

Systems of Ethics in ancient India

Michel Danino
IIT Gandhinagar, January 2016
micheldanino@iitgn.ac.in

Central concepts in Rig-Veda

Ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanty ... (1.164.46)

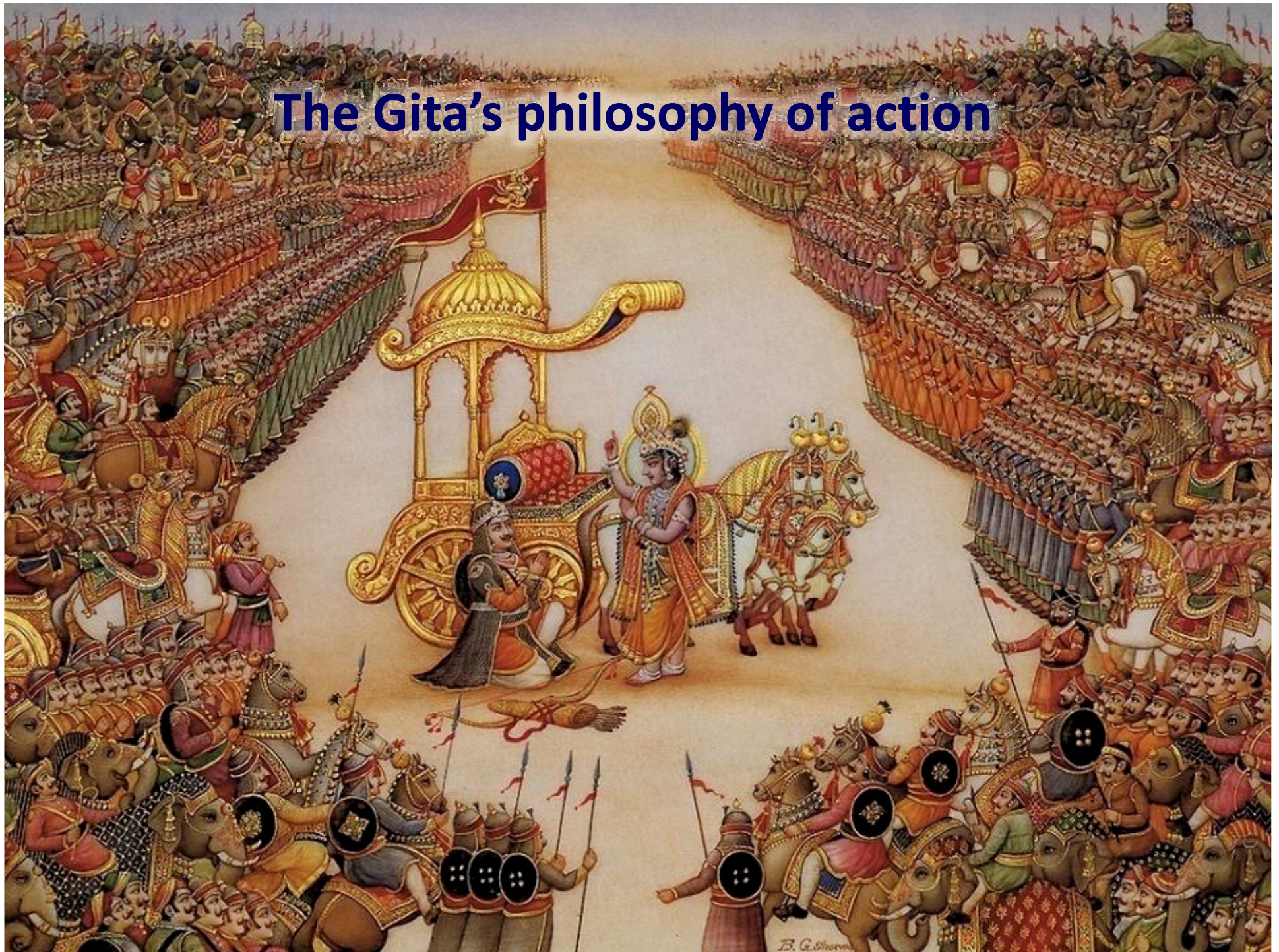
“The Existent is One, but the sages express It variously;
they say Indra, Varuna, Mitra, Agni; they call It Agni, Yama,
Mātarishvan ...”

- Only one Existence, also called *tad ekam, tat satyam*.
Unity and divinity of the creation.
- The fight for *ritam*, the cosmic order (later: *dharma*).
- Life is a sacrifice (like the initial creation), but for a growth (external or internal).
- *manur bhava janayā daivyam janam* (10.53.6): “Become the human being, create the divine people ...”

Central concepts in the Upanishads

- ***Aham brahma asmi***: Life's purpose is to grow conscious of this identity.
- All creatures are “impelled by consciousness”. Contrast with Europe's medieval debates as to whether animals — or even the Blacks — had souls.
- The interconnectedness of all creation becomes apparent: ***sarve bhavantu sukhinah***.
- ***Svabhava*** and ***swadharma***: everyone has a distinct nature, function, truth and path; plurality in unity.

The Gita's philosophy of action



- Concept of *nishkāma karma*: being “equal in success and failure”, “free from attachments”, “doing works as sacrifice”. The foundation of *karma yoga*: A will to succeed, but equanimity if we fail.
- No “winners”, no “losers” — a very different philosophy of “success”.
- The need to take sides so as to defend *dharma*: *ahimsa* vs. action.

- **Ahimsa nearly absolute in Buddhism and Jainism.**
- **In Hinduism, however, limited to Brahmins (with exceptions: Drona) and renunciates (*sannyasins*): Kshatriyas are not expected to practise ahimsa.**
- **Hinduism distinguishes between violence and the righteous use of force, i.e. for the defence of Dharma (the preaching of the Gita).**
- **Mahatma Gandhi's interpretation of the Gita (as an inner battle), at variance with the traditional interpretation.**
- **Contrast Gandhi with Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo or Subhash Chandra Bose.**

Mahābhārata

**“The class that requires greatest protection of all is composed to those who are weak, are poor, are exploited, are helpless, and are trampled upon. It is to protect them from the strong that the king was created.”
(91.1)**

Rāma's advice to Bharata

“I trust that you do not sleep too much, that you wake at the appropriate time and spend the early hours of the morning thinking about how you can achieve your ends.

“Do not take advice from only one man, nor either from too many and make sure that your innermost thoughts are not spread all over the kingdom.

“Choose one learned and intelligent man as your advisor instead of a thousand foolish men.

“Give the best of your retainers the most important tasks to perform.

“Keep your income greater than your expenditure.

“The tears of an [innocent] man unjustly accused can destroy the progeny and wealth of a king ...

“Do not pursue power at the cost of dharma ...”

Special cases!

The complexity of dharma in various life situations:

- **In the Mahābhārata, the slaying of Drona, thanks to the false news of the death of his son Ashwatthama. Krishna: “By telling an untruth for saving a life, one is not touched by sin.”**
- **The slaying of Karna: you cannot expect to be treated in a dharmic way if you do not practise dharma yourself.**
- **Rāma and the killing of Vālī, the king of monkeys: he had usurped Sugriva’s throne and wife.**



**Rāma and the killing of Vālī
(Tripurantakesvara Temple, Karnataka)**

The Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism

1. right vision
2. right intention/aspiration
(to free oneself)
3. right speech (truthful and
non-hurting)
4. right action (including *ahimsa*)
5. right livelihood (honesty, *ahimsa*)
6. right effort (to purify the mind)
7. right mindfulness (in observing oneself, from
emotions to thoughts to breathing)
8. right concentration (especially in meditation)



More Buddhist Ethics

- **Compassion:** “When you see someone who has fallen on hard times, overwhelmed with hard times, you should conclude: ‘We, too, have experienced just this sort of thing in the course of that long, long time’.” (*Duggata Sutta*)
- “To do no evil; to cultivate good; to purify one’s mind: This is the teaching of the Buddhas.” (*Dhammapada*)
- “Not by water is one made pure, though many people may here bathe [in sacred rivers], but one in whom there is truth and Dhamma, he is pure, he is a brahmin.” (*Dhammavagga*)
- **The Middle Way:** moderation.

Jain values for the laity

- Right faith, right knowledge, right walk.
- Detachment
- Surrender to the teacher.
- *Anekānta-vāda*: non-absolutism; there cannot be a unique perspective or a complete description of the truth.
- A scale for ahimsa. Violence for self-defence is accepted. (Jain kings had armies and engaged in warfare.)





**Edict in Aramaic
(Afghanistan)**



**Edict in Kandahar, bilingual
Greek & Aramaic**

Ashoka's change of heart

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi [i.e. Ashoka], conquered the Kalingas [in today's Odisha] eight years after his coronation. One hundred and fifty thousand were deported, one hundred thousand were killed and many more died (from other causes).

After the Kalingas had been conquered, Beloved-of-the-Gods came to feel a strong inclination towards the Dhamma, a love for the Dhamma and for instruction in Dhamma. Now Beloved-of-the-Gods feels deep remorse for having conquered the Kalingas.

Indeed, Beloved-of-the-Gods is deeply pained by the killing, dying and deportation that take place when an unconquered country is conquered.

Values in Ashoka's Edicts:

1. Wishing happiness to all

All men are my children. What I desire for my own children, and I desire their welfare and happiness both in this world and the next, that I desire for all men. You do not understand to what extent I desire this, and if some of you do understand, you do not understand the full extent of my desire.

2. Ahimsa

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, has caused this Dhamma edict to be written. Here (in my domain) no living beings are to be slaughtered or offered in sacrifice. ... Formerly, in the kitchen of Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, hundreds of thousands of animals were killed every day to make curry. But now with the writing of this Dhamma edict only three creatures, two peacocks and a deer are killed, and the deer not always. And in time, not even these three creatures will be killed.

3. Taking care of animals

Everywhere within Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi's domain, and among the people beyond the borders, the Cholas, the Pandyas, the Satiyaputras, the Keralaputras, as far as Tamraparni [modern Sri Lanka] and where the Greek king Antiochos rules [a king of Syria], and among the kings who are neighbours of Antiochos, everywhere has Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, made provision for two types of medical treatment: medical treatment for humans and medical treatment for animals. Wherever medical herbs suitable for humans or animals are not available, I have had them imported and grown. Wherever medical roots or fruits are not available I have had them imported and grown. Along roads I have had wells dug and trees planted for the benefit of humans and animals.

4. Follow *Dharma*

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, does not consider glory and fame to be of great account unless they are achieved through having my subjects respect Dhamma and practice Dhamma, both now and in the future. For this alone does Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, desire glory and fame. And whatever efforts Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, is making, all of that is only for the welfare of the people in the next world, and that they will have little evil. And being without merit is evil.

5. What is *Dharma*?

Dharma is good. But what does Dharma consist of? It consists of few sins and many good deeds, of kindness, liberality, truthfulness, and purity. I have bestowed even the gift of sight [i.e., spiritual insight on men in various ways. I have decreed many kindnesses, including even the grant of life, to living creatures, two-footed and four-footed as well as birds and aquatic animals. I have also performed many other good deeds.

One should obey one's father and mother. One should respect the supreme value and sacredness of life. One should speak the truth. One should practice these virtues of Dharma.

6. The ruler's duties

In the past, state business was not transacted nor were reports delivered to the king at all hours. But now I have given this order, that at any time, whether I am eating, in the women's quarters, the bed chamber, the chariot, the palanquin, in the park or wherever, reporters are to be posted with instructions to report to me the affairs of the people so that I might attend to these affairs wherever I am.

I am never content with exerting myself or with despatching business. Truly, I consider the welfare of all to be my duty, and the root of this is exertion and the prompt despatch of business. There is no better work than promoting the welfare of all the people and whatever efforts I am making is to repay the debt I owe to all beings to assure their happiness in this life, and attain heaven in the next. ...

7. Harmony among religions

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, does not value gifts and honours as much as he values this — that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is, not praising one's own religion, or condemning the religion of others without good cause. And if there is cause for criticism, it should be done in a mild way. But it is better to honour other religions for this reason. ... Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought "Let me glorify my own religion," only harms his own religion. Therefore contact (between religions) is good. ... All should be well-learned in the good doctrines of other religions.

8. Compassion

[My officers] are commissioned to work among the soldiers and their chiefs, the ascetics and householders, the poor and the aged, to secure the welfare and happiness and release from imprisonment of those devoted to Dharma.

They are also commissioned to work among prisoners to distribute money to those who have many children, to secure the release of those who were instigated to crime by others, and to pardon those who are very aged. ...

This edict has been inscribed here to remind the judicial officers in this city to try at all times to avoid unjust imprisonment or unjust torture. ...

More from *Arthashāstra*

“Having acquired a new territory, the king should cover the enemy’s vices with his own virtues, and the enemy’s virtues by doubling his own virtues, by strict observance of his own duties, by attending to his works, by bestowing rewards, by refraining from exacting taxes, by giving gifts, and by bestowing honours. ...

“He should adopt the same mode of life, the same dress, language, and customs as those of the people. He should follow the people in their faith with which they celebrate their national, religious and congregational festivals or amusements. ... He should always hold religious life in high esteem. ... He should release all the prisoners, and afford help to miserable, helpless, and diseased persons. ...”

Woman in ancient India

- Like most ancient societies, early Indian society was mostly patriarchal and male-dominated, yet women were generally respected.
- Was woman oppressed?
- *Manusmriti*: “In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent.” (5.148)
- Many examples from literature to show that sons were preferred to daughters.
- Girls could not be taught the Vedas.
- The practice of Sati, etc.

But also:

***Mātru devo bhava;
pitru devo bhava;
acharyadevo bhava;
atithidevo bhava. (Taittiriya Upanishad, 1.11)***

“Women must be honoured and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brother-in-laws who desire great good fortune. Where women, verily, are honoured, there gods rejoice; where, however, they are not honoured, there all sacred rites prove fruitless. Where female relations live in grief – that family soon perishes completely; where, however, they do not suffer from any grievance – that family always prospers.” (Manusmriti 3.55-57)

- “The teacher is ten times more venerable than a sub-teacher, the father a hundred times more than the teacher, but the mother a thousand times more than the father.” (2.145)
- *Arthashastra* spells out various conditions under which a widow must get her *strīdhana* back. Remarriage was accepted, although she lost her *strīdhana* if she remarried someone not selected by her father-in-law.
- Literature portrays many ideals: Savitri (conqueror of death), Sita (embodiment of faith and purity), Draupadi (embodiment of strength), Kannagi (embodiment of faithfulness)...

Values & ethics from the Kural

(Composed by Tiruvalluvar about the 5th century CE)

- **Learn well what should be learnt, and then
Live your learning.**
- **The wealth which never declines
Is not riches but learning.**
- **Having found the man for the task
Make him responsible.**
- **Always aim high—failure then
Is as good as success.**
- **The world gives up those who give up:
Stick to your task.**
- **Do not do what you will regret; and if you do,
Do not regret.**

- **However great the hardship,
Pursue with firmness the happy end.**
- **Make friends in haste
And repent at leisure.**
- **Adversity has this use—as a yardstick
To spread out and measure friends.**
- **The harm fools do to themselves
Is beyond anything their foes do to them.**
- **Those who desire fame with honour
Will not sacrifice honour for fame.**
- **In prosperity, bend low;
In adversity, stand straight.**
- **The great hide others' faults—
Only the small talk of nothing else.**

Some values in the Subhāshitas

- **Philanthropy:** What are the defects of a philanthropist? What are the merits of a miser? There is no defect greater than stinginess. There is no merit greater than charity.
- **Humility:** The wise should learn to accept wisdom from anybody, even from a child. Doesn't the small night lamp shine things which the sun cannot?
- **Responsibility:** The doer, the promoter, the instigator and the approver, all the four share the responsibility equally in good or bad deeds.
- **Here and Now:** One should not lament over the past. There is no use in dreaming of the future. The wise live for the present.
- **Discrimination:** It is better to be knocked by a horse than to ride a donkey. The condemnation of a scholar is better than the praise of an idiot.

- ***In unity is strength:*** Even the weak, when they are in good number, gain strength. A rope made of strands of grass can bind even an elephant.
- ***Sincerity:*** What is the purpose of parrot-like learning devoid of practice? It may, at best, entertain people.
- ***Ahimsa:*** When a mean person maligns a noble one, the noble one does not retaliate. When a dog bites a man, the man does not bite the dog in return.
- ***Selflessness:*** Trees are like good people. While they themselves stand in the scorching sun, they provide shade and fruit for others.
- ***Restraint as an antidote to greed:*** One may own a hundred cows but his need is only one cup of milk; one may own a hundred villages but his need is only one morsel of food. One may own a hundred-roomed palace but his need is but one cot. All the rest belongs to others.

Testimonies from travellers and scholars

Diodorus Siculus, Greek historian (1st century BCE):

“There are usages observed by Indians which contribute to prevent the occurrence of famine among them; for whereas among other nations it is usual, in the contests of war, to ravage the soil, and thus to reduce it to an uncultivated waste, among the Indians, on the contrary, by whom husbandmen are regarded as a class that is sacred and inviolable, **the tillers of the soil, even when battle is raging in their neighbourhood, are undisturbed by any sense of danger**, for the combatants on either side in waging the conflict make carnage of each other, but allow those engaged in husbandry to remain quite unmolested.”

Strabo, Greek geographer and historian (1st c. BCE):

“All Indians live a simple life ... But their greatest self-restraint pertains to theft; ... and that too among a people **who use unwritten laws only. ... Their simplicity is also proven in their laws and contracts, which arises from the fact that they are not litigious; for they do not have lawsuits over their pledges or deposits, or have need of witnesses or seals, but **trust** persons with whom they stake their interests; and further, they generally **leave unguarded what they have** at their homes.**

“Since they **esteem beauty, they practise everything that can beautify their appearance. Further, they **respect alike virtue and truth**; and therefore they give no precedence even to the age-old men, unless these are also superior in wisdom.”**

Said al-Andalusi, Spanish historian and astronomer (1068):

“The Indians, among all nations, through the centuries and since antiquity, were **the source of wisdom, justice and moderation**. They were a people endowed with virtues of self-control, creators of sublime thoughts, universal fables, rare inventions and remarkable conceptions.”

Al-Idrisi, Muslim geographer from Sicily (11th century)

“Indians are **naturally inclined to justice** and never depart from it in their actions. Their **good faith, honesty, and fidelity to their engagements** are well known, and they are so famous for these qualities that people flock to their country from every side.”

Le Gentil, French astronomer (1780):

“I doubt there exists anywhere on earth a place where one could be more at ease than in India, a country that offers so much attraction and charm, and whose people are at the same time so gentle. ... India is a country replete with magic and enchantments, as it were; **those who set foot there find themselves somehow metamorphosed.”**

John Malcolm, governor of Bombay (1813)

“The Hindoo inhabitants are a race of men, generally speaking, not more distinguished by their lofty stature ... than they are for some of the finest qualities of the mind; they are **brave, generous, and humane, and their truth is as remarkable as their courage.”**

Mountstuart Elphinstone, historian and first Governor of the Bombay Presidency (1841):

“ No set of people among the Hindus are so depraved as the dregs of our great towns. The villagers are everywhere **amiable, affectionate to their families, kind to their neighbours**. ... The Hindus are mild and gentle people. ... Their superiority in purity of manners is not flattering to our self-esteem.”

F. Max Müller, Sanskritist and philologist (1882):

“It is surely extremely strange that whenever, either in Greek, or in Chinese, or in Persian, or in Arab writings, we meet with any attempts at describing the distinguishing features in the national character of the Indians, **regard for truth and justice** should always be mentioned first.”