

ETHICAL BELIEFS: AN OBSERVATION FROM INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Ethics, generally, is about the inner nature of a person, not just outward behavior. The Vedic period marks the beginning of ethical ideas in Indian philosophy. The article studies the same in the beginning and also explores that ethical beliefs did exist in Vedas, concerning truthfulness and interpersonal conduct. The research now focuses on the idea of *ashrama* that refers to the four life stages in Hindu thought, each with specific duties. While dharma is a broad and central concept in Indian ethics, encompassing duty, law, morality, and truth. Karma, on the other side, is the belief that all intentional actions produce consequences beyond what is immediately visible. The link between dharma and karma implies that everyone is born into a role (social and moral) determined by past actions, with limited ability to change their status in one lifetime. Then it highlights four *purusharthas* are the main goals of human life. Also it studies Bhagavad Gita offers the concept of *nishkama* karma that teaches one should act without attachment to the results, emphasizing that action is essential, but the right lies only in the doing, not in the outcome. And the last part employs Jain ethics (a deeply spiritual and disciplined system that emphasizes renunciation and non-violence as core values) and Buddhist ethics (based on three key ideas: free will, the distinction between good and bad, and causation related to moral actions and their consequences). Thus, the results provide that ethical beliefs are valued instrumentally, as means to purify the mind for spiritual awakening.

Key Words: Beliefs, Dharma, Ethics, Karma. *Rita*, Values.

Introduction: Ethical issues have existed since the beginning of human life. Ideas of right and wrong, and what is fair or proper, change with time, place, and situation. What is considered right in one culture or moment might not be in another. These beliefs are shaped by personal and cultural values. Moral actions, whether good or bad, depend on how they are judged. Different people may see the same action in different ways. Judgments often depend on who benefits and who is responsible. Indian ethics also classifies values like happiness, health, knowledge, and truth as good, while suffering, illness, ignorance, and falsehood are seen as bad. These moral judgments are considered universal and intended for the well-being of all beings. The highest good is seen as harmony with the cosmic order, known as *rita*, which governs both natural and moral behavior. Actions are considered right when they align with this cosmic truth, and wrong when they oppose it (*anrita*). The concept of *dharma* represents this fusion of natural, moral, and social order, and is essentially the Indian equivalent of ethics. While Indian ethics may appear naturalistic, it is largely normative, often justified as a divine order. With time, the Vedas gained normative status as ethical sources, and concepts like *dharma*, *karma*, *ashrama*, and *purusharthas* became central to classical Hindu ethical thought.

Indian Concept of Ethics

According to the Oxford Dictionary, *ethic* refers to a “systems of moral principles, rules, and conduct,” while *ethics* is defined as the ‘science of morals.’ The word *ethics* originates from the Latin word *ethicus* and the Greek word *ethikos*, both of which stem from *ethos*, meaning ‘character.’ Unlike behavior, which can be influenced by external factors, ethics is considered intrinsic, deriving from one’s innermost values. In simple terms, ethics is the study or science of morals, moral principles, and rules governing social conduct.¹

Vedanta or Indian *ethos* suggests that the *Atman* (the inner self) is the true essence of a person. The ethical problem is as old as humanity itself. Concepts of righteousness (*Dharma*) and social responsibility have evolved over time and continue to vary with changing circumstances. The terms *right*, *fair*, and *proper* are commonly used to describe socially acceptable behavior.² These terms reflect judgments about how people treat others: distinguishing between right and wrong behavior, fair and unfair actions, and proper or improper decisions. Our understanding of what is right, fair, or proper is shaped by our moral standards, which are influenced by personal beliefs.

However, these beliefs can vary from person to person, culture to culture, and from one time period to another. What may be considered right or fair in one situation might be seen as wrong or unfair in another. Moral standards are not absolute; they are shaped by the moral values an individual holds. Whether an action is called good or bad, right or wrong, depends on the situation and the values of the person judging it. One important question is: Who is making the judgment? People see the same problem differently depending on their point of view, and so their judgments also differ. Often, we make distinctions like 'us' versus 'them,' or think in terms of 'benefits' versus 'duties.'

In their everyday moral thinking, Indian people often consider things like happiness, health, survival, children, pleasure, peace, friendship, knowledge, and truth to be *good*. On the other hand, they see their opposites such as suffering, sickness, death, infertility, pain, anger, hatred, ignorance, and lies as *bad* or undesirable. These values are not just limited to individuals but are believed to apply to all living beings. The idea is that the highest good is achieved when everyone in the world can enjoy the positive things the universe provides.

This highest good is closely connected to *Rita*, the natural or cosmic order. It represents the creative and guiding force that shapes human behavior. Therefore, the social and moral order is seen as part of this greater natural order. This refers to the natural, ordered way in which things work; the truth of reality (*sat*) and is seen as the foundation of the *Law*.³ People may try to avoid or fix the harmful effects of certain actions, but an action is considered *right* if it follows this natural order and *wrong* if it goes against it. When something goes against this order, it is called *anrita* (disorder).

Doing what is right helps to protect the well-being of everyone because it aligns with *rita* (the natural and cosmic order).⁴ Because of this, it is generally considered that doing the right thing is not just good, but also necessary - this is the basis of moral responsibility (the idea of 'ought'). In Indian thought, this unity between the cosmic order and moral duty is expressed through the idea of *dharma*, which becomes the Indian equivalent of what we call *ethics* in the West.

The idea of what is *right* (rightness) is often linked with *rite* (ritual). That means moral actions are sometimes expressed through formal rituals, even though the details of those rituals may vary. For example, a duty based on an important value like ensuring the survival of the community can turn into a value itself, such as performing a sacrifice, no matter what is actually being offered.

In the long run, rituals come to be seen as having moral value on their own. Hence, they can also gain power in society, and people may start using them for selfish purposes. Some groups may begin to claim special rights or advantages based on how the rituals should be done, what they involve, or how useful they are. This can lead to different duties and moral rules being assigned to different social groups, creating a complex moral structure within society.

What we call *ethics* may seem based on nature or tradition, but it is mostly about what people believed *ought* to be done, that is, it is *normative*. The usual justification is that this is the divinely ordered way of things, which often leads people to treat moral rules as absolute and unchangeable. Though, this doesn't mean that real ethical questions, problems, or contradictions are not raised. Even if these issues are expressed in religious or mythological language, they still deal with meaningful moral concerns. For example, scriptures may say one should avoid eating meat. But if a priest refuses to eat a ritual offering that includes meat, he may be seen as offending the gods. If the gods are offended, cosmic and social order could be disturbed. So what should the priest do? This presents a real ethical dilemma.⁵

In later periods, the authority of the Vedas becomes *normative*, meaning they are seen not just as spiritual texts but also as the foundation of moral and ethical life. The Vedas, which originally focused on hymns and rituals, come to be viewed as sources or symbols of ethical values. At the same time, an important social and spiritual system called the ashrama (the four stages of life) develops, along with two basic moral ideas: *dharma* (duty or righteousness) and *karma* (the law of cause and effect). These ideas eventually lead to the broader ethical concept of *purusharthas* (the four goals of human life) which are central to classical Hindu ethics.

Ashrama (Stages of Life): Life is viewed as moving through four interconnected phases, each governed by its own set of rules. These are: the student phase, which calls for discipline, self-control, and devotion to one's teacher; the householder phase, which involves marriage, family life, and related duties; the stage of partial retreat, characterized by a gradual withdrawal from worldly activities and pleasures; and finally, renunciation, which involves complete withdrawal and deep reflection. The final phase prepares one for ultimate liberation by letting go of both selfish desires and selfless attachments. This stage also requires breaking away from traditional family and societal roles, leading to becoming a self-reliant and independent person.

Dharma & Karma: It is a broad and unique concept in Indian philosophy. The word has many meanings, starting from 'fixed principles' in the Vedas, and including ideas like 'law,' 'custom,' 'duty,' 'rights,' 'justice,' 'morality,' 'virtue,' 'religion,' 'good deeds,' 'function,' 'norm,' 'righteousness,' and 'truth.' The term comes from the Sanskrit root *dhr*, which means to hold, support, maintain, or keep together. Dharma basically means that which preserves and brings order and unity to everything - nature, society, and individuals alike. It evolves from the Vedic idea of an organic whole and focuses more on the human aspect. For a Hindu, dharma represents a way of life whose authority goes beyond personal or even group preferences. It has a higher, universal sanction.⁶

Dharma is often spoken of as if it were an absolute, fixed reality. However, it actually serves as a general framework for a set of laws and rules that come from culture. The specific content of dharma is shaped by many factors especially tradition, customs, and the guidance of knowledgeable people. In this way, dharma provides a structure for what is considered morally right or desirable at any given time.⁷ What unites this idea is its focus on maintaining the natural harmony of life, ensuring justice is done, and reducing the burden of karma. It may also aim to help free the individual from the effects of past actions. The basic idea of Karma is that every conscious and intentional action a person takes creating effects beyond what is immediately visible. This idea of endless actions and their consequences leads to the belief in rebirth in Indian thought. Good actions (merit or virtue) need to be rewarded, and bad actions (demerit) punished, according to the Law of Karma.⁸ Because dharma (duty or moral order) and karma (action and its effects) are connected, several important ideas follow: there are no random births that cause social inequality; a person's social position in this life cannot be changed; and each person has their own dharma, both as their natural qualities and their social responsibilities.⁹

In addition, Manu acknowledges that dharma (duty) can change in different times, which shows that ethics can be relative. He lists ten important virtues: contentment, forgiveness, self-control, not getting angry, not taking what is not yours, purity, control over desires, wisdom, self-awareness, and truth. These virtues are common ideas in Indian ethics.¹⁰

Purushartha: The term *puruṣārtha* has been interpreted in multiple ways, such as 'value of life,' 'goal of life,' 'aim of existence,' and 'meaning of life.' The scholar like Hiriyanna translates it as "a consciously pursued human value or object of desire."¹¹ Literally, the classical Sanskrit expression *puruṣārtha* means "that which is striven for by a human being" or "an object of human effort." When used in an adverbial sense (*puruṣārtham*), it conveys the idea of something done "for the sake of man" or "on account of man."¹² Etymologically, the term '*pumarthā*' (or *puruṣārtha*) refers to something that a person either desires to attain (*upādeya*) or avoid (*heya*).¹³ While it encompasses both what we seek and what we shun, classical discussions typically focus on the positive goals, the things human beings aspire to achieve.

Hence, the traditional fourfold division of *puruṣārthas* supports the understandings. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the Kāma (pursuit of sensual pleasure and emotional fulfillment) and Artha (pursuit of material prosperity and well-being) are goals commonly pursued in ordinary life, while the other two Dharma (ethical and moral living in accordance with duty) and Mokṣa (ultimate freedom or spiritual liberation) represent higher ideals that every person ought to pursue.¹⁴

Though, these goals don't always happen one after another, but sometimes one goal helps you reach another. For example, following your duties (dharma) is often seen as helping you to achieve spiritual freedom (moksha). Because of this, people sometimes rank these goals, and there has been a lot of discussion about which goal is the most important in Indian philosophy. The idea of life goals (*puruṣārthas*) helps guiding the rules and behavior for different social groups and life stages. Each person tries to reach the best goals based on their personality, situation, and social role. Sometimes it is about balancing different goals, and other times it is about choosing which goal is most important. For example, a Brahmin in the stage of stepping back from family duties might feel he has completed his responsibilities and now wants to focus fully on spiritual freedom. What he does to reach this goal depends on his own choices, guided by his meditation and understanding. His duties fit his natural nature, and he alone controls them. So, his ethics come from his inner insight. This close link between inner knowledge and ethics is a key feature of Indian ethics.

Gita: The Bhagavad Gita, part of the Mahabharata, is clear and strong in its ethical teachings, which is why it has greatly influenced modern Hindu thought. The Gita stands between two opposing traditions: *Nivritti*, the path of withdrawal and non-action (like strict asceticism); and *Pravritti*, the path of doing social and moral duties. Both paths had their own ethical rules and often conflicted with each other. The Gita raises many difficult ethical questions, for example, whether it is right to fight and kill your own family to regain your kingdom. Not everyone agrees with its answers. The Gita solves this conflict by combining the ideas of

asceticism and duty in the concept of *nishkama* karma, or selfless action. It teaches that action is necessary for everyone, but a person has the right only to do their duty, not to the results of their actions.¹⁵

The Gita's main goal is not just to promote "Good Will" as the basis for moral actions. Instead, it aims to preserve traditional Brahmanical culture and its focus on doing one's duties, while also including the strict ethics of renouncing the world and the growing influence of devotion to God. The Gita's ethics involves both following rules and considering a person's role in society. Everyone should do their duty based on their own nature and social position. This is why the saying goes: it is better to do your own duty imperfectly than to do someone else's duty perfectly.¹⁶

The Gita also recognizes that a person's thoughtful and wise judgment is important in making moral decisions. To support this, it teaches different paths called *yogas*, like *buddhi* yoga (the path of intelligent will) and *jnana* yoga (the path of knowledge). The idea that a person's will can be both smart and practical, meaning it can understand social responsibilities and still be free to choose, is an important idea in the Gita. Besides this, the Gita also teaches values like truth, self-control, and non-violence (*ahimsa*).¹⁷ Again the Gita emphasizes caring for the well-being of everyone (*lokasamgraha*) and wishing good for all living beings.¹⁸

Jaina Ethics

Another well-known ethical tradition in India is Jainism. Jainism is both a philosophy and a way of life. Its spiritual beliefs require strict discipline and renunciation, which shapes the individual and community's way of life, or *dharma*. Jainism prefers a monastic community (called a *samgha*), but living a social life that follows these principles is also acceptable. The life of a monk, especially an *arhant*, a philosopher-ascetic who has reached a nearly perfect knowledge, is the ideal example for ordinary people. Laypersons believe they need to be reborn as monks in the next life to achieve liberation (*moksha*), the ultimate goal in Jainism. All Jain ethics are based on the standards set by monastic life.

Jain ethical life mainly means following strict vows and living simply, avoiding unnecessary or harmful actions. Actually, the Jains don't clearly explain why some practices, like painfully pulling out every hair, are needed, except to say that hair represents pleasure. They believe all pleasure is bad, and pain can be tolerated. This idea is very different from the usual belief that people should avoid pain and seek pleasure. Jain ethics teaches that right behavior means following these vows of self-control, gradually leading to full renunciation like an ascetic.

Besides, in Jain ethics, *Ahimsa* means not harming or injuring any living being and is the most important idea in Jain ethics. Since Jains believe many things are alive and can feel, they show deep respect for all life. This includes strict rules about food, like - not eating meat, alcohol, or certain other foods. They also have rules against hurting, mistreating, or exploiting any living creatures. For example, animals must not be beaten, harmed, overloaded, or kept without enough food or space. Eating meat is completely forbidden because it means killing animals.¹⁹

In general, Jain ethics appears to aim for independence; it is not based on nature alone but on what ought to be done. It accepts that there are objective values, with *ahimsa* being its most important and unique contribution.

The Buddhist Ethics

According to the Buddha, a system of ethics needs three basic ideas: free will, the difference between good and bad, and the idea of cause and effect in moral actions. The third idea means that actions have good or bad results that can be judged morally. This is connected to the Buddhist belief in life after death. There is also the idea that good or bad actions bring consequences. For example, someone who gives to charity expects to receive comfort in future lives, while someone who steals or is greedy will face poverty later. These consequences have two sides: one is about building a good character, called the craftsmanship model; and the other is about rewards and punishments, called the judicial model.

Buddha often talked about the social side of ethics, but he also saw it as a personal journey. This journey involves living a good life, practicing virtues, and doing meditation. Meditation means paying close attention to what you are doing without letting distracting thoughts interrupt. This careful attention helps building the skill to focus during meditation. Across time, meditation spread into everyday life and helped to improve a person's morality. Buddhist ethics connects thinking carefully about right and wrong, giving advice on how to behave, living a certain way, being part of society, and personal growth. The Buddha didn't write a complete book on ethics, but his teachings discuss important ethical ideas. More than just thinking about ethics, he cared deeply about ethics as a practical way of living and a clear path to freedom from suffering.²⁰

To understand where Buddhist ethical values come from, we need to look at the Four Noble Truths, which capture the main teachings of the Buddha. These truths, along with altogether Buddhist view of life, help us to see how Buddhist ethics are shaped. The Buddha did not judge an action based only on a person's intention. He believed that the action itself, how it is done, and what results it produces all matter. Because of this, Buddhist ethics can be described as consequentialist or teleological - meaning they focus on the outcomes or goals of actions, not just the motives behind them.²¹ In line with its focus on consequences, Buddhist ethics strongly emphasizes helping others both in material ways and in their spiritual growth. The Buddha himself is often described as someone deeply concerned with the happiness and well-being of all people. To sum up, Buddhist ethics takes a utilitarian approach, meaning it values actions that benefit the most people. However, unlike hedonistic utilitarianism (which focuses only on pleasure), Buddhist utilitarianism is more about reducing suffering and promoting overall well-being, not just chasing pleasure.²²

The Buddha also spoke about the importance of duties and responsibilities in everyday life. In the Sigalovada Sutta, he explained the mutual duties between parents and children, husbands and wives, teachers and students, and even friends and monks. Though, these are described as mutual responsibilities, not as formal human rights. First, the Buddhist view of duties and rights is more human-centered than legal-based. Second, although the Buddha saw duties and rights as important, he did not turn them into a full ethical system based only on obligation, like in many Western philosophies.²³

In Buddhism, wrongdoing is often described as an unskillful or unwholesome action, or something that pollutes the mind. Feelings like worry, restlessness, or unhealthy fear about past wrongs are seen as obstacles to living a good moral life. So, while ideas like duty, responsibility, justice, and righteousness are part of Buddhist ethics, they are included within a larger human-centered and consequence-based approach to right and wrong.

Conclusion: In concluding, Indian ethical philosophy is a deeply layered and evolving tradition that weaves together ritual, duty, personal growth, and universal values. Unlike many Western systems that seek a single moral foundation like reason, utility, or divine command; Indian ethics operates through an integrated framework grounded in cosmic harmony (*ṛta*), personal duty (*dharma*), karmic consequence (*karma*), and spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*). At its core, Indian ethics balances individual character (*ātman*) with social roles, moral behavior with spiritual insight, and intention with action's consequences. Traditions like Vedas, Buddhism, Jainism, and the Bhagavad Gita's teachings offer varying emphases such as knowledge, renunciation, non-violence, and selfless action; but all converge on the idea that ethics is both an inward journey and a social responsibility.

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