

Indian Ethics: Individual and Social

Ethics (*nītiśāstra*) is a branch of philosophy that deals with moral values. The word 'ethics' comes from the Greek *ethikos*, which means a set of moral principles. The word is sometimes used to refer to the moral principles of a particular social or religious group or an individual. It studies human character and conduct in terms of good and bad, right and wrong. What are the qualities of good character? What type of human behaviour is evil or bad? How should one act in life? These are some of the fundamental questions of ethics.

The moral code of the people is an indicator of their social and spiritual ways of life. The true essence of human life is to live amidst worldly joy and sorrows. Ethics is primarily concerned with the moral issues of the world. True religion lays stress on moral virtues. People are required to discharge their duties according to the moral code of ethics. A true knowledge of ethics would be attained if one practices and imbibes these moral values. Ethics is of two kinds, individual and social. Individual ethics is indicative of the good qualities that are essential for individual well-being and happiness. Social ethics represents the values that are needed for social order and harmony.

In the knowledge tradition of India, ethics has its origin in its religious and philosophical thinking. From time immemorial, various religious faiths have flourished here. Every religious and every philosophical system of India has a prominent ethical component. Ethics is the core of all these systems. In every religious tradition, good moral conduct is considered essential for a happy and contented life. Without following the path of righteousness no one can attain supreme goal (*mokṣa*) of life. For this one has to perform good deeds and avoid wrong-doing.

The Cosmic Order

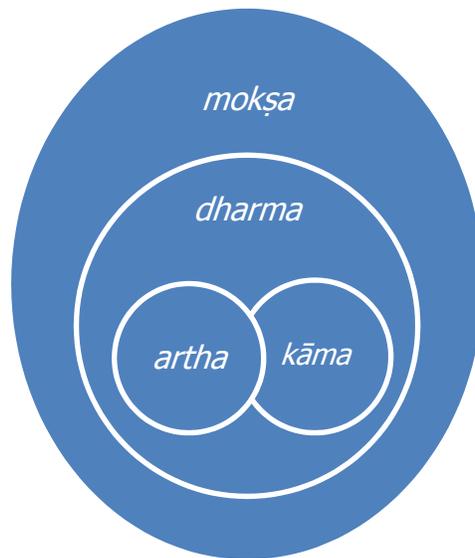
India has a very ancient history of thinking about ethics. Its central concepts are represented in *Ṛgveda*, one of oldest knowledge texts not only of India but of the entire world. In *Ṛgveda*, we come across the idea of an all-pervading cosmic order (*ṛta*) which stands for harmony and balance in nature and in human society. Here *ṛta* is described as a power or force which is the controller of the forces of nature and of moral values in human society. In human society, when this harmony and balance are disturbed, there is disorder and suffering. This is the power or force that lies behind nature and keeps everything in balance.

In Indian tradition, the concept of *ṛta* gave rise to the idea of *dharma*. The term *dharma* here does not mean mere religion; it stands for duty, obligation and righteousness. It is a whole way of life in which ethical values are considered supreme and everyone is expected to perform his or her duty according to his or her social position and station in life. In Buddhism, the word *dhamma* is used, which is the Pāli equivalent of the Sanskrit word *dharma*. The guidelines and rules regarding what is considered as appropriate behaviour for human beings are prescribed in the *Dharma Śāstras*. These are sociological texts that tell us about our duties and obligations as individuals as well as members of society.

In the Hindu way of life, every individual is expected to perform his or her duty appropriate to his or her caste (*varṇa*) and stage of life (*āśrama*). This division of one's life into the four *āśramas* and their respective *dharmas*, was designed, in principle at least, to provide fulfilment to the person in his social, moral and spiritual aspects, and so to lead to harmony and balance in the society. The four *āśramas* are: (1) *brahmacarya*, stage of studentship; (2) *gṛhastha*, stage of the householder; (3) *vanaprastha*, life in the forest; and *saṁnyāsa*, renunciation.

Apart from this, the concept of four ends of life (*puruṣārthas*) is also very important. These four ends of life are the goals which are desirable in them and also needed for fulfilment of human aspirations. These are (1) righteousness (*dharma*); (2)

worldly gain (*artha*); (3) fulfilment of desire; (*kāma*) and (4) liberation (*mokṣa*). The fulfilment of all of these four ends of life is important for man. In this classification, *dharma* and *mokṣa* are most important from the ethical point of view. They give right direction and purpose to human life. For instance, acquiring wealth (*artha*) is a desirable objective, provided however it also serves *dharma*, that is, the welfare of the society.



One possible view of the *puruṣārthas*: *artha* and *kāma* within *dharma*, and *mokṣa* beyond.

In the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, selfless action (*niṣkāma karma*) is advocated. It is an action which is required to be performed without consideration of personal consequences. It is an altruistic action aimed at the well-being of others rather than for oneself. In Hinduism this doctrine is known as *karma yoga*.



A depiction on cloth of Kṛṣṇa's discourse to Arjuna in the *Gītā*: a lesson in ethics.

The concept of right and wrong is the core of the *Mahābhārata* which emphasizes, among others, the values of non-violence, truthfulness, absence of anger, charity, forgiveness and self realization. It is only by performing one's righteous duties or *dharma* that one can hope to attain the supreme path to the highest good. It is *dharma* alone that gives both prosperity (*abhyudaya*) and the supreme spiritual good (*niśryas*).

Similarly, the importance of ethics and ethical values is highlighted in epics and philosophical texts like, *Upaniṣads*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *darśana-śāstras* and *dharma-śāstras*. The *darśana śāstras* are philosophical texts, which provide rational explanations of the ethical issues; the universal moral problems faced by man in daily life are placed in a philosophical context. In the *dharma-śāstras*, emphasis is on the social ethics. In these texts the inter-personal and social relations are placed in an ethical framework for guidance. In these texts the ethical problems are discussed in an indirect manner. Apart from these some of the texts directly deal with ethical issues:

1. *Viduranīti*: Attributed to Vidura, the great *Mahābhārata* character. A rich discourse on polity and *dharma-śāstra*.
2. *Kamandakīya Nītisāra*: A Sanskrit work belonging to c. 700-750 CE.
3. *Nītvākyamṛtam*: Literally the ‘nectar of science of polity’ contains thirty-two discourses in simple Sanskrit prose by a Jain scholar, Somadeva Suri.
4. *Ḷaghu Arhannīti*: A small manual in Prakrit verse (c. 1088-1172 CE) on civil and criminal laws by Hemachandra, a Jain scholar.
5. *Śukranītisara*: An abridged Sanskrit text on polity which is attributed to Śukrācārya but believed by scholars to be a work of the early mediaeval period of history.
6. *Nītikalpatarū*: A Sanskrit treatise attributed to King Bhoja, available in manuscript only.
7. *Nīti Śatakam*: Bhartṛhari’s hundred verses on ethics.

Buddhist Ethics

Buddhism also gives primary importance to ethics. Sometimes it is called an ethical religion as it does not discuss or depend on the existence of God (the Supreme Being with form and attributes) but instead believes in alleviating the suffering of humanity. The ethical values in this faith are based on the life and teachings of the Buddha.

These moral instructions are included in Buddhist scriptures or handed down through tradition. According to Buddhism, the foundation of ethics is the *pañcaśīla* (five rules), which advocates refraining from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct and intoxicants. In becoming a Buddhist, a lay person is encouraged to take a vow to abstain from these negative actions.



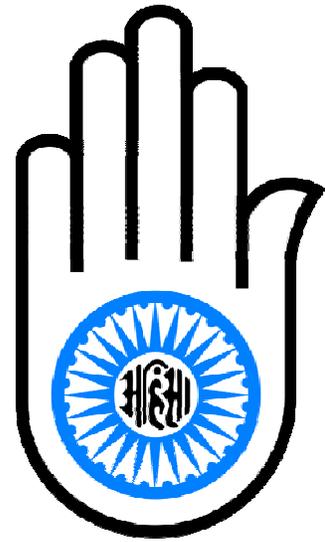
A fresco depicting the Buddha preaching

In Buddhism, the two most important ethical virtues are compassion (*karuṇa*) and friendliness (*maitrī*). One should have deep sympathy and goodwill for the suffering people and should have the qualities of a good friend. The most important ethical value is non-violence or non-injury to all living beings. Buddhist ethics is based on Four Noble Truths. These are: (1) life is suffering, (2) there is a cause for suffering, (3) there is a way to remove it, and (4) it can be removed (through the eight-fold path). It advocates the path of righteousness (*dhamma*). In a way this is the crux of Buddhist morality.

Jain Ethics

Jainism is another important religion of this land. It places great emphasis on three most important things in life, called three gems (*triratna*). These are: right vision (*samyaka dṛṣṭi*), right knowledge (*samyaka jñāna*) and right conduct (*samyaka cāritra*). Apart from these, Jain thinkers emphasize the need for reverence (*śraddhā*). There are other moral principles governing the life of Jains. Most important of these are ideas of *punya* (merit) and *pāpa* (demerit). Such deeds are very important from the ethical point of view. *Pāpa* is the result of evil deeds generated by vice and *punya* is the result of good

deeds generated by virtuous conduct. One should take up the path of a virtuous life to lead the way to spiritual growth. Ultimately, one transcends both virtue and vice. Right conduct is necessary for the spiritual progress of man. The most important thing in Jainism is the practice of non-violence (*ahimsā*), or abstaining from inflicting injury on any being. It is required that the principle of *ahimsā* should be followed in thought, word and deed. In Jainism, the other cardinal virtues are: forgiveness, humility, simplicity, non-covetousness, austerity, restraint, truthfulness, purity, renunciation and celibacy.



A hand with the word *ahimsā* inside a wheel: a symbol for the Jain vow of non-violence.

Sikh Ethics

Sikhism, the most recent faith in Indian tradition, also lays great stress on ethics in human life. In the words of its founder, Guru Nanak, “Truth is higher than everything else, higher still is truthful conduct.” The cardinal virtues according to *Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh Scripture, are: compassion (*dayā*), charity (*dāna*), contentment (*santokha*), non-enmity (*nirvair*) and selfless service (*sevā*). In addition to these one is also morally obliged to practise the general and eternal virtues.



During the battle of Anandpur Sahib in 1704, Bhai Kanhaiya, a follower of Guru Gobind Singh, was often seen carrying a pouch of water to quench the thirst of the wounded, whether they were Sikhs or soldiers of the Mughal army. This exemplifies the values of non-enmity, service and compassion.

The Bhakti Movement

During the middle ages, the Bhakti movement arose in India. It was an all-India movement of social reform and spiritual awakening. It played a very important part in reawakening moral consciousness in India. Jayadeva, Nāmdev, Tulsīdās, Kabīr, Ravidās and Mīra are some of the prominent saints of this movement. Most of these saints came from the downtrodden sections of society. Rejecting the distinctions of caste, colour and creed, they spread the message of human equality. They were saint poets. In their *vāṅī* (poetic compositions) they propagated the ideals of love, compassion, justice and selfless service. These are the ethical values which we need even today.

Comprehension

1. What are the two main elements necessary for a contented life?
2. Define *dharma* in terms of the cosmic order.
3. What does one need to do to attain the supreme goal [*mokṣa*]?
4. What are the four ends of life (*puruṣārthas*) required for fulfilling human desires?
5. What are the differences between individual and social ethics?
6. Name the four noble truths of Buddhism. What do they advocate?
7. Explain the *triratnas* of Jainism.
8. What are the important sources of ethical thought in India?

Activity 1

While the concept of right and wrong is the core of the Mahābhārata, the epic emphasizes, among others, the values of non-violence, truthfulness, charity, absence of anger, forgiveness and self realization. Select a value, discuss in peer groups and perform in front of the class through:

- role plays

- miming out a real life situation
- singing a song
- acting out a scene or scenes from the Mahābhārata relevant to those values.

Activity 2

Indian traditions offer various styles of narratives. Use any one form to depict a story on **honesty**. The selection of stories could be from different faiths/religions. The following can be used to highlight your presentation: painting, props, *sūtradhāra*, music, costumes or any other visuals.

Activity 3

Collect information on Bhakti poets and extracts of their poetry in audio form. Listen in the class and have a discussion on the virtues /values being sung in their poetry.

Activity 4

Read the following *Jātaka kathā*:

The Starving Tigress

A Tale of Compassion, Selflessness, and Generosity.

Born into a family of Brahmans renowned for their purity of conduct and great spiritual devotion, the Bodhisattva became a great scholar and teacher. With no desire for wealth and gain, he entered a forest retreat and began a life as an ascetic. There, he encountered a tigress who was starving and emaciated from giving birth; indeed, she was about to resort to eating her own newborn cubs. With no food in sight, the Bodhisattva, out of infinite compassion, offered his body as food to the tigress, selflessly forfeiting his own life.

Key events in the story:

- The Bodhisattva sees a starving tigress.
- The tigress is about to eat her own cubs.
- The Bodhisattva offers his own body.

Now think of a story that you have heard in your childhood which left an impression in your mind. Share it with your partner.

Activity 5

Have a discussion on any of the following topics, justifying your stand with appropriate examples:

- Moral values are irrelevant in today's world.
- Truthfulness and humility make a person successful.
- Killing of animals is ethical.

Project ideas

1. Visit a *matha* / *vihāra* [monastery] and make notes on how early education is imparted in the making of monks. Elucidate your project with pictures.
2. Prepare a wall magazine depicting at least four virtues from among the following: selfless service, non-enmity, forgiveness, truthfulness, humility, simplicity, righteousness, austerity, restraint, non-covetousness, purity, contentment, compassion.
3. Collect stories from various faiths / religions that illustrate Indian ethics. Your presentation must contain a biographical sketch of the author and related pictures / paintings.

Extended activities

1. Visit the nearest *gurudwāra* and observe how the four cardinal virtues are practised there. Offer your *seva* in the *langar* (community kitchen).

2. Our traditional performing arts have always been a medium of entertainment as well as education and social reforms. Attend a performance of folk theatre like *Rāmalīlā*, *Jātrā*, *Yakṣagāna*, *Nautankī*, *Swāṅg*, puppet shows, etc. Identify the ethical values depicted in the performance.
3. Create a tale treasure of your own for your junior classes / siblings, keeping the following in mind:
 - stories that have a message / moral value;
 - stories that are a part of any Indian literature;
 - You may refer to stories from *Jātaka* tales; *Hitopadeśa*; *Pañcatantra*; *Kathāsaritsāgara*; *Singhasan Battisi*.
4. Find some contemporary Indians — from India’s freedom struggle to today — who were / have been able to bring about changes in the society through ethical values. Read their life story and identify the values practised by them which made them embodiments of Indian ethics. You could also explore examples around you.

Further Reading

- *Kathopaniṣad*
- *Mahābhārata* (especially *Vana Parva*)
- *Bhagavad-Gītā* (especially chapter 16)
- *Rāmāyaṇa* (especially *Uttarkhand*)
- Tiruvalluvar’s *Kural* (especially first two parts)
- *Jātaka Kathayein*
- *Pañcatantra*
- Kabīr’s *Dohās*
- *Carakasamita*, 4.2
- The edicts of Aśoka

Internet Resources (all URLs accessed in April 2013)

- *Kathāsaritsāgar* / *Bṛhatkathā*: <http://archive.org/details/oceanofstorybein01somauf>
- *Hitopadeśa*: Sanskrit text & English translation, W. Ainapure, ed., & B.T. Dravid (1908): <http://archive.org/details/hitopadesaofnr00vasuoft>
- Tales of *Hitopadeśa*: www.chandiramani.com/tohe.html
- Tales of *Hitopadeśa*: www.culturalindia.net/indian-folktales/hitopadesha-tales/
- Story of Dadhichi: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dadhichi>
- *Jātaka* tales: <http://www.himalayanart.org/image.cfm/50191.html>
- *Jātakamālā* or “Garland of Birth” stories:
www.buddhanet-de.net/ancient-buddhist-texts/English-Texts/Garland-of-Birth-Stories/01-The-Story-of-the-Tigress.htm
- English translation of *Pañcatantra* by Arthur W. Ryder (1925):
<http://archive.org/details/ThePanchatantraEnglish-AwRyder>
- *Pañcatantra* tales:
<http://www.culturalindia.net/indian-folktales/panchatantra-tales/>



Primary Texts on Ethics: Individual and Social

A Selection

From Jain Granthas

An old man is fit for neither laughter, or playing, nor pleasure, nor show. So a man should take to the life of piety, seize the present, be firm, and not let himself be deluded an hour longer, for youth and age and life itself all pass away. ... (*Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, 1.2.1)

*

If a man kills living things, or slays by the hand of another, or consents to another slaying, his sin goes on increasing. (*Sutrakṛtāṅga*, 1.1.1.1-5)

He who carelessly destroys plants, whether sprouted or full grown,
Provides a rod for his own back.

He has said, "Their principles are ignoble
Who harm plants for their own pleasure." (*Sutrakṛtāṅga*, 1.1-9)

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Cows are of many different forms and colors;
Their milk is always white.
The path of virtue, like milk, is one.

*

The sects that teach it are manifold. (Naladiyar, 1118)

*

Heroes detached and strenuous, subduing anger and fear,
Will never kill living beings, but cease from sin and are happy. (*Sutrakṛtāṅga*, 1.2.1)

*

Without neglecting the virtues of tranquility, indifference, patience, zeal for salvation, purity, uprightness, gentleness, and freedom from care, with due consideration he should declare the Law of the Monks to all that draw breath, all that exist, all that have life, all beings whatever. ... (*Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, 1.6.5)

From Buddhist Granthas

Gautama has given up injury to life ... has given up taking what is not given ... has given up unchastity ... has given up false speech ... has given up slander ... has given up harsh speech ... has given up frivolous talk ... (*Dīghanikāya*, 1.4 ff)

*

But by charity, goodness, restraint, and self-control man and woman alike can store up a well-hidden treasure — a treasure which cannot be given to others and which robbers cannot steal. A wise man should do good — that is the treasure which will not leave him. (*Khuddakapatha*, 8)

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As a mother cares for her son,
Her only son, all her days,
So towards all things living
A man's mind should be all-embracing.
Friendliness for the whole world,
All-embracing, he should raise in his mind,
Above, below, and across,
Unhindered, free from hate and ill-will. (*Sutta Nipata*, p. 143 ff)

*

Never in this world is hate
Appeased by hatred;
It is only appeased by love —
This is an eternal law (*sanatana-dhamma*). ...

*

Above victory or defeat
The calm man dwells in peace. (*Dhammapada*, 3-5, 201)

*

The friend who is a helper,
The friend in weal and woe,
The friend who gives good counsel,
The friend who sympathizes — these the wise man should know
As his four true friends,
And should devote himself to them. ... (*Dīghanikāya*, 3.180 ff)

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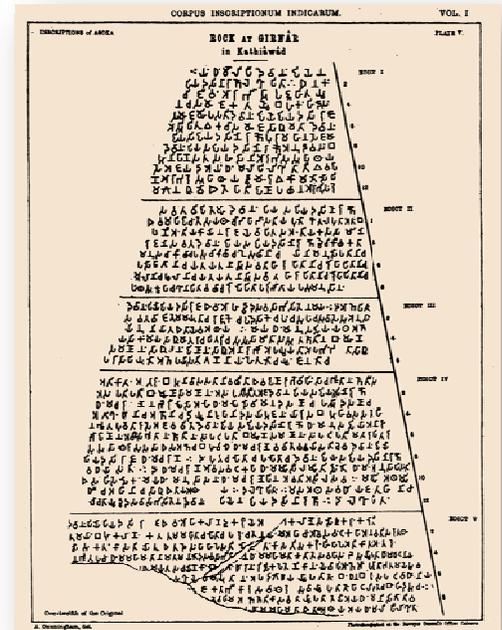
He will give up his body and his life ... but he will not give up the Law of
Righteousness.
He bows humbly to all beings, and does not increase in pride.
He has compassion on the weak and does not dislike them.
He gives the best food to those who are hungry.
He protects those who are afraid.
He strives for the healing of those who are sick.
He delights the poor with his riches.
He repairs the shrines of the Buddha with plaster.
He speaks to all beings pleasingly.
He shares his riches with those afflicted by poverty.
He bears the burdens of those who are tired and weary. (*Tathāgataḡuhya
Sūtra, Śikṣāsamuccaya*, p. 274)

From Aśoka's Edicts

Father and mother should be obeyed, teachers should be obeyed; pity ... should be felt for all creatures. These virtues of Righteousness should be practiced. ... This is an ancient rule, conducive to long life. (From a minor Rock Edict, Maski version)

*

This world and the other are hard to gain without great love of Righteousness, great self-examination, great obedience, great circumspection, great effort. (From the First Pillar Edict)



From the Kural (tr. P.S. Sundaram)

Always aim high — failure then

Is as good as success. (596)

The world gives up those who give up:

Stick to your task. (612)

To the persistent belongs the pride

Of doing good to others. (613)

A weakling's philanthropy is a sword

In a eunuch's hand. (614)

Do not do what you will regret; and if you do,

Do not regret. (655)

Do not do what the wise condemn
Even to save your starving mother. (656)

Goods gained with others' tears are lost with one's own:
Well-got, even when lost, help hereafter. (659)

To stock ill-got wealth is to store
Water in unburnt clay. (660)

Don't despise by looks: the linchpin holds
The huge wheel in place. (667)

However great the hardship,
Pursue with firmness the happy end. (669)

In prosperity, bend low;
In adversity, stand straight. (963)

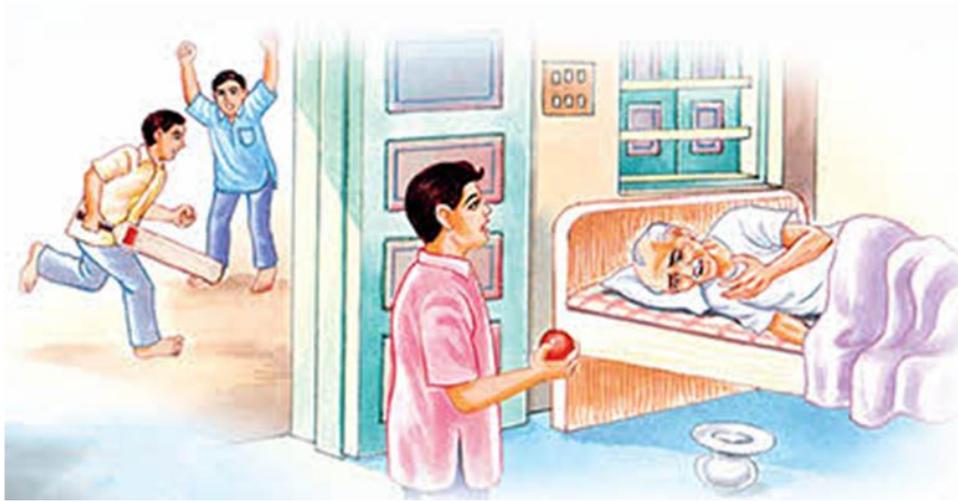
Comprehension

1. Select a piece of primary text from above. Identify the value depicted and correlate it with the preceding survey article.
2. "Values are caught not taught." How far do you agree with this statement? Reflect on some values you have acquired from your
 - family
 - friends
 - school
 - surroundings / society
 - any other source.
3. What message do you draw from the extracts below:
 - If a man kills living things, or slays by the hand of another, or consents to another slaying, his sin goes on increasing.

- He who carelessly destroys plants, whether sprouted or full grown, provides a rod for his own back.
 - Above victory or defeat, the calm man dwells in peace.
4. Read the text from *Tathāgataḡuhya Sūtra*, *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, and complete the following table:

What to do	What not to do

5. Study the picture given below. If you were to write a story based on the picture, which values would you emphasize? Why?



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