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**Norms and Exemplars: A Different Mode of Politicization of Life in
Ancient Texts and Creation Myths**

ABSTRACT

India's rich tradition of sacred texts, including creation myths in Markandeya Purana, is often celebrated for shaping societal norms and governance in ancient India. While these texts are frequently referenced in contemporary discourse as defining the norms of a historical era, their intricate and nuanced nature often goes unquestioned. This paper critically examines the extent of their influence on normative frameworks, analyzing their structure and role in addressing political, social, and ethical dimensions of life. Through a close reading, it uncovers their principles, ideologies, and strategies for politicizing and regulating human

behavior. Furthermore, it explores how these texts conceptualized governance, societal hierarchy, and moral obligations, situating them within broader frameworks of power and authority. By tracing their historical impact and contemporary relevance, this study underscores their enduring legacy in shaping norms and values within the Indian context.

Keywords: Hierarchy, Ideology, Norms, Politicization and Sacred Texts

Every society is structured around differences, organized both hierarchically and horizontally. A sovereign or state governs its citizens based on principles of equality and universality, where differences are theoretically absent. However, in practice, citizens are always differentiated by the privileges they are granted or denied. Various norms—ranging from legal to medical—regulate these differences to facilitate governance. These norms subtly shape individuals' identities, often without their awareness, while categorizing certain groups as anti-social and others as aligned with governance. However, the processes of inclusion and exclusion do not operate uniformly across societies. Their functioning largely depends on how the existing differences within a societal structure are addressed.

To elucidate the point, let us examine Turner's argument on structure and anti-structure, or counter-structure. Turner posits that social transformation

necessitates the coexistence of structure and a corresponding anti-structure within a society. In anthropology, this concept is described in three stages: segregation, liminality, and reincorporation. These stages are best understood through the lens of initiation rituals.

In such rituals, an individual is first segregated from the societal structure and removed from the conventional formulations of the society. The final stage, reincorporation, involves reintegrating the individual into the community, typically with a status that differs—usually higher—from their previous position. However, the focus here is on the intermediate stage: liminality.

Liminality represents the phase between two points of social transformation, a state that is betwixt and between. During this period, the vertical structures of society are dissolved, creating a temporary state of homogenization. This liminal state not only allows an individual to reflect on their prior societal structure but also to envision the structure they are about to enter.

Liminality often serves as the precursor to anti-structure. Turner observes that in India, structure and anti-structure coexist without converging, thereby reinforcing each other's distinctiveness. One example he provides is the relationship between *Jangama* and *Sthavara*. These concepts belong to the Virasaiva community of Karnataka, which emerged as a departure from the

mainstream Brahmanical tradition. The name of the community derives from Lord Shiva, and it adheres to a monotheistic belief system.

Turner's example, drawn from A. K. Ramanujan's paper, *Structure and Anti-Structure: A Virasaiva Example*, highlights *Jangama* as representing anti-structure in contrast to *Sthavara*, illustrating the dynamic interplay between the two within the Virasaiva tradition.

Jangama signifies movement and Sthavara that which does not move. Turner takes up the project of reading the poetry of Virasaiva community called Vachanas (literally Vachana is poetry in prosaic language) in terms of binary opposites. Following is the vachana that Turner takes up for analysis,

The rich

will make temples for Siva

What shall I,

a poor man,

do?

My legs are pillars,

the body the shrine,

the head a cupola

of gold.....

...but the moving ever shall stay (Basava, trans. Ramanujan 1973)

The above vachana that Turner examines deals with being versus making: sthavara (something that is in station), as Turner explains, denotes “status, estate” and is therefore being (what is), while jangama refers to “moving... coming and going” and thus indicates process, becoming, and making. Sthavara signifies the authority that existed in society, whereas jangama represents a condition of freedom from the shackles of the structure. The vachana conveys the same meaning and operates through the juxtaposition of opposites. However, the poem presents a highly generalized interpretation of jangama. Jangama was not an example of free movement. Even jangama was hierarchically structured based on the jati from which a person was converted. Hence, it is difficult to view jangama as an anti-structure generated by the forces of the structure (sthavara) in the Indian context.

Anti-structure relies on the generative functions of structure, which often work through strict binary distinctions. However, some ancient Indian texts do not adhere to such rigid binary differences. This does not imply the absence of hierarchical distinctions but rather suggests that hierarchies in these texts were

contextual and flexible. Turner appears to interpret the differences present in ancient India through the lens of systemic binaries. Let us examine how these differences were articulated in some representative texts of ancient India.

The performative tradition of ancient India is articulated through texts, which functioned as normative frameworks guiding societal practices. Rather than analysing these texts in their entirety as comprehensive representations of ancient Indian culture, it is useful to focus on specific examples. Two such texts are Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and *Manusmriti*.

Both texts start by presenting rigid classifications of various aspects of life, serving as structured frameworks to guide human behavior. However, they do not conclude by rigidly enforcing these classifications as immutable norms. Instead, these texts demonstrate a dynamic understanding of life and its complexities. For example, the *Manusmriti* meticulously outlines the stages of a person's life, offering detailed descriptions of prescribed actions and responsibilities at each stage. These actions are not static or absolute but are contextualized within the broader societal and temporal framework. Each prescribed action often gives rise to subsequent actions, which either complement or modify the primary action based on situational variables. This fluidity suggests an adaptive system, where the classifications act as guiding principles rather than strict, universal mandates. By acknowledging the variability of human

circumstances, these texts reveal an intricate interplay between structure and flexibility, aiming to balance normative prescriptions with practical applicability. Even in the context of punishment, differences are not arbitrarily homogenized. The quantum of punishment is not determined solely by the nature of the transgression but also depends on the *jati* (caste) of the offender. For example, *Arthashastra* provides an extensive list of varied corporeal punishments for the same offense, differentiated by the offender's *varna*. This meticulous classification of punishments reflects an effort to preserve heterogeneity and context-specificity rather than enforcing a homogenized standard.

The *varna* system in India is traditionally divided into four categories: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. At first glance, this division appears to be a rigid structuring of society into distinct groups, each governed by its own set of rules. Endogamy, or marriage within the same *varna*, seems to reinforce this rigidity. However, historical evidence, particularly from the *Arthashastra*, indicates that intermarriage between *varnas* was widely practiced.

Marriages between individuals of different *varnas* were classified as *anuloma* (a man from a higher *varna* marrying a woman from a lower *varna*) and *pratiloma* (a man from a lower *varna* marrying a woman from a higher *varna*). These classifications also influenced property inheritance. In cases of intermarriage, property was bequeathed to offspring based on these distinctions.

Interestingly, the *Arthashastra* does not display any resistance to *pratiloma* marriages. In one section, Kautilya discusses the inheritance of property (3.5.33 and 3.7.4-19), emphasizing the importance of ensuring the continuity of property within the family under all possible circumstances. Adhering to this goal, Kautilya outlines various provisions for property transfer. For instance, if a woman has no son to inherit her husband's property, she can beget a son through her husband's brother—a practice known as a *levirate* relationship.

This arrangement, while not a permanent marital relationship, is neither considered illicit nor improper. Instead, the *levirate* relationship serves as a supplementary provision sanctioned by the state to ensure the continuity of lineage and property within the family.

Manusmriti which was written much before *Arthashastra* works mainly through propositions. Each section begins with an injunction, which is then followed by a proposition that accommodates possible deviations in practices. In the book there is a provision for inter-marriages despite the existence of rigid classification of varnas. For example, in the tenth chapter there are around forty verses that speak on so many sub classifications based on inter-marriages. It is clear from the two examples that open-endedness is one of the important features of the social order described in the texts. A plausible reason for the open-

endedness would be that these texts are describing actions and not exactly prescribing norms. If a ritual, which is performed in compliance with stipulated practices does not yield expected results, then the mode of performing a ritual is altered according to the context.

Let us consider a slightly contrasting example to the levirate relationship, drawn from local cultural practices. It is notable that several narratives in Kannada literature, at least to my knowledge, begin with heroic characters and their extraordinary deeds. Interestingly, the birth of these characters is often attributed to natural phenomena. For instance, in southern Karnataka, the narrative of *Manteswami* is widely known, with his birth being attributed to a termitarium. Similarly, in the South Canara region of Karnataka, the goddess Siri is said to have been born from the flower of the areca nut.

One could argue that such narratives elevate their protagonists to extraordinary status, with imagination embellishing the facts. While this is true, an anthropological explanation for attributing births to nature might lie in the rituals practiced in these regions to conceive children outside of wedlock. These children, born out of such practices, did not belong to any established clan. However, their births were not disregarded; instead, their clans were symbolically associated with elements of nature. These children were then integrated into society and assigned roles, often serving the state in various capacities.

Similarly, an example that we can take from the travelogue *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, points to how widows who refused to perform Sati were allowed to live in society. In the book Barbosa says that Sati granted the status of God to the widow. But widows who refused to perform sati, lived in the city either as devadasis or by performing some art forms. What exactly is happening in the two examples? In the first case the so-called illegitimate births were included in the social order and in the second example those who did not comply with the law were not excluded from society. In both cases we can see an inclusionary tendency operating in society. But the inclusion does not dissolve the hierarchical structures and even in both cases the status after inclusion is not the same.

It is not that every transgression gets its own space in a structure that is fluid and is hence unpunished. Transgressions are not seen as a threat that must be combated, but as problems that are to be addressed. Hence a rigid distinction between licit and illicit does not figure in these texts. To prove the point, we can take the example of Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra*. In the section, 'Obstacles to relations with the wives of other men', Vatsyayana says that one can "seduce the wife of another man, if one runs the risk of dying of love for her, (57)". Here the desire of the lover gets prominence over the norm against adultery. The norm against adultery is relaxed here only for men, not women, who are seen as the objects and not subjects of passion. The norm is patriarchal, and as such it is hierarchical. But within this hierarchy, adultery calls for not rigid and universally

applicable or abstract rules but context-specific distinctions that are transformable. So, what about the questions of morality? If modes of subjectivization in ancient India did not work in terms of severe exclusionary tendencies and consequent inclusions, what propelled the social transformation and ubiquitous hierarchical formations?

To answer these questions, I am going to use a model called action knowledge model-developed by SN Balagangadhara- which suggests a different mode of subjectivization, that is through exemplars. The need for the model is necessitated by three important observations about Indian social structure. It is challenging to identify any indigenous theorization of India's complex social structures, such as the caste system or moral frameworks. The efforts to conceptualize and theorize these systems have generally not originated from within India. However, in practice, every caste and sub-caste operates with a seemingly infinite number of specific rules and prohibitions (*do's and don'ts*), which rarely overlap. These rules often include alternative practices that are contextually adaptable, yet they function without a justificatory literary corpus to explain or standardize them. The absence of such external literary documentation does not imply the presence of a central authority to regulate these actions. Instead, the practices are inherently contextual and self-regulated within their respective social frameworks.

Given these three conditions how does a culture like this communicate a sense and feeling of order to posterity? According to the model a culture which transforms knowledge through actions, experience order by speaking about the world, not by imposing an order. The culture believes that to speak of the world is to experience the world. The Primary way of this type of culture to experience the world is in terms of actions. This leads to the learning process and to improve the ability of performing actions. The knowledge constituted by afore mentioned process is action knowledge. This knowledge is acquired through mimetic learning- exemplars. Exemplars are not examples that corroborate a statement but are something to be imitated.

One model for exemplars is stories. In India stories constitute a major part of learning. But stories inherently do not carry anything that can be called units of learning. Stories implicitly carry a pattern of order, and the representational character of the stories helps them to perform the function of being a unit of learning.

Stories do not inherently carry explicit morals but function as propositions that foster mimetic learning by illustrating actions. Through mimesis, stories establish a practical connection between the actions depicted within them and those of their listeners. In essence, stories provide indirect instruction, where their subtlety allows the process of understanding and imitation to unfold naturally.

This raises critical questions: How do stories, as exemplars, differ from norms within a framework that resists consolidating differences into rigid binaries? Are the actions described by the model analogous to the concept of performance, which has been central to critical discourse in the West? To address these questions, it is essential to revisit and critically analyze some of the key ideas discussed in earlier sections of this paper.

According to Turner, the liminal condition represents the most fertile ground for the creation of religious and ritualistic metaphors. Over time, social actions arising in the liminal state become normalized. The repetitive nature of a performance plays a pivotal role in how it is embedded in space and time. However, Turner places less emphasis on the repetitive aspects of ritual performances and instead focuses on their transgressive potential. His primary interest lies in the creative ways societal norms are metaphorically challenged and resisted within the liminal condition.

Given this context of normativity, it is necessary to see how exemplars operate in terms of action-knowledge models. Stories as exemplars have a very minimal job to do as instructional mechanisms. At the same time stories are not coextensive with instructional authorities that are external like religious, moral and political authorities. As mimetic learning is sub-intentional learning, the responsibility of constructing an instructional authority lies in the hands of the

learning subjects. In the process of telling stories the listening subject constructs an authorial figure or an other as instantaneously as possible. The authority or the other changes in every context and lacks iterability. The process of constructing the other is similar even though the stories have divine flavor.

The above idea can be explained in the way the story of the *Mahabharata* is explained. The narration of the *Mahabharata* is in terms of ritualistic renderings. First the story is attributed to Vyasa and lord Ganesh who wrote the story for Vyasa. Then the same story is rendered to King Janumejaya, the great grandson of Arjuna— one of the Pandava brothers— by saint Vyshampayana. The reason is to help Janumejaya to come out of the serpent-curse. Then again, the same story is narrated while performing a ritual in Naimisha forest. What is happening here? The same story of the *Mahabharata* is narrated to different people coming from different contexts (Janumejaya—to cleanse him out of serpent curse). The story is acting as an exemplar helping the listener to construct his own authority based on the context from which he comes.

The major benefit of this form of learning is the construction of the notion of authority and learning almost falls on the learning subject. The same applies to the notion of morality. In the west norms always determine the relationship between a statement or an injunction and an individual. In India the injunction type models do not exist as the moral concerns are between individuals either the

one who narrates the story to the listener or a character in the story and the listener.

In a society where order derives from universally valid injunctions then the structure strictly works with the notion of exclusion and inclusion. For example, we can take the way norms work in the west. In general terms a norm usually works towards homogenizing the given societal classifications. The process of homogenizing is based on choices that a society makes under the claim of rationality. Preferences do not exist independently but always have the other which can be called the not preferred. Unlike law, norm does not impose itself on the subjects but displays possibilities. A norm is activated as a norm only after a choice has been made among a given number of possibilities. The choice defines itself by what can be called the not preferred, detested or to use Canguilhem's word 'repulsed'. Gradually norms discriminatorily divide and attribute polarized values. Cultural specificity guides the way through which norms are normalized and expressed in a society.

According to Foucault, norm is the element that circulates between the disciplinary and the regulatory technology of the body. Technology of discipline adopts the mechanism of surveillance and rigorous training. It concentrates on the individual body in terms of institutions. On the other hand, the technology of regularization considers population as a whole and is adjusted to bio-sociological

process. Though the two technologies work at different levels they are not mutually exclusive in all circumstances. By the Integration of these two technologies, a society is normalized.

The problem with this type of normativity lies in assuming homogeneity of differences. In the west the norms, injunctions and law assume iterability or context-freeness. According to the ‘action-knowledge’ model the differences are relativized to the context from which the differences are generated, and the authority lies not outside of the learning subject. Action knowledge carries the property of generating new actions. Hence an exemplar, at least in the form of stories, constitutes a linguistic description of the actions that are performed.

Our general intuition regarding the nature of guidelines or decision principles is that the more general, abstract and context independent they are, the more useful and true they are. In fact, this is a demand that we make upon all knowledge-claims: a moral principle, a legal statute is acceptable if and only if it enables you to choose and execute the right action in all/most contexts. For that to happen, a moral principle requires to be context free. However, for action-knowledge it appears to go the other way: Inter-contextual applicability is directly proportional to contextual embeddedness and inversely to context insensitivity and generality. (Gangadhara 51)

In *Homo Sacer* Agamben says that though the roots of the biopolitics can be traced back to the times of Greek society, in modern days the exception has become the principle of life. But it is difficult to see the rule of exception as central to politicization of life in India. The reason is that in ancient India codes were relativized to contexts and laws as such were not considered as universally applicable. The norms did not act as universal codes. Contrastingly it works according to the context hence the principle of exception does not work as rigidly as it does in the context of the west.

Merleau-Ponty extends the arguments of Heidegger with his idea of 'Flesh' by considering it as a spatial category. He depended much upon Husserl notions of phenomenology to infer the relationship between the sensible and intelligible and the constitution of the other on the body. Esposito cites Merleau-Ponty, "the world is the horizon of meaning in which the body recognizes itself and which is traversed by the diversity that keeps it from being coterminous with itself" (Esposito 160), to show how he is reversing the immunity paradigm which cares for 'self' and encloses itself in a narrow mode of life. The concept of 'Flesh' addresses diversity and converge the spatial and temporal distinctions. Exactly speaking, Merleau-Ponty tries to investigate the problem of "such a body" that encloses itself and fails to represent itself an immunity paradigm that led to Nazism in Germany. Flesh unites not only that which has a body but also animals,

the living and non-living to re-define biopolitics in an affirmative tone and to recognize Flesh in the exteriorization in other's body.

Are not exemplars doing something like what communitarian paradigm or Merleau-Ponty's 'Flesh' inscribed? It seems the functions are almost the same. Exemplars which do not work with external authority give possibilities to the listeners to construct other and open different possibilities in various contexts. But the previous observations do not de-qualify exemplars from being norms. For example, the basic function of a norm and exemplar is to guide the way of life of an individual but the mode of functionality of the two differs radically.

Exemplars as a mode of politicization of life do not function as norms. Unlike norms, exemplars do not claim to be the yardstick of the way of life. Exemplars being a form of subjectivization frame the objective of a society (ancient India) to assure the continuity of order and lineage by transforming themselves incommensurate with the context.

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