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**SEEING BEYOND *DHARMA*: ETHICAL EXCELLENCE
IN *VIKRAM* AND *VETAAL* STORIES**

VASANTHI SRINIVASAN
Visiting Scholar (Spring 2009)
Center for the Advanced Study of India
University of Pennsylvania
Reader, Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad

CENTER FOR THE ADVANCED STUDY OF INDIA
University of Pennsylvania
3600 Market Street, Suite 560
Philadelphia, PA 19104
<http://casi.ssc.upenn.edu/index.htm>

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ABSTRACT

Seeing Beyond *Dharma*: Ethical Excellence in *Vikram and Vetaal* Stories

VASANTHI SRINIVASAN
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Besides canonical texts such as *Bhagavad Gita* and *Dharmasutras*, reflections upon *dharma's* complexity and dilemmas abound in popular narratives such as *Pancatantra*, *Hitopadesa* and *Vikram and Vetaal* stories. Popularised by *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Chanda Mama* as *Vikram and Vetaal*, this classic is second only to *Pancatantra* and has been part of the narrative repertoire of many Indians. It is about the encounters between King Vikramaditya and a superhuman daemon, *Vetala* dwelling in a corpse. In several stories, King Vikramaditya is presented with two or more instances of noble or generous or virtuous actions and asked to judge which is greater. This essay examines ethical reasoning and judgment as they are presented in five stories about superlative nobility, magnanimity and virtue. Focusing on Vikramaditya's verdicts, I argue that judging extraordinary nobility or generosity or virtue involves going beyond *dharma* whether we take it as customary duty (based on caste and class, stage of life or family usage) or even occupational duty (*svadharma*). It appears that ethical greatness is all about sovereign gestures through which one responds to the challenges posed by the sacrifices of others.

Vasanthi Srinivasan
Visiting Scholar, Center for the Advanced Study of India
Reader, Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad

In his path breaking work, J. N. Mohanty has argued that *dharma*, in the sense of ethical rules of action and moral virtues, is best understood as a social ethics (*a la* Hegel's *sittlichkeit*) rather than individual morality (Kant's *moralitat*).¹ As such, it includes the actual norms, duties, virtues and goods as well as customs of a community.² In this perspective, ethical rules and virtues are anchored in customary usage and not in any grand metaphysics or categorical imperatives. What one ought to do is a function of one's caste, family usage, stage of life (student, householder, forest dweller or renunciant) and so on.³ *Smritis*, or the canonical texts such as *Yajnavalkya smriti* or *Manu smriti*, also deal with one's proper duty (*svadharma*). There are exhaustive lists of common virtues (*sadharana* or *samana dharma*) including non-injury, forbearance, honesty, cleanliness, control of the senses, charity, love, sweet temper, etc.⁴ In cases of uncertainty or conflict, *dharma* texts themselves say that individuals must look to those respected for their wisdom and conduct (*sadacara*) in the community. Complicating matters further, the texts speak of crisis-ethics or *apad dharma* such as extreme distress or adversity when some norms and virtues may be suspended or adapted. Despite such context sensitivity and comprehensive lists, moral dilemmas do crop up as with Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Reflection upon ethical virtues and dilemmas is also to be found in popular narratives such as *Pancatantra*, *Hitopadesa* and *Vikram and Vetaal*

¹ Though the word *dharma* is used to refer to disparate things such as cosmic order, natural essences, ethical duty and even laws, it is used here to refer to ethical rules of action and moral virtues. See J. N. Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy* (Lanham, Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield 2000), p 107-110.

² J.N. Mohanty, *Ibid.*, p.109

³ *Ibid.*, p.106

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.108

stories. Popularized by *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Chanda Mama* as *Vikram and Vetaal*, this classic exerts a powerful influence among young adults. Second only to *Pancatantra*, this classic has been part of the narrative repertoire of many Indians⁵ and is about the encounters between King Vikramaditya and a superhuman daemon, *Vetala*, who dwells in a corpse⁶. In several stories, King Vikramaditya is presented with two or more instances of noble, generous, or virtuous actions and asked to judge which is greater. This essay examines ethical reasoning and judgment as they are presented in five stories about superlative nobility, magnanimity, and virtue. Focusing on Vikramaditya's verdicts, I highlight the distinction between ordinary acts of nobility, generosity, or virtue which draw upon habit and customary norms (*dharma*) and extraordinary acts of virtue which exceed the demands of customary duty or obligation. I argue that judging extraordinary nobility, generosity, or virtue involves setting aside *dharma* whether we take it as customary duty (based on caste and class, stage of life, or family usage) or even occupational duty (*svadharma*). For instance, the *dharma* of servants is to sacrifice for their masters, but when masters sacrifice for their servants, they are to be regarded as greater than their retainers. When it comes to those who are marginal or outside such hierarchy, common virtues such as non-injury to others score over grand acts of self-sacrifice. As we unpack the rationale of Vikramaditya's answers, we also get a sense that ethical greatness is

⁵ This essay draws upon Chandra Rajan's insightful introduction to her translation of Sivadasa's recension of the Vikram-Vetaal cycle as "the five and twenty tales of the genie." See Chandra Rajan, "Introduction" in Sivadasa's *The Five and Twenty Tales of the Genie (Vetalapancavinsati)*, translated by Chandra Rajan (New Delhi: Penguin Classics, 1995) p. xv-lxiii. However, the argument developed herein is different.

⁶ Throughout, I use "K" (upper case) for King Vikramaditya to distinguish him from other kings depicted in the stories. Instead of *Vetaal*, we use *Vetala* as in Rajan's text.

all about sovereign gestures through which one responds to the challenges posed by other's sacrifices.

Although the contents of these tales have an ancient provenance, they appear to have been committed to writing during the medieval period between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries CE. Four recensions survive from this period; two of these are found in larger collections such as Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara* and Ksemendra's *Brhatkathamajari* and two autonomous recensions penned by Sivadasa and Jambhaladatta.⁷ Of the latter, Sivadasa's rendition is sophisticated in that it addresses "well educated, cultivated, accomplished men-about-town with a keen interest in fine arts and beautiful women, with a lot of time on their hands and plenty of money in their purses, men who were aesthetes, dilettantes, wrote poetry, painted the pictures of their mistresses, played music, danced, told stories, understood the finer points of writing."⁸

Apart from entertainment, it appears that Sivadasa also meant this as a *Nitisastra or science of ethics*. Through twenty five delightful tales of talking corpses, conniving courtesans, famished hermits, adulterous wives, jealous husbands, ambitious merchants, virtuous thieves, foolish and fastidious brahmanas, adventurous warrior-princes, and wise kings – not to mention demanding gods and goddesses – the author presents ethical dilemmas which

⁷ Rajan, *Ibid.*, p. xix.

⁸ *Ibid.*, lxi.

require subtle reasoning and judgment. In many stories, the author portrays competing candidates for superlative courage or virtue or greatness or delicacy or fastidiousness. He also presents villains and knaves who outdo one another in wrongdoing or foolishness. In each case, King Vikramaditya is called upon to judge relative merit and settle questions of superior virtue or wrongdoing.

The hero of these stories, King Vikramaditya has been famous “down the centuries, and throughout the length and breadth of the country, for magnificence and courage, nobility and wisdom and magnanimity...”.⁹ He is the ideal King: heroic, kind, benevolent, and learned. Historically, we come across many kings by this name with Chandragupta Vikramaditya (fourth century CE) being regarded as the greatest.¹⁰ During the time when Sivadasa composed his text, memories of a Malava king named Vikramaditya, who ruled around tenth century CE, may have been fresh. But this king ruled from Ujjaini whereas King Vikramaditya of Sivadasa’s text rules at Pratisthanapura on the banks of Godavari.¹¹ As such, the King of the text may not represent one historical figure as much as an archetype or an “ideal type” of wise ruler. Sivadasa describes his hero as “never overstepping the bounds set by Law” and as committed to protecting the good and punishing evil doers. As an epitome of wisdom, his answers to the *Vetala*’s ethical dilemmas provide authoritative answers worthy of special consideration.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.vv.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xxix.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xxxi.

The *Vetala* has usually been translated as vampire, demon, goblin and spectre.¹² Rajan points out that *Vetalas* probably belonged to a class of pre-vedic, non-brahmanical divinities closely associated with fertility and vegetation, commonly referred to as *yakshas*.¹³ Being associated with Siva, the Lord of destruction, these chthonic forces are believed to haunt cremation grounds, corpses and other symbols of death. Like Siva, these forces are regarded as both benevolent and hostile and must be mastered with reverence and skill.¹⁴ King Vikramaditya attempts to bring the *Vetala* which inhabits a corpse hanging on a tree in the cremation grounds to his necromancer who plans to use it for some esoteric ritual. Why is the monarch involved in one of the most humble and degrading acts of carrying a corpse on his shoulder for twenty-five nights?

King Vikramaditya is indebted to a yogi *ksantisila* who wants the corpse for some secret ritual which would give him supernatural powers. The yogi had brought fruits to the King for twelve years daily and one day, the fruit slips from the King's hand, is broken by a monkey and a ruby rolls out. It turns out that all the fruits hitherto presented – fortunately stored separately (and perhaps refrigerated for twelve years!) – contained precious gems. Astonished, the King exclaims that he cannot even pay the cost of one of these gems and wished to know what the naked mendicant desired in return. In private, the yogi asks the King to bring a corpse hanging from a tree without speaking to it for some esoteric rites. The corpse, inhabited by a *Vetala* or spirit-genie engages the King

¹² *Ibid.*, lxxvii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, lxiv-lxv.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, lxvi.

with stories and concludes by asking him to solve riddles about the just, noble, rightful or legitimate nature of specific agents and actions. If he keeps quiet despite knowing the answer, his head will burst and he will die. If he answers right, the corpse is likely to return to the tree. The King's answers to a few stories are the subject matter of this essay.

Among the extant renditions, Sivadasa's version carries a profound sense of the presence of evil and moral retribution.¹⁵ It alone has a preamble which shows Vikramaditya's father Gandharvasena setting in motion a series of incidents due to his pride. Once he visits the famous bark eating ascetic Valkalasana who, absorbed in meditation for a thousand years, does not even register his presence. Offended, the king sends a courtesan to seduce him who, following her success, brings the hermit along with their child to the palace. The king insults him in the royal hall whereupon the hermit dashes his child to the floor; the head falls inside the palace, the torso in a potter's house and the feet inside an oil merchant's house. Three boys are born in each of these places and the astrologer predicts that one will try to kill the other two and that the one who survives shall be lord of the earth. The boy born in the palace becomes King Vikramaditya in the course of time; the potter's son, having heard the story of his birth and the prophecy sets out and kills the oil merchant's son and hangs the body on the tree. The citizens find him out and report the matter whereupon he flees that city. The king, who also was aware of the prophecy, thinks that his crown is secure what with one brother dead and the other in flight. Several years

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xxxv

later when a naked mendicant asks for the body hanging from a tree, King Vikramaditya appears not to have doubted the mendicant's identity or motives.

Rich in mythic and symbolic details such as the setting in the cremation grounds, the ordeal of picking up a corpse twenty-four times, tricky questions to be answered, and so on, this set of stories may be read as education of a hero who must qualify himself as exceptionally courageous, prudent and wise. Like other mythic heroes, he must stake his life to accomplish his task and lower himself to the level of a mere undertaker in carrying a possessed corpse. Notwithstanding these parallels with the hero myths, the King is unaware of the reward that shall accrue to him after this ordeal.¹⁶ This distinguishes him from mythic heroes who are normally seeking immortality or golden treasure or worldwide sovereignty. The King engages in this task out of sheer gratitude to the yogi who had for twelve years gifted him fruits laden with precious gems. In this respect, the King's conduct itself may be examined as to whether it was just ordinary, drawn from within *dharma* or extraordinary; overreaching what was expected of him as a king. But first we must figure out the difference between these two kinds using examples of the King's ethical reasoning and judgment.

Now, Tell Me O'King...

King Vikramaditya is asked time and again to judge what is more noble, magnanimous, courageous, virtuous, foolish, or evil. Twenty-three times, he replies to the *Vetala* or genie correctly only to fail in his larger mission of

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, lvii.

bringing the corpse to the necromancer for his ritual. In this essay, I focus on five tales where *Vetala*, the genie, asks the King to decide upon whom or which action is nobler. The tales that follow are chosen because they explicitly raise the question of superlative nobility, magnanimity, courage, or virtue. The King's answers may be considered authoritative in that they represent the views of an ideal king known for his wisdom and nobility. Reflection upon some of the dilemmas reveals that routine ethical conduct may be learned from the customs and law of the land. *Dharma*, as many scholars have noted, points in the direction of "situated ethics" in that what is right is informed by regional and caste customs and conduct of good people rather than by abstract rules or principles. To protect his subjects, to be courageous, or to be a benefactor are among the duties of a king; to be loyal even to the point of risking one's life is the duty of a servant; to be a devoted wife who values the husband's honor more than one's children is the duty of a wife.

However, ethical excellence or superlative virtue is not so much about following rules or customs, i.e one's *dharma*. Instead it is about exceeding the demands of rightness and propriety to the point of risking one's life. At least, this is what emerges from the stories outlined below.

Tale 4: Viravara, a noble warrior, arrives at the city of Vardhamana ruled by King Sudraka, seeking employment. Asked how much he expected to be paid, he says he wants one thousand gold coins per day. Intrigued, the king asks how many elephants, horses and foot soldiers he maintains and Vardhamana replies

that, besides himself, he maintains only his wife, son, and daughter. Thinking that his munificence might yield fruit some day, the king retains him. Viravara uses the extra wealth to distribute alms to brahmanas, bards, dancers, and others during the day and at night, he stands guard outside the king's bedroom. The king would call out at midnight and he would respond, signifying his presence. One night, the king hears a woman wailing and sends Viravara to investigate. Viravara finds that the woman is a royal consort who has divined that the king, her husband, will die in a couple of days due to the displeasure of a goddess. The goddess may be pacified and pleased if Viravara were to sever the head of his son himself. Blessed with a devoted wife and children, Viravara sacrifices his son. However, unable to bear the loss, the whole family (Viravara's wife, daughter, and Viravara himself) commits suicide. The king, who had followed Viravara secretly and witnessed the gory acts, draws his own dagger to kill himself when the goddess appears and restores everyone to life. Subsequently, the king gives half his kingdom to his retainer. Asked as to who is the nobler one, the King replies that it is King Sudraka because he was ready to give up his life thinking his kingdom is not worth much. As a master, he did not have to give up his life for a retainer while the latter is expected to sacrifice for his king.¹⁷

Tale 8: In another story, a Rajput (princely warrior) seeks employment but is unable to get an audience with the king. When he had thought his luck had run out, he chances upon the king who had gone deep into the forest leaving his

¹⁷ In the *Katha Sarit Sagara* version, Viravara is presented as a Brahman warrior who is so noble spirited that he does not proclaim his sacrifice even when asked. And yet king Sudraka is judged to be braver because he was ready to give up his life. See *Katha Sarit Sagara* or *Ocean of the Streams of Story*, translated by C.H. Tawney, M.A, Vol 2 (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal 1980), p 255-56.

retainers behind and is lost. The Rajput follows him, serves the famished king by fetching him fruits and water and shows him the way back. Pleased by his conduct, the king takes him into royal service. Subsequently, he is sent on a coastal mission and sees a beautiful lady worshipping at a shrine in mid-ocean. When she asks him about his business, he replies that he is impassioned by her. She suggests he bathe in the sacred pool nearby and enter her palace; he does so only to find himself transported back to his own city. Astonished, the king himself comes to the ocean and sees the lady. She falls in love with the king this time and declares that “I am yours to command. Whatever you ask of me, I shall do it.” Thereupon, the king asks her to marry his retainer. “Who is the most noble?” asks the genie. The King replies that it is the retainer who rendered assistance first. On further questioning, the King argues that applause is appropriate when one who has cause to do harm performs a noble deed but not when a benefactor performs a good deed because the latter is expected to do so.¹⁸

Tale 9: Madanasena, a beautiful maiden, is amusing herself in a pleasure grove with her friends when a young merchant Dharmadatta who comes that way, falls in love with her. When he confesses his love to her, she reveals that she is shortly to be married to another. As he threatens to take her by force, she pleads that she is obliged to uphold family honor and vows to return to him after the marriage ceremony. The merchant relents. On her wedding night, Madanasena explains to her husband about her vow and is permitted by him to go to Dharmadatta. On

¹⁸ In the *Katha Sarit Sagara* version, the Rajput prince is forced to plunge into the sea to save the ship only to find himself in a splendid city and he voluntarily plunges into mid-ocean the second time while escorting his master. For this act, he is judged the braver of the two. *Ibid.*, 271.

the way, a robber sees her and prepares to rob her of her jewels. She apprises him about her date with the beloved and he lets her go.¹⁹ Dharmadatta is enchanted upon seeing her but cannot recall who she is. She reminds him of the promise she made and apprises him that her husband allowed her to keep her vow. Perhaps amazed by the husband's nobility, Dharmadatta suddenly loses all interest in her, declares that women are fickle, vicious, and not worth the trouble and lets her go. The robber commends her highly and also lets her go a second time. Asked which one among the two merchants and the robber is most noble, King Vikramaditya replies that it is the robber for his unexpected act of kindness. While the husband perhaps lets her go thinking she loves another, and the merchant lets her go for fear of reprisal, only the robber had no reason whatsoever.

Tale 15: This story revolves around a prince, Jimutavahana who has abdicated his kingdom to pursue a virtuous life and is living in a forest along with his wife and parents. One day, he encounters a weeping woman who is grieving the impending death of her son at the hands of the eagle-king, serpent enemy and Vishnu's vehicle, Garuda. Jimutavahana offers to sacrifice himself and despite protests from the appointed victim, Sankhacuda, he climbs the rock of slaughter and waits for Garuda. As Garuda picks him up and hovers in the sky, Jimutavahana's wife and her parents come crying loudly. The intended victim Sankhacuda returns to the spot and appeals to Garuda to spare Jimutavahana. Undaunted, Jimutavahana declares that a life lived only for one's self is not

¹⁹ In the *Katha Sarit Sagara* version, Madanasena's virtue of keeping her word is commended by everyone, including *dharmadatta* and the robber. *Ibid.*, p.280.

human but bestial, that noble men live to help others, and insists that Garuda finish the job of killing him. As he lies wounded, his wife begins to wail and Garuda hastens to bring the Elixir of life and rejuvenate him. Garuda also promises to eschew eating snakes and restores the earlier victims to life. Now, the genie asks King Vikramaditya who is the more magnanimous one: Jimutavahana or Sankhacuda. The King replies that it is the latter and points out that the former was used to sacrificing himself due to past habits and previous births while the latter did not allow another in his place even though there was a willing volunteer.

Tale 16: This story is about a merchant prince who has a beautiful daughter called Unmadini who the prince offers in marriage to the king. The king sends experts to ascertain if she is indeed beautiful. After examining her and finding her exquisite, they fear that the king would lose all interest in the kingdom if he married her, and therefore report that she is ugly. At this point, the king refuses and the merchant marries her off to the commander of the royal forces. One day, the king chances upon her and intoxicated with love, is deeply disturbed. When the commander hears of the king's passion, he offers to bring her to the king. The king is incensed at this offer and asserts that *Dharma* forbids possessing another's wife. The commander argues that his wife is a slave to the king like himself and should not be regarded as "another man's wife."²⁰ The king refuses to go against the accepted practices of society whereupon the commander suggests that he could donate her to the temple which would make her a

²⁰ Sivadasa, *op.cit.*, p. 130

courtesan and thus available for the king. Refusing, and yet pining with love, the king expires. The commander too enters the fire and Unmadini follows suit. The genie then asks King Vikramaditya who is the most virtuous among the three and he replies that it is the king who preferred to die rather than accept what was offered to him voluntarily.

Thus while the kings are judged greater in the first and final stories summarized here, the Rajput warrior, the robber, and Sankhacuda turn out to be greater in the other three. Except for the story of Madanasena (Tale 9) which involves a merchant-prince, all others involve a royal person who is ruling (Tales 4, 8, 16) or fit to rule (Tale 15). Addressed as they are to an ideal king, it is probable that the author intended these stories for aspiring princes who must be educated about and encouraged to perform great deeds.

Keep the Women Out

All the stories involve women who follow *dharma* which lays down that they support and obey their husbands, fathers, or sons. Tale 4 involves a devoted wife who rejects her husband's entreaty to go away, allows him to sacrifice their son, and commits suicide after the gory event. Tale 8 involves a woman who passionately implores the king to command her and is compelled to marry the retainer to keep her word. Tale 9 involves a woman who is determined to safeguard family honor until her marriage and consequently to fulfill a vow made under duress. Tale 15 involves, among other heroes, a mother who would not allow a king to substitute for her own son who is destined to be killed. Tale 16

presents Unmadini, who follows her husband into the funeral pyre. The *Vetala* takes into account a woman's virtue only in the last instance when he poses his riddle to King Vikramaditya as to who is more or most noble.

Thus all the stories considered here involve heroic women but the two men discussing virtue (the *Vetala* and King Vikramaditya) ignore women's virtue. Is this because all these women invoke family honor and may be said to act within the bounds of their respective *dharma* as wives or daughters? However, following their *dharma* does not disqualify men from being considered for ethical excellence (though they do not finally get chosen by the King). Also not all women are rigidly bound by their filial piety and pre-defined duties. The woman in Tale 8 is independent and marries the retainer to keep her word even though she is passionately in love with the king. Why is her sacrifice not considered, especially when women are said to be slaves of their passions throughout the text? Although Tale 9 is titled after Madanasena, who kept her vow, she is not considered a candidate for superlative virtue while the merchant who threatened to rape her is. Could it be because she is foolish enough to keep a promise made under duress to a stranger and thus willingly puts herself into danger? Then again, this reasoning would preclude the Rajput warrior or Sankhacuda, both of whom could be considered foolish (the former for not eating at least one fruit himself and the latter for offering himself despite a willing volunteer).

Sivadasa's text presents women who are resolute and virtuous but the King and *Vetala* mouth the conventional view that "women are more prone to commit

evil than men for the latter are instructed in good and evil.”²¹ And yet, the preamble where the king’s father, offended by a hermit’s indifference, sends a courtesan to seduce him and the frame story where a naked mendicant demands a talking corpse for undisclosed reasons, reveal men to be chief evildoers. In fact, the king appears to be totally oblivious to women’s virtue; for instance, in the case of Madanasena (Tale 9), he suggests that her husband let her go, thinking that she loved another man. This is peculiar since the text suggests that Madanasena had apprised her husband of the circumstances under which she made the vow. He allows her to go and takes her back. It is only to the robber that she may have hinted about going to a beloved. Hence, the King’s reasoning appears sexist and out of touch with reality. But then again, educating the King about women’s virtue is not the overt purpose of Sivadasa’s tales.

Making Sense of the King’s Verdicts

With the competition thus being restricted to men, what is the reasoning underlying King Vikramaditya’s judgments? It may be noted that conventional hierarchy plays no role in the King’s judgments. The king in Tale 4 is chosen because, dismayed by the sacrifice of Viravara’s family, he is willing to lay down his life. It is not because he gave half his kingdom to Viravara, but because he was ready to kill himself that he is considered nobler than his retainer. Also, mere gratitude, as in the case of the king in Tale 8 who commands the beautiful woman to marry his retainer, does not reflect ethical greatness. Similarly, the king in Tale 16 is chosen because he gives up his life rather than accept the wife of the

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.48.

commander. If it is about a superior who gives up his life or is ready to do so, Jimutavahana who offers to die for a stranger must also be counted as great. Why is he not chosen?

The King argues that Jimutavahana was disposed to do sacrificial acts from previous births and such sacrifice caused him no harm.²² The King is suggesting that as an ascetic, he is habituated to self sacrifice. There is some ambiguity as to whether Jimutavahana is to be regarded as an ascetic or a warrior; he begins as a prince, is married to a princess – even while living in the forest – and is eventually restored to his kingdom. Garuda, as he hovers in midair with his body, is troubled by the wailing below and wonders whether his prey is a brahmana or a warrior.²³ If we consider him a king, then he is outreaching his *dharma* by dying for one who is not even a subject. This is how Garuda judges him and therefore rewards him in the end.

But King Vikramaditya ignores this ambiguity and judges Sankhacuda as more magnanimous and since the *Vetala* is content, we must proceed to figure out why this may be so. It appears that those who are habituated to sacrificial acts through their *dharmic* roles do not qualify even though such acts may involve extraordinary sacrifices. This is the reason why retainers like Viravara (who distributes alms everyday) or the royal commander or Unmadini are not chosen

²² Jimutavahana is portrayed as a *bodhisattva* in the *Katha Sarit Sagara* version (Tawney 314).

²³ Sivadasa, p. 121.

even though they all die. It appears that one must do more than what *dharma* requires of one's self.

By this principle, the king in Tale 16 must not be chosen for he was only following *dharma*. And yet, King Vikramaditya judges him to be the greatest. Even though the commander is more than willing, the king refuses to violate *dharma* – as both abstract rules and as the accepted practices of society – which forbids adultery. The commander suggests ways around this prohibition which are rejected by the king. After all, the commander is trying to deal with an emergency and crisis-ethics (*apad dharma*) allows the king to save his life even at the cost of his wife and money.²⁴ As a powerful king, he chooses not to transgress the Law even though he was dying of the pangs of love and this elevates him over the commander and his wife.

Kings qualify for ethical greatness when they go way beyond what is enjoined on them by their royal *dharma*, which is to rule over their kingdom and honor the sacrifices of their subordinates. But when they come close to sacrificing themselves or actually do so, are they not going against their kingly duties? Does going “beyond” involve going “against” our duties?

Consider the king in Tale 4 again: He follows Viravara, who goes out to investigate the reasons for the woman's weeping and witnesses the gory drama of

²⁴ Manu. *The Laws of Manu*. Translated by Wendy Doniger with Brian K. Smith. (New Delhi: Penguin, 1991), p. 150

an entire family dying for his good. He does not interfere with Viravara when he severs his son's head before the Great Goddess thinking "whatever is going to be brings its own means as well."²⁵ He could have stopped the sacrifice but perhaps he hoped for divine intervention. Perhaps he was curious as to whether Viravara would go all the way in fulfilling his duty. Perhaps he was just being selfish. Whatever the reason, the situation puts him in a moral dilemma: if he stops Viravara, he would be going against his royal duty to preserve himself through the sacrifice of a retainer. If he allows him to die, he still falls short of the royal duty of protecting one's subjects.²⁶ By following the latter course, the king gets disillusioned and exclaims "for my sake, this whole family has been destroyed. What use is my kingdom to me now?"²⁷

Similarly, the king in Tale 16 is also facing a dilemma in that if he accepts the commander's offer of his wife, he would be contravening his royal *dharma* of safeguarding virtue. By not giving in to desire and preferring death, he again falls short of the royal duty of ruling the kingdom. The point is that royal *dharma* is not always clear cut and poses ethical dilemmas. In fact, *dharma* in general is seldom unambiguous; even Viravara and the commander had duties to their families and had to set aside those duties. As Bimal Matilal has observed,

²⁵ Sivadasa, *op.cit.*, p.56

²⁶ Of course, the king could have stopped one or all three suicides (Viravara's, his wife's and daughter's) though it is questionable whether that would have mitigated the dilemma.

²⁷ Sivadasa, *op.cit.*, p.56.

“*dharma*-morality is pluralistic” and demands considerable practical reason in figuring out moral priorities.²⁸

Furthermore, since everyone involved is going way beyond the call of mere duty in these stories, why are the kings chosen as ethically superior? King Vikramaditya highlights the fact that they subvert the hierarchy by sacrificing for their retainers. But is this not because they were in a position to do so? Kings may choose to die for their retainers whereas the latter had no choice. True, kings are more powerful than their servants and yet seldom do they use that power to their disadvantage; that the two kings in question did so makes them superior to their counterparts. As the *Katha Sarit Sagara* colourfully puts it:

But kings are inflated with arrogance, uncontrollable as elephants, and when bent on enjoyment, they snap asunder the chain of moral law. For their minds are overweening, and all discernment is washed out of them when the waters of inauguration are poured over them, and is, as it were, swept away by the flood. And the breeze of the waving chowries fans away the atoms of the sense of scripture taught by old men, as it fans away flies and mosquitoes. And the royal umbrella keeps off from the rays of truth, as well as the rays of the sun; and their eyes, smitten by the gale of prosperity do not see the right path.²⁹

²⁸ Bimal Krishna Matilal, “Dharma and Rationality.” In *The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal*. Ed. By Jonardon Ganeri. (New Delhi, Oxford 2002), p.68.

²⁹ Tawney, *op.cit.*, 321.

Marginality and Ethics

In posing the ethical dilemmas, the *Vetala* is testing whether King Vikramaditya can see beyond fixed roles and assigned duties. After all, King Vikramaditya is dealing with the riddles as he lugs a talking corpse through a cemetery in the dead of the night. And the *Vetala* entertaining him is also a marginal and hybrid figure, a spirit inhabiting a corpse hanging from a tree. Thus, subtle questioning about *dharma* is not pursued within the palace but in a cemetery, suggesting that this questioning is not free for all but permitted only to select kings in exceptional circumstances and pursuing extraordinary tasks. That such critical thinking may also be necessary when dealing with marginal figures becomes clear as we look at the remaining three heroes. The Rajput prince, the robber and Sankhacuda are all outside the pale of social order and fixed roles. The Rajput prince is bereft of money and friends and is roaming in the forest. Having failed to secure employment with the king, he is impoverished. The robber is obviously a transgressor of law. Sankhacuda is a “serpent youth,” a hybrid figure from the underworld. They all act out their great deeds in forests.

As Charles Malamoud observes, “outside the village, the world of the *aranya* is at once within and without the *dharmic* norm.”³⁰ Forest is within the *dharmic* norm because the “thieving and brigand” creatures who, were they to be caught would be dealt with according to *dharmic* law.³¹ Forests also represent the other world – the world of the gods – and as wilderness, they are an image of the

³⁰ Charles Malamoud, “Village and Forest in the Ideology of Brahmanic India” . In Charles Malamoud, *Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient India*. Translated by David White. (Delhi: Oxford University Press 1998), p.81.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Absolute. They represent transgressive forces that suspend, if not challenge ordinary hierarchies and conventions. They are inhabited by irate but powerful ascetics, sages with their beautiful wives and alluring daughters, “savage” tribes, thugs and robbers, proud demons, ferocious animals, and mysterious *daimons* or spirits. As such, forests are dangerous places where the rich and the mighty often get lost or exiled, find generous guides and patrons, listen to edifying stories, rescue and marry beautiful damsels, get humbled by “lowly” persons, meet heavenly friends, and get powerful weapons. In both the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the heroes must go through long exile in forests in preparation for epochal wars. These sojourns involve conquering many dreaded forces through love and war as evident in the many adventures and marriages of Arjuna and Bhima with bewitching *apsaras* (heavenly females) and *rakshasis* (demonesses).

Historians have noted that forests were not uncharted territory but were very much scenes of conflict and conciliation between established settlers and forest peoples. State building involved negotiating with forest peoples some of whom could be gainfully accommodated while others had to be subdued.³² Kings had to be educated about distinguishing and dealing appropriately with *aranyacaras* or forest dwellers and *atavikas* or savage tribals who operated autonomously and had to be subdued.

³² Aloka Parasher-Sen, “Of Tribes, Hunters and Barbarians.” *Studies in History* (Vol 14, 2, 1998,) p. 179.

In our text, there is no hint of state building or the attendant conflicts with marginal groups. What is clear is the pedagogical intent of educating the ideal king about those who have no specific *dharma*, thus forcing him to reckon with virtuous conduct that is different from what is routinely observed. But in the absence of customary norms, how do we even know that the conduct of these figures was exceptionally virtuous? That the Rajput warrior, the robber, and Sankhacuda were kind is not difficult to make out. For when the Rajput gives fruit to the famished king or the robber lets the woman go, are they not following common virtues (*sadharana dharma* or *samanya dharma*)? What makes their conduct so exemplary that they are exalted over other agents we encountered before such as the king (Tale 8), the generous husband (Tale 9), or the noble ascetic (Tale 15)?

Consider again the Rajput prince who follows the king charging into the forest on foot. It is possible that he was looking for a chance to make an acquaintance with the king and is therefore motivated by self-interest. However, when he fetches two fruits for the king and goes hungry himself, he rises above his immediate interest. Impoverished as he was, he was not under any obligation to feed the king. In fact, it would have been proper for him to feed himself with at least one fruit according to crisis ethics (*apad dharma*). Thus, the Rajput goes far beyond the call of common virtue or *samanya dharma* and even crisis ethics or *apad dharma*. Having lost his retinue, the king was under the mercy of the warrior prince; now the latter had failed to secure employment with the former despite roaming the gardens attached to the palace. But he is generous enough to

say that it was all his own misfortune. Against his conduct, the king – who later gets the beautiful damsel to marry his retainer – pales, for he is only paying back his dues. Explaining his reasons, King Vikramaditya points out that the Rajput rendered assistance first and that though he had cause to do harm, he acted nobly.

The robber in Tale 9 need not have foregone the opportunity twice to rob the woman. The first time, he assumes that she is going to visit her beloved and the second time he commends her highly and lets her go again. Among the competing candidates, the husband who lets his wife go to another to keep her vow and accepts her when she returns shines out. And yet, King Vikramaditya only interprets it as the conduct of a husband who thinks his wife loves another man. What redeems this verdict is perhaps the fact that the robber acts decently for no reason at all.

The most fascinating story is about the third figure, Sankhacuda, who returns to face death even though he is free to go away when faced with Jimutavahana, an all too willing volunteer. Sankhacuda is not a saint used to doing good deeds. He is described as a “serpent youth” who “comes from the underworld.” Moved by Jimutavahana’s magnanimity, he argues that insignificant beings like himself rise and fall away. Following “the virtuous people who do not wish what is hostile to one’s self on others,” he returns to take his place as Garuda’s victim and is thus ready to die. Interestingly, while Garuda is moved by Jimutavahana’s magnanimity and blesses him to be “Paramount

Sovereign on this earth,” King Vikramaditya chooses Sankhacuda as the greater of the two, showing that he does not judge like the gods. In fact, most of these tales show the gods to be crazy, making impossible demands and bestowing goods on undeserving people. The King judges like the “virtuous” people, those who are regarded as beacons of good conduct in the community. In recognizing Sankhacuda, the King is also showing that ethical excellence is not confined to specific caste groups.

In all three instances, King Vikramaditya sets aside those who act according to *dharma* in that the king who reciprocates to the Rajput or the husband who lets his wife go or Jimutavahana are not seen as candidates for ethical greatness. Instead, those who had no specific *dharma* qualify even though some of them, like the robber, only desisted from non-injury to others. None of these figures are shown to be habitual do-gooders. They are ordinary human beings moved by emotions and passions. The Rajput laments his bad luck, the robber is moved by delicate feelings, and Sankhacuda is moved by Jimutavahana’s magnanimity. What makes them great is that despite being worldly, they manage to rise above their immediate self interest to help strangers and subordinates. In fact their acts are sovereign gestures in that they cannot be matched in any way; no reward can match the generosity of the Rajput, the robber, or Sankhacuda.

These figures direct us to what may be called the contingent nature of some ethical acts; none of the actors were seeking glory or reward. They found

themselves by chance in ethically demanding circumstances. They defy the general idea that ethical habituation and mature reflection upon ethical conduct are essential for ethical excellence. Ethical greatness is not only about more of the same courage or magnanimity as displayed by those who are used to fighting or giving; sometimes ordinary and oppressed persons face ethically demanding circumstances heroically and prove that morality feeds upon the human spirit of self-mastery rather than selfishness.

They also show that elaborate theologies such as the *Bhagavad Gita* may be helpful but are not necessary for great conduct. There is no talk about soul or spirit by any of these agents. In fact, the Rajput prince laments that “He who provided me with milk, means/to sustain my infant years, is He asleep? Or dead?”³³ An ideal king must know about the unexpected sources of ethical greatness even though his primary responsibility is to preserve and sustain the conventional moral order based on right habits and norms of reciprocity.

Sivadasa’s rendition shows that King Vikramaditya is indeed very wise for he solves the riddle correctly every time. Through the King’s example, the virtuous may also learn how to judge excellence when faced with competing great actions. In weighing and judging, we reflect upon the acts, their sources, and context. We learn to distinguish between kinds and degrees of virtue, courage, or generosity. More than anything, we learn with the King about seeing beyond the moral economy – structured by roles, habits, and norms – and appreciate the

³³ Sivadasa, *op.cit.*, p.73

contingent circumstances under which ordinary beings rise to perform great actions. Through fine-tuned ethical reason, we may learn about acting nobly in situations where customary duty is ambiguous, irrelevant, or unattractive. Alongside how to judge, the stories also provide some clues on how to act well in ethically challenging situations. Obviously, these situations do not arise everyday and none of the heroes is deliberately pursuing ethical greatness as a goal. When they do arise, they respond to the challenge posed by the circumstances.

In four of the stories, the heroes are second performers; as such they could be said to have been moved by and responding to the generous or noble actions of others. The king in Tale 4 is moved by Viravara's sacrifice and the king in Tale 16 is displeased but not oblivious to the loyalty of his commander. The robber is moved by the plight of his acquaintance and acts out of delicate sentiments such as "how could I even think of depriving her of her jewels when she is on her way, beautifully dressed and adorned, to meet her beloved?..."³⁴ The second time, the robber is possibly moved by Madanasena's virtue because he lets her go after commending her highly. Sankhacuda goes away unable to convince Jimutavahana and returns possibly because he is moved by the piteous wailing of Jimutavahana's young wife and parents-in-law. The only exception to this is the Rajput warrior, who is himself destitute and famished when he feeds the king and leads him out of the forest.

³⁴ Sivadasa, *op.cit.*, p.80

Ethical conduct that is praiseworthy in all these cases springs from a good heart. All the figures discussed above may be said to be acting out of good heartedness even to the point of risking their lives. Standing tall above these figures in the stories, there is King Vikramaditya himself who seems to be going beyond what is required of him by the call of duty. He was not aware that the mendicant had been presenting fruits containing rubies until the day the fruit slipped, broke, and revealed its riches. He was also unaware of the dark past or future plans of the mendicant to kill the King and usurp the throne. He is so moved by the mendicant that he agrees to the dangerous and demeaning task of retrieving a talking corpse. Twenty-three times the *Vetala* asks him questions, the correct answer to which only means walking back to the cremation grounds; not replying even when he knew the answer would have meant terrible death. Thus, the King subjects himself to more than what is required of one in debt to a generous stranger.

Paradoxically, acting disinterestedly out of a good heart at great risk to one's life may not always have beneficial effects unless accompanied by good judgment of character. This is hinted in the fact that the King is going out of his way for a mendicant who has tricked him into service and actually plans to kill him. Even though he is good and wise, his education is not complete for he is still vulnerable to crafty mendicants.³⁵ He is good at judging what is noble but not at the kind of benefactor who deserves such heroic service; this only happens in the

³⁵ Sivadasa, *op.cit.*, lvi

last story after the *Vetala* reveals to him the mendicant's plans and the means of escape from the danger awaiting him.

Conclusion

In general, it has become customary to uphold the situatedness of Indian ethical thought as an alternative to deontological ethical theories coming from the west. While this may be a step in the right direction, much work remains to be done with both the *nitisastra* texts and *dharmic* practices on the ground to clarify the nuanced ways in which such situatedness is understood. Even though not a canonical *dharma* text, Sivadasa's rendering of *Vikram* and *Vetala* cycle reveals that *dharmic* situatedness did not exhaust the range of ethical possibilities and that there were instances when ordinary beings went out of their way in responding to challenging ethical contexts. In doing so, they often rose above their immediate self-interest without the aid of elaborate theologies or ethical theories. Even though the text was mainly addressed to kings – who aspire to greatness – and to the leisurely class with a taste for ethical discourse, its lesson about the unexpected sources and unconventional character of ethical greatness deserves more consideration, for there are still poor beggars who return lost wallets and it is they, more than preachy patrons, who sustain and nourish our everyday moral sensibility.

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