

FROM SELF TO SOCIETY: MORAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE ERA OF
GLOBALIZATION IN MODERN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction:

The rapid expansion of globalisation has redefined human interdependence, challenging traditional notions of morality and identity. Economic liberalisation, digital interconnectivity, and cultural mobility have fostered new forms of unity, but also new divisions and ethical dilemmas. As Amartya Sen observed, globalisation —si not a monolithic force of good or evil; its value depends on how it is managed.”³⁶Globalisation, as both a process and an ideology, has reshaped the human condition by transcending national, cultural, and economic boundaries. It has facilitated unprecedented exchange of ideas and resources while simultaneously intensifying ethical and social challenges. The phenomenon invites fundamental philosophical questions: What does it mean to be morally responsible in a world where actions in one region reverberate across the globe? How can moral values be sustained amid economic competition and cultural relativism?

In modern Indian thought, the concept of moral responsibility has been deeply intertwined with both spiritual realisation and social ethics. Thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, and B. R. Ambedkar envisioned human life as an ethical journey from self-purification to social transformation. Their ideas not only revitalised India’s moral imagination during colonial modernity but also anticipated the moral challenges of globalization, ecological imbalance, economic inequality, and moral alienation. Their reflections on duty (*dharma*), non-violence (*ahimsā*), universal love, and social justice provide a profound ethical foundation for addressing the moral crises of globalisation.

This paper explores moral responsibility through the lens of these thinkers, showing how their philosophies balance the inner moral self with the external social order. It argues that modern Indian thought articulates a moral vision capable of

³⁶ Sen, A. *Development as Freedom*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999, p. 13.

guiding global ethics, one that bridges individual consciousness with collective welfare.

Globalisation and the Question of Moral Responsibility:

Globalisation is not merely an economic or technological process; it is also an ethical condition that redefines human relationships.³⁷ It interlinks societies through communication, trade, migration, and culture, yet it also deepens inequality and alienation. From an ethical standpoint, globalisation demands a renewed sense of responsibility toward others, not only within one's community or nation but across the global human family. Western philosophical discourses, such as those of Kant or utilitarian ethics, tend to frame moral responsibility in terms of rational duty or consequence. In contrast, Indian philosophy situates responsibility within an ontological and spiritual framework, emphasising interdependence (*samsarga*) and cosmic order (*ta*). In this view, the individual's moral life is not separable from the collective moral order.³⁸

In the global era, the Indian ideal of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, —the world is one family”, acquires renewed relevance. It encourages a sense of universal moral belonging that transcends nationalistic and economic divisions. Modern Indian philosophers adapted this ancient insight to respond to modernity's ethical dilemmas. Gandhi's insistence on non-violence, Tagore's advocacy of universal humanism, Aurobindo's vision of integral evolution, and Ambedkar's struggle for equality all express the conviction that moral responsibility begins with self-awareness but must culminate in social and global justice.

Gandhi: Moral Responsibility as Self-Realisation and Service

Mahatma Gandhi's moral philosophy revolved around truth (*satya*) and non-violence (*ahimsā*) as universal principles of conduct. For Gandhi, moral responsibility begins with self-purification and culminates in service to humanity. He held that the root of moral disorder lay in human selfishness and the disconnection between one's

³⁷ Ibid., p. 88

³⁸ Radhakrishnan, S. *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*. London: Oxford University Press, 1940, p. 201.

inner conscience and outer action. His philosophy of *Satyāgraha*, the force of truth, embodied the idea that moral responsibility involves self-purification, courage, and service to humanity.³⁹

In *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, he writes:—To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself.”⁴⁰This insight reflects Gandhi’s conviction that self-realisation and moral duty are inseparable. Globalisation’s ethos of consumerism and competition contradicts this ethic of restraint. Gandhi critiqued modern civilisation as one that seeks to increase bodily comforts and it fails miserably in doing so.”⁴¹ His idea of trusteeship, that wealth should serve the welfare of all—offers a moral corrective to unrestrained capitalism:—A rich man should hold his wealth in trust for the welfare of all.”⁴²Gandhi’s ethical vision was deeply influenced by the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which teaches that one must perform one’s duty selflessly, without attachment to the fruits of action (*Gītā* 2:47). In a globalised world marked by inequality, Gandhi’s concept of *Sarvodaya* (the welfare of all) remains profoundly relevant. It demands that personal and national interests yield to a sense of universal moral duty. As he states in *Constructive Programme*:—The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”⁴³

Gandhi thus transforms morality from an abstract principle into a way of life. The self becomes the locus of moral experimentation, while society becomes the arena for ethical action. His emphasis on *swadeshi* (self-reliance) and non-possession counters the dehumanising tendencies of global consumerism, calling for a globalisation tempered by spiritual and ecological balance. Gandhi’s insistence on trusteeship and non-possession challenges the moral legitimacy of unrestrained capitalism and consumerism. As Gandhi (1945) wrote, —True economics stands for social justice; it promotes the good of all equally, including the weakest.” This

³⁹Gandhi, M. K. *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1993, p. 112

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 89

⁴¹Gandhi, M. K. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1997, p.37

⁴²Gandhi, M. K. *Towards New Horizons*. Bombay: Harijan Publications, 1945, p. 21

⁴³Gandhi, M. K. *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1956, p. 42

conception of moral responsibility extends from the individual's self-discipline to their duty toward humanity and nature. In today's globalised economy, Gandhi's emphasis on local self-reliance (*swadeshi*) and ethical restraint provides a counterpoint to global consumer culture. His ideal of the moral self as a servant of society offers a spiritual foundation for global responsibility.

Tagore: Universal Humanism and the Ethics of Harmony

Tagore envisioned moral responsibility as a form of spiritual humanism that transcends national boundaries. The poet-philosopher and Nobel laureate, articulated a vision of universal humanism that transcends nationalism and narrow identities. For Tagore (1917) moral responsibility arises from the recognition of the —divine in man” and the harmony between self, society, and nature. He believed that true freedom is moral and spiritual rather than political or economic. Tagore's critique of mechanistic modernity and industrial civilisation resonates with the ethical challenges of globalisation. In *Nationalism* (1917), he warned that blind pursuit of material progress could erode humanity's moral centre. For him, education and art were means of cultivating sympathetic imagination, the capacity to feel the suffering and joy of others.⁴⁴In *The Religion of Man*, he affirms:—The highest education is that which makes our life in harmony with all existence.”⁴⁵Tagore regarded moral responsibility as rooted in sympathetic imagination, the ability to perceive the divine unity of all beings. He warned against the mechanical modernity of the west, which he saw as producing —the cult of power and wealth.”⁴⁶ His critique of nationalism anticipated the moral dilemmas of globalisation: —When this organisation of politics and commerce... tries to crush the spirit, then it becomes a danger to humanity.”⁴⁷

In contrast, Tagore proposed a moral cosmopolitanism founded on love and freedom. His concept of *Visva-Bharati* embodied his vision of cultural synthesis.⁴⁸ He envisioned a world in which diverse cultures cooperate ethically, not competitively. Tagore's humanism was not merely idealistic; it had profound ethical implications for

⁴⁴Tagore, R. *The Creative Unity*. London: Macmillan, 1931, p. 95

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73

⁴⁶Tagore, R. *Nationalism*. New Delhi: Macmillan India, 2002, p. 42

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36

⁴⁸Tagore, R. *Visva-Bharati Lectures*. Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati Press, 1921, p. 10

global society. He argued that “freedom is not the absence of restraint, but the harmony between the individual and the universal.”⁴⁹ Thus, moral responsibility, for Tagore, involves aligning personal autonomy with the collective good. In a globalised world fragmented by cultural conflicts and ecological crises, Tagore’s moral vision reminds humanity of its shared spiritual origin. He saw art, education, and culture as vehicles for nurturing moral imagination a foundation for global ethics grounded in love, not law.

Globalisation often promotes uniformity and consumerism; Tagore’s humanism reminds us of the need for diversity and compassion in global ethics. His concept of Visva-Bharati embodied his belief that learning and culture should foster mutual understanding among peoples. As Tagore (1930) noted, “The unity we seek is not mechanical but spiritual; it is a bond of love.” In this sense, Tagore’s philosophy extends moral responsibility from the self to the world through aesthetic and spiritual awareness. The global citizen, for Tagore, is one who lives ethically in harmony with all beings, a vision that challenges both cultural domination and moral indifference in today’s global world.

Sri Aurobindo: Integral Evolution and the Ethical Transformation of Humanity

Sri Aurobindo’s philosophical synthesis offers a profound reinterpretation of moral responsibility considering human evolution. He perceived globalisation as part of the larger spiritual evolution of consciousness, where humanity is destined to realise its divine nature through integral development.⁵⁰ Aurobindo viewed ethics as an evolutionary process, one that begins with personal discipline and culminates in collective transformation. The moral task, therefore, is not merely to follow external codes but to manifest the divine will through self-transcendence. He wrote in *The Life Divine* that “man’s perfection cannot come by the law, but by self-exceeding.” In the context of globalisation, where technological progress often outpaces moral development, Aurobindo’s vision of integral evolution urges humanity to align material advancement with spiritual consciousness. He warned that without inner transformation; global unity would remain superficial and conflict-ridden. For

⁴⁹Tagore, R. *The Religion of Man*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930, p. 55

⁵⁰Aurobindo, S. *The Life Divine*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2005, p. 163

Aurobindo, moral responsibility involves participating consciously in the evolution of the world, transforming ego-based existence into a life of collective harmony. His idea of supramental transformation symbolises an ethical ascent from the fragmented self to a global consciousness that recognises the divine unity of all beings. This vision offers a philosophical foundation for sustainable and compassionate globalisation.

B. R. Ambedkar: Social Justice and Moral Responsibility in a Global Context

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar redefined moral responsibility in the context of social justice and equality. For him, ethics was inseparable from the structure of society. He insisted that morality must challenge oppression, not legitimise it. Ambedkar declared: —The religion which does not recognise the equality of man and woman is not the religion for mankind.”⁵¹ Ambedkar’s moral philosophy confronted the dehumanising effects of caste, patriarchy, and economic exploitation. While globalisation has created new opportunities, it has also deepened structural inequalities, echoing Ambedkar’s warning that social order without moral justice is inherently unstable. He wrote: —Democracy is not merely a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.”⁵² For Ambedkar, fraternity, the moral relation among equals, was the cornerstone of a just society. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, he explains that true morality arises from compassion and reason, not tradition: —Religion must relate to the practical affairs of man, to make the world better and happier.”⁵³ Ambedkar’s ethical framework directly engages with globalisation’s contradictions. Economic integration without moral justice, he warned, results in new forms of enslavement. His advocacy of liberty, equality, and fraternity thus anticipates a global moral democracy, where justice transcends national and caste barriers. In global ethics, Ambedkar’s legacy teaches that moral responsibility must be institutional as well as individual, rooted in social structures that uphold dignity for all.

⁵¹Ambedkar, B. R. *Who Were the Shudras?* Mumbai: Thacker & Company, 2014, p. 47

⁵²Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste*. New Delhi: Arnold Publishers, 1994, p. 58

⁵³Ambedkar, B. R. *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2013, p. 112

The architect of the Indian Constitution, redefined moral responsibility in terms of social justice, equality, and human dignity. For him, moral responsibility entails dismantling structures of oppression, especially caste, class, and gender hierarchies, that deny human equality. While globalisation has connected markets and information, it has also exacerbated inequalities, making Ambedkar's ethical insights profoundly relevant. He argued that true morality arises from liberty, equality, and fraternity, values he derived from both Enlightenment thought and the Buddhist ethical ideal of compassion (*karuṇā*). Ambedkar's embrace of Buddhism in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* reflected his conviction that moral responsibility is not abstract but social: it demands action to eradicate suffering and injustice. He wrote that —society should be based on reason, not on tradition; it should give moral and spiritual freedom to all.”⁵⁴ In the globalised world, where economic structures often replicate historical injustices, Ambedkar's moral philosophy calls for an ethics of responsibility toward the oppressed. His vision of democracy as —a mode of associated living”⁵⁵ implies a moral community bound by empathy and justice, an ideal essential for global ethics today.

Ethical Challenges of Globalisation: The Indian Response

Globalisation has created paradoxes of progress: while it promises freedom and connectivity, it has generated alienation, environmental degradation, and cultural homogenisation.⁵⁶ These issues expose a moral deficit in global structures, demanding a reorientation of ethical consciousness. Modern Indian thinkers respond to these challenges by reasserting the primacy of moral and spiritual values over material accumulation. Gandhi critiques consumerism, Tagore critiques nationalism, Aurobindo critiques mechanistic civilisation, and Ambedkar critiques social inequality. Collectively, they propose an ethics of interconnectedness grounded in compassion, duty, and respect for diversity.

From the Gandhian perspective, economic justice and ecological balance form the basis of moral responsibility. Tagore's perspective highlights cultural

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 121

⁵⁵ Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste*. New Delhi: Arnold Publishers, 1994, p. 211

⁵⁶ Appadurai, A. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 33

pluralism and universal humanism as antidotes to global alienation. Aurobindo's philosophy envisions a moral-spiritual evolution toward collective consciousness, and Ambedkar's democratic ethics emphasise equality and human dignity as the foundation of global morality. These perspectives converge on a central insight: that moral responsibility is not limited to national or personal domains but extends to all humanity and the planet. The Indian response to globalisation is thus not isolationist but transformative, seeking to humanise global systems through ethical and spiritual renewal.

From Self to Society: The Evolution of Moral Consciousness

In a moral sense, globalisation is incomplete without the inner transformation. As Gandhi remarked, —You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”⁵⁷ Tagore expressed a similar ideal: —The great world is waiting to be linked with us in truth.”⁵⁸ Ambedkar concluded that —The Buddha's religion is morality, and morality is social.”⁵⁹ Thus, Indian philosophy conceives global ethics not as an external code but as a spiritual practice, an evolution from the purified self to the just society. The movement —from self to society” symbolises the ethical journey envisioned by modern Indian thought. It begins with self-discipline and ends with social commitment. The self, in Indian philosophy, is not an isolated entity but a participant in the universal order. As the *Upaniṣads* proclaim, —He who sees all beings in his self, and his self in all beings, never hates” (*Iśa Upaniṣad*, verse 6).

Gandhi translated this spiritual insight into moral action; Tagore expressed it through art and education; Aurobindo envisioned it as spiritual evolution; and Ambedkar realised it through social justice. Each thinker underscores that personal enlightenment must lead to collective welfare, an idea that can anchor moral responsibility in the age of globalisation. Globalisation often emphasises competition and individual success; modern Indian thought calls for cooperation and compassion.

⁵⁷Gandhi, M. K. *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1993, p. 241

⁵⁸Tagore, R. *The Religion of Man*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930, p. 61

⁵⁹Ambedkar, B. R. *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2013, p. 132

The ethical movement from self to society thus represents both an inward and outward transformation, an integration of consciousness and conduct.

Relevance for Contemporary Global Ethics:

Globalisation has made the world materially interconnected but morally fragmented. The philosophies of Gandhi, Tagore, and Ambedkar offer ethical correctives to this fragmentation. Their teachings advocate a balance between self, society, and nature, equilibrium necessary for sustainable globalisation. Gandhi's trusteeship proposes a model of ethical economics; Tagore's universalism calls for a culture of empathy; Aurobindo's vision of divine evolution, Ambedkar's democracy demands institutions of justice. Together, they redefine moral responsibility in global terms:

- For Gandhi, globalisation without moral restraint leads to violence against humanity and nature.
- For Tagore, globalisation without love leads to alienation.
- For Sri Aurobindo, globalisation without divine evolution leads to moral, spiritual, and cultural degeneration.
- For Ambedkar, globalisation without justice perpetuates inequality.

Their collective vision insists that technological progress must be guided by ethical progress. In their synthesis lies the foundation of a global *dharma* moral order that unites the personal and the planetary. In the 21st century, global issues such as climate change, economic disparity, refugee crises, and cultural intolerance demand a moral reawakening. Indian philosophy offers principles, *ahimsā*, *dharma*, *karuṇā*, and *sarvodaya*, that can guide global ethics toward sustainability and justice.⁶⁰ The challenge is to cultivate global citizens who act responsibly toward humanity and the environment. Education, policy, and technology must embody moral purpose. As Gandhi emphasised, “The end is in the means,” implying that ethical methods are integral to global progress. Similarly, Tagore's call for “creative unity,” Aurobindo's vision of divine evolution and Ambedkar's democratic morality

⁶⁰Chakrabarty, D. *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2021, p. 57

all converge in advocating ethical universality with cultural rootedness. By reinterpreting these insights, globalisation can become not a force of exploitation but of moral integration, where human interdependence fosters empathy rather than competition. The Indian philosophical heritage thus offers both critique and guidance for a morally responsible global order.

Response to Critical Objections:

Let us discuss about some key critical questions on moral responsibility and Global Ethics.

1. How can focusing on collective moral duties lead to the loss of individual rights in practice? It can be recognised that an excessive emphasis on collective duties may, in practice, marginalise individual rights. However, the paper argues that modern Indian thinkers do not advocate the erasure of individuality. Rather, *dharma* is understood as ethically grounded responsibility that safeguards human dignity. Ambedkar, in particular, warned that when duty is detached from equality and justice, it becomes a tool of oppression. Hence, the potential loss of individual rights is not inherent in duty-based ethics but results from its misuse without moral conscience and constitutional safeguards.
2. What is the response to critics who argue that Indian ethical traditions are too culturally specific to be relevant for global ethics? This contends that while Indian ethical traditions are culturally rooted, their core moral values, compassion, interdependence, justice, and respect for life, are universal in scope. Gandhi's *ahimsā*, Tagore's universal humanism, Aurobindo's integral consciousness, and Ambedkar's democratic morality address global concerns such as violence, alienation, inequality, and ecological crisis. Far from being parochial, these traditions offer ethically resonant insights applicable to global moral discourse.
3. Has Western ethics also developed ideas of relationships and duties, thereby challenging a sharp contrast between traditions? Like Indian ethical traditions, Western ethical traditions also contain strong conceptions of duty, responsibility, and relationality, evident in Kantian moral obligation,

Aristotelian virtue ethics, and contemporary care ethics. The distinction between Western and Indian ethics is therefore one of emphasis rather than absolute opposition, allowing for meaningful dialogue and convergence in global ethics.

4. Does individual moral responsibility ignore the structural inequalities caused by globalization? Individual moral responsibility must be complemented by structural and institutional reform. Drawing particularly on Ambedkar, the paper emphasises that ethics cannot be separated from social justice. Gandhi's idea of trusteeship, Tagore's critique of power, and Ambedkar's insistence on constitutional morality collectively show that moral responsibility includes transforming unjust economic and social structures produced by globalisation.
5. Is it true that promoting traditional values may slow progress in a fast-changing global world? Tradition, as interpreted by these thinkers, is dynamic rather than static. Gandhi creatively reinterpreted ancient values for modern political life; Tagore critiqued tradition when it stifled freedom; Aurobindo viewed tradition as evolving consciousness; and Ambedkar rejected traditions that violated equality. Traditional values, when critically examined, can guide ethical adaptability rather than hinder progress.
6. Can spirituality and compassion be impractical in addressing urgent global ethical issues? Spirituality and compassion are presented not as abstract ideals but as practical moral foundations for ethical action. Gandhi's non-violence, Ambedkar's compassion-based social reform, Tagore's humanistic education, and Aurobindo's integral ethics demonstrate that spiritual values can effectively guide responses to urgent global crises. Without moral depth, technological and economic solutions risk becoming ethically hollow.

Conclusion:

Modern Indian philosophy articulates a moral vision that bridges the self and society, the local and the global. In the face of globalisation's moral vacuum, Gandhi, Tagore, Aurobindo and Ambedkar offer complementary pathways toward ethical renewal. Gandhi teaches self-restraint and service; Tagore inspires human unity through art and empathy; Aurobindo contends on the inner evolution of

consciousness which is the foundation of ethics; Ambedkar insists on justice and equality as the basis of moral order. Their combined legacy advocates that moral responsibility is not merely a matter of individual conscience but of collective transformation. To globalise responsibly is to spiritualise progress to ensure that the expansion of power is matched by the expansion of compassion. As the world confronts new ethical challenges, the Indian vision of moral responsibility, moving from self to society, remains a beacon of hope for a just and harmonious global civilisation.

Globalisation has expanded the material boundaries of human life but contracted its moral horizons. In confronting this paradox, modern Indian thought provides an invaluable ethical compass. Gandhi's non-violence, Tagore's universal humanism, Aurobindo's integral evolution, and Ambedkar's social justice together form a composite vision of moral responsibility that begins with self-realisation and culminates in global harmony. The journey from self to society, as conceived by these thinkers, transcends individual morality to embrace collective and planetary well-being. Their ideas remind us that moral responsibility in a globalised world is not optional but essential, anchored in the recognition of our shared humanity. By integrating ethical self-awareness with social and ecological justice, the modern Indian perspective transforms globalisation from a merely economic phenomenon into a moral project, a movement toward a compassionate and sustainable civilisation.