In every societal structure, the need for rules and effective social management becomes evident. The enduring tradition of the Indian subcontinent, still present today, sometimes contends with Western influences in the contemporary era. Occasionally, due to the unfavorable attitudes of certain individuals, the positive elements that have been cultivated for the well-being of humanity over the ages appear to be diminishing gradually, as if fading away with each passing hour.

The majority of us today are ensnared by advertisements that promise effortless success without hard work or at a minimal cost. Personally, I feel engulfed in disappointment, having fallen short of achieving goals through minimal effort and anticipating extraordinary success in a short timeframe. As individuals who have evolved, our waning interest in hard work, patience, resilience, and enthusiasm for a challenging life is gradually leading us towards a natural decline every day.

II. PLAN OF THE STUDY/RESEARCH

A prevailing atmosphere of indifference surrounds us. In the face of this unbearable situation, we can shift our focus towards the ethical principles of ancient Indian society for liberation. The term 'Niti' or ethics holds a comprehensive and profound meaning. The word 'Niti' is formed by adding the suffix 'क्ति' (kti) to the root 'नी' (Nee). Niti serves as a guiding force for both society and individuals on the correct path. In essence, without rules and discipline, society becomes inherently unstable.

The favorable conditions of righteousness, liberated from this unbearable circumstance, pave the way to freedom. To grasp the ethical standards of our ancient Indian society, we can center our attention on the term 'Niti.' In the absence of discipline or regulation, society descends into chaos.

"When we explore ancient history, going beyond the religious discussions in the Rigveda, we encounter details about social customs, rituals, attire, education, governance policies, and other pertinent aspects that remain relevant today. Moreover, insights into the independence and empowerment of women can be gleaned from the Vedas. Rigveda 10.34 also unveils the concepts of sportsmanship and the poignant emotions within a gambler's heart."

The Samaveda explores the realm of music, the Yajurveda centers around rituals and sacrifices, and the Atharvaveda encompasses healing mantras, as well as mantras for enemy destruction, protection from demons and ghosts, and penance mantras. Though not explicitly moralistic, these texts assure safeguarding against sin and reference penalties for violating regulations.

While individual Vedas may not overtly present moral principles, the associated Brahmanas linked with each Veda function as both narrative and explanatory compositions. These Brahmanas are categorized into three segments: Shuddha Brahmana, Aranyaka, and Upanishad. Aranyaka delves into the clandestine knowledge of the fusion of knowledge and action, while the Upanishads establish the groundwork for transcendental knowledge.

"The ancient sages of India pursued the path of human well-being through knowledge. Initially, they regarded rituals (yajna) as the exclusive means to achieve salvation. However, they later came to realize that enduring welfare cannot be solely attained through rituals but also through knowledge. This viewpoint of the sages is documented in literary works known as the Upanishads.

The Upanishads convey the core concept that Brahman (the ultimate reality) is the truth, the world is an illusion, and there is no distinction between the individual soul (jiva) and the ultimate reality (Brahman). In the Katha Upanishad, we encounter the narrative of Nachiketa, whose father Vajasravas conducted a yajna named Vishwajit. To address a flaw in the ritual, Nachiketa, motivated by a sense of duty towards his father, ventures to the realm of Yama, the god of death.

This story of Nachiketa exemplifies the son's commitment to his father, highlighting the ethical dimension. It serves as a symbolic representation of a son's acknowledgment of duty and morality towards his father.

The themes of ethics, dharma, philosophy, and religious doctrines are intricately interwoven into the narratives of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Various religious sects, including the Shramanas, Bhikshus, Aranyakas, and Buddhists, view these two epics as effective vehicles for conveying their respective religious beliefs. The stories within these epics, incorporating elements such as sacrifice, friendship, non-violence, and detachment from worldly matters, serve as moral lessons.

From the Vedas to the Ramayana and Mahabharata, a timeless inquiry echoes: What is the secret of life? Where is salvation attained? How can life be enriched and meaningful? Ancient Indian sages explored answers to these enduring questions through contemplation. The insights they gleaned, disseminated through literature, have enriched subsequent human societies. This wisdom finds expression in various forms, including the Vedas, Brahmana literature, philosophical treatises, and the narratives of the Ramayana and Mahabharata."

"Despite the evolution of eras and literary styles, the timeless questions persist, and so do the answers. The insights derived from the Vedas are presented in a different manner in philosophical texts, and once again in the Ramayana and Mahabharata through storytelling. Consequently, the essence has been embraced by the human heart, transcending distinctions of caste, religion, and age. This makes the Ramayana and Mahabharata, particularly, the quintessential scriptures of India.

As the times have changed and literary forms evolved, the questions and answers have remained consistent. The truths conveyed in Vedic scriptures align with those in the Ramayana and Mahabharata, conveyed through the medium of storytelling. Consequently, the philosophy has become ingrained, universally accepted across castes, religions, and ages. Hence, the Mahabharata is often hailed as the fifth Veda, underscoring its pivotal role in shaping India's civilization, culture, and philosophical thought. Serving as a treatise on ethics, a philosophical doctrine, and a historical narrative, the Mahabharata genuinely embodies the greatness of India."

"Bharata, born to Dushyanta and Shakuntala, lends his name to the Indian subcontinent and the Mahabharata. This narrative provides insights into ancient Indian spousal relationships, the roles of wives and sons in human life, marriage customs, and laws of inheritance. The tale of King Yayati imparts a moral lesson, cautioning against allowing desires to be the driving force behind one's actions. Analogous to clarified butter intensifying flames when poured into fire, succumbing to desires intensifies the flames of craving. The stories of ascetics and monks within this narrative emphasize the principle of detachment, advocating a policy of non-attachment to worldly desires."

"In the post-Vedic era and the age of epics, particularly the Ramayana and Mahabharata, we encounter a diverse array of ethical teachings. The Ramayana imparts valuable lessons on filial piety, self-sacrifice, and tolerance. The narrative unfolds with Ram's exile, the self-sacrifice of his younger brother Lakshman, the unwavering devotion of Hanuman, and the demon king Ravana's adherence to righteousness, providing a source of satisfaction and joy. The dimensions unveiled in the Ramayana are unparalleled in world history.

Broadly speaking, the story highlights the exceptional morality of Bharat, who, despite being a rival, approaches his elder brother Ram with the intention of returning everything during Ram's exile. This episode is considered the second instance in world history to showcase such an exemplary act, emphasizing the rarity of extraordinary morality. The Ramayana portrays the

magnificence of Ramchandra and the rebellion against the unrighteous actions of the demon king Ravana as symbols of unwavering commitment to virtue and ethics."

"While Sita's self-sacrifice for her husband Rama's coronation, including the challenging trial by fire, may appear stringent, it aligns with royal policy and religious observance, rendering the Ramayana ethically regarded. In the Mahabharata's account of sibling rivalry, encompassing conflict, violence, and animosity, the triumph of truth and adherence to righteousness stands out as the catalyst for ethical teachings. Hence, it is expressed, 'The Mahabharata's narrative is akin to nectar,' as eloquently stated by the wise Kashiram."

Within the Mahabharata, numerous moral discourses, such as Vidura's teachings characterized by sagacity and commitment to righteousness, are prevalent. He counsels against a king employing greedy methods to kill a flock of golden-winged birds, resulting in the loss of both the birds and the gold. This narrative conveys the message that a king should refrain from resorting to such means for achieving goals. Various stories rooted in morality within the Mahabharata significantly contribute to the initiation of ethical teachings."

"The narrative of King Shibi in the Mahabharata serves as a noteworthy example. The moral imperative of self-sacrifice for the preservation of life takes center stage in this account, underscoring the significance of love and friendship even towards adversaries. The tale of the hawk and doves illustrates that, in the pursuit of protection, all living beings should unite and stand together, highlighting the potential dangers of disunity and mutual conflict. These narratives, including the story of King Shibi, convey valuable ethical lessons, not only through similes but also with a clear purpose.

Despite the utilization of allegorical or metaphorical storytelling, the Mahabharata contains numerous stories centered on morality. King Shibi's story, in particular, emphasizes the profound moral principle of self-sacrifice for the preservation of life."

"The narrative involving Gautami's son, who succumbs to a snake bite, is another story that imparts lessons about the significance of past karmas (actions). In this account, a snake presents a deceased cobra to Gautami and inquires about how he could avenge his son's death. Gautami refuses to harm the snake, asserting that it is not accountable for her son's demise. According to her, the snake's actions are a consequence of past karma. The snake further discloses that it has no control over its actions, as everything is governed by Mahakala (the great time).

These stories function as instructive tales regarding ethical conduct and the repercussions of one's actions. They underscore the importance of moral principles in everyday life, whether within the relationships of spouses, parents, and children, or in broader social contexts. The narratives in the Mahabharata offer valuable insights into the ethical and moral framework of ancient Indian society."

"The story of Chirakarin is truly captivating. It revolves around a man whose son, named Chirakarin, faced a challenging situation. Fueled by anger towards his wife, the man instructed his son to kill her and then abruptly left home. Chirakarin found himself deeply troubled, torn between the prospect of committing a heinous crime by killing his mother and violating his father's command. Reflecting on his sense of duty, Chirakarin continued his journey with these conflicting thoughts. Meanwhile, his father returned, and in that moment, his anger had subsided. Observing that his son had not carried out the order, the father was pleased. Throughout the Mahabharata, discussions on righteousness, ethics, and liberation are interwoven, with the Shanti Parva and Anushasana Parva standing out as particularly rich sources of such discussions."

Reclining on a bed of arrows amidst the battlefield, Yudhishtira engages in a discourse with his grandfather Bhishma, initiating the Shanti Parva. This section extensively explores topics such as the duties of a ruler, the principles of varnashrama dharma (duties based on caste and stage of life), a son's responsibilities towards parents, and a disciple's duties towards a teacher. The latter part of the Shanti Parva delves into philosophical discussions, while the Anushasana Parva incorporates discussions on jurisprudence. Similar themes are evident in the Vanaparva, Udyogaparva, Bhishmaparva, and Shalyaparva.

Additionally, a foundational work in ethics is the Bhagavad Gita, where Lord Krishna imparts crucial teachings to the distressed Arjuna on duty and the nature of the self. Addressing philosophical issues within Indian philosophical traditions concerning the self, the Bhagavad Gita's essence lies in the teachings of Jnana Yoga (the path of knowledge), Karma Yoga (the path of action), and complete surrender to God. This profound wisdom is divided into 18 chapters, integrated within the Mahabharata. King Avantivarman of Kashmir (883 CE) is reported to have heard the Gita's recitation at the time of his death, while the Arabic traveler Al-Biruni praised the Bhagavad Gita for its profound wisdom.

Next is the era of the Puranas. During this period, writings on cosmology, the genealogy of royal dynasties, and depictions of deities and their significant deeds emerge. Each Purana is deeply rooted in Vedic traditions, leaving no room for doubt about

their connection to Vedic dharma. The historical and legendary events presented in these Puranas are recognized as authentic history, acknowledging their importance.

Following this, Buddhist literature unfolds with precious philosophical doctrines. Nagarjuna's works, including "Madhyamakakarika," "Mahayana Bhashya," and "Pragnadanda," stand as invaluable scriptures. In the 5th century AD, Dignaga authored "Pramana Samuccaya" and "Nyaya Pravesa." Ashvaghosha's "Buddhacharita" focuses on the life and teachings of Buddha, while "Sundarananda" narrates the tale of Sundari and Nanda. Despite Sundari initially resisting, she eventually embraces Buddha's teachings, depicting her profound distress. The central themes of this epic revolve around the fundamental principles and teachings of Buddha.

The "Sariputta Prakarana" holds notable significance as it explores the theme of Sariputta and Maudgalyayana seeking education from Buddha. In the narrative, Sariputta engages in a discussion with his friend Maudgalyayana about pursuing Buddha's teachings, despite Vidushaka discouraging them by asserting that receiving education from a Kshatriya (warrior) is unsuitable for a Brahmin. Sariputta counters this argument, stating that even medicine administered by an inferior person can effectively cure illnesses.

Arya Shura's composed stories in the Jataka Mala are compiled together, serving as an exemplar of religious philosophy. Numerous tales from the Jataka Mala have become intertwined with the tapestry of antiquity. Alongside the Jataka Mala, two significant scriptures, "Avadana Shataka" and "Divyavadana," draw upon and support the stories found in the Vinaya Pitaka. Buddhist followers propagated these stories to disseminate religious principles and offer examples of the divine.

Within the realm of Sanskrit literature, tales have been crafted to illuminate universal ethical teachings, independent of any religious context. A notable and invaluable scripture in this literary tradition is the Panchatantra, a compilation of fables categorized into Mitralabha, Mitrabhedha, Sandhibigraha, Labdhaprakash, and Aparikshitakaritva. Kalidasa's "Abhijnanasakuntalam" imparts moral wisdom through Kanva's teachings in its fourth act, while Harsha Bhardwaja's "Nagananda" is a dramatic work rooted in moral principles. "Hitopadesha" represents a storytelling genre grounded in moral philosophy.

III. CONCLUSION

In Indian philosophy, the schools of thought, including Sankhya, Yoga, Nyaya, and Vaisheshika, are directly incorporated into discussions on logic and experience. However, collectively, they are often referred to as ethical philosophy or Niti Dharma. Despite presenting diverse perspectives, a common thread unites them in certain ethical and spiritual principles. Each philosophy recognizes the practical utility of darsana shastra in human life. The overarching goal shared by all major and higher philosophies is the fulfillment of life's purpose, encompassing ethics and spirituality, collectively known as Niti.

Smriti shastras, comprising legal texts, provide written regulations governing the four stages of life (Chaturashrama). Prominent examples include Manusmriti, Yajnavalkya Smriti, Vishnusmriti, Parashara Smriti, and others. Kautilya's Arthashastra stands as a foundational work in political science, delving into national and worldly issues. The seventh chapter of Manu Smriti, titled "Rajadharma," eloquently discusses the principles of justice. Chanakya, also known as Kautilya, is revered as a guru, and his work, "Arthashastra," serves as a significant treatise on political and legal principles. Additionally, Somadeva's "Nitibakhyamrita" focuses less on warfare and more on ethical teachings. Thus, it can be asserted that ancient Indian literature reflects the embodiment of ethical values within the social structure of ancient Indian society.

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