

BOOK REVIEW - II

Prasad, Rajendra : *VARNADHARMA, NIṢKĀMA KARMA AND PRACTICAL MOR* Utkal University, Bhubaneshwar, 1999, pp. xii + 292.

In the First division of the Review of this Book, which appeared in one of the recent issues of this journal, (IPQ : Vol. XXVII, No.4, Oct. 2000) I had covered five lectures of Prasad incorporated in the first part of the book. His main job was to present philosophical critique of the moral ideals or frameworks which dominated thinking of the Indian philosophers from the ancient past. The basic idea was to show how they thwart the autonomy of morals and hence how they become woefully limited in their application to the modern Indian society which has committed itself to a democratic way of life. People at large certainly expect philosophers not merely to wrangle in hair-splitting conceptual analysis, but also expect some guidance for the lines on which they ought to shape their forms of life in response of the needs of the times in which they live. The second Part of the Book is thus rightly titled as *Ethics in Practice* and contains Prasad's invaluable reflexions on Secularism, Inculcation of a General moral principle (General Dharma), Professional Ethics and the problem area of Business Ethics. It also brings out the limits of applied ethics. We should not forget that the task of shaping the future of our society is indeed a herculean one. We are a society comprising religious, linguistic, cultural, regional, ethnic and socio-moral variety and diversity. Democratic working of our polity would be meaningless if the whole society is not cohered well with the spirit of moral integrity.

In writing about 'Inculcating Secularism, the Buddhist Way', Prasad

makes reference to the contemporary debate on Secularism and rejects partisan interpretations given of it by the votaries of religions, by political parties and by all those who are interested in power-politics. He rightly claims that in the conflicts between religion and morality over any issue, it's the moral consideration on that issue which must prevail. He also argues for the supremacy of morals over politics. What Prasad pleads for can hardly ever be questioned by any liberal minded thinker or any one who has an enlightened moral sense. In this chapter, Prasad strikes us a great visionary but there is nothing wrong in being visionary if that vision is embedded in realities of life. If the ideal has to have any normative force in human life, it must be within the power of man to translate it in society's life. There are bound to be conflicts between religion and morality but, according to Prasad, they can be resolved certainly not by adopting a fundamentalist's attitude but rather by taking a secular stand. Prasad recommends cultivation of secular attitude in the present Indian scenario, although a clear-cut tenable theory of secularism as such may not be possible. Unfortunately secularism and fundamentalism have become themes of active debate for grinding political axes. The debate has overshadowed the primacy of morals which should be really the sole concern of our thinkers including the political ones. For him, there isn't any opposition between a genuine religion which accords primacy to morals and the secular attitude to life's practical problems. "Religion may have a doctrine, belief or practice which is morally neutral.....but it cannot have any which goes against or is forbidden by a moral principle." (p.143) If Buddhism appeals to Prasad, it is just for this reason. Instead of asking men to waste their time and energy on discussing barren metaphysical issues, Buddhism asks us to recognise primacy of the ethical and devote one's time to finding out ways and means to remove suffering. For Buddhism, "suffering is not only something bad but also a moral evil". (p.143) Prasad, however, does not seem to be critical enough. Earlier he had opined that all suffering is not necessarily bad and that people do not avoid all suffering in life. If that is so, one cannot whole-heartedly welcome Prasad's sympathies for Buddhism, on this ground. Buddhism, as a religion, is surely a great historical episode but one must also see the other side of it viz., why it failed. Prasad, time and

again, speaks of the primacy of moral and ethical but does not tell us why of it or how of it. How do we go about deciding which considerations extend primacy to moral and ethical and which do not? Surely reasons do not come to us with labels duly stuck on them. Can we avoid pragmatic considerations altogether? At least from the tenor of the discussion that follows, it seems that Prasad's reflections are imbued with well-meant and purposeful pragmatism, wedded to the creation of a happy cohesive society. We cannot also ignore the role which science has played in cultivating rational and secular approach to the problems of human life. Fundamentalist's or a communalist's approach in the context of any human society, and especially in our context, would be certainly a great hurdle in building a cohesive society. Nevertheless, Prasad's plea for promoting secular approach and attitude is most welcome.

In the seventh chapter, Prasad analyses the notion of forgiveness as a moral cement in achieving an ideal of cohesive society for enhancing human happiness and for enriching spirituality—a life which is morally and highly commendable for peace and order, pursuits of science, arts and literature. As usual, Prasad starts with mentions of this great virtue in various ancient texts but complains woefully the lack of its analysis by any classical or contemporary Indian philosopher. Prasad knows fully that invoking it as a sort of laudable moral injunction does not help much. "Such questions as to whether it is an unconditional virtue, or a virtue to be practised only when certain conditions are fulfilled.....whether it is obligatory or supererogatory.....whether its exemplification does or does not go against the retributive moral intuitions....." all such questions have not been critically discussed. (p.152) Prasad begins with a simplified version of an inter-personal context and examines conditions under which the question of forgiving anyone for the wrong done by him would arise. If the wrong doer *sincerely* repents for his wrong-doing, that is certainly a good reason for forgiving him his wrong doing. The word 'sincerely' in the last sentence is emphasised because repentance - the behaviour involved - can be a sham. But as Prasad sees it, even forgiveness can be a sham. He goes into the details as to how attitudes get transformed when there is sincere

repentance and genuine forgiveness. Prasad tackles the situation as a human situation and does not suspect any incompatibility even when we accept that God is the supreme forgiver. Human situations involving wrongs done by one to another under normal circumstances invite moral reasoning. Concept of moral anger, concept of repentance and concept of asking or granting forgiveness—they are all conceptually linked with the concept of 'moral wrong'. The link, as Prasad correctly notes, is not just conceptual but it is sometimes much more than that. There are also the cases where men are led to repent for their morally right actions. The path of good intentions, they say, sometimes leads to hell due to accidental happenings. Presenting his analysis of certain episodes in *Mahābhārat* Prasad drives home the point that 'not granting forgiveness and further allow his moral anger to cool down is, in a normal person, a sign of low morality and contrarywise, granting forgiveness when its required conditions have been fulfilled is a sign of high morality. The chapter also contains Prasad's reflections on the ideal of *Sthitahprajña* or *jeevanmukta* and *samadarsī*. He locates certain incongruencies in that ideal. I shall not pursue those reflections although they contain some very important points. Prasad's main concentration, as he himself admits, is on normality of ordinary people's wrong doings and forgiveness. His main contention is that the social relationships which are thus ruptured can be taken care of through repentance and forgiveness. In a society like that of ours where structure is fossilized by the considerations of castes and sub-castes, reparation of ruptures in social relationships becomes extremely strenuous and difficult. One would not however hesitate to agree with Prasad that repentance and consequential forgiveness are the most effective means of repairing the ruptured social relationships. It is in this context that he recommends virtue of tolerance to a certain degree. One cannot be tolerant of every immoral wrong doing in the society but it's equally true that one cannot right every wrong just by indulging in another wrong. Society has to develop naturally an institutional framework of judiciary which plays quite an important role of maintaining morality through law. The chapter ends with a fine analysis of the relation between forgiveness and retribution. Prasad argues that there is nothing selfinconsistent in granting forgiveness to a repentent offender while continuing to be a retributivist.

(p.195). Prasad's claim is even stronger than that. He claims that what the punishment could not do, genuine forgiveness in all likelihood would. (p.199). It is appropriate that Prasad should end his reflections with a salutary note on 'self-forgiveness'.

The eighth chapter gets us closer to our daily dealings in several professions where we are either experts or consumers. In fact this whole area is the area of business ethics but certain professions have been traditionally regarded as prestigious - such as, medicine, law, judiciary, teaching etc. - and they are given special attention. They are concerned with realization of such values as health & life, justice and knowledge. Three interrelated things or sets of things are the prominent components of a professional : a) expertise in profession b) some sort of relationship between him and the recipient of his services, and c) his right to charge fees for the services. Prasad discusses these three thereadbare thinking that if these items are explicated, they would go a great way in unpacking what is involved in the concept of a professional. He examines Gewirth's view in this regard and puts forth his own reasons to disagree with him and brings out the salient features of the commitments and obligations which issue from the fact that expert is also a member of a society and that his client is in a vulnerable situation being at the receiver's end. Some professions have therefore evolved certain codes of conduct for the practitioners but still it's personal commitments to one's own professional ethics that matters the most. The issues of conflicts between professional morality and general morality become sometimes ticklish and the expert has to handle them carefully. Compromises become necessary. Standards of any professional morality ultimately depend on the extent to which the professions are able to translate the standards of general morality. Treating clients or patients as human persons i.e. as ends and never as means, benevolence, nonmalevolence, and doing justice-these constitute prima-facie obligations of any profession. One may wonder whether professional ethics is an ethics of compromise but theoretically at least one cannot agree to a professional ethics which admits compromises as a routine practical morality. Professions are practised in a Society and as such the goals of professional ethics

cannot deviate from the moral norms of society. A professional must remember that any misconduct in the professional deal spoils the image of the profession itself along with his own image as an ethical person, howsoever great an expert he may be. Professionals play significant roles in maintenance and enhancement of the moral health and happiness of the society in which they serve and exercise their expertise. Any undue advantage of the invincibility they enjoy may invite operation of social (and possibly legal) sanctions against them.

Business ethics is truly a problem area. To bring out the problematic of this all-gripping zone of applied ethics is Prasad's concern in the ninth chapter of the book. Prasad's anecdotes, ancient as they are, make it clear that in one sense business ethics is not, contrary to usual supposition, a very modern concern. Morality creeps in, the moment two persons enter into any deal. It is the complexity of modern urban and civil society which has made the business ethics a prominent but problematic area of philosophic inquiry. Prasad realizes this and proceeds to unravel the ethical relationship-matrix of producers of commodities and consumers. Transparency in all deals, recognizing corporate responsibility in the face of business obligations, development of appropriate social and legal controls in enhancing the quality of goods, doing advertising within the bounds of moral spheres - all these factors require special attention in modern times when we want to build up liberal society wedded to democratic set up. Business ethics enters our lives from several sides. Owners, Share-holders, Employees, Workers, Managers, Market operators, Shop-keepers and consumers-all these are the members of this kingdom of ends where moral law prevails as an instrument of happiness in society. It is heartening to see that our moral philosophers are focusing on the practical concerns of our day-to-day life instead of indulging in sheer abstract and abstruse moral theories. Prasad very rightly notes that "philosophy' including applied ethics which is specifically concerned with business ethics, is a cognitive instrument (jñāpaka kārāṇa or sādhanā) or moral improvement and not an actuating or desired-effect-producing instrument (kāraṇa kārāṇa or sādhanā)." (p.257)

Part III of the book which comprises the lone 10th chapter concerns

itself with the background conceptual framework of Prasad's entire project on hand. In the first part Prasad had located some problems in applying some classical Indian ethical concepts or principles and in the second part, as indicated above, brought out certain issues involved in applying general ethical principles or concepts. This 10th chapter is complementary in the sense that it strengthens philosophically the reflections presented in the two parts. For Prasad, Ethics is down to earth of a central concern with our earthly life. "The primary purpose of a moral principle is to provide guidance in living a morally desirable life". Prasad analyses carefully the conditions of the possibility of any moral principle getting applied. Firstly, the moral principle must be implementable. Secondly, human beings should either through rational means or other persuasive means, accord their recognition to it as a moral principle; Thirdly, mere recognition is not enough, there should be strong motivation to act on it. And last, but not least, the moral principle should be instantiable. With these conditions fulfilled, one gets to the heart of applied ethics. Reflecting on Wittgensteinian aphorism that "Ethics does not treat of the world; it must be a condition of the world like logic.", Prasad stresses the primacy of ethical desirability of a world over any other kind of desirability, say, political, economic etc., The world may be otherwise desirable but it cannot be truly desirable unless it is morally desirable. World without ethical desirability would be an anaemic world. The world that exists before us is not the ideal world and we also cannot expect that we can do always the best. In an ethical exercise to make this world better and better, we are sometimes justified morally in violating moral principles. The world contains four types of things: i) those that must exist, ii) those which are forbidden, iii) those which are permissible and iv) those that are recommended to exist. In an ideal world that we want to create we shall see that the forbidden things exist least, the obligatory things continue to exist and the recommended ones are made existent. Moral programming is thus to be done carefully to translate moral principles into realities because ethics is related to the world in which we live. "The normal way to improve its ethical quality is to minimise the number of forbiddens and to increase that of the obligatory and the recommended." (p.264) Since the permissibles are ethically neutral or indifferent, their

presence or absence will depend on considerations other than moral ones. Ethics thus constitutes necessary condition of the desirable world, from which two important lessons follow, according to Prasad. One, the built-in applicability of moral theory to the world we live in and two, the primacy of ethical desirability. Prasad's reflections on this point are full of his scholarly wit and wisdom. Space considerations prohibit me from eliciting their significance in fullness.

Prasad's assumption that no human being can be morally neutral is by and large a reasonable assumption. One cannot obviously demonstrate it but at the same time one cannot do without it. Being morally neutral is to be immoral. With this assumption, Prasad's classification of human beings or persons into three categories deserve our attention. There are those who have low level commitment to moral principles, then there are those who intensely feel committed to moral principles and then there are those who are hyper-actively committed. Prasad uses the labels; sub-committals, committals and hyper-committals. Depending upon the category to which an individual belongs, depend the ways of deliberating, decision making and translating principles into actions. The hard-headed moralist is a hyper-committal who likes to have things his own way alone while sub-committal is inclined to suspend his judgment for acting on any principle. Committals feel obliged to follow moral principles in a normal way. Discussing all the three categories in details, Prasad drives home the point that the right way to make a person to act on a moral principle is to employ good moral argumentation-that is to be rational and reasonable. A moral theory can be used in three possible ways; it enables agent to make judgment, or a decision or may have enough persuasive power to act in a certain way.

Prasad's book is a work on applied ethics covering a necessary philosophical ground-work for it for modern times. It is a priceless contribution to the moral resurgence of Indian community which has suffered many a moral fall owing to ignorance, poverty and lack of critical thinking into the ethics of past. The book signals a novel and bold approach inviting budding philosophers to be optimistic and constructive about future.

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