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MORAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR IN PUBLIC LIFE: A SPIRITUAL ETHICS PERSPECTIVE

Vaswati Mahato[1]
[1]*Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, Purulia*

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ABSTRACT
It is becoming more and more clear that morality and ethics are going down in today's society. This decline is shown by the abuse of power, widespread corruption, and a growing lack of empathy for both people and organizations. These examples show that laws, rules, and government are not enough to stop people from doing detrimental things. Moral consciousness refers to an individual's core moral values and beliefs, and how these values are expressed in personal and social life. On the other hand, spiritual ethics in public life can be defined as having the potential of stimulating the moral thoughts of individuals who are dealing with ethical issues, thereby reducing unethical behaviour and generating positive behaviour towards society. This piece of paper aims to explore the importance of spiritual ethics in enhancing moral responsibility, ethical behaviour in public life and through value-based education and institutional practices. This paper is based on a comprehensive review of existing literature related to moral psychology, Swami Vivekananda's practical Advaita Vedanta as an ethical guide, and leadership studies. Scholarly articles, books and theoretical writings from the field of moral development, moral identity, and self-regulatory processes are used to examine the psychological role of spiritual ethics in shaping moral responsibility in public life. Findings suggest that Spiritual ethics not only focus on religious boundaries but also emphasise universal human values such as integrity, compassion, self-control, and selfless service towards society. These values play a crucial role in developing moral reasoning, ethical judgment, and responsible decision-making in public roles. Previous research also argues about psychological challenges commonly faced in public life, including power-induced moral distancing, cognitive dissonance, and gaps between innermost values and external behaviour. The paper concludes that strengthening spiritual ethics through education and leadership development can support morally responsible behaviour and help rebuild public trust.

KEYWORDS: *Spiritual ethics, Practical Vedanta, Moral consciousness*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, Indian society has become increasingly concerned about moral decay in politics, governance, administration, media, and institutional leadership. The repeated instances of corruption, abuse of power, policy manipulation, and reduced transparency have raised questions about the effectiveness of current accountability systems. Despite constitutional protections, anti-corruption laws, and regulatory bodies, ethical breaches continue, and people still engage in unethical behavior. The implication is that a formal system alone isn't enough to guarantee ethical behavior. Researchers have argued that people often use rationalizations to explain their wrongdoings and distance themselves morally when facing strong personal, political, or institutional pressures (Bandura, 2017; Treviño et al., 2006).

These misconducts are alarming a deeper crisis of moral consciousness —not merely of governance, but of moral consciousness within those who occupy positions of public responsibility. Morality refers to a set of rules, norms and regulations within a group, society, culture, religion or organizations. This guides everyday behaviour through traditions and expectations of that particular group, which may be followed without judging or questioning (Weiss,1942). Whereas ethical behaviour can be defined as a critical and systematic examination of moral norms, analysing the logic, values and principles behind the norms. Ethical behaviour is based on rational reflection and philosophical inquiry.

In Indian tradition, ethical life is guided by the idea of dharma, emphasizing duty, righteousness and responsibility towards society and people. However, contemporary life is continuously guided by the power, politics, competitions for personal gain, economic interests and most of the time by media influence, which leads to conflict between internal morality and external public behaviour.

In this context, there is a growing need to revisit value-based frameworks that go beyond legalism and institutional rules. One such framework is spiritual ethics. In this piece of paper Spiritual ethics is not presented as a religious doctrine, but it emphasises a universal system of inner conscious values like universal brotherhood, integrity, compassion, self-discipline and service to others. Cultivation of these qualities can enhance an individual's moral awareness as the foundation of ethical action (Bhatt, 2023).

One of the most relevant perspectives within the Indian context is the idea of practical Vedanta narrated by Swami Vivekananda. He represents Vedanta not as an abstract mythology-oriented but as an applied ethical foundation of the divinity within every individual. In practical Vedanta, he has emphasised that the unity of existence means non-duality

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(Advaitavada), the divinity of all beings, and selfless services (Seva) and character building (Vivekananda, 2023). Practical Vedanta shows us that our ethical behaviour relies more on inner moral beliefs and universal connectedness than on external authority. This approach is very similar to psychological views that moral behaviour is shaped by internal values, moral identity and self-regulatory processes (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Rest, 1986). So that Spiritual ethics can be appreciated as a psychological and value- based framework that can connect our inner moral consciousness and outer ethical behaviour or social interactions (Spohn, 1997).

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To conceptualize spiritual ethics within public life.
2. To analytically integrate Vivekananda's practical Vedanta with governance models.
3. To identify daily ethical dilemmas in contemporary society.
4. To propose practical ways to manage ethical dilemmas.

3. METHODOLOGY

This is a narrative review paper that explores previous studies on moral consciousness and ethical behaviour in public life in the light of Swami Vivekananda's practical Advaita Vedanta perspective. The review involved searching various sources, including Scholar Google and ResearchGate. The keywords used to conduct this piece of paper were: "Spirituality", "Ethical behaviour", "Morality", "Moral consciousness", "Moral Disengagement", "Spiritual ethics", "Swami Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta".

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Contemporary politics and administrations have often been spoiled by corruption and unethical practices, highlighting a crisis of ethics and accountability. Rule- based legalism fails to control an individual's wrongdoing, suggesting the need for a deeper values-centred framework. Spiritual ethics offers a value-based concept that goes beyond mere compliance with legalism and institutional rules. This approach invites universal virtues and inner moral consciousness to guide public behaviour. According to swami Vivekananda, the basis of all morality is the recognition of oneness; therefore, the loss of society means loss of one's self (Vivekananda, 2019). From his point of view, moral responsibility arises from realizing that all beings share the same Divine essence.

Discussion-1. Spiritual Ethics Within Public Life-

Spiritual ethics refers to moral principles rooted in universal, non-sectarian values rather than any specific religious dogma. It is a character-centred moral framework where public responsibilities in social, political and institutional domains emerge from inner transformation and inner realisation of ethical unity and human dignity. Laws, norms, rules and policies are essential to continue an organisation, but often these rituals are unable to deal with ethical lapses such as corruption, abuse of power and indifference to social welfare. Spiritual ethics address these gaps by awakening the consciousness of the people. So true ethical living arises when people recognize the divine essence in all beings, leading them to selfless services and ethical decision-making in public service (Vivekananda, 1896/2010)

In addition, Spiritual ethics promotes key virtues such as empathy, truthfulness, humility, and self-discipline, which are essential for ethical leadership. Leaders guided by spiritual ethics promote selfless services where common goods get more priority than personal or political gain. As a result, people's trust in the organization and authority remains intact and institutional integrity increases. This perspective is similar to contemporary moral psychology, which indicates ethical behaviour is deeply rooted in internalised values and moral identities rather than external enforcement alone (Aquino & Reed, 2002).

Core principles – truth, compassion, self-restraint, integrity and service are the key spiritually guided conduct can shape ethical public life, not as abstract but deeply practical.

- **Truth (Satya):** Truth is the centre of all ethical practices. Truth can be defined as the unwavering commitment to honesty and authenticity. In public life, truth generates accountability, transparency and builds trust between leaders and followers or authority and citizens. Mahatma Gandhi believes that truth is the highest moral value, ensuring that ethical public action must be rooted in sincerity and openness. Truthful leadership diminished corruption and misinformation, fostering democratic integrity (Gandhi, 1901).
- **Compassion (Karuna):** Compassion is deep empathy, care, and concern about others' well-being specially who need it. In government and public administration, compassion influences public welfare works and leads to inclusive policies. Dalai Lama mentions that compassion is one of the most essential qualities for ethical leadership as it connects individual responsibility and collective welfare (Lama, 2001). Leaders driven by compassion are more empathetic and more responsive to social suffering and public injustice.
- **Integrity:** Integrity is the strong promise to stick to honest action even in tough situations, and no one is observing. It requires honesty, bravery, and following the rules of ethics. Past studies indicate a robust correlation between integrity and moral identity, wherein ethical principles are fundamental to an individual's self-perception.
- **Service (Seva):** Service, or Seva, involves doing something for someone else without expecting anything in return. In the spiritual tradition, doing your service selflessly is considered the most valuable moral, and it is essential in public life. According to Swamiji, serving others is the same as serving God. A selfless service-oriented attitude promotes humanism, social justice, and governance centred on the needs of the people.

The importance of ethical behavior in the public realm is particularly evident under the current ethical dilemma. Spiritual ethics serves as an essential connection, linking internal moral awareness and external responsibility, promoting a holistic approach to developing leadership that is accountable, transparent, compassionate, and aligned with core values. This framework encourages those in positions of power within society to actively engage in the welfare of the community as a whole.

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Discussion-2. Linking Practical Vedanta to Governance models-

This examination explores the impact of Practical Vedanta on modern governance structures. It links Vedantic concepts, including Tat tvam asi and seva, to the ethical leadership paradigm, highlighting their significance for both training methodologies and ethical conduct. Furthermore, this analysis probes the relationship between Advaita Vedanta's principle of non-duality and Vivekananda's commitment to "Sarvodaya," considering the underlying belief in the intrinsic equality of all individuals concerning their worth, rights, and societal position.

Consequently, it supports the eradication of socioeconomic disparities, alongside the implementation of anti-corruption measures and equity initiatives. This discussion ultimately supports the incorporation of spiritual ethical principles to improve leadership effectiveness, promote fairness, and encourage moral growth within public organizations (Ongaro & Tantardini,2024).

A. Ethical leadership: Ethical leadership is characterized by integrity, empathy and a commitment to service, also encourages followers to apply these qualities. Leaders always illustrate Seva (Selfless services) and Satya (truth), guiding by personal example rather than rebellion. Practical Vedanta, as Greenleaf (2007) describes, prioritizes the needs and growth of its followers, which directly influences the practice of servant leadership. So Authentic leadership, defined by self-awareness and transparency, resonates with jnana yoga (Self-knowledge), incites leaders to act according to their core values.

Leadership training can integrate Vedanta through:

Service immersion- Such as encouraging individual engagement to practice seva. Mindfulness meditation involves doing meditation and self-reflection exercises. Value Workshops- this aims to analyse the ethical texts and case reports to internalize those virtues in their own life. Ethical Role models: Engagement of spiritual mentors to support an individual's ethical conduct and prevent wrongdoing.

B. Justice and Institutional fairness: The core insight of Advaita Vedanta that all selves are one (Brahma). Swami Vivekananda absolutely rejected the concept of social class and caste or casteism as contrary to Vedanta. This perspective supports distributive justice, which is the fair distribution of all resources and equitable policies, which states that every person deserves dignity and basic rights regardless of their socioeconomic status and caste, because "in hurting you I hurt myself" (Vivekananda, 1969). It also grounds Procedural justice, where decision-making processes must treat everyone with respect, since all share the same essence. A leader or an institute aware of this perspective will strive to remove bias and corruption.

Vivekananda's vision of "Sarvodaya" society promotes social equality and policies supporting education and healthcare, while Vedantic though align with restorative justice, focusing on community harmony rather than punishment and perceives corruption as a communal ethical failure (Goyal & Singh). Universal oneness enhances fair governance and equality. Finally, Vedanta emphasises the connection between personal and public interests; Stealing government funds harms oneself. Procedural safeguards bring honour, and equitable measures like taxation reflect the Vedantic principle of wealth sharing, fostering a culture of charity.

Discussion-3. Daily Ethical Dilemmas in contemporary society

Daily ethical quandaries frequently arise in contexts where established norms and regulations offer insufficient direction, or where personal and professional obligations are at odds. For instance, a public servant might encounter pressure from a political figure to favour specific decisions, a bureaucrat could be urged to disregard minor infractions to expedite administrative procedures, or a professional might experience tension between allegiance to coworkers and adherence to ethical guidelines.These situations create a moral obscurity; in these situations, people should rely on their core values, judgements and sense of responsibility. Repeated exposure to such dilemmas can normalize these ethical misconducts. An individual starts to justify them as necessary or unavoidable.

In contemporary society, Ethical dilemmas are not limited to extraordinary cases of corruption or large-scale misconduct; they also appear in everyday decisions and interactions within social and administrative life. People who work in the public sectors such as civil servants, policy makers, educators, health professionals, and media operators, regularly encounter situations where competing interests, personal values, and institutional expectations create moral dilemmas. These situations often require individuals to make a difficult choice between what is serviceable, what is expected and what is ethically correct. Although these dilemmas may seem minor, their cumulative result significantly influences the ethical climate of any institution and the level of public trust in governance.From a psychological perspective, ethical dilemmas involve processes of moral reasoning, value evaluation, and decision making. Individuals experience internal psychological conflict whenever their actions contradict their moral beliefs. Cognitive dissonance, a psychological state of discomfort, arises when there's a conflict between what a person believes and how they act (Festinger, 1972).

To alleviate this unease, individuals often engage in rationalizations or reinterpretations of their transgressions, thereby rendering their conduct seem justifiable, as posited in Bandura's (2017) work on moral disengagement. People frequently detach themselves from the consequences of their actions, particularly within hierarchical frameworks where responsibility is dispersed across multiple entities. Studies in behavioural ethics demonstrate that individuals are often influenced by the ethical environment of their organizations, including both peers and superiors. Therefore, when unethical behaviours become common in a professional setting, individuals might gradually weaken their moral understanding, seeing these actions as acceptable and normal (Treviño, 2006).

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Discussion-4. Practical ways to Manage Ethical Dilemmas

Managing ethical dilemmas in contemporary society and administrative life needs more than formal rules and organizational control; it calls for the cultivation of one's inner moral strength. From a psychological standpoint, an effective ethical act depends on moral awareness, reasoning, self-regulation and moral identity. This section proposes practical ways to address everyday ethical challenges by integrating psychological and spiritual insights, organizational strategies and value -based approaches.

A primary step in managing ethical dilemmas is the development of moral awareness and ethical sensitivity. An individual must first be able to recognize that a situation contains ethical issues. Research shows that ethical decision making begins with moral sensitivity – the ability to understand that one's behaviour affects others' lives (Rest, 1986). Vivekananda's idea of seeing the same divinity in all beings encourages individuals to develop empathy and awareness towards other wellbeing.

A second approach is strengthening moral reasoning and ethical judgment. Individuals often experience conflicting values and have to choose between competing interests. In accordance with moral development theory, the apex of moral development involves the internalization of universal ethical principles, thereby enabling individuals to transcend self-interest and embrace wider concepts of justice and fairness (Kohlberg, 1981). Institutions can foster more rational and accountable decision-making by promoting critical thinking, dialogue, and ethical deliberation. Furthermore, a crucial approach involves the cultivation of self-regulation and moral identity. Ethical behaviour is closely related to how individuals see themselves as moral and responsible person. When moral identity is the core of the self, individual consistently act according to those values (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Self-regulation helps individuals resist temptation, manage stress, and control their impulses when faced with conflicting situations.

By strengthening these abilities, self-reflection, mindfulness, and value clarification can help reduce the likelihood of ethical violations.Furthermore, confronting moral disengagement is essential for effectively navigating ethical quandaries. People can justify unethical behaviour by downplaying the perceived harm, shifting the blame to others, or normalizing such actions within a group. Bandura suggested that reducing this disengagement requires creating an environment that encourages personal responsibility and reflection on the consequences of one's behaviour. Transparent decision-making processes and accountability structures can help to counteract these tendencies.

Furthermore, the integration of value-based methodologies, encompassing spiritual ethics like honesty, compassion, self-discipline, and service, coupled with consistent engagement in ethical deliberations and peer-based reflection and oversight, can facilitate the exchange of experiences and the enhancement of responses over an extended period.This not only improves individual decision-making but also helps build a strong ethical culture.

5. CONCLUSION

Spiritual ethics can strengthen moral responsibility in contemporary public life. Swami Vivekananda's practical Vedanta posits that an individual's contemplation of the collective welfare, as opposed to self-interest, is cultivated through the realization of inner truth, the practice of compassion, and the dedication to selfless service. He contends that genuine freedom is contingent upon a robust moral framework, thereby suggesting that external constraints and punitive measures are insufficient to guarantee ethical conduct.

Therefore, it's important to support the personal growth of leaders, along with building strong institutions. Future research should look into how spirituality affects public service motivation and ethical behaviour in different cultures. Meanwhile, policymakers and educators can start applying these ideas by training public servants in core values, encouraging servant leadership, and creating laws that focus on human welfare. These steps can help solve ethical problems in governance and work towards a fair and caring society.

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