

UNIT 3

ETHICS IN MODERN PHILOSOPHY

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3.0. OBJECTIVES

In this unit, you are exposed to Ethics in modern Indian Philosophy. Ethical and religious concepts were very much influenced by the radical reformation movements of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They try to reinterpret the traditional values in the light of modern and western thinking.

3.1. INTRODUCTION

Most Hindus today still adhere to traditional teachings and practice passed down via the four main communities. What has been termed "modern Hinduism" has grown largely out of a number of quite radical reform movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These movements had a relatively small number of followers and by no means replaced or superseded the major traditional forms of Hinduism. Some specific reform movements, like the Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission, still continue to be influential.

The reform movements largely emerged from the growing contact that Hindu thinkers had with Western thought, culture and religion. Below are the three most important reform movements and their ethical outlook.

3.2. ETHICAL TEACHINGS OF RAJA RAM MOHAN ROY AND THE BRAHMA SAMAJ

Raja Ram Mohan Roy's lifelong endeavor was to recreate human brotherhood and unity on a religious basis, by rediscovering the harmony and unity of all religious strivings of mankind. In this regard he can rightly be considered the last link in the long chain of religious teachers

of India – a chain unbroken from the days of Kabir and Nanak to his own. His desire to combine the best of both East and the West led him to advocate the introduction of the western system of education for Indian students. Like other contemporary Indian thinkers, he also pleaded for the scientific basis of education. But his deep study of ancient Hindu culture despite his love for scientific education did not make him appreciate materialism of the west.

During the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, Hindu religion in India came under the complete domination of the corrupt priestly class. To maintain their supremacy, the Brahmin priests were interested in keeping people ignorant, and fed them with false hope of rewarding after life. They commercialized religion by introducing costly ceremonies and offerings to the images of gods. As a result of these efforts by the vested interests the real spirit of Hinduism was clouded. Many social evils such as child-marriage, Sati, degradation of women and division of Hindu society into endless castes and sub-castes weakened the whole Hindu society. The degraded social system and artificial compartmentalization resulted in mutual hatred and discontent. It was the time when India began to pass through the age of general resentment, reaction and opposition to the existing religious and social values. It was also the time when India saw the new light of renaissance, reformation, enlightenment and reconstruction. The religious movements like the Brahma samaj, was an earnest effort to recast Hindu religion into a new form in order to meet the requirements of the new society.

The fundamental principles of the Brahma Samaj, founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1828 are:

1. There is only one God, who is the creator, and the savior of this world. He is spirit, infinite in power, wisdom, love, justice and holiness, omnipresent, eternal and blissful.
2. The human soul is immortal and capable of infinite progress, and is responsible to God for its doings.
3. Man's happiness in this and the next world consists in worshipping God in spirit and in truth.
4. Loving God, holding communion with Him, and carrying out His will in all the concerns of life, constitute true worship.
5. No created object is to be worshipped as God, and God alone is to be considered as infallible.

To this, Raja Ram Mohan Roy added "The true way of serving God is to do good to man." Since no one person is considered to be infallible, the Brahmos hold all the great religious leaders of the world in respect, and believe that truth is to be gleaned from all the scriptures of the world. To that extent, the Brahma religion is truly eclectic. Universalist in nature, it is "dogmatically undogmatic".

Faced with the superstitious beliefs and rituals of popular Hinduism on the one hand and seeing distinctly on the other, the truth contained in Islam and Christianity as well as in the Upanishads the Raja found a layman's solution to the complicated problem. He seized the theistic elements common to the three faiths and declared them to be at once the original truths of Hinduism. In so doing he believed, he was restoring the Hindu faith to its original purity. As a humanist he

thought that mankind could be united if the basic elements of the major religions like Hinduism, Islam and Christianity were brought home to the people.

Raja wanted to provide a rational basis for religion condemning all irrationalities. In this sense he had the honor of bringing about revival of Hinduism. His efforts in the direction can be treated in three parts, namely, his conception of religion, his attack on the existing form of religion, and founding of the Brahmo Samaj for realizing his ideals. He found that religious conflicts were based on ignorance. In his first appeal to the Christian public he said, "May God render religion destructive of differences and dislikes between man and man, and conducive to the peace and union of mankind". In India, the land of many religions, he not only tried to reconstruct the faith of his forefathers but tried to purify Islam and Christianity with a sublime conception of the universal in all human beings.

Apart from the spiritual aspect he was well interested in the social and ethical aspects of religion. He did not believe in the existing formalistic religion of the Hindus and introduced his conception of ideal and inspirational religion based on strict monotheism and humanism. In this contest Dr Iqbal says "For him the practical expression of such faith must always be in ethical conduct, in dedication for the good of the society. The devotion he claims, which is most acceptable to the creator consists in promoting union of human hearts, with mutual love and affection for all one's fellow beings, without distinction of caste or creed, race or colour".

His attack on orthodox Hindu customs not due to any narrow sectarian bias but guided by his desire to reform Hinduism of all the rubbish of superstition and priestcraft created during centuries of ignorance. He declared that in its purity Hinduism could not be different from other religions. Against polytheism he said that there was one God for all religions and humanity. In his conception of religion Raja was motivated by national and socio-ethical considerations. He believed that religion must inculcate knowledge, love of God and sympathy for his own fellowmen. It must inculcate human feelings and soften the general attitude. He wanted everyone to assess the rational character of religious doctrines and reject those which contrast the rational test.

He always emphasized that all human problems must be solved in human ways. The social problems in India were only due to inhuman practices. He condemned religious sanctity attached with social evils. Following are the areas of reformation.

Removing the Caste System

The caste system has been a part of Hindu society for hundreds of years. It's inherent divisive nature and social injustices were abhorrent to the early Brahmos. Therefore an important reform that the early Brahmos campaigned for was the removal of the caste system.

Many of the early Brahmos came from the Brahmin caste, who wore a sacred thread around their body to signify their caste superiority. From the 1850's onwards the renunciation of the sacred thread came to symbolise this break with tradition. The equality of all men was fundamental to the Brahmo movement, and to them it did not matter what caste or indeed religion someone was born into.

Sati and Child Marriage

The attractive programme of the Samaj won the support of a large number of educated people in Bengal and outside. It fought against the social evils like child marriage, sati and selling of female children and all other inhuman practices which heaped suffering on women in the name of religious sanctity. In spite of an organised opposition from the Dharma Sabha, Brahmos came out successful in getting the law passed in 1829 against the sati practice, they were thankful to God and British Government, whose protecting arm has rescued our weaker sex from cruel murder, under the cloak of religion. It fought against the continuation of evil practices which subjected women to miseries, degradation and inferiority.

Widow Marriage

Despite Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar's campaign that led to the legalisation of widow remarriage (1856) in India, Hindu society had many reservations on this issue. The Brahmos campaigned against such pre-judices. To reinforce their commitment to this many young men of the Brahma movement made a positive point of marrying widows.

Saving of Upper Caste Unmarried Women

It wasn't just the lower castes who suffered in the caste system. Despite their caste status, the girls from the upper caste families suffered because of their position. If a suitable bridegroom could not be found for such a girl in their caste, their options were limited, as marriage to lower caste men was not permitted. These girls often found themselves being married off to very old men who were already married several times over. Or worse still, sometimes these girls would be poisoned to death. Again the Brahmos campaigned against such unjust practices and saved the lives of many such girls.

Women's Education and Status

Traditionally education had been primarily for the men. However during the 1860's and the 1870's the attitude of the Brahmos started to change. Education was encouraged among the Brahma women. At the same time their equal status in society was emphasised by allowing women to pray with men at the prayer halls. In 1881 the Brahma Samaj at Barishal (Bengal) appointed the first woman Brahma preacher (Manorama Mazumdar).

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What are the five fundamental principles of Brahma Samaj?

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2) Write a note on *sati* and child marriage.

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3.3. ETHICAL TEACHINGS OF SWAMI DAYANANDA SARASVATI AND THE ARYA SAMAJ

Despite his revulsion for many features of popular Hinduism, Dayananda Saraswati stressed the need for unity and friendship among all Hindus for the sake of well being of the whole country. He was a radical but he was also willing to compromise on certain issues. To instantiate, although he himself didn't believe in any food taboos he maintained them in the public sphere for in their absence they would be cut off from Hindu society and lose the chance of influencing its masses.

Similarly; he adopted the cause of cow protection to unite the sectarian Hindu outfits to come under one platform and struggle for a common cause. It is noteworthy that Dayananda pertinently advocated the cause for cow protection (*gau raksha*) not on the orthodox premise of cow being vestige to 84,000 divinities or cow as mother but due to its economic utility. A dead cow could feed only a dozen but a living cow could feed a thousand. Also, the dung of the cow was a valuable source of manure. His reasons for cow protection clearly rested on economic, ecological and probably political criterion; but not on theological or emotive ones. That the economic argument was foremost in his mind is evident from the fact that he takes great pains to show that *go-medha*, the sacrifice of kine, refers most of the time to bulls, whose economic value is less than that of cows. And when the texts unmistakably refer to a female animal, then a barren cow is meant.

Other instances of his pragmatism include his adoption of *sanyas* to run away from home; his prompt closure of his failing schools and his study under the blind Virajnanda to learn grammar.

However, it would be a grave mistake to conclude that Dayananda had any elements of opportunism in him. Dayananda sincerely subscribed to his ontological view in the infallibility of the Vedas, and them being the source of all knowledge as an axiomatic truth. The claim of the opponents of the Arya Samaj that the Swami admitted to one, Bholanath Sarabhai that he didn't himself believe in the infallibility of the Vedas, but held on to them for the sake of tactics; they

being the rallying points of all Hindus according to Jordens lacks any convincing proof. Dayananda accepted the Vedas as his rock of firm foundation, he took it for the guiding view of his life and he regarded it as the work of eternal truth.

An Ethics Based on Vedic literature

Although virtually all the six systems of Hindu philosophy pay lip service to the Vedas [especially the samhitas] as being the repository of the greatest spiritual and metaphysical truths; yet in practice the samhita portion [especially the rig Veda] have been viewed only as closed manuscripts; commentaries or bhasyas on them have been very few and far between. Sayana had written the last great bhasya on the Rig Veda in the 13th century. But interest in the Vedas revived in the 19th century due to the pioneering work of the German Indologists like Max Muller and Griffith.

Dayananda wrote his bhasya chiefly out of the old national albeit dormant instinct in Vedic superiority; a move to counter the misconceptions of these current orientalist commentaries which he claimed were inferior to his work, since the latter was based on original commentators like Yaska. Also a bhasya would allow the Arya Samaj members to have a definite and reliable reference for all their literary queries on Vedic interpretation. Dayananda briefly concluded that the Vedas literally contained all the wisdom of god; and hence was universal in nature. He repudiated the idea of Vedas carrying any historical references since the Vedas to him antedated all history. His second, assumption was Vedas proclaiming a pure monotheism unlike the popular view of modern indologists (then and now) that the Vedas proclaimed a henotheistic mode of devotion.

Dayananda had a rudimentary knowledge of science and technology but this didn't stop him from asserting that the Vedas contained all scientific truth in them. Also, he reasoned that there was nothing in the Vedas which could remotely offend morality.

Although, Dayananda's bhasya spanning thousand of pages is not taken seriously in Vedic studies and considered outdated; the fact remains relatively unknown that it did win the approval of few of his later contemporaries whose works are considered at least intellectually far superior to his. For instance, Sri Aurobindo, arguably the most original thinker of modern India concludes *"in the matter of Vedic interpretation I am convinced that whatever may be the final complete interpretation, Dayananda will be honored as the first discoverer of the right clues....He has found the keys of the doors that time had closed and rent asunder the seals of the imprisoned foundations"*

Last but not the least; the bhasya constitutes the very first effort and a massive one at that in bringing the Vedas out of the sanctuary of Brahmanical dominance into the open and make them accessible to all Hindus; irrespective of caste and creed. Jordens believes this to be the strongest argument in him being called "The Luther of India"

An Ethics Supporting Hindu Nationalism

Dayananda is one of the chief figures of Indian nationalism who began his career as a British loyalist. In fact, the first edition of the *Satyartha Prakasha* carries a tract describing the merits of the British rule which unlike that of the decadent, intolerant Mughals was rational and scientific in its scope and expression. When Dayananda had to face the ire of the orthodox Hindus who resented his literal iconoclasm; he had famously remarked that *“If you expel the English, then, no later than tomorrow, you and I and everyone who rises against idol-worship, will have our throats cut like mere sheep”*.

Yet, in a remarkable transformation; Dayananda emerged as one of the paramount figures of North Indian Hindu Nationalism in Modern India. Some of his conceptualizations like a mythical golden age of the Aryans where Vedic wisdom ruled the length and breadth of not only India, but the world; where people of all classes lived in happiness and comfort; where women were respected and educated universally; where crime, poverty and adultery were unknown remain till date some core ideas of the ultra-orthodox elements of Hindu Nationalism. The origin of this tendency in Dayananda had a multifocal origin, one of whose epicenters must have been in Punjab where he was repeatedly confronted with the missionaries. He criticized the Christians in his second *Satyartha Prakasha* [and to an ordinary 19th century India; Christian and British were synonymous] as being usurpers who descended on the property of foreigners. They were so biased that when a black man is killed by a white man, they acquit the murderers in court. Since their God enjoins animal sacrifices *“why should they not fill their belly with beef”* They have taken delight in war; for war is their guru mantra. Dayananda’s criticism of Christ for declaring war on humanity, in declaring his mission to make war between brother and brother, mother and son is denounced in the most unapologetic terms. While all this may seem to be a harsh judgment; the Swami was only paying back the missionaries in the same coin who had used even more extravagant arguments in their attacks on Hinduism.

Dayananda attempts to unite Hindus cutting across sectarian and caste lines is another feature of his ingenious attempt in constructing the idea of Hindu nationalism. We have already noted how Dayananda had considerably toned down his attack on popular Hinduism; his tolerance for food taboos and certain other dogmas for which he cared little are an outcome of the same for he realized that dissent would lead to a forced divorce from the Hindu community which would mean inability to further influence the ignorant Hindu masses. The protect cow movement was also more of an attempt to unite Hindus under the garb of an issue to which all had a natural sympathetic and emotive attitude. He had regretted deeply; the divide in the Hindu community which had prevented them from exerting sufficient pressure in compelling the government to enact a cow protection act.

Dayananda’s Hindu nationalism was essentially rationalistic; it was not a blind espousal of all things hoary and of yore but instead an attempt to seize a vital thing out of the past and throw it into the stream of modern life, for it is the most important means of renovation and new-creation. He knew too well that the Hindu religion was the lifeblood of the nation; it was unquestionably its very identity.

Views and Visions

Dayananda was an extrovert; a fiery determined man who had only a singular passion in the rise of a great Arya nation. His spirituality was practical and betrayed no signs of that unfortunate tendency of ascetic voyeurism. A spontaneous power and decisiveness is stamped everywhere on his work. As Sri Aurobindo writes *“what an act of grandiose intellectual courage to lay upon this scripture (Veda) defaced by ignorant comment and oblivion of its spirit, degraded by misunderstanding to the level of an ancient document of barbarism and to perceive in its real worth as a scripture which conceals in itself the deep and energetic spirit of the forefathers who made this country and nation.”*

He was a man of principle; and he refused to compromise on them howsoever great the peril. Neither threats of loss of influence, of ostracism, of the demise of friendship, even of danger to his life, nor promises of wealth, success in reform work could dislodge the Swami from his stand. However, it is also true that he lacked in him the ability to appreciate any shades of grey; to him all things were defined in black or white.

While his rationalism paved the way for initiating several reforms; this radical rationalism also failed him as a theologian to decipher the crucial relationship between myth and symbol. His totalitarian rejection of the Bhagavatam, Puranas and Brahmanas is a mistake, a limitation, the nadir of his genius. Even if his claim of infallibility of the Vedas tends to seem exaggerated there is no reason to dismiss his belief in Vedas being repository of scientific truths. Sri Aurobindo reminds us that great facts of science were not unknown to ancient civilizations, and while it would be premature to affirm Dayananda’s contentions there is still nothing fantastic in Dayananda’s idea....He would even add his own conviction that Veda contains other truths of a science that modern world doesn’t at all possess, and in that case Dayananda had rather understated than overstated the depth and range of the Vedic wisdom.

The Arya Samaj couldn’t revivify itself through the vicissitudes of time; it has lost its potency as a reforming organization by being rooted in time; it has failed to take note and learn from its founder who constantly adapted, harnessed, and remoulded, if not modified his ideas with time.

Nevertheless, Dayananda will go down in Indian History as the most significant and radical reformer of modern India. His humanism, courage, intellect and vision will remain an epic tale for centuries to come.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Why was Dayanand Saraswati called ‘Luther of India’?

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3.4 LET US SUM UP

Modern Indian Ethics was developed in the context of the British Rule. The ethical thinkers in this era gave relevant meaning to traditional ethical outlook in dialogue with the Western ethics. These interpreted traditional Indian ethics in terms of prevalent significance.

3.5. KEY WORDS

Pragmatism: Pragmatism is a philosophical movement teaching that a proposition is true if it works satisfactorily. The meaning of a proposition is to be found in the practical consequences of accepting it; unpractical ideas are to be rejected.

Sati: Sati is a practice among some Hindu communities in which a recently widowed woman would immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. This practice is now outlawed in modern India.

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3.7. ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. There is only one God, who is the creator, and the savior of this world. He is spirit, infinite in power, wisdom, love, justice and holiness, omnipresent, eternal and blissful.

-The human soul is immortal and capable of infinite progress, and is responsible to God for its doings.

-Man's happiness in this and the next world consists in worshipping God in spirit and in truth.

-Loving God, holding communion with Him, and carrying out His will in all the concerns of life, constitute true worship.

-No created object is to be worshipped as God, and God alone is to be considered as infallible.

2. The attractive programme of the Samaj won the support of a large number of educated people in Bengal and outside. It fought against the social evils like child marriage, sati and selling of female children and all other inhuman practices which heaped suffering on women in the name of religious sanctity. In spite of an organised opposition from the Dharma Sabha, Brahmos came out successful in getting the law passed in 1829 against the sati practice, they were thankful to God and British Government, whose protecting arm has rescued our weaker sex from cruel murder, under the cloak of religion. It fought against the continuation of evil practices which subjected women to miseries, degradation and inferiority.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. Although, Dayananda's bhasya spanning thousand of pages is not taken seriously in Vedic studies and considered outdated; the fact remains relatively unknown that it did win the approval of few of his later contemporaries whose works are considered at least intellectually far superior to his. Last but not the least; the bhasya constitutes the very first effort and a massive one at that in bringing the Vedas out of the sanctuary of Brahmanical dominance into the open and make them accessible to all Hindus; irrespective of caste and creed. Jordens believes this to be the strongest argument in him being called "The Luther of India."

2. Vivekananda believed in the possibility of Universal Religion. Religions of the world vary in important details. They differ from the point of view of mythology, rituals, social values, and philosophic traditions. Yet Vivekananda says, "The religions of the world are not contradictory and antagonistic. They are but various phases of one eternal religion". He continues; "Religion is one because like blood and breath, it belongs to the very life of man". The essence of all religion is the same and that is God-realisation. A religion of love, peace and harmony is a universal religion, according to Swami Vivekananda.