

abandon the individual to save the family?"; "Can *dharma* be taught?" and other similar issues.

Lest you think that this book is an epitome of sobriety, let me allay your anxiety by pointing to just one example of hilarity – Mr Das' account of the frustration experienced by Mr Arun Shourie when, as minister of administrative reforms, he tried to answer a query on whether government officers could use inks

other than blue and black. He also uses several contemporary examples of unethical acts such as the misdeeds of the Ambanis and Mrs Pratibha Patil.

After reading this book for the first time (as I shall surely return to it), I am also inspired to revisit the epic itself. I shall now do so with fresh insights provided by Mr Das and the host of philosophers to whom he refers throughout his book. I strongly commend this book.

Matters of life and death

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Nancy S Jecker, Albert R Jonsen, Robert A Pearlman, editors. *Bioethics: an introduction to the history, methods and practice*. Second edition. New Delhi: Jones and Bartlett India Private Ltd; 2010. Student edition. 545 pp ISBN 978-93-80108-09-4

This is a textbook on bioethics with contributions from major writers in the field. The editors are professors at the University of Washington and have carried out pioneering research in ethics. Part I of the book takes the reader through the history of bioethics, explaining its emergence as a discipline. Part II examines the methods of ethical reasoning and developing justification of moral beliefs. Part III covers ethical concerns related to reproductive decisions such as abortion, prenatal genetic testing and assisted reproductive technologies.

Albert Jonsen sets the tone by providing information on developments in medical ethics. Daniel Callahan comments on the use of technical jargon in the discussion of ethics. He points out that the discipline of bioethics should be so designed as to help physicians and biologists make practical decisions.

The essay by Leon Kass is an attempt to provoke discussion on the meaning of concepts such as "betterment of mankind", a "good man", a "good life", a "good community" and the values that should guide society. According to Kass, all decisions to develop or use biomedical technologies inevitably contain judgments of value. He argues that the very definitions of benefit or risk to individuals or society are based upon value judgments, not simply technical ones

James Childress takes on the question of "who can live when not all can live", giving examples of moral questions specifically related to scarce life-saving medical resources such as haemodialysis and kidney and heart transplants.

Hans Jonas's contribution is a philosophical reflection on experimenting with human subjects. This essay, considered a seminal exposition on the ethics of medical research, exhorts

us to remember that while slower progress in the conquest of disease will not threaten society, the erosion of moral values most definitely will. This erosion will render the most dazzling research achievements worthless.

The article by Nancy Jecker examines the central methods of ethical reasoning used to support ethical judgments in particular cases. She comments that none of these methods offers ways of dealing with human rights questions such as health inequities between rich and poor nations, a statement that also has serious implications for medical practice in India.

The challenge of caring for patients in multicultural settings and the related philosophical problems of ethical relativism are brought out by Ruth Benedict and James Rachels. They state that different societies have different moral codes which determine what is right in that society. Further, there is no universal truth in ethics and there are no moral truths that hold for all people at all times. Thus, the moral code of any society at any given time has no special status; it is one among many. They conclude that we cannot sit in judgment on the conduct of other people and we should adopt an attitude of tolerance towards the practices of other cultures.

Arguing that women's moral experience has been discounted in the construction of ethical theories and principles, Virginia Held concludes that the practice of mothering has important perspectives to contribute to ethics. Susan Shermin adds that the critical question of the structure of medical practice and its role in a patriarchal society is largely ignored and is not considered a part of the standard curriculum in textbooks of medical ethics.

Writing on the ethics of reproductive technologies, John Robertson states that theological, social, psychological, economic and feminist perspectives would emphasise different aspects of these technologies. Susan Shermin, discussing the context of the alarming increase in the range of reproductive technologies, argues that in vitro fertilisation should be

understood against the backdrop of the social and political structures that have maintained power relationships to the disadvantage of women and people of lower socioeconomic status.

This book is a "must read" for professionals in the human care sector. The writers and editors are senior bioethicists, eminently qualified to discuss these issues. However, it could have benefited from a few additions. An introduction explaining the three-part framework could have been provided by the editors. Although this is a large volume comprising 545 pages, the original articles of certain authors could have been included

in place of abridged versions, as these are seminal articles on medical ethics. Though this is the Indian edition of the book, readers who wish to explore specific aspects of Indian ethics or biomedical ethics in India will be disappointed. Finally, the format employed throughout the book could have been made more accessible by the inclusion of introductions and summaries capturing key elements.

Despite these limitations, this textbook is well suited to advanced graduate and undergraduate students who plan to pursue careers in healthcare ethics as well as in the medical and social work professions.

FILM REVIEW

Warding off the evil eye

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***Matti o manush* (The soil and the people). Bengali with English subtitles. Rimjhim Gupta and Sabyasachi Chakraborty. Directed by Sisir Sahana, cinematography by Asim Bose, music by Nachiketa.**

Sisir Sahana is a "stormist" from the metaphor of the storm that he uses in his second feature film venture, *Matti o manush*, with its anguished portrayal of ritualism that is mindlessly practised even in the new century. Sahana holds a mirror to our middle-class hypocrisy that reduces the sacred pursuit of the truth to the mechanical following of insipid rituals and superstitions.

The film's story revolves around a teacher of scientific temperament who gives in to his mother's wish, in a moment of emotion, and agrees to leave no stone unturned in driving the so-called "evil" out of his mute daughter's life. He joins the band of village sanyasis who insist that he join them in rituals like dancing around the village in the hot sun, and hanging upside down from a banyan tree - all to ward off the evil eye.

The teacher's daughter, Jhonu, is a happy-go-lucky, uncomplaining adolescent, a keen observer of nature and a connoisseur of line, light, and artistic depiction. Jhonu's portrayal is reminiscent of the woman in Picasso's famed *Guernica*, her extended hand holding the lamp of light and hope. Jhonu is engrossed in the delight of life and draws stunning pictures, some of these on the walls of the room in her mud house. Her mother is a genuinely fond parent, indulgent but protective. The girl's happiness is put at risk when her father begins to participate in the rituals.

Then, when a baby falls and dies in what is a rare mishap in a Santhal tribal fair, the mute girl who happens to be present (and attending the fair like any other "normal" person) is called a fiend and hounded. The anguished child recalls how, over the years, everybody around her has developed a hatred towards her, unreasonably singling her out as the cause of the village's calamities. The youngster's spirit rapidly ebbs.

People's irrational faith in amulets and unscrupulous soothsayers is presented as thoughtless, everyday compulsion. What will our society come to if educated people do not rise as one against blind beliefs? How can we allow meaningless, unreasonable and unscientific ideas to kill the very spirit that keeps each of us alive, playing our individual roles in the cosmic dance drama of life?

The film offers several moments of visual candy: the teacher leading sanyasis in paying obeisance to the lifegiving water of the river, the girl's thrill at the blowing gale, the saffron-clad sanyasis walking across the river complemented by the serene blue waters in the foreground, and the girl in a blue sari, dancing carefree along with the santhals on the silver sands. The artful creation of storms, the fish-eye-lens close-ups of the enraged girl, the baby falling to its death, and the earthen colours of rural Bengal make for some scintillating cinematography by Asim Bose.

Music by Nachiketa adds much to the film's production values, especially lifting high the memorable opening sequence of the sanyasis crossing the river. "*Bam bam bole*," too, is a definitely hum-along tune.