

Introduction

On a fresh morning as we prepared for breakfast, my four year old daughter Ananya was intently listening to her grandmother rehearsing for her upcoming singing performance. Ananya had been hearing the song for several days and had picked it up in parts, perhaps not fully understanding the deeper meaning of the song. She had a sense of curiosity and urgency in her voice as she requested me to explain the meaning of a few lines. The lines were from a popular Bollywood song from the 60's:

“Aa chalke tujhe, main le ke chaloon ik aise gagan ke tale....

Jahaan ghum bhi na ho, aasoon bhi na ho, bas pyaar hi pyaar pale

Ik aise gagan ke tale... ” (Door gagan ki chhaon mein – Kishore Films, 1964)

“Come walk with me, let me take you under such a sky (to a place that exists)...

Where there is no sorrow, no tears, and where only love and love grows

Under one such sky (a place that exists)...”

As I explained the gist of this utopian place referred to in the song, my daughter looked quizzically at me, her face riddled with confusion and questions and put came one at me “can such a place even exist in real?”, she asked, and went ahead to answer it as well with a resounding “No! Not possible!” Pleasantly surprised by her interest in questions of existence and reality, the researcher in me followed up with more probes: “why do you say that such a place can’t exist?” My four year old asserted that it wasn’t possible for such a ‘perfect’ world to exist, where people are not sad at all, and where happiness alone surrounds you at all times. She explained that happiness and sadness, good and bad health go hand in hand and exist for everyone at different times.

When probed for examples, she explained how she sometimes cried and laughed in the same day, how she felt weak when tired and strong after a good meal, and most strikingly (for a 4 year old), she explained that although there was happiness in our home, there could be sadness in another person’s home, and that she felt sad for them even though she had a happy home. At that point I realised that in her simple way, she had expressed an awareness of herself as affected by a genuine concern for others, their emotions and circumstances. Humbled by this reflection, I went on to ask what she thought about the latter part of the stanza on love and whether love could blossom irrespective of joy and sorrow. She answered with much conviction that love

grows nevertheless—in good and bad times. And went on to say that her parents and extended family would always be there in good or bad times.

As a researcher in developmental psychology, it is often these mundane, everyday conversations that have profound influence on our research questions. How do children understand good and bad? How do they gain knowledge about values and virtues? How does their context influence this learning? How do they assess moral situations and respond in thought and behaviour? Are children's ways of reasoning and behaving constant or do they change with age? What about the influence of changing circumstances around them? These exchanges highlight the importance of socialization processes such as conversations, observations and daily practices that convey meanings and messages to children early on, when their fertile minds are eagerly engaging with all that is available to them. It is these questions that drew my interest in understanding moral reasoning among children, adolescents and adults in India; and the impact of cultural socialization.

In the present thesis, I share my journey from a naïve student interested in moral development to a more refined researcher aware of the significance of studying morality with a cultural-developmental lens, using an emic approach. I started this journey as an undergraduate student debating the merits and demerits of Kohlberg's theory, followed by a qualitative study using in-depth interviews and ethnographic methods to study moral reasoning among children across social class in India as part of my masters' research. In my doctoral work I employed mixed methods and an emic approach using the cultural-developmental lens to explore the interface of the Big Three ethics of Autonomy, Community and Divinity and several indigenous concepts in the Indian moral worldview.

I begin the thesis with a review of literature of how the field of moral psychology has progressed with time, the cultural-developmental approach and research with the Big Three Ethics of morality, the role of social class in moral reasoning, an introduction to worldviews and more specifically the Indian moral worldview. This is followed by the chapters for methods, results and discussion, implications, limitations and future directions.