

Rajendra Prasad Varnadharmā, Nishkama Karma and Practical Morality. A Critical Essay on Applied Ethics in Utkal Studies in Philosophy, VI/, New Delhi: D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., 1999, pp. Xii+291, ISBN 81-2460125-9, Rs.380.

This is a laudable work for its intellectual pursuit, subtle distinctions, logical precision, compelling arguments, convincing statements and above all for its rational non-partisan approach to the Indian classical theory on ethics. It is a book embodying great originality and individual liberty. The traditional belief systems, its sanctions are rationally scrutinized. The divine figures, sages and scholars of international reputation are not given any concession in this treatise. Hence it is revolutionary in content.

The reader will undoubtedly discover in Rajendra Prasad a great philosopher ethicist, who parts company with religious beliefs and cultural underpinnings, which, in themselves, are great forces in supporting and promoting the people in attaining the goal they have in mind. From the Indian perspective, there was no compartmentalization between philosophy and culture or philosophy and religion, which is, unfortunately, being hatched in this work. It was all darsana and anubhava, a holistic and healthy approach to life and its goal. This oriental approach to life is indirectly questioned. Though he does not explicitly attest any special significance to any philosopher or school of philosophy, he seems to have been influenced by certain western philosophers of consequentialism or teleological approach to ethics. Beyond any doubt, the author deserves recognition and respect on account of his intellectual acumen and insights into moral life of a person, like, the role of freedom, the usefulness of instruction, etc.

Varnadharmā, Nishkamakarma and Practical Mortality is the seventh book in the series of Utkal Studies in Philosophy. The present volume is the fruit of a series of lectures delivered the author at Utkal University, Bhubaneswar in the year 1998.

P.K. Mohapatra, the general editor, strikes a right note of assessment concerning the author and his writings: "A uniquely creative and critical thinker and a very serious philosopher, the illustrious author breaks away from the conventional way of doing Indian philosophy" (p.vii). Prasad's approach to the classical Indian theories of ethics is through and through analytical and critical. In the analysis of the concepts of the classical Indian ethics, the author maintains a distance from the cultural and religious traditions of the land and people of India. As far as the approach to the Indian classics, the author himself clarifies his position. He considers them "as human, and not divine" (p.x). Hence, he approaches them as "documents, which can be evaluated as any human document" (ibid.). In interpreting the texts and theories on Indian ethics, the author seems to have adopted an approach of demythologization. The methodology made use in the study is thoroughly "conceptual analysis" (p.ix).

The book is divided into three parts. While the first part focuses on the study of some of the basics of Indian normative ethics, the second part deals with ethics in practice and third part concentrates on the background conceptual framework. It would have been of further help to the readers, if the volume had a subject index and bibliography.

In the present volume, the author claims to have worked in applied ethics (ibid.). the author is right in saying that the criterion of normative ethics should "be viable, must be applicable to real social situations" (ibid.). The primary motivation in examining classical views and concepts in Part I, in the words of the writer, "is to ascertain how far they can be used to provide us meaningful guidance in living a morally good life in today's world. It is my conviction that a logically indefensible or incoherent normative theory or concept cannot do that" (p.x).

In the first chapter of the book, the author starts with the varnadharma. It is understood to be natural and obligatory. Over against the

traditional understanding of varnadharma, Prasad challenges its maintainability.

The point of departure is the classical Indian concept of a varnadharma as the basic normative structure of classical Indian ethics. That is to say, the varna determines dharma, obligation. Since one is born to a varna, there is little room for option, but determined by dharma of a varna, to which one is born. Hence ethics is considered as natural obligatory in the classics.

According to the author, "accounts of dharma contain normative ideas, i.e., ideas pertaining to what ought to be, and what ought to be done, as well as ideas pertaining to what normally is, or is normally done" (p.3). dharma means "the essential property, or properties, of a thing on account of which it is what it is" CpA).

The author limits his discussion to dharma as varnadharma. In varnavyavastha, R. Prasad finds the concept of dharma "very specific, and also very neat crystallization, or systematization, of dharma as a basic normative ethical structure, or code (p.6). The theory of varnasrama-dharma is one about the duties of the four classes, or castes, of people into which the classical Hindu society was then divided, and about those of the four stages of an individual's life into the latter was divided. This four-fold division of the society into the four varnas called brahmana, ksatriya, vaisya, and sudra, and of the individual's life into four asramas called, brhmacarya, garhastya. vanaprastha and samnyasa, was taken to be complete and exhaustive (p.7). . R. Prasad approaches the traditional view critically and philosophically. He writes: "But it seems to me that, if some of the aspects, or claims, of it, which will be discussed here, are studied in a non-partisan, critically philosophical, manner, serious objections can be raised, on both theoretical and practical grounds, against calling it a viable ethical, or normative theory" (p.11).

In order to present the objection against varnadharma, first of all, the author states the traditional view: "Each one of the varnadharmas, or duties assigned to the members of each one of the four varnas, is said to be natural because it is born out of his nature (svabhavajam), i.e., assigned to him on account of his having the nature he actually has" (p.12). Consequently, "Every varnadharma of an individual of every varna is thus bound to be in concordance with, suitable to, or fitting, his nature. It means that if something is a duty for an individual, it is something he is naturally capable of and disposed to doing, i.e., something which is natural for him to do" (p.13). since duty is nature-born, the writer is compelled to ask the following question. 'Can morality be taught?' or 'Cannot one be trained to inculcate a virtue he, as per his present natural propensities and predispositions, is not disposed in inculcate?'"

The discussion becomes systematized and sophisticated as the author progresses in his analysis. He argues, "The varnadharma of an individual A is his svadharma, his own dharma, because it is determined or regulated by his own nature {svabhava-niyata-karma}: It has to be different from the varnadharma, or svadharma of B belonging to another varna because the latter would be determined by B's nature which would be different from A's nature. Obviously, then B's svadharma would be, for A, a paradharma" (p.15-16). According to Krishna, "He who performs his svadharma, a duty determined, or regulated, by his own nature, incurs no sin" (p.16). "What is natural is obligatory and what is obligatory is natural" (p.16). the author challenges this fatalistic view on ethics. "Why is naturalness, or nature-bornness-, to be called the determiner of varnadharmata, or dharmata? It is bound to be an open question, no matter whether the propounder of the varnadharmika theory is a venerable rsi, or even divine being" (p.17).

In order to the non-tenability of svadharma which is svabhavaja, R. Prasad conducts a search in Gita and comes out with a conclusion' that

"nowhere Krishna calls human nature duty-centric. Rather, he considers it very liable to be corrupted and befogged by desires, passions, indiscrimination, etc. He considers even Arjuna's disinclination to fight a sign of his confused, misguided, nature. Even the general Indian tradition considers human nature to be easily corruptible, and therefore emphasizes on its purification by self-control, penance, instruction from a learned teacher, etc. Therefore, it would not be fair to say that for Krishna, or classical Indian tradition, human nature is intrinsically equipped with the ability to always unerringly determine duties" (p.18). The crux of the problem with the traditional classical view with varnadharma, the classical view on ethics, lies here. On the one hand, the theory of svabhavaja presupposes one to do what he ought to do without fail, for it is nature born. But on the other hand, it becomes inexplicable why one fails to do a varnadharma of his (p.18).

Now the author illustrates the moral implications inherent in the theory of svabhavaja concerning varnadharma. The author is right in concluding "that the admission necessitation by nature to do a nature-born duty amounts to denying the agent's freedom, and therefore his praiseworthiness for having done a duty, is too obvious to be doubted. Denying freedom to him would also entail that there is no need to argue with him that he ought to do his duty. There is no need to try to persuade Arjuna that he ought to fight the battle, because he would necessarily do it being bound (nibaddha) by his nature to do it (p.19). In the absence of freedom of choice, which is denied by deterministic understanding of varnadharma coupled with svabhavaja, immutability is either diminished to destroyed. So without freedom, there is If varnadharma is always nibaddha, obligatory, there is no point in instructing moral values. And if svadharm is understood to be svabhavaja, natural, there would not have been any confusion in the mind of Arjuna. The story of Gita takes another direction. Hence the usefulness of instruction in moral matters. Had it not been the case, concludes the author, "this

would entail the disutility of all moral instructions, or persuasions, even of the type which Krishna gives to Arjuna in the Gita" (p. 19).

According to the author, to call svadharma or varnadharma, "a categorical imperative would be unfair to the spirit of the general classical Indian theory of values" (p.20). He fields a number of classic examples from Ramayana to substantiate his position. For Rama and Laksmana, to obey their father, which is a sadharana dharma is superior to their svadharma as ksatriya (p.21). Thus, the writer observes, "To know the subtle nature of dharma is, thus, to know when to follow a sadharana dharma and when to make an exception to it" (p.22). If exceptions are permissible, then laws cease to be absolute. They are not categorical imperatives.

From the above viewpoint, R. Prasad puts forward a moral principle, which is consequentialist in nature. His argumentation is follows: "Many ethical systems or theories consider some duties, or principles, violable in some conditions. But whoever considers the violation of a duty D permissible in the situation S would say the S is, or has to be, in some sense unusual. What makes the violation permissible is invariably some prizable consequence C of the violation which is not likely to be achieved if D is violated. The contribution of S is that it makes it extremely unlikely, or impossible for the agent to produce C without violating D". (p.23).

According to Prasad, the classical Indian theory of dharma not only considers some violations of dharmas permissible but also commendable (p.23). The author holds the view that the classical Indian theory of dharma is consequentialist (p.23). Thus, the author arrives at a logical conclusion which is quite revolutionary in content and having far-reaching social significance. Thus the syllogism runs as follows: "All varnadharmas are svabhavaja and no svabhavaja varnadharma could be categorical. Therefore, no varnadharma could be categorical" (p.24). Svabhavaja of an action, therefore, cannot itself be the criterion of calling it a dharma or duty. Prasad makes a subtle

distinction, "to know that fighting is svabhavaja for a ksatriya is not the same as knowing that it is his duty" (p.27).

Basing on human experience and through the citation of the stories of Eklavya and Kama, the author underscores the possibility of change in human nature, no matter to which varna one is born. Therefore, he is just in saying that "what one can naturally do cannot be determined at birth, and what is his nature cannot a priority be determined, one for ever, because his nature may change" (p.31). Since varnadharma does not satisfy the criteria of normative ethical theory, Prasad points out the inherent weakness it embodies. "It seems to me that too much emphasis on the naturalness (svabhavajata) of varnadharmas, determining naturalness in terms of an a priori conception of human nature, assignment of varnadharmas by an external agency no matter divine etc., are some of the main factors responsible for its having this fate (p.31).

However, one thing is crystal clear. The author's stance on svabhavajata varnadharma is worthy of attention. If the birth of person into a varna decides her or his morality, it will end up in determinism of fatalism, which leaves little room for freedom, the foundation of morality. If the agent has no choice, she or he is condemned to be in the present state of life. The agent is not responsible for his action. Therefore, no question of culpability arises. Whereas, if attention is directed .to the truth of humans sharing a common nature (All are born sudra. It is through samskaras one attains greater heights in human life), there is scope for morality. Seen from this perspective, svabhavajata and nibaddha gain new horizon. Whatever be the varna to which one is born, it is her or his dharma to have karmas to be svabhavaja in the concrete living context. It is the anubhavajanya jnana which leads to nibaddha karma. Blindness or forgetfulness or sightlessness of the truth is not anything entirely alien to human perception, thinking, knowing and experience. Hence there is the usefulness of instruction in order to awaken the human consciousness and conscience to march forward

with clarity and certainty. There lies the importance of dharma, the normative and regulative principle of life.

It seems to me that the author is preoccupied with varnadharma almost to the neglecting of other factors, such as smṛti, śiṣṭa and antaranga, which are necessary elements to draw the parameters of morality, to see things in right perspective and to chalk out an adequate action programme. Though the author is logical and rational in his approach, he knowingly or unknowingly but conveniently neglects the other sources of morality.

Without any hesitation, I can say with certainty that the views of the R. Prasad deserve our attention in order to comprehend and complement the articulation on dharma, which supports and holds people together and helps them march together to the destiny.

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