

A Critical Examination of Contextual Morality in the Light of Professor Bimal Krishna Matilal.

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In ancient Indian philosophy, the word “*dharma*” has been used in a wider sense. Here, we do not use the word “*dharma*” only in the sense of religion. It means duty. What one ought to do is one’s *dharma*. Now a question arises: how we are expected to do our duty in a situation which is not normal? According to the *Mahābhārata*, it must be different from the usual duty to response the situational contexts.

Now a day, situational ethics is very important issue in our worldly life. Without our moral value, we cannot do any moral activity. Here, in this article, I have chosen Professor Bimal Krishna Matilal because he was an eminent philosopher whose writings presented the Indian philosophical tradition as a comprehensive system of logic and philosophy. He was the first one who has discussed contextual ethics or *āpadkāla dharma* from a new angle. He has given examples from *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana*. We can see that Lord Krishna and Lord Rama both are divine characters for our normal human beings. But here, Professor Matilal has discussed the issues from the critical and logical point of view. He has also explained contextual ethics or *āpad-kāla dharma* from various kind of moral ground and tried to focus a logical and analytical ground.

Now, I may be remarked that if we consider the word “*dharma*” in categorical sense, then we cannot handle the abnormal situation. Our duties are different in these two situations: these are normal and peculiar situation. That is why, depending upon the situation our action will not be same. Western philosopher Immanuel Kant

accepted 'Duty for Duty's sake' as a 'unconditional command of reason'. Similarly, Rabindra Nath Tagore has mentioned in '*Gandharir Abedan*' "dharma nahe sampadero hetu, nahe se sukher kshudra setu, dharme dharmar sesh".[1] Duty is an end in itself. It cannot be explained in narrow sense. Rather it can be described through the practice of moral duties.

But sometimes it is very difficult to practice in normal worldly life. In '*Devatar Gras*', Rabindra Nath Tagore has approached a different mode of humanistic ground. He argues that in the case of contextual ground, we should not act on the face value of the language or literally meaning of sense. Its meaning is to be understood considering upon the situational context. In this writing, we can see that mother Mokshada (the mother of Rakhal) "had angrily said to her disobedient child that he would be thrown into the sea, but had not meant it".[2]

Further we can see that there are some situations between two actions which we cannot ignore. Such as, in the student life our first duty is to do study "*chātrānām adhyayanaṁ tapaḥ*". Now, there is a situation, when a student is engaged in his study, then immediately the student comes to know that his neighbor, an old lady has fallen down from the upstairs and she needs help of the doctor.

Now, here is a situation of moral-doubt or *dharma-saṁśaya*. As a student, his first priority is study. But when there is a question of a 'one's life saving' that means when both duties are equally important like A and B then depending upon the situation which is more important, that should be given priority. When you are getting a stronger argument in favor of a duty B then your usual duty of A is to be neglected rightfully. So, the student is quite sincere with his study which is his actual *dharma* in normal situation. But in the case of a peculiar situation, there is another duty of the student as a

human being “to help your neighbor” which should be given priority and his actual duty is to help the old lady. This is called moral and righteous duty. He overcomes his moral doubt by more convincing and preferential treatment of reasoning.

Some situational actions are difficult to decide upon actual state of affairs of life. This is called moral dilemma or *dharma sañkaṭa* where arguments for both the cases are equal in strength. This time is called *āpad-kāla* and the duty for this *āpad-kāla* is called *āpad-dharma* in the *Mahābhārata*. In this world, everything exists on their mutual co-interdependence. If we admit that then we must say that our moral judgment cannot always be absolute in nature; rather we can say that it is relative to the contextual situation or moral dilemmas or *dharma-sañkaṭa*. When there is a question of existential crisis, then it is our first duty to overcome it with mutual correspondences. In normal situation which acts are to be obeyed but in abnormal situation due to the existential crisis, the odd act should be acted. This is called *āpad-dharma* or contextual morality. Here, the *dharma* or duty is relative depending upon the situation.

In some cases, when we try to follow a particular action from our own psychological moral ground, namely “A” then another conflicting situation also arises which instructs us to follow to do “non-A” or “B” action. Now, if we try to consider these both situations from the moral ground that ‘which one should be taken?’ then problem arises. Because, when both of them are equally strong, then it arises a situational dilemma or *dharma-sañkaṭa*. Both conditions are right from their own standpoints then it is very difficult to select one of them.

When there is a question of existential crisis or to save one’s life from the death then the situational act should be like this: to be neglected the common duty or the primary act “always you should

speak the truth". That act can be neglected if it can save one innocent's life not for a guilty. In that particular moment or in the time of *dharmasaṅkṣāta*, speaking lie is to be called *āpad-dharma*.

Professor B. K. Matilal has mentioned it as "moral-dilemma". This "Moral dilemmas are like mathematical puzzles," which he has mentioned in his book "*Moral Dilemma in Mahabharata*," name of the chapter- *Moral Dilemmas: Insights from Indian Epics*. He has also mentioned that "my analysis will show that they were genuine dilemmas, and also that traditional wisdom, as I have emphasized, maintained an ambivalent attitude towards the *ad hoc resolutions* described in the ancient texts." [3]

"Nothing is either good or bad, but our thinking makes it so" (Hamlet). Moral judgement or its analysis depends upon the practical situation. So, the same action and its moral value is going to be changed in different kind of situation. We have already mentioned that earlier.

In the normal case, we should follow our common practices there is a no question to doubt. But if the question arises about a human life "to save him at any cost" or about "existential crisis" then "what should we do?" if we break our promise and do not speak truth or try to follow our regular primary act then we cannot be able to tackle the peculiar situation. So, then a moral dilemma arises, such as: in *Mahābhārata* we have seen the story of Kausika muni, merchant and robbers. On the other side, when, there is a question of one's life and truth telling then contextual morality *āpad-dharma* comes. In a particular situation a certain action becomes "permissible" and in a different situation that very action becomes "non-permissible". In abnormal situation only between truth telling, and saving the life of innocent people, there the *dharmā* is "telling non-truth". [4]

We all know that *ahimsā* or non-violence is the greatest virtue. But in the case of any existential crisis to save one's life, then *ahimsā* or non-violence cannot be taken as effective. Such as: we all know that in our nature, all creatures have their own intrinsic value. We should not harm others life at any cost. But when there is a question to save own's life from to others then action B is permissible act.

We can also see such similar conditions of existential crisis of moral issues which is called *āpad-dharma* or contextual morality in *Mahābhārata*, in many dimensions. Here, we propose to concentrate on *āpad-dharma*. From *Mahābhārata* in *śāntiparva*, there is a story of Cat-Rat-Dialogue (*mārjāra-muṣika-saṁvāda*). This is a story where we have to consider the situation of determining ought-ness of action from contextual moral ground.

When one's life is in danger from all possible options then in that case of abnormal situation no common rules or normal act is to be followed. Rather this peculiar situation can be tackled by some other tactics. May be they both have old-aged enmity like cat and rat. But depending upon the situation to save their own life from the third party, immediately they forget their old enmity and take a decision to make friend-ship with each other. Always 'existence' precedes 'other considerations say, generalization. This kind of association is acceptable for the specific time being to sustain one's existence. So, it is to be advised that at the time of existential crisis, an act is morally right and permissible even it is wrong or non-righteous action in the normal situation.

We all know that Cat and rat they both are enemy of one another. A rat is the food of a cat. In *śāntiparva* of *Mahābhārata*, we can see that once upon a time, in the forest, there was a tree-hole where a rat was living. One night, when the rat came out from the tree-hole then he immediately saw that a cat was in front of him,

caught in a hunter-set cage and the cat wanted to be rescued himself from the cage made of net and to come out from it.

In the tree, there was an owl who was sitting over on the branch of the tree. There was also a mongoose near the tree. All are enemies of the rat, such as: cat, owl, mongoose in normal situation. Now, how the rat will save himself from the all his enemies? Because, he does not have any option to return back in the tree-hole. But in the following context, there are some conditions. Like, owl can see in the night only except in the morning. Mongoose and owl can eat the rat easily but this is not possible because of the presence of the cat. If the rat helps the cat by cutting the net to come out from the hunter-set cage then the cat will come out easily, and the mongoose and the owl will be in danger. But here, the rat is very intelligent.

Now, in that moment if the rat helps the cat to come out from the cage then the cat will eat the rat. So, the rat took a decision to save his life and make friendship with cat. Otherwise, owl or mongoose will eat the rat. Now, the rat also tried to convince the cat that not to be worried. When the sun rises in the morning and the farmer will come to catch the cat before that the rat will complete the cutting of the net and save cat's life. And the rat kept his promise and save cat's life from the farmer and also save his own life from the owl and mongoose. When one's life is at stake from all corner then the situation is like that by applying all the means of right action, maybe one is not able to save one's life, then this situation is called '*āpada-kāla dharma*'.

Next day, when again the cat came to the rat to thank him for saving his life and requesting the rat to go for some refreshment then the rat denied the cat immediately. Because, in the normal situation they both are enemies of one another. But in the time of existential crisis, they make friendship with each-other. Now the

crisis is over. So, there is a no friendship to be maintained. This is righteous, *dharma*. The most powerful consideration is one's own life. So, on the basis of contextual situation one should take his own decision that who is originally a friend and who is a foe. In the situation of existential crisis for combating stronger common threat, it is right to form friendship even among commonly known enemies.

Now, in conclusion we must say that *dharma* or righteous action is such that can be known by only practice. Dharma-ethics does not allow any gap between belief and behavior. In our daily life, we face various type of confusion or *dharma-saṅkaṭa* that appears to us as a challenge. At that moment, we cannot take our decision in between our apparent duties and actual duties. Our training in virtue ethics helps us to do any action in normal situation but in the situational crisis time, there is no common formula which has to be taken. That moment our practical wisdom (intuition) and our commonsense is the stronger guiding principle to overcome this situation. Here, Professor Matilal observed that “but the acknowledgement of possible flexibility does not mean that the fixity and universality of ethical laws will be entirely negotiable. Situational constraints may require some bending, but by allowing genuine moral sentiments like remorse or guilt it makes up for occasional lapses.”[5]

Notes and References

1. Rabindra Nath Tagore “GandharirAbedan” (Bengali Dramain poetry), Kahini, -see, *Rabindraranavali*, Vol.4, Visva-Bharati,1986, p.86

2. See, B. K. Matilal, *The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal: Philosophy, Culture and Religion, Ethics and Epics*, ed. Jonardon Ganeri, Oxford University Press, 2002, p.12.
3. See, B. K. Matilal, "Moral Dilemmas: Insights from Indian Epics" in *Moral Dilemma in the Mahabharata*, IAS, Shimla & MLBD, Delhi, 1989, p.12
4. See, B. K. Matilal, "*Niti, Yukti O Dharma: Kahini Sahitye Ram O Krishna*" (Essay), Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 1423 (Ben Era), p.49
5. See, B. K. Matilal, *Moral Dilemma in the Mahabharata*, IAS, Shimla & MLBD, Delhi, 1989, p.17.

Bibliography:

1. Matilal Bimal Krishna, *The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal: Philosophy, Culture and Religion, Ethics and Epics*, ed. Jonardon Ganeri, Oxford University Press, 2002
2. -----, *Moral Dilemma in the Mahabharata*, IAS, Shimla & MLBD, Delhi, 1989.
3. -----, "*Niti, Yukti O Dharma: Kahini Sahitye Ram O Krishna*" (Essay), Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 1423 (Ben Era).
4. Rabindra Nath Tagore, *Rabindraranavali*, Vol.4, Visva-Bharati, 1986.