

Exploring Social, Religious, and Ethical Dilemmas of Indian Culture and Society

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ABSTRACT

The Indian psyche is an amalgamation of several intellectual systems, civilizations, cultures, and traditions. It is embedded in a multitude of ideas and customs. These ideas and practices serve as tools for the construction of one's mindset. However, in the event of internal psychological conflict, an individual may exhibit a proclivity to adapt to or align with another cultural setting that is intricately connected to their identity. In this process, such individuals find their customary understanding inadequate and therefore confront dilemmas and paradoxes within their societal setup. In light of this, the paper encompasses two primary goals. The first part explores several beliefs and ideas that help shaping the Indian psyche while, the second part explores its understanding of cultural paradoxes that are ingrained in it, leading to dilemmas that involve societal, moral, and ethical dimensions. In addition to this, three case studies are presented to illustrate these intricate predicaments.

Keywords: *Indian Psyche, Dilemmas, Beliefs, Contradiction, Culture*

Human mind is a product of incredible engineering comprised of both cognitive and non-cognitive elements. The cognitive aspect involves thinking, intelligence, perception, judgment, memory, consciousness, etc., while the non-cognitive aspect involves emotion and instinct part. Both cognitive and non-cognitive aspects are known as the primary source of constructing worldviews and concepts for an individual. These concepts and worldviews are not only influenced by the socio-political roots of an individual but also by cultural elements.

Discussing the influences on the Indian psyche, it is various cultural practices, traditions, and philosophies that directly influence its essence. Vedas and Upanishads were the first ones who paved the road by setting various beliefs and ideas on the Indian psyche. It originated from a diverse polytheistic belief system, evolving into monotheism and ultimately culminating in rigorous philosophical monism. This further resulted in defining, understanding, and finding answers to questions regarding the inner self and the ultimate reality. Various cultural perspectives encompassing moral and philosophical ideas, ranging from monotheism to polytheism and from materialism to idealism, were introduced (Moore, 2008).

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Exploring Social, Religious, and Ethical Dilemmas of Indian Culture and Society

Subsequently, the epic period of *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana* laid the foundations for religion-cum-philosophical discourse in the development of the Indian psyche. This period is considered a semi-philosophical period because it was the time when Hindu culture's essential social customs, practices, and governing rules originated. It was also known as the period of *Dharma-śāstra*, where primary emphasis was placed on social welfare and the social philosophy of life. The three fundamental values, i.e., morality, pleasure, and material welfare, have formed the outline of the social structure of the Indian psyche.

Moreover, during this period, various political philosophies of India were developed, of which *Arthaśāstra* of *Kauṭilya* was prominent. During this time, the original beliefs of Hinduism were applied, which highly captured the minds of Indian people. This period is considered creative, productive, and rich in Indian thought, as it brought about a variety of values, ideas, and theories.

The third era, the Sutra period, begun before Christianity. It was when the six great systems of philosophy originated, were formulated, and systematized. Different commentaries and commentators discussed and formulated the vital problems of philosophy.

Apart from these periods, significant concepts, thoughts, and beliefs give importance to the Indian psyche. The concept of *Puruṣārtha* (Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha) is known as the human pursuit and is considered the primary aim of human life. The theory of karma sets a higher principle for the Indian masses. It is those different actions and their repercussions that directly influence an individual and his life.

Additionally, the concept of *Nītiśāstra* or Ethics holds a specific position in Indian society as it helps transform the self and aids spiritual realization. Ethical principles such as non-violence, self-control, non-attachment, charity, compassion, etc. are considered essential codes for social and individual life. Also, the concept of innate disposition (*saṃskāra*) is relevant in Indian tradition. Known as the mental impression and recollection of psychological indentation of past life, it teaches the Indian psyche to accept the inevitable disappointments that come with the most fortunate situations. However, it can also be used to acquit individuals of their accountability and responsibility.

Furthermore, Indian imagination is vital in building its psyche. The strong and alive imagination of the Indian people implies a dynamic and culturally rich mental landscape. This could be rooted in the diverse history, traditions, and cultural tapestry of India, contributing to a unique collective psyche among its people. Different tales, myths, cinema, art, etc., influence it directly.

As these are the foundational elements of a culture, they serve to explain origins, moral lessons, and societal values. All these tales and narratives are not just stories but are deeply embedded in the cultural consciousness, shaping the worldview of Indian individuals.

Speaking about Indian cinema, it serves as a modern-day storyteller, reinterpreting various myths and presenting them in a contemporary context. The idea for such a presentation is to formulate an intriguing and exciting worldview for its masses. As it is a widely consumed and influential form of entertainment, it has the power to shape societal fantasies. The portrayal of diverse fantasies in films reflects the complexity of Indian culture and society, which creates a sense of unity and commonality among the masses, fostering a shared cultural experience.

Perhaps it is sorrowful in the sense that they perceive human experience as being filled with contradictions and doubts, and humans have no choice but to carry the burden of existential questions, different conflicts, and incoherent afflictions of fate, which are unavoidable. (Kakkar, 2007).

Another critical and central aspect of the Indian psyche is the caste and varna system, an expansion of four varnas consisting of *Brahmins* (priestly class), *Kshatriyas* (warrior class), *Vaishyas* (agriculturist and merchant class), and *Shudra* (laborers and service providers). It comprises hierarchically structured endogamous groupings, each made up of people working in specific occupations passed from generation to generation. This system represents the configuration of social stratification, where rituals, social interactions, hierarchical status, and cultural perceptions of purity and pollution come into play. It is considered a complex and influential aspect of Indian culture, shaping social structures, relationships, and opportunities for centuries. While efforts have been made to address its inequities, the impact of the caste system is still felt in various facets of Indian society.

Modernity and the Emergence of Paradox

Our self-perception is often shaped by the prevailing cultural norms, which guide us to adopt a conventional and relatively stable understanding of ourselves. This conventional view is influenced by the dominant cultural narrative, leading individuals to grow up with a clear and consistent sense of identity. For instance, someone born into a lower social class may unquestioningly see themselves as 'lowly' under the influence of those who consider themselves 'upper' in the social hierarchy. Despite experiencing different social realities, both perspectives ultimately agree on who is deemed 'upper' or 'lower.' Consequently, individuals from these diverse backgrounds navigate their lives without critically reflecting on or being aware of the underlying influences shaping their self-perceptions.

However, when we approach other societies or attempt to connect our worldviews, a distinct challenge emerges. Our assumptions and presumptions seem to lose their relevance, presenting us with dilemmas that disrupt our previously made choices. At that time, we are compelled to reconsider our decisions, prompting a reflective examination of ourselves and our identities.

It was during the modern era when exposure to Western ideas and liberal thoughts significantly influenced the Indian psyche. The 19th-century social reform movements emerged as a response to the challenges faced by colonial India. Reformers took a stand against prevalent social issues such as child marriage, the sati system, restrictions on widow remarriage, caste discrimination, etc. Their efforts aimed to challenge and eradicate these social prejudices deeply rooted in pre-colonial India, blending traditional values with a modern context.

Moreover, the evident structural and cultural diversity in India plays a crucial role in shaping how Modernization², Westernization³, Sanskritization⁴, and Secularization⁵ impact different

²It's a transformation process of agrarian and rural society to liberal, secular, and urban society. It is an absolute modification of society that comprises of Industrialization and globalization; it is an open-ended and continuous process.

³Cultural assimilation of western thought and practices. It comprises of many-layered diffusion of western ideas and forms in Indian society.

⁴A process of imitation by which low castes pursue potency in caste hierarchy by copying the rituals and practices of dominant upper castes.

Exploring Social, Religious, and Ethical Dilemmas of Indian Culture and Society

groups. The ascendancy of modernity and the widespread influence of scientific technology, rational thinking, and material progress have significantly shaped India's socio-political and cultural landscape.

“The era of consumerism has penetrated the Indian mindset, affecting both the educated and uneducated segments of society. The persistent exposure of both uneducated and educated classes to colorful and seductive images of consumerist products and lifestyles through the transnational flow of information and programming has brought drastic changes not only in the cultural environment but also in mentalities, i.e., new ways of seeing and thinking” (Mohan, 2011, 215).

The consumerist influence on the Indian psyche is not merely about buying products but extends to shaping cultural norms, societal values, and the way individuals conceptualize their lives in the context of a globalized consumer culture. This prevailing ethos has given rise to a calculative, accumulative, and hedonistic approach to Indian culture, leading to inherent contradictions in individual subjectivity.

Thus, these processes made a profound impact on India's socio-economic culture, driving a substantial transformation in modern India. The seismic shift is underpinned by these inclusive processes, particularly the pervasive influence of consumerism, which is reshaping individual subjectivity and psychology. The concept of freedom and autonomy has undergone a paradigm shift, with individualism emerging as the predominant theme of human progress. This shift from a collective to an individualistic approach has also given rise to a profound spiritual crisis. The modern era introduces a new value system that challenges established moral and ethical beliefs, affecting individuals across various social strata in distinct ways. While the upper echelons of the caste hierarchy were early adopters of Westernization and became its proponents, those lower down the ladder stand to benefit the most from the ideals of individualization. This change opens up the possibility of treating all humans equally, irrespective of their caste, thereby sparking a transformative change.

Nevertheless, the suggestion that adopting a scientific worldview would erode traditional values and beliefs was only partially accurate. This presumption primarily impacted practical cultural values and their traditional expressions, rather than the core values cherished by individuals and societies. Consequently, a multitude of modern instrumental values have found broad acceptance and integration in India. Numerous longstanding norms that once wielded unquestionable influence over religious beliefs and behavior have diminished as a result (Singh, 2012). In this context, India demonstrates significant advancement in the harmonious coexistence of instrumental and fundamental values. This amalgamation has fostered heightened self-awareness, a sense of uniqueness, and historical identity, while also revealing inherent contradictions in the Indian psyche.

The State of Dilemma

Paradoxes or dilemmas can be understood as a critical juncture marked by conflicting choices or considerations, presenting a challenge in selecting from various moral obligations. Failure to make a choice intensifies the complexity, giving rise to a sense of stagnation and inner turmoil. The profound mental conflict in grappling with dilemmas

⁵ Secularization refers to an adoption of constitution that provide individual rights and collective freedom to human.

prompts the emergence of existential questions and contributes to ontological insecurity⁶. The inability to choose between options, leading to a state of inertia, generates internal conflict, ultimately impacting one's existential identity and precipitating an existential crisis.

A series of such examples can be found in the Indian epic *Mahābhārata*. The famous *Viśādayōga Parva* shows *Arjuna's* dilemma⁷ of fighting against his family on the battleground. Killing them for the attainment of the kingdom was the biggest dilemma for *Arjuna*. His dilemma was based on the choice between individual duty and social responsibility. Another character of *Mahābhārata* who always seemed in a dilemma was *Dhṛtarāṣṭra*. His extreme affection for his son didn't let him do the right thing. Thus, he is caught in different dilemmas, resulting in escaping from the right decisions.

Satre, an existential philosopher, delves into the concept of human choices and existential crises, asserting that "man is condemned to be free" (Satre, 2016, 394-405). Following this, Heidegger writes, "man is thrust into the world, necessitating active and aware decision-making" (Heidegger, 1993, 189-241).

In addition, human existence is inherently tied to the centrality of choice. Man is granted the freedom to choose, making choice a fundamental aspect of human life. The power to shape oneself is always within the individual's grasp, and he possesses the liberty to mold his own identity. In times of dilemma, the entirety of one's being is confined to various choices. A challenge arises when one acknowledges the capacity to choose and define their existence. The realization of both the freedom to choose and the constraints on free choice gives rise to existential crises within one's being.

Furthermore, the awareness of freedom to choose brings about a sense of responsibility. The concept of responsibility is intricately linked to the ability to make choices. In the realm of freedom, an individual stands alone and bears responsibility for their chosen actions. Even emotions and circumstances are products of individual choices. Consequently, complete accountability rests on the individual for their decisions, leaving no room for excuses⁸. There is no way to evade the consequences of one's choices. Thus, humans are inextricably tied to the inevitability of making choices; even the refusal to choose is itself a decision. The freedom to choose necessitates a simultaneous commitment to and acceptance of the risks and responsibilities inherent in shaping one's life. Therefore, freedom and responsibility are interconnected, with an increase in freedom corresponding to an increase in the accompanying responsibility.

However, with more responsibility, fear and anguish tend to come naturally. It simply means that if a man chooses something, he assigns some value to it, and if it is of value, then that value is for others too. It means that by a particular choice, he is not only responsible for himself but also for others, even though the other person may or may not agree with his choice. Thus, this awareness increases the feeling of anguish, which becomes tormenting and unbearable for the individual. The fear of expectation and the threat of regret from the choice create turmoil in an individual's psyche. This state is painful and full of anguish, and people try to avoid responsibility. The avoidance of responsibility brings fear and anxiety,

⁶In an existential sense, a state refers to a person's sense of "being" in the world. An ontologically insecure person does not accept the fundamental level of reality of existence, things, themselves, and others.

⁷<https://www.bhagavad-gita.org/Gita/intro.html>

⁸Pantajali philosophy notes, Contemporary Western philosophy, 2017, 62.

which, in turn, creates the continuous construction of false reality and brings an individual into a state of vacuum.

Social, Religious, and Ethical Dilemmas of Indian Society

As humans are inherently interconnected with society, they share a profound and reciprocal relationship with the social fabric. This interdependence significantly shapes the choices and decisions made by both societies and individuals. The constant interplay between individual psyches and societal or moral norms gives rise to paradoxes and conflicts. These contradictions raise doubts about an individual's social, ethical, and moral identity, putting them in an existential crisis. The subsequent case studies⁹ will deeply illustrate this phenomenon.

Case Study 1: The Social Dilemma

A 28-year-old professor, originally from Haryana and belonging to the Jat (FC) community, found himself in a challenging situation when contemplating marriage to a girl with whom he was romantically involved. She was his batchmate and belonged to the Yadav community (OBC). Despite their deep love, the couple was well aware of societal norms discouraging inter-caste marriages.

Subsequently, familial pressure compelled the professor to consider marrying within his community. Faced with the dilemma of choosing between his love and adhering to family expectations, the young man grappled with profound insecurity and a fear of losing his partner. After much deliberation, he ultimately chose to marry another girl from his caste, forsaking his love.

The prevalent social norm in India, discouraging inter-caste marriages, heavily influenced his decision. Unfortunately, this choice led him to frustration, and depression, ultimately resulting in divorce from his spouse.

Examining this case closely reveals that the young man's predicament is not merely a social dilemma but also a moral one. The dominant belief in caste endogamy in India significantly impacts his mental state. Caste endogamy is a widespread and unacceptable norm in Indian society. Even among educated urban individuals, the practice of self-choice marriages remains uncommon. The freedom to choose a life partner is constrained by societal norms, particularly through parental involvement in the initiation process, making it an undesirable practice.

As a result, it is argued that challenging the norms and expectations associated with caste membership can pose a significant fundamental threat (Mahalingam, 2007). Perhaps this is the primary reason behind the threat to the young professor's identity based on caste.

Further, marriage in India is deeply entrenched as one of the most ingrained caste conventions. The young man grapples with this threat, presenting him with a substantial moral dilemma: choosing between accepting his love or adhering to family conventions.

⁹These case studies involve the examination of concrete examples or specific situations rather than abstract or theoretical discussions. By focusing on real-life scenarios, the author grounded her inquiries into practical experiences. It involves examining various aspects of the case, such as relevant facts, ethical considerations, logical implications, and political consequences.

In addition to this threat, he is conscious that going against the norm of marrying outside his caste would bring shame to the family, as such norm violation is considered unethical (Branscombe et al., 1999). Individuals strongly identifying with a high caste tend to become defensive when a threat is posed to their moral value-related identity. The fear of jeopardizing this moral-value-related identity compels the young professor to continue with the established family lineage.

Case Study 2: The Religious Dilemma

A 45-year-old nun, who ardently served her religious duties is displaying symptoms suggestive of depression, such as chronic insomnia, fatigue, a sense of hopelessness, and suicidal thoughts. Despite recognizing these symptoms, the researcher is hesitant to attribute the nun's condition solely to depression. Instead, she finds herself in a dilemma that now defines her life: adhering to a disciplined existence within her religious community, which involves abstaining from sexual intimacy or forming a biological family. This has presented her with a profound conflict, challenging her commitment as a nun. The nature of her struggle appears to result from her socio-religious dilemma, independent of her suggestive depression. Traditional methods of treatment and therapies have proven ineffective in addressing her concerns. Finding her situation hopeless, she adheres to her faithful vows of celibacy.

This case highlights the religious and moral dilemma faced by the nun as she grapples with her social identity set against her inherent desires as a woman. The inherent contradiction between her innate desires and her commitment to a religious community engenders insecurity and alienation from her cultural identity.

Upon a closer examination of her internal conflict, it is safe to infer that her dilemma is deeply rooted in the societal construct of being a good woman. In the Indian context, the idea of a good woman suppresses a woman's understanding of her sexual fantasies and desires. The Indian patriarchal society defines purity and chastity as essential conduct for a woman. The well-known characters of Indian epics i.e. *Sita* from *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Drapudi* from *Mahābhārata*, have played a significant role in shaping the Indian woman's psyche. (Kakar, 2007). Thus, we can say that the essential conduct to become a good woman in Indian society might be the prominent reason for suppressing their natural desire.

Case Study 3: The Ethical Dilemma

An unmarried, 21-year-old undergraduate finds herself in an ethical dilemma when she finds out about her pregnancy. The young independent woman, who is also an adoptee is torn between the moral obligation and the daunting task of bringing up a newborn all by herself, as the biological father of the unborn refuses to share any responsibility.

If we look closely at her dilemma, we find that two main factors are directly contributing to her problem. The first factor is based on the concepts of duty (*Dhārma*) and non-violence (*ahimsā*) which are both deeply ingrained in her psyche.

In Indian thought, the concept of duty (*dhārma*) in Indian philosophy emphasizes one's responsibilities to society, encompassing moral, religious, and social duties. In this case, the teenager might feel a sense of duty towards the unborn child, driven by societal expectations and ethical considerations. While non-violence (*ahimsā*), which is another fundamental principle of Indian thought too, influences her psyche. As, aborting the unborn child may be

Exploring Social, Religious, and Ethical Dilemmas of Indian Culture and Society

perceived as a violation of this principle, as it involves the termination of life. The woman may be torn between her duty to the unborn child and the principle of non-violence.

The second factor contributing to her predicament is the socio-economic aspect. With a lack of financial stability, she is confronted with economic constraints that will ultimately harm the well-being of the mother and the child simultaneously. Thus, having to abort remains her only viable option to save herself and her unborn child from any future ailments, both financially and socially. The deeply ingrained societal expectation of women's chastity and purity intensifies concerns as women fear potential abandonment by society.

Also, it is not wrong to say that her existential anxiety is exacerbated by the intertwining of cultural, moral, and socio-economic factors. The conflict between duty, non-violence, financial stability, and societal expectations creates a complex web of considerations, making it challenging for her to find a resolution that aligns with her values and ensures overall well-being.

In summary, this case study highlights the intricate struggle faced by women, where ethical, cultural, and socio-economic factors converge. Her decision-making process is influenced by a delicate balance between duty, non-violence, financial constraints, and societal expectations, reflecting the complexities that individuals may encounter when navigating such challenging situations in a culturally nuanced context.

CONCLUSION

This paper shows how the historical backdrop of a state or nation aids in constructing a person psyche and forming cultural contradictions when they interact with the cognitive processes of other cultures. It shows how the idea of autonomy and freedom changes when a person is exposed to another culture. Social, ethical, and religious paradoxes arise due to a substantial conflict between individual and cultural worldviews. To show this, the paper offers three case examples, each explaining one of the three primaries, i.e., societal, ethical, and moral dilemmas impacting the Indian psyche.

The demonstration also underscores how modernity and Westernization give rise to numerous issues that contribute to mental illnesses. The assimilation of a new value system not only reflects the increasing awareness among the Indian populace but also supplants ancient conventions. This substantial change in moral and ethical norms imposes a strain on the Indian value system, which the Indian psyche struggles to balance effectively. It gives rise to several contradictions in Indian society, fostering psychic unrest and contributing to the prevalence of mental disorders.

Thus, the paper underscores that the diverse and evolving nature of Indian culture and society gives rise to intricate moral and ethical dilemmas. The tension between tradition and modernity, societal expectations and individual aspirations, contributes to an ongoing dialogue and negotiation of identity within the Indian psyche. As India navigates through the complexities of contemporary challenges, it is essential to recognize and address these dilemmas to foster a more inclusive, understanding, and harmonious society.

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Conflict of Interest

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