

The Individual and the Collective in Indian Thought

Harmonising the individual and the collective has been one of the most challenging problems human societies have had to tackle.



Published: 04th October 2018 04:00 AM | Last Updated: 04th October 2018 10:08 AM

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By [Michel Danino](#)

Harmonising the individual and the collective has been one of the most challenging problems human societies have had to tackle. From the most individualistic, libertarian, capitalist ideals to the steamrolling statism of Communism, the tension is palpable throughout history. The Supreme Court recently had to deal with several issues that were rooted in this conflict between personal “rights” and the society’s collective demands. Contrary to what one might think, there is nothing new there, except for the current garb of the problem.

Let us trace some of India’s ancient perspectives on this conflict. Indic thought very early on attempted to “order” human life by setting well-defined objectives to it: among other codifications, the *purushartha* or four goals of human existence —

kama, *artha*, *dharma* and *moksha*. Enjoyment and wealth, both regulated by *dharma*, and the ultimate aim of *moksha*, whatever meaning we may give this word. Since *moksha* is not supposed to be within everyone's reach, *dharma* remains in practice the overarching guideline. All of the word's translations — law, rule, truth, duty — are crude and incomplete. But does it imply a single template for everyone? Far from it: there is indeed a collective *dharma*, that of the family or the community, the land or indeed the whole cosmos. But equally is there a concept of *svadharma*, which recognizes that we are all different from one another, each with a nature of his or her own: *svabhava* is the joint concept of *svadharma*, and both together constitute one of the key master ideas of Indian civilization.

Were the concept to merely note our differences, it would be of little use. It translated into reality by recognizing that if there is indeed one truth (*tat satyam* in the Rig-Veda), it is many-sided and there cannot be a single path to it. There should be, in principle at least, as many paths as there are human beings, or at least *svabhavas*. In other words, a dogmatic definition of the truth together with a single creed and code of conduct for all is an impossibility in the Indic perspective. In this, it distinguishes itself radically from Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which posit a single god, a single book, a founder, a set of dogmas to be accepted on faith, consequent guidelines in daily life, and, with the last two religions, ecclesiastical institutions that will claim a sanctified authority with a power to impose these dogmas on large populations, and ultimately the whole planet.

None of these uniformizing concepts had currency in India: at the cultural level, plurality was built in. Even as the caste system increasingly imposed rigid divisions and discriminations within the society, it unwittingly promoted cultural diversity among the thousands of *jatis* and sub-*jatis*, each with its distinct pantheon, modes of worship, rituals, social customs, etc. Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, which were far more cohesive than Hinduism, followed the same ethos of pluralism; all three had many sub-sects, with occasional doctrinal disputes but rarely any violent attempt to crush one another, and certainly nothing ever on the scale of the Crusades or Christianity's internal wars of religion (holy or not). Jainism, for instance, promoted the concept of *anekantavada*, which may be roughly translated as “non-uniqueness” or “many-sidedness”; this was in tune with Vedantic thought too.

There are several ways to view this phenomenon. One, prevalent in the colonial era, was to note the lack of cohesion and central structure in Hinduism and its amorphous character averse to any rigorous definition; this aspect was both condemned and put to political use by the colonial authorities, since they realized soon enough that Hindus could hardly ever act unitedly. Another, common in Indological studies, has been to praise the “tolerance” of Asian non-proselytising religions, not realizing that this is not about tolerance (the “I-barely-tolerate-you” of Christianity) but about acceptance of otherness. A third, common in current “South Asian” studies, is to point out that the caste system creates otherness by excluding its lowest layers; there is obvious truth in this, but the social and the cultural levels should not be confused. Hinduism (although caste often extends to non-Hindu segments of Indian society) did give immense cultural freedoms while curtailing social ones. A look at the spiritual history of India throws up many low-caste spiritual figures, for example, from mythological ones such as Valmiki or Vyasa to poets of the Tamil Sangam literature or some of the Bhakti saints in several regions of India.

Does it mean that the only fulfilment for the individual was spiritual? Matters are not so simple. True, ancient India did not have a concept of “human rights” in the modern European sense of the term, although it did highly value justice and the common man’s welfare, as we can see in Ashoka’s edicts, texts like the *Arthashastra* or the *Thirukural* and numerous inscriptions where the ruler boasts of being as righteous and benevolent as Rama himself! What was foregrounded was not individual “rights” but *dharma*, and that applied to the ruler too, who, according to some texts, should be fined a thousand times more than the common man for the same offence. The ideal, never fully expressed perhaps, seems to have been that if everyone follows his or her *svadharma* sincerely, as parent, spouse, teacher, student, worker, trader, priest or ruler, the society will function harmoniously.

Expectedly, the scanty historical data we have is enough to show us that the ideal was not often the rule. Be that as it may, in an age when our species has in a brief span of time sawn nine-tenths of the branch we sit on, we may find that an unbridled cult of individualism is not sustainable; an urgent and growing sense of our responsibilities at the individual as well as collective levels seems to be the *dharma* humanity will have to adopt if it is to survive.

Michel Danino is a French-born Indian author, scholar of ancient India, and visiting professor at IIT Gandhinagar. *Email:* micheldanino@gmail.com.

This is the fifth part in a series on Master Ideas of Indian Civilisation; earlier articles in this series:

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