

School of Sanskrit, Philosophy and Indic Studies  
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# From Ascriptive Ethics to Human Dignity: A Reappraisal of Indian Moral Thought

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An online talk by  
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**Meet Link: [meet.google.com/fyn-smfb-nio](https://meet.google.com/fyn-smfb-nio)**

## Abstract

India possesses a remarkably rich and diverse heritage of ethical thought. However, the dominant discourse on Indian ethics has often been narrowly framed through the lens of the Vedic tradition, particularly the framework of Purusharthas and Varnashrama Dharma. This model, historically central to Hindu philosophy, has served to legitimize social hierarchies, including untouchability, slavery, and other forms of structural inequality. Rather than promoting a moral society grounded in human dignity and self-respect, this system has institutionalized segregation, marginalization, and dehumanization.

Alternative philosophical traditions, notably the Śramaṇas, emerged in opposition to this caste- and birth-based ethical system. These traditions questioned the moral legitimacy of social stratification and offered more egalitarian visions of human flourishing. Despite this, many modern scholars have continued to uphold the Purushartha–Varnashrama model without a sufficient critical examination of its ethical content and social implications.

In comparison with Western ethical theories, scholars like McKenzie argued that while the West developed systematic ethical philosophies, Hindu thought emphasized dharma rather than ethics. In response, prominent Indian philosophers such as S. Radhakrishnan, M. Hiriyanna, and T.M.P.

Mahadevan sought to defend dharma-based ethics by grounding them in metaphysical and spiritual ideals. For these thinkers, ethics in the Indian tradition is not concerned primarily with worldly happiness or moral virtue, but with guiding the individual toward a transcendent experience that is supramoral and supramental. As Radhakrishnan succinctly stated, “the perfect ideal of our life is found only in the eternal Reality.”

This tension—between ascribed moral ideals rooted in metaphysical absolutism and the lived experiences of social exclusion—defines the core of the debate on Indian ethics. In contrast to the dominant model, an alternative philosophical and ethical discourse has developed, one that centers human dignity, self-respect, and the moral autonomy of individuals. This shift marks a movement in Indian ethical thinking: from varna to virtue, from subjugation to the celebration of personhood. Modern Indian thinkers such as Jotirao Phule, E.V. Ramasamy Periyar, and B.R.

Ambedkar contributed significantly to this tradition. By interrogating and challenging the dominant ethical paradigms, they laid the foundation for a more inclusive and humanistic vision of Indian ethics.

## Bio

Prof. P. Kesava Kumar is a faculty member in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Delhi. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Hyderabad and previously taught at Pondicherry University before joining the University of Delhi (DU). His areas of specialization include Social and Political Philosophy, Contemporary Indian Philosophy, Continental Philosophy, and Dalit Studies. At the University of Delhi, he has introduced several innovative M.A. Philosophy courses, including Philosophy of B.R. Ambedkar, Critical Philosophical Traditions of India, Critical Reading of Western Philosophy, and Indian Materialism. These courses aim to offer alternative perspectives that challenge the dominant narratives within philosophical discourse.

Prof. Kumar is the author of *Political Philosophy of Ambedkar: An Inquiry into the Theoretical Foundations of the Dalit Movement*, *Jiddu Krishnamurti: A Critical Study of Tradition and Revolution*, and *Dalita Udyamam: Velugu Needalu* (a collection of essays on the Dalit movement in Telugu). He is an active commentator on Dalit literary and cultural politics and has recently published two poetry collections in Telugu: *Aadima Pourudu* and *Yegire Pallem*, Nadiche Mancham, O Kuniragam.