UNIT 2: ETHICS IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit is — understanding the evolvement of Ethical life in Medieval India. The different religious and philosophical systems of India commonly stress on the need and importance of leading an ethical life. The value system is both ‘general’ and ‘specific’ in nature. The development of vast literature continuing with an invariable general perspective and revamping the moral values varying specifically, serves as the mirror to peep into the cultural ethos of Medieval India, which in turn reflects the Ethical life of people in general. In this unit, we shall attempt to survey the Ethics or Moral philosophy embedded in various literature that reflect the social, economic, political and other conditions of the respective time. A sweeping change in ethical life over a period of time is not only a historical impact governed by time principle but also a geographical impact governed by region based customs and practices. Keeping aside the historical and geographical content at bay, we shall embark upon ethical life sketched in various literatures, in what we assign as, in the Medieval Indian context.

Thus by the end of this Unit you should be able:
• to differentiate the development of Moral philosophy from the Vedic Age
• to relate to the Ethical life in Medieval India
• to appreciate the general and specific value systems based on various factors
• to see the relevance of morality in current scenario
• to imbibe the ‘general’ ethical life for creating a harmonious global world

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The social structure of medieval India was, by and large, governed by the law of Vedic scriptures that has transformed its teachings through secondary sources like Dharmasastras, Puranas, Itihasas, and other minor literature. The time immemorial classification of social strata based on varna (class) and ashrama (stages of life) was widely prevalent and discharging one’s duty based on such a classification was considered to be dharma (righteous living). Dharma, as
the word indicates, is said to be the sustainer of the universe in a symphonic harmony. A harmonious living was set as a presupposition for the function of a value system in the society. In our glimpse into the literature of medieval India, we shall find the basis of morality as the striking chord for inner growth and universal peace. At a different plane, there was an emphasis on the observance of the samanya dharma (general ethics) irrespective of any societal classification and a reiteration of viseesa dharma (specific duties) so as to cater to the accountability in the peaceful co-existence of every being.

2.2. ETHICS IN EPICS

The two great epics or the historical record, as it were, are the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Both these immortal works, time and again, remind the humanity of the moral order in a social structure. Here, the social condition encompasses the political, economical, cultural, and the natural order.

Ramayana, through its immortal characters, reveal the sense of dharma in various shades. Of the many dialogues in Valmiki’s Ramayana, one striking dialogue between Rama and Sita estimates the concept of dharma without compromise. Sita speaks when Rama resolves to vanquish the demons in the forest on the request of the sages. She says, desire produces three qualities – untruth, abduction of another woman and anger towards an alien. Of the three, Rama cannot entertain the first two qualities, but in this case, Rama seems to fall a prey to the third quality, which Sita considers as adharma. She defines dharma as the essence of the universe and feels that Rama’s resolve to vanquish the demons who are not enemies of Rama is unfair. Here, we see the rights exercised by Sita in voicing out her viewpoint on Rama’s action and condemning it as adharma, requesting him for an explanation for such a move. Rama answers that he has promised to help the sages who have taken shelter in him and hence resolved to demolish the demons. He goes to the extent of saying, that he is ready to abandon Sita and Lakshmana in order to keep up his promise. Here, Rama evokes his sense of duty as a ksatriya (warrior class), that is to protect those who have taken refuge in him. This episode reveals the right exercised by Sita and Rama’s binding duty, thereby drawing our attention to not only rights but also duty as the two sides of the same coin. The freedom of expression of one’s opinion is again revealed through the episode where Dasaratha calls for an open-house discussion declaring the next heir-apparent. When the ministers, well-wishers and people assembled expressed happiness on Dasaratha retiring to coronate Rama. But Dasaratha questioned the assembly if it has exercised its will in favouring such a decision. This is an ascertainment of the opinion put forth. We find an open-house discussion in the court of Ravana too. The value of free expression lessened the gulf between any two relationships.

The Mahabharata pictorially depicts a telling tale of each of its characters, which is worth reflecting upon by every individual. Vyasa shows that dharma and adharma cannot be categorically compartmentalised in white and black. The characters in Mahabharata portray ‘grey’ areas of dharma and adharma, in varying heights in different stages of life. This epic through its narration of the story of over six generations, unfolds the changing value system of the society. Each character symbolises an evolved understanding of dharma and the consequence of every character gives an insight into the assimilation of the code of ethics. One of the highlights in Mahabharata is the episode where a Yaksha questions Yudhishthira as, ‘what is the greatest wonder in this world?’, Yudhishthira replies, ‘Seeing death everyday one continues to think one is immortal, is the greatest wonder in this world?’ The perception of mortality of the
body serves as the key to inculcate morality. Mahabharata declares, dharma as the code of life that will sustain and maintain a harmonious living. It presents a simple dictum “whatever is not conducive to social welfare, and what you are likely to be ashamed of doing, never do it”. Thus, the two epics is a living tradition that on and off reminds the value of a moral living to obtain peace.

2.3. ETHICS IN GITA

Bhagavad Gita, the famous dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna in the middle of the Kurukshetra battle, popularly considered as a sacred text of moral code, is a liberating text. As even Arjuna surrenders to Krishna, pleading for removal of his confusion and inability to decide in this crucial moment, Krishna begins by instructing on the imperishable nature of Self. Self-knowledge is presented as the means to salvation. The pre-requisite for self-enquiry is shown as an ethical life that is mentioned as Karma Yoga.

Krishna says, it is impossible for one to remain actionless even for a moment. Since a person is by nature forced to act, Krishna says, let this action be channelised and well-directed. Karma yoga is explicated as proper action (karma) and proper attitude (yoga). Action is said to be three-fold based on the gunas, sattva, rajas and tamas. The action is to be oriented based on the sattva guna, where the benefits of one’s act reach more number of beings, which serves as the cause for spiritual upliftment. The attitude is the ability to accept the consequence of action as the grace of God.

The importance of karma yoga is highlighted and is presented in four different layers. Firstly, karma yoga is to be performed as a commandment of the scripture. It involves an element of fear and is said to be the initial stage of action. Secondly, the sense of gratitude in the form of worship of God out of love (and not out of fear) is seen as karma yoga. Thirdly, karma yoga is performed as a means to refine the mind and lastly karma is seen as the very dharma, performance of which, maintains the cosmic harmony of the universe.

Concept of Svadharma: A society prospers when dharma is followed fearlessly. One consumes the world, and it is important to reciprocate, says Krishna, else such a one is considered a thief. Dharma, in nut-shell is, ‘take and give’. Svadharma or one’s own duty is to be done for the sake of well-being of the society and the code of righteous living is determined by time and the people who are seen as the role model of the society. Whatever is done by a famous figure becomes the standard of living of current times. So Krishna says, Arjuna is a famous warrior known for his commitment to dharma, and swerving away from his dharma in the time of crisis will be cited as an example for violation of dharma by the commoner. Krishna shows the impact where if one violates dharma, the entire society will sheepishly follow such unhealthy ‘models’ leading to a sociological disruption. This further creates confusion with regard to each one’s duty resulting in a chaos.

Arjuna questions ‘what is the cause of unrighteous living when one wants to lead a moral life?’. Krishna replies, it is the ignorance of the fundamental understanding of the difference between the role of dharma and adharma in a given time. This non-understanding is expressed in the form of two forces, ‘want’ and ‘anger’. Want, says Krishna, is a ‘Great Consumer’ that never satiates; it eats away the mind to materialism. The non-fulfilment or contrary fulfilment of one’s want is expressed as anger. Krishna warns, one who is subject to anger can never follow dharma.

Check Your Progress I
2.4. RELIGIOUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL ETHICS

Religious Ethics: The bhakti movement can be considered almost a reform period when value structure seems to crumble. An intense devotion to Almighty instantly developed as a widespread movement arousing unity in nook and corner of the country. Religion gives scope for expression of devotion and a devout helplessly take to a disciplined life, since a ‘clean’ life is said to be the path towards the Lord. The different incarnations were eulogised as an event of resurrection of justice and goodness. A situation of chaos in the societal structure, lop-sided development of rich and poor, superstitious belief system etc, were uprooted by the living legends who led simple life and won the grace of God. The devotees boosted the morale of the commoner in finding a meaning in leading an ethical life. Religion propagated purity at physical, verbal and mental level. The physical expression of devotion was popularised through rituals, festivals and pilgrimages where people of different strata and walks of life come together. The verbal expression includes study of one’s own scripture and the mental mode is practice of meditation. Thus, refinement at three levels paved the path for moral standards. Religion facilitated in symbolic representations of the omniscient, it included personification of abstract qualities like faith (shraddha), anger (manyu), intellect (dhi), patience (dhrti) etc. The virtues like humility, non-injury, purity, dispassion etc were identified with devotion. The religious consciousness, thus, presupposed an ethical living. The ritualistic practices were simplified and compromised to suit the changing times. The religious reformers created a break-through by bringing about a sense of oneness of varied practices in the length and breadth of the country. Religion could sufficiently succeed since the value system was universally accepted that has to be indispensably adhered to and this moral scheme was utilised by the devotees to bring about a moral discipline. The value structure in various tones is embedded in the Puranic literatures.

A need for development of dispassion was considered as a pathway to spiritual achievement, and hence we find many religious and philosophical schools eulogising dispassion towards ephemeral world and its relation. Many works were specifically devoted to highlight the quality of ‘dispassion’ and one such work is ‘Vairagya Shatakam’ of Bhartrhari. He addresses the desire in mind in a nostalgic mood and says, ‘O desire! I travelled distant lands which turned fruitless, giving up family, relatives, and my country I sought greener pastures in the bargain I

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<td>1)</td>
<td>Bring out the concept of dharma in Ramayana and Mahabharata.</td>
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<td>2)</td>
<td>How is Karma Yoga presented in Bhagavad Gita?</td>
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gave up my customs and practices, ate all kinds of food like a crow losing my self-respect, still you O desire! is not satisfied’. The insatiable desire is presented as that which rejuvenates in its youthful lustre but the physical body is wrinkled with grey hair and feeble limbs. Bhartrhari says, even when the life is cheerful there is a constant fear of its coming to an end. Every sense pleasure has an intrinsic defect which is the cause of fear. He says,

‘If one is born in an illustrious family there is the fear to maintain family reputation. If one amasses wealth there is the fear of Tax norms. One who is conscious of self-respect has the fear of insult. If one is strong there is fear of enemies. If attached to physical beauty there is fear of old age. If a scholar, there is fear of debaters. If virtuous, one is afraid of criticism and if attached to body there is fear of death’.

Bhartrhari exclaims that detachment is the only way by which one can understand fearlessness. He presents the world as a pair of opposites: birth and death, youth and old age, contentment and temptation, poise and passion, virtuous and jealousy etc. This is described in the Bhagavad Gita as dvandas or pairs of opposites and the attempt is to maintain a balance in either case and avoid extreme reactions in instances of favourable or unfavourable circumstances.

Philosophical Ethics: The classical orthodox and heterodox philosophical systems laid down values or ethics as the pre-requisite condition or the very means to liberation. Kapila of Sankhya school presents bondage as misery caused by three-fold factors, adhyatma (oneself), adhibhuta (others) and adhidaiva (natural forces). Liberation is overcoming the miseries from these three-fold factors. The attitude towards these three aspects itself calls for an ethical discipline, which is seen as a means to liberation.

The eight-limbed theory of Patanjali’s Yoga system is well-known. Yoga emphasises the discipline of mind, since, for Patanjali thoughts are cause of bondage. Thoughts create impressions in the mind which in turn is the cause of rise of thoughts. This vicious circle can be eliminated in two methods, that is practice and dispassion. Practice of effort is to be repeated for development of concentration of mind and dispassion is to be attained by detaching oneself from sensual pleasures. The refined mind then has to be directed towards God. Patanjali’s discipline at physical, verbal and mental level aims at an ethical life.

Gautama in his Nyaya sutras explains dharma which is expressed in two ways, verbal and mental. The verbal expression is speaking the truth that is beneficial and pleasing and recitation of one’s own scriptures and the mental expression is compassion, bereft of enviousness and faith. The contrary of these is said to be adharma. Nyaya’s liberation is knowledge by removing the adharmic effects which calls for a moral life.

In the Vaisesika system of Kanada, dharma is presented as the source of attainment of prosperity and liberation. Jaimini in his Dharma sutra refines this definition by stating that the source of dharma is vedic injunction which is the cause of prosperity and liberation. The performance of action as enjoined, for Jaimini, is dharma which not only is conducive to maintain cosmic, social balance but also is the means for liberation.

The Vedanta sutra of Badarayana explicates four-fold qualities as a pre-requisite for self-enquiry. This value structure serves two-fold purpose, one to develop a moral standard and other to lead to spirituality. The first quality is discrimination of ephemeral and eternal entities, everything other than the self is perishable being an effect and self being devoid of doership is eternal. The second quality is dispassion for the results in this world and the other worlds. The
third is a six-fold discipline that includes mastery of mind, mastery of sense organs, performance of one’s ordained action, forbearance, faith, and concentration and lastly the quality is desire for liberation. Thus, ethics is a presupposition for entry into any philosophical system.

The heterodox schools equally played an important role in development of moral standards. The materialistic Carvaka proclaimed that body is the soul and pleasure is the ultimate end of life. This can be taken as the starting point, since any thinking person can ascertain by direct experience that pleasure do not last and one have to cope with rising problems. Buddhism and Jainism ingeniously designed the course of life and held high the value system. In the middle path of Buddha, he advocates the right vision, right resolve and right conduct which resonates morality. Jaina ethics define dharma as the obedience to safe guard against karma disrupting the soul. The dharma includes forgiveness, simplicity, cleanliness, celibacy etc. Thus, the development of the philosophical schools enhanced the value structure and emphasised its importance for overall development.

2.5. SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ETHICS

The Social Ethics of medieval India reflects in the famous Manusmriti of Manu, who is considered as an extreme moralist. Manu in his code of law, kept in mind the social condition and reveals his awareness of the diminishing value system in each yuga. He recommends the highest value to be upheld in the kaliyuga as ‘charity’. The common conduct to be upheld by the first three varnas is charity, study of scriptures and performance of rituals. While the specific responsibility of brahmana is propagation and preservation of wisdom, the ksatriya is responsible for protection of people. Manu specifies, that the ksatriya should keep away from over-indulgence of sensual pleasures. The duty to protect the animal kingdom and engage oneself in trade and commerce is the key area of vaisyas, while the sudra varna is to assist the other three varnas. The specific duty of sudra mentioned is charity and freedom from jealousy. Practice of one’s specified duties with utmost care, Manu feels, will result in a poised living condition. He explicates the importance of five great sacrifices, viz, study and propagation of scriptures (brahma-yajna), worship of ancestors (pitr-yajna), worship of gods (deva-yajna), service to mankind (manushya-yajna) and caring the animal and plant kingdom (bhuta-yajna). He defines ‘dharma’ as wisdom, good conduct and tranquil mind. Even though, the duties and responsibilities are enjoined based on a particular feature, Manu favours the idea that one should take to an action that pleases the mind. Manu seems to warn one who takes to unrighteous path (adharma) that such a person will find no peace while living. Through the concept of transmigration of soul, Manu shows that soul is the carrier of results of action that has to be experienced in different births. He says, in death of the body, no person or relation will follow but only one’s conduct. This seems to be an incentive provided to attract all to lead a righteous life while living.

Over a period of time, many other works exclusively highlighting the changing moral life were written for the laity and one such work known as ‘Nitishatakam’ by Bhartrhari is popular. It encapsulates the value system in poetic language, wherein the consequence of association with good ones and bad ones is based on the law of association. He says, a good company removes sluggishness in thought, motivates to speak truth, elevates self-respect and pleases the mind, whereas a bad association is condemned in the manner that it should be given up as even one abandons a snake. An unrighteous life led out of lack of knowledge is also condemned. He says,
that the fire can be quenched with water, the bright sun can be avoided by using an umbrella, elephant with rut can be controlled with a goad, disease can be removed by medicine but there is no medicine for a foolish person who refuses to lead a virtuous life.

The Political Ethics resonates in the Arthasastra of Chanakya that is considered as the Dharmasastra addressing the rulers and transgression of law was seen as a punishable crime. Arthasastra emphasises three-fold duties of a ruler, that is, protection of the state from external aggression (raksha), maintenance of law and order within the state (palana) and safe-guarding the welfare of the people (yogaksema). Chanakya recognises the four stages of life as relevant for the maintenance of the social and political order of a nation. In the work ‘Chanakya Neeti’, Chanakya highlights the importance of education. He censures an uneducated person as a scentless flower. He has a high regard for wisdom and states no land is alien for a man of learning. For him, knowledge yields fruits in all seasons, it protects and rewards one in distant lands and is the greatest secret treasure. Chanakya maintains that the highest bliss is attained through knowledge and one should never be content with knowledge gained. He defines dharma as the eternal principle unlike wealth, prosperity, life and youth. Chanakya cautions not to be too simple and straight forward, he says, in the forest the smooth, straight trees are felled whereas the crooked ones stand unharmed.

2.6. ETHICS THROUGH AESTHETICS

A less focussed area in the ethical tradition is the contribution of Aesthetics in augmenting the moral standard of the society. The creative expression of any art form reflects the many facets including the moral condition of a said society in a particular time and place. In the Indian tradition of ethical development, Aesthetics has played a vital role which can be traced to the earliest extant available so far, that is, the Natyashastra of Bharata. Bharata, categorised as the ‘Father of Indian Dramaturgy’ was himself a moralist who expounds in his Natyashastra that the very ‘Natya’ emerged in order to re-establish the diminishing value system. People were overpowered by anger, jealousy, etc and have forgotten their own duty to be performed, as a reminder Natya was developed. Natya was meant to reach out to all sections of the society and present the dharma structure with audio-visual effect. The Natyashastra commented upon by various scholars include Abhinavagupta a Pratyabhijna philosopher who heightens the performing art to a spiritual journey. Later, Aestheticians who penned dramas etc, enlightened the morals poetically. In fact, the Buddhacharita of Asvaghosha is said to have created a wide impact on the value of peace that ‘shanta’ as a separate ‘rasa’ emerged. Artistic expression calls for a high acumen of knowledge and skill that includes a disciplined life. It is considered that the quality of art work is directly proportional to one’s disciplined life. We have instance of the transformation of the young Gandhi to take the resolve of truth and non-violence based on his viewing of the enactment of the life of Harishchandra. Thus, visual presentation has an impact on young minds. We see literature galore in the medieval India that reflects the moral life through its rich literature catering to all kinds of people. Its relevance and refinement lies in the present generation who dictate the quality of life now.

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) What is the role of religion and philosophy in developing moral disciplines?
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2) Bring out the impact of social and political ethics. What is the role of aesthetics in moral life.
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2.7. LET US SUM UP

We have had a brief survey of the development of ethics in medieval India. In this unit, we have focussed on the study of ethical discipline as found in the available literature dating to medieval period. Literature is said to be the mirror of the society and hence we derived value system from different literatures beginning from the two great epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. Set in different time period, the varied literature reveals the changing value structure thereby indicating the changing life standard. This is inevitable and assimilation of this helps us in leading a peaceful life. We find the common thread throughout the different times is want for a harmonious living and every attempt in different guises is bringing about peace and co-ordination. The disruption of peace can be at any level, but individuals who make the society are the key factor. Hence, we find the literature covered in this unit, focus on general and specific disciplines for every individual. Duty performed will naturally result in gaining rights. The reverse of this is a dangerous bargain. However, exploitation is demolished by reformatory movements time and again. There seems to be a cyclic process. A balance of religious, philosophical, social, political condition through its defined ethics may seem an ideal situation, but is a necessity that is reminded in aesthetic culture. We have seen the role of ethics in each of these fields and their contribution for a better mankind, which is the need for this hour. It is said that whenever ordinary men of the world were in doubt regarding dharma and adharma, they should decide the issue by closely observing the dharmic deeds of the elders in their area or by consulting them on specific issues. Each one of us should serve as the referent point of righteousness of our times.

2.8. KEY WORDS

Dharmashastra – treatises on defining dharma based on changing times
Purana – treatises dealing with various sciences and religious disciplines
Itihasa – historical record, refers to Ramayana and Mahabharata
Varna – the classification of society based on intrinsic inclination
Ashrama – the classification of society based on the stage of life
Samanya dharma – the general duties, universally accepted like truth, non-violence.
**Visesa dharma** – the specific duties, governed by particular time, place and custom.

**Rasa** – the sentiment experienced through dramatic presentation.

### 2.9. FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

- Bhagavad Gita. Gorakhpur: Gita Press,
- Bhattarcharya, Haridas. *Indian Ethics*.
- Hiriyanan, M. *Philosophy of Values. Cultural Heritage of India*. Vol.III. Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission,
- Hiriyanan, M. *Indian Conception of Values*. Mysore: Kavyalaya Publishers,

### 2.10. ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

#### Check Your Progress I

1. Ramayana, through its immortal characters, reveal the sense of dharma in various shades. Of the many dialogues in Valmiki’s Ramayana, one striking dialogue between Rama and Sita estimates the concept of dharma without compromise. This episode reveals the right exercised by Sita and Rama’s binding duty, thereby drawing our attention to not only rights but also duty as the two sides of a same coin. The freedom of expression of one’s opinion is again revealed through the episode where Dasaratha calls for an open-house discussion declaring the next heir-apparent. In the Mahabharata the characters portray ‘grey’ areas of dharma and adharma, in varying heights in different stages of life. This epic through its narration of the story of over six generations, unfolds the changing value system of the society.

2. The importance of karma yoga is highlighted and is presented in four different layers. Firstly, karma yoga is to be performed as a commandment of the scripture. It involves an element of fear and is said to be the initial stage of action. Secondly, the sense of gratitude in the form of worship of God out of love (and not out of fear) is seen as karma yoga. Thirdly, karma yoga is performed as a means to refine the mind and lastly karma is seen as the very dharma, performance of which, maintains the cosmic harmony of the universe.

#### Check Your Progress II

1. Religious Ethics: The bhakti movement can be considered almost a reform period when value structure seem to crumble. An intense devotion to Almighty instantly developed as a widespread movement arousing unity in nook and corner of the country. Religion gives scope for expression of devotion and a devout helplessly take to a disciplined life, since a ‘clean’ life is said to be the path towards the Lord. Religion propagated purity at physical, verbal and mental level. Religion facilitated in symbolic representations of the omniscient, it included personification of abstract qualities like faith (shraddha), anger (manyu), intellect (dhi), patience (dhrti) etc. The virtues like humility, non-injury, purity, dispassion etc were identified with devotion.

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