

"A man is
great by
deeds, not by
birth"

-Chanakya

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Working Paper

IIMK/WPS/342/ECO/2019/18

JUNE 2019

How effective is Theory Based Learning of Ethics in India?

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How effective is Theory Based Learning of Ethics in India?*

Abstract:

The absence of ethics or the inculcation of ethics among the people is a matter of serious concern. We investigated into the role of religion-teaching school in incorporating ethics through an experiment. We found that the attitude to cheating in the examination is no different for students in a religion-teaching school compared to a regular school. We analysed this situation with respect to different perspective and concluded it to be the indicative of the failure of inculcation of ethics through teaching on religion. Our result is bolstered from the fact that an estimated 30% of the students were actually found to be cheating in the examination using the method of ransomised response. The presence of a significant proportion of cheaters demonstrates that the students' answers could be considered realistic rather than hypothetical. The implication of our result is much greater than this observation. Balagangadhara (1994) divided the human cultures into two classes of "Religious (Theory-driven) and "non-Religious (Empirics-driven)". The ethics must be taught in two different ways for these two cultures. Although a theoretical way of teaching ethics may help for a Theory-driven culture, it would not help for an Empirics-driven culture. India is noted as a non-Religious culture by Balagangadhara and this illustrates the validity of his theory to explain the failure of a theory-driven ethics education in India.

Keywords: Culture, Management, Ethics, Social Norm, Religion, Education.

* **Disclaimer:** This article has been written in good faith on the basis of the information available in the public domain. The views and opinions expressed in this article are exclusively of the author and not of Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

1 Introduction

Inculcation of ethical behavior among the empowered class is a perennial problem. Many ethical issues come up regularly as a societal or management related problem. Before dealing with this issue, first ponder over the definition of ethics and ethical behavior.

What kinds of conducts are considered socially acceptable? The subject of Ethics defines them. The conducts approved by the written guidelines of ethics are considered ethical. However, this definition of socially acceptable behavior is not a universal one. Balagangadhara (2012) explained how many cultures may not have the idea of ethics as we know it in Western education. Therefore, for them, socially acceptable conduct does not come from any book based written understanding. The word "ethical" may not be appropriate for them to denote social acceptance. A more generalized definition of ethical domain was provided by Balagangadhara (2012). However, we continue to define the word ethical as pertaining to socially acceptable.

Coming back to our original point, how important are the failures of ethical behaviour to the society at large? What are the kinds of problems attributed to failure in ethical conduct? I offer a range of examples from various management related issues.

In 2007-08, a massive financial sector failure, known as Subprime Crisis happened. In this unprecedented problem of the financial sector, most of the developed nations were affected as many mortgages held by the financial institutions were found to be overvalued. The total amount of the loss was estimated at a few trillion dollars, as per International Monetary Fund (2009). Even though ethical failure and lack of integrity may not be the sole cause, it is considered as one of the prime causes of this crisis (Jennings, 2008; Gilbert, 2011).

How strong was the concern about the lack of ethical conduct? The economists, as a community, were blamed for their general failure to predict the crisis and suggest change in Institutional structure. After the incidence of the subprime crisis, the American Economic Association, one of the most premier societies for the Economists, adopted a mandatory disclosure policy for publication of articles in their journals. They have to abide by a disclosure policy that explicitly states that the contributor is free from any financial or even non-financial obligations that can potentially be obstructive to research ethics.

The concern for lack of ethical responsibility in the political system is a paramount one. Corruption is a recurrent issue in Indian politics. Often people consider moralistic preaching as a solution to corruption in politics. In India, corruption is perceived as a quite common phenomenon. Movements against corruption too are quite common. However, what is at the root of the corruption could be a fairly complicated proposition. The simplest view would be that corruption happens because people are corrupt. Indeed this view may be challenged as the corrupt people deal between themselves in an ethical manner. Corruption can be a compound effect of institutional rigidity, legal ineffectiveness, detachment of laws from cultural context and many other such issues (Balagangadhara, 2012). In any case, there is no denying of the idea that the corrupt people may have a different notion of ethics than the law-makers.

Often anti-corruption moralism is deemed as an antidote to corruption. Researchers found that moralism affects the anti-corruption cause in India, if anything (Riley & Roy, 2016). Moralism may be the final solution of the problem as it was found in India for decades. The issues are much deeper than what a moral crusader against corruption insinuates. Still, people associate religious teaching as the solution to the problem of corruption, as they equate religious teaching to moralism. Is it the right avenue to tackle corruption?

In essence, the hypothesis we would like to test is whether teaching on religion has any impact on ethics as an immediate effect. Arguably an exhaustive set of one's ethical understanding is difficult. We focused on a narrower aspect – whether application of ethics related to the schooling is found or not.

We collected data from a religious teaching school in a religious community in South India. Religion is a sensible topic in India to be discussed. Therefore, we kept the location of the school and the name of the community anonymous. We asked the students questions regarding their attitude to ethical code of conduct. In the Section 2, we present our experiment and discuss our result. In Section 3, we analysed the implications of our experiment in the light of the social norms across cultures. Section 4 concludes our discussion with analysis of our result using the framework of Balagangadhara (1994).

2 Experiment

We visited a religion-teaching school of a religious community. There were twelve class levels from Standard one to twelve with each academic year beginning in June and ending in April for a few weeks of summer vacation. Headmaster was in charge of the academic responsibilities of the students in the religion-teaching school along with a spiritual advisor. Students were promoted from one class to the next based on their performance in written exams where questions would be based on the textbooks for the particular class levels. Exam also included questions on general awareness about the religion, the religious scripture and the prayers which are to be memorized and reproduced on the exam sheets. Each class would have a class teacher who takes classes for the students based on the prescribed textbook. After completing each chapter, there could be assignments or tests also depending on the preferences of the teacher. Students get certificates for their performance after completion of the tenth and the twelfth standards. While these certificates are academically not valued, nevertheless they may have social recognition within the community.

The Questionnaire

We have offered a written questionnaire to 55 students, 25 boys and 30 girls, between the ages of 9 and 17. The average age was 13.4 years. The questionnaire asked the following questions:

1. Do you feel alienated when everyone plays a game in class and you are not part of it?
2. Would you mind taking note of answers off a sheet of a neighbour which has fallen below your desk during the course of an exam?
3. Will you help your friend in need in an exam hall by showing your answer sheet?
4. The last question in the exam is very tough and everyone is looking at the neighbours answer sheet for the answer. Will you do the same?
5. You wrote exam on your own but almost half of the class copied. You are angry. Will you report the same to your teacher?
6. If your parents hadn't forced you to come to class, would you have attended it?
7. Your friend says that the activities in classes like quizzes, assignments and projects etc are a waste of time. Do you agree with him?
8. What do you think is the reason behind copying in exams?
 - a. Students want to get more marks in the exam

b. Students want to please own parents and teachers

c. Students won't look cool if s/he doesn't copy

There were five choices for all answers: “Always”, “Often”, “Sometimes”, “Rarely” or “Never”. All these questions were asked in the context of their regular school as well as this religion-teaching school.

Insert Table 1 Here

Table 1 presents the compilation of the answers. To say the least, the answers show that the students were equally respectful or equally disrespectful towards the examination of the regular school and its counterpart in the religion-teaching school. In fact, for many questions, the numbers suggest that students are to some extent, more favourable to cheating in the religion-teaching school. For example, to the second question, 53 out of 55 students responded that they would either sometimes mind or rarely or never mind to taking note of answers off a sheet of a neighbour which had fallen below their desk during the course of an exam, in a regular school. Among these 53, 39 students would never mind to taking note of answers off a sheet of a neighbour. This demonstrates the extent of moral support for cheating in a regular school. Now, in case of religion-teaching school, again 53 out of 55 students responded that they would either sometimes mind or rarely or never mind to taking note of answers off a sheet of a neighbour which had fallen below their desk during the course of an exam. However, this time 44 students would never mind to taking note of answers off a sheet of a neighbour. This is not an atypical example but representative of the responses for all the questions. Other questions show the same pattern.

The questionnaire did not ask about a person’s attitude to cheating but asked the students about the collective attitude to cheating. This is the generally accepted way of asking questions about so-called “unethical” activities to a sub-group. Very few may be forthcoming about their support or participation to these activities. However, they may not face any similar problem to declare the collective attitude to these activities without personally acknowledging any involvement.

Proportion of Cheaters

Were all these questions about cheating purely hypothetical for the surveyed students? How commonplace was cheating in an examination for these questions? If there were nobody who actually cheated among the surveyed students then the answers may not be exactly considered as demonstrative of real life actions. On the other hand, if a good proportion of students were actually cheating in the examination, the responses may be considered quite authentic.

Randomised response technique is an appropriate strategy in this case to estimate the proportion of cheaters in the examination without actually revealing the identity of those cheaters. This technique is widely used in these kinds of situations. One recent use can be found in Mortaz Hejri (2013). As per the requirement of this technique, we asked the students to offer a response of Yes or No to a question. If on tossing a coin, a head appears then the student may answer the question, “Is your birthdate an even number?” On the other scenario of having a tail, s/he may answer her/his response to the question, “Do you cheat in the exam?” We received 22 responses of “Yes” and 33 responses of “No”. We made a statistical analysis (see Appendix for the calculations) to estimate the proportion of cheating students at 30%, a significant proportion.

The presence of a good 30% of self-confessed cheaters demonstrates that the answers to the question may be quite representative of real life understanding of the students. The students, we

repeat, generally supported cheating in the examination of the religion-teaching school more than cheating in the regular school.

3 Religion, Ethics and Relative Ethics

Our experiment demonstrates that violation of the ethical norm of no cheating is quite common among students of a religious school. What kind of ethical violation does it point out to? Which institution is exactly responsible for this problem? We will delve into discussion of this topic.

What is the purpose of teaching of religion? Religions claim that the degree of religiosity is generally associated with higher ethical attitudes. Different studies also support this claim. Conroy and Emerson (2004) stated that religiosity and ethical behavior are strongly correlated. They also cited other papers such as Allmon, Page, & Roberts (2000) and Barnett, Bass & Brown (1996) which says that religiosity and cheating in the examination are negatively associated. However, we are left with more questions even if these findings are correct.

Does teaching of religion create ethics? Where does exactly the line of demarcation between idealism, religiosity and ethical behavior lie? Is the answer to the latter question is not known then we may not gain much by associating ethics with religiosity. We may actually end up with the wrong conclusion that teaching of religion helps ethics. We are particularly focused on the effect of teaching of religion on ethics and we found out that the students are not improving their ethics in the religion-teaching school—a conclusion that may seem to go against the conclusion from the above studies of Conroy and Emerson (2004), Allmon et al (2000) and Barnett et al (1996). We clarify here that we may not be contradicting their conclusion as we are not investigating into the religiosity of individual subjects. It is not also our goal to define religiosity in this paper.

The other big question comes from the choice of subjects. All the three above studies were done in the United States society. Even if one may want to believe that teaching of religion may help one better one's ethics, we would post the counter question. And, is this a universal phenomenon? It is universal if we believe that expressions of religiosity are a cultural universal phenomenon or religion is a cultural universal phenomenon. Both of these may not be so. Balagangadhara (1994) has methodically demolished the claim of religion as a cultural universal or a ubiquitous human experience. Moreover, India and the West stand at diametrically opposite ends as far as the classification of cultures by Balagangadhara (1994) is concerned. Therefore, it makes sense to gather sampling from India.

Ethics means a sense of what is desirable or expected of the learner. An ethics course will create respect for the code of conduct expected of someone. In our experiment, we found that the students' attitude to cheating which was considered as a breach of ethics, was no different in a religion-teaching school as opposed to a regular school. The violation of ethics was no different for students in a religion-teaching school which was supposed to improve ethics. There was, however, one crucial difference between two schools. Good performance in the regular school is quite important for future career prospects while good performance in the religion-teaching school is almost not important enough for career prospects.

Our claim is that when survival of a person is not at stake, it can be considered a stronger violation in an ethical domain if someone violates what her ethical domain expects from her. We support our claim by drawing from an example from the Indian culture.

If we look back to the Indian culture, one element of approved conduct was to take food cooked by own *jati* (endogamous community). However, in a time of urgency or tour, taking food of a different *jati* was permitted. This was narrated by eminent scholar Dharampal (Alvares, 2000):

“Around 1960, I was travelling from Gwalior to Delhi by a day train, a 6 or 7 hour journey in a 3rd class compartment when I met a group of people and I think in a way that meeting gave me a view of India, the larger India. The train was crowded. Some people however made a place for me. And there was this group of people, about twelve of them, some three or four women and seven or eight men. I asked them where they were coming from. They said that they had been on a pilgrimage, three months long, up to Rameshwaram, among other places. They came from two different villages north of Lucknow. They had various bundles of things and some earthen pots with them.

I asked, what did they have in those pots. They said that they had taken their own food from home. They had taken all the necessities for their food-atta, ghee, sugar - with them, and some amounts of these were still left over. The women didn't seem to mind much people trampling over them in the crowded compartment, but they did feel unhappy if someone touched their bundles and pots of food with their feet.

And then I said they must all be from one *jati*, from a single caste group. They said, 'No, no! We are not from one *jati*, we are from several *jatis*.' I said, how could that be? They said that there was no *jati* on a *yatra*-not on a pilgrimage. I didn't know that. I was around 38 years old, and like many others in this country who know little about the ways of the ordinary Indian-the peasants, artisans and other village folks.”

This example illustrates our claim that some actions that were deemed as outside the realm of the ethical domain, was considered permissible when someone faced a challenging situation in terms of survival. If we accept this attitude in a generalised manner and view the attitude of the students of our experiment, we arrive at an interesting perspective.

For the students, we can consider that doing well in the regular school examination, is a matter of survival, career wise. Therefore, we may view their supportive attitude to cheating in case of a regular school with some leniency for being termed as unethical. However, we cannot consider their attitude to cheating in case of a religion-teaching school in the same light. Since there was no survival involved, career wise or else wise, in their performance at the religion-teaching school, we can conclude that their supportive attitude to cheating in the religion-teaching school was more unethical than the counterpart in the regular school.

4 Concluding Discussions

Our observation was interesting. How exactly do we make sense of our experiment? To make sense of this observation, we invoke the theory offered by Balagangadhara (1994) who has provided a framework called Comparative Science of Cultures. This framework demarcates the world cultures into two categories. The first set of cultures may be called Theory-driven or Religious cultures while the second set of cultures are called Empirics-driven or Secular cultures.

The idea of ethics can also differ between the cultures. For a religious culture, there will be some written norms as ethical standards which will be transmitted as ethics—the codified ethical norms—to people. However, the same thing cannot be told about a non-religious culture. In the latter

scenario, no written absolute version of ethical standard may exist but the social conducts may help one learn the expectations of the society from her/him. These unwritten expectations, also may be called social norms, form an “equivalent” of ethics in this particular society. It may not be proper to call them as ethics, however, we used the terms ethics rather fluid manner. For all kinds of societies, the ethical domain is referred as ethics as was done in Balagangadhara (2012).

The education system of a religious society may demand teaching of ethics as a theory. While it may be perfectly fine for such a society, it may not have much relevance for a non-religious social norm-based society. The ethics course would be redundant in that case. For them, the best way to teach ethics is to stay in an environment with the “appropriate” social norms being observed. This will imbibe in them those social norms without being explicitly taught.

Now, the present education system of India was largely, if not entirely, shaped by the British colonisers. India had own education system for all people of society. This education system did not survive during the British rule (Dharampal, 1983). The present education system is the continuation of the system introduced by the British. Naturally, this system is the shadow of the British education system. The British society, as per Balagangadhara’s framework, is religious society, for which a theory-driven teaching of the ethics works. Consequently, theory-based ethics course is taught from pre-school to the post-graduate curriculum of the business school.

The question is: How effective is theory-based ethics course for Indian society? We could potentially go to an ethics course taught in a post-graduate curriculum and analyse the impact of the course on the ethical standards of the students taught. Many may not be convinced if we reported the failure of the ethics course with the argument that ethics is mostly formed in a younger age. We could have actually relooked into the ethics course taught in a school but any failure of that course is not easily identifiable. Multiple courses may shape a student’s perspective. Moreover, the race to career begins at the school level for most Indian students. Therefore, it is quite difficult to prove the futility of a regular ethics course.

Our experiment was done in a different setting. The students were asked about their attitude to cheating—an activity which may not lie in the ethical domain. We found no support for the hypothesis that religious teaching improves the student’s ethics. As religion-teaching school may have nothing to do with one’s career, it makes our conclusion stronger. The empirical observation, empowered by Balagandhara’s theory, indicates that any theoretical ethics course would not bear much fruit in Indian society.

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Table 1: Attitude of Student Towards Examination in Regular School vis-à-vis in Religion-teaching school

Sl. No	Questions	In Regular School					In Religion-teaching School				
		Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Always	Many times	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1	Do you feel alienated when everyone plays a game in class and you are not part of it?	2	6	20	7	20	2		8	10	35
2	Would you mind taking note of answers off a sheet of a neighbour which has fallen below your desk during the course of an exam?	1	1	6	8	39	1	1	5	4	44
3	Will you help your friend in need in an exam hall by showing your answer sheet?	3	3	14	12	22	5	2	12	11	24

4	The last question in the exam is very tough and everyone is looking at the neighbours answer sheet for the answer. Will you do the same?	1	5	11	11	27	1	5	10	9	30
5	You wrote exam on your own but almost half of the class copied. You are angry. Will you report the same to your teacher?	7	5	13	8	21	8	4	15	2	24
6	If your parents hadn't forced you to come to class, would you have attended it?	35	2	8	3	6	34	5	5	4	5
7	Your friend says that the activities in classes like quizzes, assignments and projects etc are a waste of time. Do you agree with him?	1	5	4	1	43	1	3	5	1	42
8	What do you think is the reason behind copying in exams ?										
	a. Students want to get more marks in the exam	24	8	9	3	11	22	8	7	6	11
	b. Students want to please own parents and teachers	6	5	18	15	11	6	5	15	12	16
	c. Students won't look cool if s/he doesn't copy		2	5	5	43		2	5	7	41

The sample size is 55 (25 boys and 30 girls). The age ranges between 9 and 17 with an average age of 13.4 years.

Appendix: Estimation of Proportion of Cheaters

Let there be N students among whom p proportion are cheaters, where p lies between zero and one. We made three specific assumptions.

The first assumption is that the coin is a fair coin which roughly offers head half of the time. The second is that cheating is independent with the outcome of the toss. The third assumption is that half of the people have their birthdays in even days and this event is independent of the coin toss. All assumptions are rather innocuous and standard in estimation problems.

Number of people saying "Yes" could come from two groups —the first having a Head in the toss and the second having a Tail in the toss. The laws of the conditional probability dictate,

$$P(\text{Yes}) = P(\text{Yes/Head}) \times P(\text{Head}) + P(\text{Yes/Tail}) \times P(\text{Tail}) = 0.5 \times 0.5 + p \times 0.5$$

Now, only 22 out 55 students offered the response "Yes" which means that the probability of people saying "Yes" can be estimated at 0.4. Therefore, from the above equation, we can estimate p at 30%.

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