

# ETHICS AND SPIRITUALITY IN INDIAN THOUGHT

**S. R. Bhatt**

University of Delhi, India

## **Abstract**

*In response to problems of Globalization, we are faced with the need for an ethics which does not feed into the problems of materialism and egocentrism. The Indian tradition provides a possible solution, especially the tradition of **spiritualistic organicism**. Through its spiritualistic metaphysical premises one can work out an **organicismic ethics**; it would be an ethical system which can provide the norms to regulate human conduct in relation to other human beings, their social organizations, other living beings and the natural environment.*

Humankind is at present facing a crisis which is manifold and multi-dimensional. On the one hand, there are the marvels of science and technology that are bewitching and bewildering; on the other, there are the erosion of values, moral degeneration, and deprivations leading to tensions, strife and sufferings. The human mind is faced with a dilemma as to how to respond to the present turmoil. Undoubtedly, there is tremendous material progress, but it has been unable to usher in peace and prosperity at the physical, mental and spiritual levels. Some people do have enormous levels of material and mental comfort but yet they do not recognize its evanescence. The crux of the situation is that the present-day distracted humanity is suffering from exhaustion of spirit and languishing in the narrow and rigid confinements of *ego-centricism*, parochialism and disastrous materialistic consumerism. So long as one is entangled in the labyrinth of materialism one does not feel the pinch of it. But the moment one

gets out of it, one is exhausted and lost. It is a paradoxical feeling of both having and not-having, liking and disliking, seeking and shunning.

As we are marching ahead in 21<sup>st</sup> century, humanity still is engrossed in a bewildering situation. The future course of humankind is condemned to face a choice: one road leads to friendship, peace, and prosperity and the other to strife, suffering, war and destruction. At every juncture of life there is a demand to exercise an option, whether it is the life of an individual or of a nation or of the world at large. The choice is posed to the human race which has the capacity to reason and also the freedom to abide by its dictates. Whatever be the decision, the choice is ours and the consequences are also for us to bear. We are the agents of war or peace, peril or perfection. We are rational free agents and it is our free will to adhere to reason and prosper or to give a go-by to reason and perish. Time and again the wise and sane people all over the world have reminded us of this fact, and so long as human nature remains as it is, there will always be a need to be so reminded. In this context it is useful to present the Indian perspective in its positive form. As Late Professor Charles Moore, the former Director of East-West Center of Hawaii University in the preface to his book *The Indian Mind* has opined, it is possible to get newer intuitions and fresh insights from the Indian thought if only we care to do so.

The Indian approach to life and Reality can be characterized as ‘*spiritualistic organicism*’ which stands for harmonizing the multiple in the unitary. It regards the multiplicity of all existences as originating from, sustained by and embedded in One Ultimate Spiritual Principle. One of the most significant implications of the *organicistic* view of Reality is the acceptance that the cosmos, rather the cosmic process, is a totality of interdependent and interrelated occurrences and things. It is a highly complex and intricate but planned and purposive networking of events and not a mechanistic arrangement of preexistent entities. Every existence, living or non-living, has a dependent origination out of a causal complex characterized by mutuality and openness, inter-relatedness and reciprocity. Each one has a specific nature, place, role and function in the cosmic setup as determined in the scheme of the universe. The cosmos is a vast and subtle inter-netting of multiple interpenetrating and coexisting existences which

are in a constant flux. It has physical, mental and spiritual dimensions. There is determinism at the physical level but freedom and spontaneity at the spiritual level. The mental realm is partly determined and partly free. The human being is an organic unity of psycho-physical processes animated by spiritual element. It is thus a complex of body, mind and spirit.

With these spiritualistic metaphysical premises one can work out an *organicistic* ethics. This would be an ethical system which purports to provide the norms to regulate human conduct in relation to other human beings, their social organizations, other living beings and the natural environment. This is because all are dynamically interrelated and interdependent and functioning of one affects the rest. However, the human being is at the center stage of ethical considerations as it is the most evolved being having freedom and spontaneity, creativity and manipulating capacity. It has the prerogative to exercise free will and thus feels responsible for one's conduct. Freedom necessitates norm-prescription and this implies norm-adherence as well as norm-violation.

Human life in the worldly state is incomplete and imperfect and points beyond itself. It has a goal to achieve, a purpose to fulfill, and an end to realize. It is establishment of a society of individuals wherein the sorrows and sufferings of the world may cease to exist. This is the longing intensely cherished by every human being. The release of human beings from the travails and travesties of worldly life is not effectuated by mere wish, nor is it an idle or ideal apprehension through abstract speculation. It is a realization through properly planned, executed and accomplished endeavor. It requires rigorous discipline of knowledge, will and conduct and the fruits of conduct in mutual sharing, mutual cooperation and collective enterprise. It demands harmonious organization and skillful management of end, means and modalities. It implies just and distributive sharing of the fruits without selfish considerations which is possible only through equanimity of mind and feeling of self-sameness. This can be achieved by self-control and self-sacrifice. But this is not self-abnegation. It is self-fulfillment through corporate living and partaking, by mutual caring and sharing.

A spiritual approach to ethics is not *rights-based* but *duty-oriented*. It involves performance of one's obligations as per one's station in the total cosmic setup without any attachment to consequences. In order that one can perform one's duties properly, faithfully, efficiently and disinterestedly one must know one's nature and capabilities as also what is to be performed, how to be performed, when to be performed, why to be performed etc. An unwavering skillful performance depends upon rightness of action and firmness of will.

In Indian culture, philosophy and religion, view and way of life, theory and practice, knowledge and conduct are not divorced and segregated. They are named as *Darsana* which is not mere reflection upon the nature of reality but also a quest for and a realization of values. Basically it is a discipline for realization of 'perfection' (*moksa sastra*) which stands for fullest efflorescence of the inherent potentialities of all existences. There is a definite purpose in life and reality if we care to know and a definite goal to achieve if we have a will to do so. Our existence is not meaningless. It has a value and significance. But we must first of all know what we are, what is the nature and purpose of life, what we should be in our life and how we can be so etc. The aim of human existence should be spiritual perfection through material progress. But material progress is only a means and not an end. The end is self-realization which is achieved through the removal of karmic matter and liberation from *samsara*. This is the ultimate teaching of all schools of philosophical thought in India.

In Indian philosophy great emphasis is laid on proper knowledge. Knowledge is the only and surest way to material progress and spiritual perfection. It, therefore, emphasizes that we must draw a clear distinction between truth and falsity. Falsity entangles us in the vicissitudes of worldly life. It is bewitching and bewildering and it springs from ignorance. In order to have right knowledge right attitude or right mental make-up is necessary. This is a prerequisite for a proper view and way of life. This is authentic existence. Opposed to this is falsity with which we generally suffer. Falsity does not serve any genuine purpose and hence it must be discarded. For an aspirant of perfection only right type of knowledge is helpful. This is the main theme of the teachings of all the schools. Knowl-

edge always leads to good conduct. The value and purpose of knowledge is not theoretical but necessarily practical. Conduct without knowledge is blind and knowledge without conduct is lame. The two are complementary to each other. Without right conduct deliverance from worldly miseries and from trials and tribulations is impossible and without complete deliverance from these no permanent happiness can be achieved. Right attitude, right knowledge and right conduct are the three jewels of life which every human being must wear. But this wearing is not decoration but actual practice and concrete realization. However this is not easy to achieve. It requires austerity and rigorous discipline, a rigorous control of body, will and mind.

Knowledge pertains to the real. The real is multifaceted and multidimensional. It has infinite properties and relations and therefore it can be approached in infinite ways. This is *perspectivalism* at the levels of reality, thought and language. As there are many aspects of reality there can be multiple approaches to reality. Each one is true in itself but it is only partially true. It is true from a particular perspective. From another perspective it may not be true. We may have a total or holistic perspective also. This type of understanding leads to mutual complementarities, mutual cooperation, mutual trust and co-existence and above all to non-violence (*ahimsa*) which is the highest truth and highest virtue in Indian ethics. *Perspectival* approach to Reality alone can lead to non-violence and coexistence and this in turn can guarantee peace, progress, prosperity and perfection in the world.

*Organicism*, with its corollary of *perspectivalism*, provides for democracy in ideas and in living. It inculcates the spirit of peaceful co-existence, tolerance and mutual support. This alone can ensure universal peace, solidarity and harmony. It is a unique contribution of Indian spirituality. It is not very easy to understand it and to practice it. But with proper education and firm determination this can be achieved and if this can be achieved the world will be an ideal place to live in and to realize spiritual perfection. Another significant implication of *organicism* is practice of vegetarianism and environmental protection which are the dire needs of the day. Every thing in the world is interrelated and interdependent. Every

thing has its unique existence and value. So nothing should be destroyed by the human being for his selfish ends. The Indian ethics not only regulates human conduct in relation to one's own self and in relation to other human beings but also goes a step further to bring in human conduct in relation to all living beings and natural environment. Every existence has intrinsic worth and it must be given due respect. In case there happens some misconduct due to ignorance or negligence or even willfully there is a provision for forgiveness and repentance, and rectification.

The Indian ethical tradition advocates self-sameness in all existence in spite of their inherent differences. It thus has the unique feature of synthesizing quantitative and qualitative monism and pluralism, monadic uniqueness and modal dependence. In fact *organicism* is the cardinal tenet of Indian thought and it is impregnated with immense possibilities of drawing out newer and newer implications and corollaries for cosmic well-being. But this should not be mere intellectual exercise. It must involve programmatic action at the corporate level on a cosmic scale. This may not be easy but not impossible.

The Indian thinkers have put forth the concept of 'dharma'. It is another unique contribution which is highly valuable in the spheres of thought and action. It provides a strong base for relativism, *perspectivalism* and *situationalism* which are needed for pluralistic worldly life. It helps in avoiding the pitfalls of absolutism, dogmatism, obscurantism, ego-centricity and narrowness of all types. The concept of dharma stands for the unique and distinct nature of each entity, its place, function and value in the scheme of reality and also the principle which has to regulate its behavior and interrelationship. Thus dharma has both constitutive and regulative aspects.

The pursuit of excellence, striving for betterment, and attainment of quality of life have been perennial human concerns and aspirations. All human endeavors in diverse fields of culture and civilization have been directed towards realization of this goal. Freedom from imperfection and consequent suffering has been the main motivating factor for all cognitive enterprises and technological advancements. Though every human indi-

vidual cherishes and strives for this and posits it as the ideal of life, its realization requires planned corporate efforts. It can not be a single individual enterprise. A single individual may work out a plan but its execution has to be corporate. Moreover, quality of life concerns the individual as well as the cosmos since the two are interrelated and interdependent and constitute an organic whole. This apart, one can not attempt to realize a good quality of life keeping in view an isolated individual, society, nation or region. It has to be a global vision and a universal realization without any prejudice to any one section of the universe. Every one has to participate and partake in this venture which is a collective enterprise. Every one should be able to contribute by manifestation of one's capabilities through a dynamic discovery of one's potentials being assisted in this process by the society and natural surroundings.

Quality of life is the *summum bonum* and globalization is its essential corollary. Its realization therefore requires propagation and profession of global ethics. The principle of *universalizability* of ethical norms and their adherence without exception stem from this very consideration. But globalization is not to be understood in materialistic terms only in the sense of liberalization of trade and commerce. Basically it is a spiritual ideal. It is inculcation of the attitude of seeing self-sameness everywhere leading to global unity. It is realization of the fundamental unity of the entire cosmos. It is a mode of co-existence with a spirit of mutual support, mutual sacrifice, mutual caring and sharing. It is an enlightened conduct like that of a *Bodhisattva* or a *Jivanmukta* who is constantly engaged in universal well-being, who is happy in the happiness of others and feels miserable in the miseries of others, who always thinks of good of others and acts for their welfare. The moral codes prescribed in all the cultural and religious traditions of the world aim at cultivation of this mindset of universal affinity and self-sameness.

Globalization is a viewpoint and a course of action, a policy instrument and a world-wide movement for a new world order based on enlightened principles of conduct aiming at enhancement of 'Quality of Life' not just of human beings but of the entire cosmos. This calls for newer formulation of global ethical norms which may regulate the entire

gamut of human conduct in relation with one human being and another and also between human beings and the rest of the cosmos of animate beings and inanimate things. This is the precursor of the emergence of a global society in which the entire world can be experienced as one single family. This is possible through the realization of self-sameness and cultivation of the spirit of sacrifice. But this necessitates a trans-valuation of values, a paradigm shift in values, a changed mind-set, and an enlarged vision of *cosmo-centricity*, an enlightened view and way of life by a proper training of body and mind by illuminating knowledge and liberating wisdom. It calls for a total transformation of matter and mind and realization of spiritual oneness. It is widening of the self as totality, from 'I' to 'we', from oneself to total self, from individual to cosmic. Here there should be no deprivation and exploitation, no sorrows and sufferings which remain unmitigated, no injustice and discrimination unabated. The cosmos is full of splendors and can provide sustenance to all its inhabitants in a just, fair and equitable manner. But this is possible only through the postulation of a new value schema and a new ethics which cares for all and tends all. This has been the cherished desire of the enlightened mind. It is not a utopian dream but an ideal realizable in actual practice through proper education. This has been the message of all great religious traditions of India and this has also been shared by all great thinkers of the world.

## References

- Bhatt, S. R. *Studies in Ramanuja Vedanta*. Heritage Publishers, 1975, New Delhi.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Knowledge, Value and Education*. Gian Publishing House, 1986, New Delhi.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Vedic Wisdom, Cultural Inheritance and Contemporary Life*. Sundeep Prakashan, 2004, New Delhi.