

Socia Evils in India: Is the 'Dharma' at the Root

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Abstract

In Indian society it is seen that not only most of the old social evils are continuing but are increasing day by day. Intellectuals while pondering over the cause of the evils of the society the role of dharma in the society has been very often taken into account by them. And it has been considered to be one of the major factors among the several causes of evils and sufferings. There have been opinions by some atheists, rationalists, secularist and few others that the society should be free from dharmas as those are found to be in the root of many social evils. Not only dharma but also the other-worldly concepts like moksha which is considered to be the ultimate dharmic goal of human beings is also equally responsible for the promotion of some major evils. The paper aims at finding the nature of the social evils and to examine if the dharma or dharmic considerations are at the root. So first of all it is important to see what are the social evils appears to be caused by dharma or dharmic considerations.

Keywords: Moksha, Dharma, Evil etc

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The human sufferings we witness due to some evils can be characterized into two categories in the sense some are continuing from remote past or from ancient days and some are found to be in operation from the recent past. The evils like i) the effects of caste system, ii) untouchability, iii) *sati daahaprathaaiv)devadasi prathaav*) infanticide, vi) patriarchy or men-women inequality, etc. are of the former category. The evils like i) female foeticide, ii) corruptions, iii) exploitations (in various sectors like, industrial, service, political, and many others), iv) cyber cheatings v) child labour, vi) violation of business ethics, media ethics, medical ethics, etc. belong to the latter category. Besides these man related evils there are also many other evils which are found to be in operation in the name of dharma. For example, there are huge numbers of instances of rituals of animal sacrifices in the temples or religious institutions. In respect of this type of evils due to the effort of social reformers and animal lovers there has been gradual development in the situations and the practice has been stopped in many places. Since the evils of the second category are not found to be concerned with dharma those will not be taken up in this paper. Let us have a look on the practice and nature of the evils of the first category to see the role of dharma with regard to those evils.

The effects of caste system:

One of the most long standing and prominent social evil is the dominance of the Brahmin caste of people in the formation of social laws as a result of which a class of people were very much neglected and ill-treated in the Indian society. There was no limit to the ill treatment and to their sufferings. Many social reformers have raised their voice against this social evil and have attempted remove the evil from the society. Very often the religion (dharma) is criticized for this evil and held responsible for this evil and sufferings of a section of the people.

The feelings of superiority and inferiority among the different castes of people happen to be the major effect of the caste system (*varna-vyavasthaa*) recommended by our ancient literatures like the Vedas, Dharmasastras, Puranas, etc. In this respect the maximum emphasis is attached on two very prominent and popular sources. Those are namely, *PurusaSukta* of the *Rg. Veda* and the *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*. Scholars are of the opinion that prior to the vedic period and in the early vedic period there were only two classes of people. The two classes were namely, *aarya* and *daasa*, representing to general-class and serving-class respectively. The term ‘*varna*’ which later on understood as signifying a caste at the beginning stage understood in its primary sense, that is ‘colour’ referring to *aarya-varna* and *daasa-varna*. The purpose behind was the colour of the former class of people was white and of the later class was non-white. In the early Vedic literatures there has

been mentioning of three classes of people namely, *Brahma* (the people engaged as poet-priests), *Ksatra* (for the warriors) and *Vaisha* (comprising all common people) being treated as three sub-classes of *aarya* class. But specific view developed in the later period of *Rg. Veda*.

The follow up period of *Manu Smṛti* was clearly accepting the caste system and the four fold classification of the *varnas* was clearly prescribed by Manu. The possibility of fifth *varna* was categorically denied by Manu. (I.10). Manu seems to have agreed to the divine origin of classes as well as the continuation of the classes on hereditary basis. For him the *sudras* belong to a servile class belonging mostly to the aborigines. It was decided on hereditary basis. It was seen that if some *sudras* manage to acquire more wealth and some position, they were commanding the services of other *sudras*. But neither were they given the status of higher class nor any other caste people were ever rendering service to this class of people. Since there is the rejection of the possibility of the fifth class, the possibility of the mixed class (leading to a sub caste) is accepted. The term used for the mixed class is *varnasankara*. A son of a Brahmin male and Vaisha female was called *Ambastha*. They do not belong to *Varnas* rather belong to some *Jati*. He refers to four *varnas* but mentions about 57 *Jatis*.¹

Sharma mentions that "It was a principal object with Manu to glorify Brahmins and to preserve the purity of the twice-born classes by restraining mixed marriages as far as possible."² Brahmins were given highest position among the four *varnas* and though not directly but a gradation was clearly maintained among them keeping *sudras* at the lowest position. Following (*Mahabhasya*, 2.22,. 5.1) Sharma also mentions : "The great grammarian Patanjali also speaks about the superiority of the Brahmins when he says that in a compound, words like Brahmin, Ksatriya, Vaisya, Sudra, take the first, second, third and fourth position according to their status in the social set-up."³ In fact the Brahmin dominance and their self-interests have promoted the evil related to castes through interpreting the classical literatures in their own way.

Untouchability

Untouchability is also another evil which has been pervaded in the society due to the superior and inferior caste feelings and the *brahmin* dominancy. This evil can be treated as corollary to the evil caused by the caste gradations. It is such an evil which brings a very poor image of human thinking to treat the same human species of same blood and flesh as untouchables. It was possible for some people who were considering them to be higher grade of people. There have been many practices seen in Indian society being based on untouchability. Some particular categories of people were/are treated as untouchables. It was decided on the basis of the birth in a particular family. Not only they were debarred from many facilities

like visiting temples or using the public source of water but they were also not allowed to touch the higher classes of people. The *dalits* were not allowed to touch the higher class people. It is supposed that their touch will make unholy the higher class people. Mostly the *dalits* were the victims of this evil.

The exact starting point of untouchability cannot be traced. But the practice was conspicuous from the days of the follow up of *Manu Smriti* as the primary guidelines for the social laws. Currently the practice though not found conspicuously but it cannot be said that there is complete dead stop of the practice. As per the data cited by Christophe⁴ till 1931 the census was taking note of the percentage of the people of the different castes. The picture of the 1931 census is very much pathetic in the sense even though the people of *sudra* class out numbering all other classes of people but this huge class was under the suppression of the people of the other small classes, specially the *brahmin* class. As an example we can see their percentage in one of the most advanced state, like Maharastra that when *brahmins*, *ksatriyas* and *vaisyas*, were 3.9%, 1%, 1.69% respectively the *sudras* were 31.19% and the untouchables were 16.47% of the total.

Circumstantially *dalits* were not given scope for learning and educated people were not seen among them. The understanding was given to them by the so-called higher class Brahmin people that the caste gradations as well as the inferior status of certain categories of people are granted in our *dharma-sastras* and religious scriptures having divine sanctions. It is also claimed that there are certain scriptures which are the direct utterances of Lord. There were no administrative supports in favour of this poor class of people to raise their voice against the practice. It is because in king-ship administration the vice-virtue considerations were also in the hands of those so-called *panditbrahmins*.

Sati daahaprathaa

At present this practice is not seen and it is treated as criminal act in the eyes of law. The fear of police action has helped in checking this most inhuman act. But this act was very much in practice for several centuries in this soil being supported by the values like dharma and moksa. The belief was that if the alive wife will dedicate her life in the funeral fire of her husband following his death then the women will incur lot of virtues and will be liberated. So there was a practice of putting the alive women (wife of the dead person) in the funeral fire of her husband which was named as *sati daahaprathaa*. Here *sati* stands for 'most virtuous lady'. In order to become sati one has to sacrifice the life of living as a widow. In order to become the virtuous lady regardless of her age she has to kill herself by setting herself on her husband's funeral pyre.

It was an age old custom which was found as a common practice and most peculiarly it was treated as holy instead of unholy. It was a clear case of murder. But the picture was given that it is the holy desire of the women to become virtuous and she welcomes her death through this act of suicide. There was an endeavour to construct a shrine to honour Rani Sati Narayani Devi is indicative of the mindset of the people towards this practice. In fact a sati temple was found in the Jhunjbunu District of Rajasthan, where the worship of Rani Sati first emerged. It was supported by sizable Marwari people. A blind belief was converted to virtuous act through creating a mind-set by interpreting dharma in their own way to promote patriarchy (suppressed) by the intelligent males.

Since women themselves chose suicide than being ravaged by hostile forces, sati was first favoured by the society before the British government banned sati by legislative action. Even after such a step it is seen that three instances were recorded in 1980, and there were seven cases in the State of Rajasthan alone. Again three instances of Sati were documented in 1983. The most important consideration which was linked with this practice was rarely realized by the women class. The women were treated merely an extension of their husbands and there is no necessity of their living after the death of their husbands was the primary concern of the male dominated society. The attempt was to keep women as good as slaves by giving a different a different picture that their virtues are increased by this means. *Sati daahaprathaa* is a case of promotion of suppressed patriarchy.

Devadaasiprathaa

There is another dharma linked social evil, *debadaasipratha*, which is still prevailing today at some places. There is almost no scope of treating this practice to be illegal from the legal point of view. But it is a type of sacrificing the life for the sake of religious life which is not appreciated by many rationalists and intellectuals.

In this custom (*prathaa*) an unmarried girl opts to serve the lord treating that the lord is everything for her and remains spinster throughout her life. In some places it is treated that she has married to lord and she has no other desire for her other than offering service to lord. There are slight differences in the operation this custom from places to places. Of course in certain places married women at a particular time decide to become *devadaasi* for offering service to lord to earn virtues. In Tamil state this custom is called *tevaratiyal*, which refers to a woman who is a slave of lord and meant to serve a particular deity or holy idol in a temple. In most of the brahmnical temples of this state were having *devadaasi*.

Normally there are only male servitors in the temples. Female servitors were not found in any temple till the beginning of twenty-first century. After the

development of the consciousness regarding liberalization of women in few temples some women servitors are seen. To take an instance, in the Sri Jagannathadhaam of Puri, which is one of the four famous dhaamas of India, there are more than five thousand servitors and all of them are male. Here too *devadaasi* custom is followed and there are one or two female servitors who are known as *devadaasi*. They remain spinster throughout the life and their primary concern is to amuse the lord by singing song before lord before the lord taking rest in the night.

The critics point out that, by and large, in the early days of this custom, *devadaasis* were solely providing sexual favours to monarchs and temple priests. As time went on, maybe for the sake of a comfortable living they began offering sexual favours to regular temple visitors as well. In contrast to prostitutes and other commercial sex workers, *devadaasis* were only taking presentations and were not charging money for their services. Some elderly people went back to live with their spouses in their homes. It is customary for them to stoop to begging at five different neighborhoods residences, but this was not followed because of the need. As previously said, the commercial sex business, which is well-organized in Indian cities, is where *devadasis* are most needed. Many men leave their wives and families behind as agricultural operations in the villages decline and relocate to cities in search of permanent or temporary employment. As a result, the commercial sex business has an easily accessible consumer and increased demand. A research on the growth of the *devadasis* self-help movement conducted in Belgaum in 2001 found that 31% of *devadasis* are relocated in Mumbai's red light areas.

The problem with this *devadassi* custom is that out of emotional decision to dedicate the life for the service of lord one becomes *devadaasi*. But subsequently the life becomes a burden for them primarily for these following few reasons.

- (a) In a survey done by Joint Women's Programme for NCW it was reported that in Bangalore out 375 *devadaasis*, 67% adolescence girls were not opted but compelled to become *devadaasi* for the sake of keeping up the tradition.
- (b) The scanty salary provided by temple management was too less to live a standard living. They were facing acute financial problems to meet their livelihood.
- (c) When they were going for singing or dancing before lord in the night they take good make up to look as beautiful as possible. But after their service they became the target of amusement by other male servitors. For the financial gain very often they fall prey to it. That is a kind of prostitution adopted by them.
- (d) Some *devadasis* enter the commercial sex business after the devotion, while others engaged in prostitution in their homes and communities. In some cases either for physical need or financial need prostitution becomes the

secondary source of earning for them. Through this custom the unethical profession like prostitution is promoted.

- (e) The devadaasis are initiated as lord's property but later on treated as 'public property, or the property of the temple management trust.

Thus, it is seen that the link between the *dharmic* institutions and *devadaasi* custom cannot be denied so also the role of dharma for this type of social evil can be challenged.

Infanticide

Infanticide is another inhuman social evil where people do not hesitate to kill their own offspring to which the female parent carries for nine months in her womb bearing all types of sufferings linked to it. Jacob Bryant has pointed out that "One would think it scarcely possible that so unnatural a custom as that of human sacrifices could have existed in the world, but it is very certain that it is not only existed, but almost universally prevailed." ⁵Infanticide stands for killing of an infant preferably within five of age or in tender age. It is not same as infant mortality. The later concept stands for the natural death of a child at its infant state. Taking the practice of infanticide into account joint authoress, Neera Desai and MaitheyiKrisnaraj,⁶ mention that infanticide is the killing of the newly born within twenty-four to forty-eight hours of the birth of the child. However the cases of killing the new-born baby within a short period of birth, preferably within three to four days, are usual.

It has been said that there are primarily two types of infanticides are seen in India. In the state of Odisha, in the Ganjam district there are some tribes who go for infanticide for the sake of sacrifice. Similarly in the West-Bengal some parents through their newly born child in order to keep their vow with the expectation of some better future or the fulfilment of some unfulfilled desire. There is some sort of religious link in these cases of infanticide. But the practice seen to be prevalent in North-Western states Gujarat, Rajasthan and also in Punjab the practice of infanticide was massive as compared to other regions. It is seen with the Jats, Tagas, Ahirs belonging to Rajput clan and Kories clan. It is also seen with Bedis and Sodhis of Punjab. Moyal Brahmins, Bhats, Charans and Khatri also were seen to adopt this practice.

The exact origin of this practice is not known. But there has been mentioning of punishment for the adoption infanticide in different *Smritis* shows that it was there in that remote past. During Mughal regime it was so conspicuous that emperor Jehangir had issued a proclamation in order to prohibit female infanticide. Since it was seen with this practice Guru Gobinda Singh had also condemned this practice. Maharaja of Jaipur in 1731 and Bukht Singh of Jodhpur in 1752 issued edicts to limit marriages expenses, which was supposed to be one of the reasons of female infanticide. In spite of several attempts there some cases detected in the nineteenth century.

Now the question is in what way the infanticide is linked with dharma for which religious desires are treated as at the root of infanticide. It has been already pointed out that there primarily two reasons for opting infanticide. In majority of cases in later days economic condition of the family was seeking infanticide as the solution to get rid of the future burden of the female child. Here there is no causal link between the act of infanticide and dharma. But when infanticide is preferred as a sacrifice to God, which practice was more in earlier days, certainly shows a link between dharma and infanticide. These cases are not immediately after the birth of the child. Such cases are crueller than killing immediately after the birth. In this type the killing/murder is fully clear in the name of sacrifice. After nurturing the child for two to three years selecting an auspicious day the child is offered Goddess Ganga or in some river which are treated to be holy places. The places utilised for this type of killing are TriveneeSangam, Nudeeya, Ganga, the branch of Ganga at Calcutta, Saugur, Chakdhuh, Prayag or Allahabad, etc. The child was allowed to take bath till taken away by the stream. The reason of such offerings was the parents have taken oath previously when they will become parent due to grace of God they will offer their first child to Lord in some holy river. The cruelty involved in infanticide reaches the apex in another type of cases of the following manner. If the child somehow refuses to take mother's breast feed then the child was treated as inauspicious and was subjected to death by left hanging on a tree. Muthulaxmi has described the cases as "If an infant refuses the mother's breast, it is considered to be under the influence of some malignant spirit. Such a child is put into a basket, and hung up in a tree where the evil spirit is supposed to reside. That child is generally destroyed by ants, of birds or prey: but sometimes it perishes by neglect."⁷ These instances clearly show that the religious beliefs are definitely at the root of the act of infanticide.

Patriarchy or men-women inequality

It does not appear to be that serious social evil from the face of it. Practically full equality consideration is never possible. But on principle there should not be inequality. It is a matter of regret that for a pretty long period the status of women was no better than a slave. There was no end to the inhuman and ill treatment to the women members of a family to the extent of treating such activities to be no less than social evil. The fight for justice is still in the process and though some changes in attitude and living has changed in urban areas the rural areas not still free from the consideration of inequality. Of course at present the difference is not there on principle or in the eyes of law. Our concern is to examine whether dharma is in any way can be held responsible either in promoting the evil or facing the challenges of the evil.

So far as vedic period is concerned no conspicuous record is witnessed regarding the ill treatment to women. Rather it is seen that in the performance of *yajans* the presence of the wife of the performer of the *yajnas* was treated to be essential. Balse points out that "Education was not denied to girls who went to *Gurukulas* or forest universities, studying side by side with boys in co-educational institutions. It was a father's bounden duty to educate his daughters as well as his sons."⁸ The picture becomes clearer for this event that when the female partner enters to her in laws home after marriage she is welcomed by some vedic mantras or hymns. The meaning of that hymn is that 'let the home may be delighted with wealth as well as the new family members (babies). Take proper care of this family with your watchful vision. Continue your family life with your husband till your old days and guide the household till the end.'

The picture of the epic period is not clear so far the status of women is concerned. It appears that the epics were designed more for literary purposes than depicting the real picture of the society. One single incident is sufficient to establish this above mentioned stand. On the one hand Draupadi had the privilege to select her life partner through *swayambara*. The same individual was used as a commodity to be pledged in the game. It seems that the author has utilised his intellect to make the story more interesting than anything else. The picture of women was not deplorable either in the Buddhist or Jaina cultures.

ArthaSastra of Kautilya was considered to be one of the most important judicial and political guides of the then period. In this *Sastra* he has given a very poor status to women by saying that the maintenance of wife and children is the responsibility of the male head of the family and he did not recommend women for taking part in the administrative affairs or the duties of state. He has mentioned that they can be used as spies or bodyguards to help the administration.

The position of women became precarious when the society followed various *SmritisSastras* to be their judicial guides. The basic role of woman according to the law maker Manu is found as: "By a young girl, by a young woman or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons, a woman must never be independent." It is seen that the influence of Manu continued for a very long period until the social reformers came forward to change the slave-status of women class.

Now taking the above mentioned cases the question follows that does dharma come to the picture regarding the deplorable condition of the society in respect of continuing evils? Here though it has been put as a single question but the issue is a

complex one because of its link with other social phenomena. The most important factor is that from the very beginning the law makers have become successful in relating the moral/ immoral considerations with the laws they have formulated for the society. Their primary motto was to keep the *brahmins* at the top of the order of the society and the male persons of a family should also be the decision maker. The support and respect of the king-ship administration towards *brahmin* scholars has helped a lot for the monopoly of the *brahmin* law makers to keep them at the top of the social order and treat others to be inferior. Such practice continued for years without facing any challenge was primarily for two reasons. The first reason is that any challenge to the existing social principles was treated as crime and was subjected to punishment. And the other reason is that the two major classes of victims, namely, the *sudras* and the women were away from educational facilities to raise their voice against the oppression against them. Rather the social psychology was developed in such a manner that women had the understanding that their husbands are their living lords and to think against their will is *adharma* or immoral. This kind of psychology has helped subsequently for their mental preparation that the life of women is useless after the death of the husband and it is preferable to get *mukti* in jumping to the funeral pyre of the husband. Thus at the root of many social evils the link of the concept of dharma is either openly or tacitly there.

Taking the above mentioned cases into consideration it is seen that dharma condemned to be at the root of these above mentioned social evils. There is no doubt that there are some elements of truth in the above mentioned observations so far as the traditional understanding of dharma is concerned. But it is also fact that the people who have shown their concern for the removal of such sufferings like, Buddha, Vivekananda, Gandhi and many others have attempted in the proper understanding of dharma which is value based. As a cardinal value cannot be at the root of any social evil. Since at the *prima facie* the religious foundation of those evils cannot be denied. But the understanding and attitude about dharma can be rationalized to remove the evils.

In fact those who have attempted in bringing reformations in respect of the evils they have attempted in challenging the religious foundations of these practices. The two eminent intellectuals of India, Gandhi and Ambedkar have admitted the religious foundation of this evil practice and have fought against the evil practice in different ways. Gandhi personally gave up the feeling of high-low considerations among people and put it into practice since 1905 by rejecting the consideration of untouchability. But he took up the mission of removal of this evil practice from 1909 by publicly rejecting the notion of high-low caste-gradation. Gandhi attempted in attacking the religious

foundation of it by analysing the proper motive of religious scriptures. Ambedkar was belonging to the *mahar* class which was coming under untouchables and he must have faced this evil at the early part of his life that has prompted him to fight against the evil. Ambedkar's aversion for the Hinduism and adoption Buddhism was mainly due to the *brahmin* dominance in Hinduism and castelessness of Buddhism. Ambedkar was not against religion but very much against the practice of untouchability for which he was against some of the views of the Hindu scriptures. But the proper understanding of dharma will change the shape of the society.

In this context let us put a glance on one of the celebrated definition of dharma as mentioned in the Vaisheshika Sutra (*yato abhyudaya- nihsreyasa- siddhihsah dharma* 1.1.2). This definition says that in case of dharma at least two factors are important as identifying marks. Those are: what intends at the social wellbeing (*abhyudaya*) and the accomplishment of supreme good or transcendental good (*nihsreyasa- siddhih*). As old as in 15th century Sankara Misra has translated *nihsreyasa- siddhih* achievement of 'final cessation of pain'. Dharma is and can be for the social evils but for the sake of social justice and social welfare is beyond doubt. As we have learnt that dharma protects, sustains, upholds, and uplifts the self and the society. It harmonizes the individual life with the social life. It involves the sacrifice for the community. Dharma constitutes in the attitude to a set of values for right conduct and living. This understanding of dharma should be properly emphasized rather than the misguided interpretations of the self-centred pundit of the *Smriti* period.

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