

HINDU CONCEPTS OF SIN



atyāśanād ati pānād yacca ugrāt pratigrahāt |
tan me varuṇo rājā pāninā hyavamarśatu ||

May King Varuna efface and absolve me of whatever sins I have incurred by eating unlawful food, drinking unlawful beverages and accepting gifts from unlawful persons.

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Introduction

Modern Hinduism has three major sources — (1) the Dharma Śāstras, (2) the Upaniṣads (Vedānta) both based upon the Veda collectively called *nīti* and (3) *Rīti* — custom and usage of the various castes and communities.

Vedānta is the theoretical heart of Hinduism and the Dharma Śāstras the source of common practice. The concept of sin is peripheral to the philosophy of Vedānta which hardly even touches on it, the Dharma Śāstra on the other hand, as legal manuals of practical conduct does deal with it in depth.

The Vedānta, like all the Indian philosophies, centres on the universal problem of suffering (*dukha*), it's causes (*avidya* or nescience) and it's eradication. Sin is regarded as unskilful action (*akuśala karma*), which results in further suffering, hinders spiritual practice (*sādhana*) and retards spiritual progress and reunification with Brahman.

The key existential problem of Hinduism is an *epistemological* one — i.e. **spiritual ignorance** (*avidya*) which means ignorance of our true natures as modes of Divinity (*jivātman*) and the mistaken personal identification with our bodies, minds and material circumstances (*moha*). The solution to the problem is self-knowledge — *ātma-vidya* or *ātma-jñāna*.

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF SIN

In comparison to Hinduism where sin is peripheral, sin is **central** to the whole theology of Christianity, everything in Christianity relates to the reality and evil of sin. Without the doctrine of sin, Christianity ceases to exist. Sin is an *ontological* problem — meaning that sin is the very problem which religion addresses.

Sin is anything that is contrary to the law or will of God. If you do what God has forbidden, then you have sinned. In addition, if you do not do what God has commanded, you sin. Either way, the result is eternal separation from God

Original sin

According to mainstream Christian theology, at the moment the mythological Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge — which God had commanded them not to do — both sin and death were born. Their years of life were limited. Since Adam represented the father of the human race, he is held responsible and thus the Fall of man is referred to as the "sin of Adam", which is inherited from him as a condition of fallen human nature. Satan tempted Eve who then tempted Adam — so Christians believe that the Devil has a significant role to play in tempting humans to sin.

Original Sin is the cause of Adam and all his descendants losing unrestricted access to God:–

"Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned."^(Rom 5:12)

In Christian theology, the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is the atonement for the sin of Adam.

"For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive."^(1 Cor 15:22)

So every person that is born is born sinful and corrupted by their very nature. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was the remedy. As a result of that act of sacrifice all who put their trust in Jesus and are baptized now have unrestricted access to God through him.

1. Sin in the Vedas

In the Rig Veda we are presented with the vague idea of sin as some kind of an offence against the gods which results in illness, misfortune, drought, conflict etc. The so called 'sins' are not actually detailed, but a number of synonyms are used which gives us a notion of what they were on about:—

āgas (scandal, offence), *agha* (impurity, mishap, distress), *abhidroha* (injury) *enas* (bad luck), *durita* (bad course, difficulty), *duskṛta* (bad deeds), *drugdha* (hurtful, malicious actions), *amhas*, *urjina*, *droha* (injuring, spiteful, hurtful actions), *kilbiṣaḥ* (stain, defilement).

There are many Sūktas addressed primarily to Varuṇa imploring his forgiveness and to withhold his anger and punishment for the transgressions committed.

The Vedic concept of 'sin' (*anṛtam* = untruth) is a co-relative of it's positive polarity — *ṛtam*

Ritam/ Satyam — refers to the regular order or equilibrium and harmony of the Cosmos, the homeostasis of the Cosmic Person (*puruṣa*), the "body" of which is the physical universe. Vedānta is pantheism — Brahman is the totality of being, it is the quantum energy of which everything is composed.

Ritam has three aspects:—

1. The regular and general order in the cosmos and the natural laws (*adhibhūtam*)
2. The correct and ordered way of the cult of the gods (*yajña*)¹ (*adhidaivatam*)
3. Ethics, morality and spiritual evolution of humankind (*adhyātmam*)

Our proper response to these three imperatives are encapsulated in the doctrine of the *Hita Trayam* — the threefold benefit.

1. Assisting in the cosmic order by doing the right thing by the environment and ensuring we live sustainably.
2. Ensuring the continued making of offerings and ceremonies for the devas through *yajñas*².
3. Living an ethical life creating harmony, stability and peace in society between all social orders.

2. In the Dharma śāstra

The cosmic struggle in Hinduism as reflected in the Dharma Śāstra and the Purāṇas is not between good and evil like the Abrahamic religions but between **chaos** and **order**. Sins are a symptom of chaos, a disturbance of social order and harmony based on selfish individual motivation (*svārtha*) and not in anyway related to a force of evil (the devil or Satan as in Christianity).

In the Dharma Śāstra literature, which is primarily practical and legalistic, we find a shift away from the view that 'sin' was an offence against the gods to the idea that

¹ *yajño vā ṛtasya yoniḥ* (S.B.1.3.4.16) *Yajña* (reciprocal exchange of energy) is the matrix of *Rita*.

² *saha yajñaiḥ prajāḥ sṛṣṭvā purovāca prajāpatiḥ | anena prasaviṣyadhvam eṣa vo 'stviṣṭa kāmadhuk* || Gītā 3:10
 10. In the beginning the Lord of all beings, created humans along with the *yajña* (sacrifice), saying: 'By this shall you prosper; this shall be the cow of plenty granting all your desires.'
 11. By this, may you nurture the gods, and the gods will nurture you [in return]. Thus, nurturing one another, you will obtain the highest good

‘sin/crime/transgression’ was the cause of spiritual, physical, social and ritual *pollution*³ remedied through purificatory rites and penance. Like all ancient literature the Dharma Śāstra does not differentiate between crime (secular) and sin (religious).

Sins, referred to as *pāpam* or *pātakam* are divided into categories and enumerated at great length. There is a lot of difference of opinion in the Dharma Śāstra about which sins/transgressions fit into which category. The purpose of categorizing them was to indicate the type of atonement/penance that was to be prescribed, and about this there is also much difference of opinion amongst the law-givers.

Transgressions are also gender and class (*varna*) based, and what is considered as *pāpam* for one class or gender may not be so for another — e.g. it is a sin for a Brahmin to drink alcohol but not for a Sūdra. A woman can begin her daily chores without taking a shower whereas it is compulsory for men.

It is important also to retain an awareness of historical time difference and avoid applying our modern socio-political theories of gender-politics, class-conflict, egalitarianism, socialism, humanism, cultural relativism etc., when judging texts which are 1000 + years old! So please view these descriptions and prescriptions in the time frame and social context in which they were given and then judge whether they are still valid or not. Some of the "sins" enumerated are quite quaint and quirky to us in the 21st century! What is no longer valid can readily be rejected, since in Hinduism they are not the immutable laws of the Creator but rather legislation of very human law-givers!

Āpastamba divides crimes/sins into two categories viz.

1. *pataniya* (those that result in social impurity and social demotion — i.e. loss of caste). Seeing that the classical caste system is no longer applicable, these acts while they are still crimes/sins do not result in any social disability.
2. *aśucikara* (those that cause personal impurity, though no social disability).

pataniya	aśucikara
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crimes whereby one becomes an <i>abhiśasta</i>⁴ • Complete loss (by neglect) of the Vedic learning that one secured by study and memorization. • Grand larceny • Drinking of <i>sura</i> — alcoholic beverages. • Causing abortion • Incest • Sexual misconduct — intercourse with the female friend of one's female guru (mother etc.) or with the female friend of one's <i>guru</i> (father etc.) and with the wife of any stranger. • Constant commission of immoral acts (<i>adharmā</i>). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohabitation of a noble woman with commoners, • Cohabitation of noble men with commoners. • Eating the flesh of forbidden animals such as that of a dog or a human being or village cocks and pigs or other carnivorous animals, • Eating the excrement of human beings • Partaking of food left over by persons other than parents or gurus.

³ The technical term for purity is *śaucam* and impurity *aśaucam*, derived from the root *śuci* which means bright/clear.

⁴ *abhiśastas*, are those who murder a Vedic scholar or one who had been initiated for the performance of a *soma* sacrifice; one who causes an abortion, or one who kills a menstruating woman. (1.9.24.6-9).

The *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* (II.1) divides sins into:—

pataniya	upa-pātaka	aśucikara
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making voyages by sea • Stealing the property of a priest • Misappropriating a deposit • Giving false evidence regarding land (disputes) • Trading with merchandise of all descriptions • Serving lower classes • Begetting a child on a commoner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sex with a proscribed female. • Sex with the female friend of a female <i>guru</i> or with the female friend of a male <i>guru</i> • Sex with a female outcast. • Practicing medicine. • Officiating as a village priest. • Earning a living through theatre and drama. • Violating virgins. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gambling • Engaging in black magic • Subsisting by gleaned corn fallen in the field • Subsisting by handouts after graduating. • Staying for more than four months at his teacher's seminary after graduation. • Practicing astrology as a profession.

Kātyāyana divided sinful acts into five classes viz. *mahā-pāpa* (mortal sins), *ati-pāpa* (the highest sins than which there is nothing worse), *pātaka* (sins similar to *mahā-pātakas*), *prāsangika* (due to association or contact with offenders) and *upa-pātaka* (minor sins).

The *Viṣṇu-dharma-sūtra* (33.3-5) speaks of nine kinds of transgressions viz. *ati-pātaka*, *mahā-pātaka*, *anu-pātaka*, *upa-pātaka*, *jāti-bhramśa-kara* (social-expulsion), *saṅkari-karaṇa*, (drop in social status), *apātri-karaṇa* (rendering the perpetrator unworthy of receiving gifts), *mala-vāha* (causing defilement) and *prakīrṇaka* (miscellaneous).

Manu-smṛiti omits the separate mention of *ati-pātaka* and *anu-pātaka* and includes most of them under those that he designates as equal to one of the four well-known *mahā-pātakas*.

3. The Mahā-pātakas

The *Pañca Mahā-pātakas* or ‘Five Great Sins’ are the framework for much of the Hindu discourse on the subject of sin. These are five broad headings and not specific acts per se.

Usually the five *mahā-pātaka* have been enumerated from the days of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* and throughout all the Dharma Shastras as:—

- (1) *Brahma-hatyā* — heinous murder.
- (2) *Surā-pāna* — drinking the spirituous liquor.
- (3) *Suvarṇa-steya* — theft of gold.
- (4) *Guru-talpaga* — sexual intercourse with the wife of a guru.
- (5) *Samsarga* — association with the perpetrators of any of these four (for a year or more). Some texts substitute infanticide or abortion instead of *samsarga*.

What constitutes a **crime** as differentiated from **sin** has changed over time with the evolution of the modern legal system. Adultery and homosexuality for example in English and Religious Canon law were crimes until quite recently. In modern western society both adultery and homosexuality are no longer crimes but are still considered as ‘sins’ according to (Christian) Canon Law.

In Hinduism, murder, theft and certain sexual misconduct such as rape, incest and pedophilia are crimes as well as being sins, but drinking alcohol while not a crime is considered to be a sin for some (priests) and not for others (commoners). Continued and regular association with these miscreants is not a crime but is considered to be corrupting or ‘polluting’.

Both the secular law and the ecclesiastical laws make a difference between a sinful act intentionally committed (*kāmataḥ*) and one committed through ignorance or heedlessness (*ajñānataḥ*) and between an act done only once (*sakṛt*) or done repeatedly (*asakṛt*).

In the case of the three social orders other than that of the priests, some *smṛtis* like that of *Cyavana* laid down other *mahā-pātakas* in addition to the five, viz.

- for the ruling class — punishing an innocent person and fleeing from the battle-field.
- for the business community — using false balances and weights and cheating in general.
- for the working class — engaging in the meat trade, causing harm to a priest.

All Hindu Canon law (*not* being a revelation from an omniscient god) is subject to considerations of time, place and circumstance, so while retaining the categories of the *Mahā-pātakas* we are at liberty in the modern world to modify and adapt them to contemporary social circumstances and mores.

1. *Brahma-hatyā* — Heinous Murder

The literal meaning is *brahma* = enormous, great, heinous; *hatya* = murder.

Brahma-hatyā, or *vadha* (killing) is defined as:— “an act which immediately or after some time results in the loss of life directly without the intervention of any other cause”.

The primary meaning given by the lawyers is the premeditated murder of a learned priest.⁵ But refers more to the extreme gravity of the crime rather than the specific act of murdering a member of the *brāhmin* caste. In the days before mass media all knowledge was learned by rote and carried in the heads of the priests. Killing a learned priest was therefore like destroying a library of precious books before the advent of data retention devices.

According to *Āpastamba* one who instigates, approves of, and commits an act — these share its results in heaven and hell; but he amongst these who contributes most to the accomplishment of the act obtains a greater share of the results'.⁶

Exceptions

One important question that very much exercised the minds of ancient and medieval *Dharma-śāstra* lawyers is whether one can justifiably kill a *brāhmaṇa ātatāyin* (a member of the brahmin caste who is an arsonist, a poisoner, a kidnapper, an assassin, or who intends to illegally appropriate another's land), in self-defence without incurring any sin.

The conclusion of the *Mitākṣarā* is that, an *ātatāyin* whoever he may be, may be physically opposed, resisted and even killed without incurring any blame.

Equivalent Transgressions

The gravity of premeditated murder was extended by the law-givers to include all other forms. The *Sāma-vidhāna* held that killing anyone who had studied and memorized the Veda, abortion and of a woman⁷ who was in her period (*ātreyi*) are equal to *brahmāhatyā*.

⁵ A man may be the cause of the death of a priest in five ways, viz, he may himself murder (i.e., he becomes the *kartā*), he may incite another to murder (*prayojaka*) by ordering by imploring and giving advice about the murder, he may encourage another to kill by his own approval (*anumantā*), or by helping the killer when he wavers or by offering protection to the killer against others (*anugrahaka*) and by becoming a *nimittin*. A *nimittin* is defined as one that angers a priest by rebuking or beating or depriving him of wealth etc. and in whose presence and on account of whom, the priest that is distressed commits suicide.

⁶ 'Where many persons are armed and have a common purpose in view, if even one of them kills a person, all of them are guilty of murder' (according to Manu)

⁷ *Viśvarūpa* on *Yajur-veda* says that no *prāyascitta* can expiate the sin of killing a woman intentionally.

Pretending to be of noble birth (falsifying one's pedigree to gain advantage), giving false testimony regarding a crime, and spreading false rumours about one's guru are equal to *Brahma-hatyā* according to Manu⁸.

One who witnesses land, stock and the wives and children of others being forcible abducted and does not report the same to the authorities, is equal to the killer of a Brahmin according to Brihaspati⁹.

Decrying the Vedas and despising preceptors are equivalent to the sin of *brahma-hatyā* in gravity according to Yajñavalkya 13:7.

Contemporary Application.

Seeing that in modern western pluralistic society the pre-meditated killing of a learned priest is a non-issue, the definition of *brahma-hatyā* should be extended to cover all acts of pre-meditated murder — especially of vulnerable persons and of those who have dedicated their lives to the service of the community — doctors, nurses, teachers, fire-fighters, paramedics etc.

Brahma-hatyā can also be extended to cover the willful creation of destructive internet viruses which wipe out the entire life's work of some individuals, or cause immense damage to beneficial knowledge reservoirs.

2. Surāpāna — Alcoholism.

The word *surā* occurs several times in the Rig Veda. *Soma* was a treasured psychedelic beverage to be offered to the gods and to be drunk by the priests and yajamāna and was sharply distinguished from *surā*. Sat. Br. V. 1. 5.28 furnishes the striking antithesis:— '*soma* is truth, prosperity, light; and *surā* is untruth, misery, darkness'.

The alcoholic beverage *surā* is said to be of three kinds¹⁰, viz. that prepared from molasses (*gaṇḍī*), from grain (*paiṣṭī*) and from *madhuka* flowers or from honey (*mādhvi*).

There is a great deal of discussion about *surā* in many of the digests and the propositions established by most of them are:—

- All intoxicants (*madya*) are forbidden to priests at all stages of life.¹¹ But, according to Vishnu Dharma Sūtra a priest drinking *surā* of the *gaṇḍī* or *mādhvi* kind (i.e. beer made from molasses or mead) would not be guilty of *mahā-pātaka* but of *anu-pātaka* (a lesser transgression).
- Apart from Priests other members of the community commit no offence in drinking alcohol judiciously according to Vishnu Smṛti 22:84. The elites are expected to be more sober and the higher one's social standing in the community the more temperate one should be.
- Working class people are permitted to drink any kind of intoxicant.
- Students in general, but especially those studying the Veda have to abstain from intoxicants of all kinds.¹²

⁸ Manu 11:56.

⁹ Brihaspati Smṛiti. 68

¹⁰ *Manusmṛiti* 11:94

¹¹ *Gautama* II. 25 '*madyam nityam brāhmanah*' and *Ap. Dh.* S. I. 5. 17-21);

¹² The *Vishnu Dh.* S. (22. 83-84) specifies ten kinds of *madya* (intoxicants) prepared from sugar, madhuka flowers, flour, molasses, dates, grapes, jack fruit, coconuts, honey.

Equivalent Transgressions

Forgetting the Veda, reviling the Vedas, giving false evidence, causing the death of a friend (through neglect), eating forbidden food, or (swallowing substances) unfit for consumption, are six (offences) equal to drinking surā according to Manu¹³.

Taking prohibited food, low and base acts, and kissing a menstruating woman are all akin to drinking of surā according to Yajñavalkya¹⁴.

Another Ancient View

"Used judiciously wine relieves a person of worries, otherwise it leads one to hell. It gives the ability to work, helps the natural functions and blesses with beauty. Judicious use of wine is like that of the nectar of immortality." (Garuda Purana 1:156:34-35)

According to Āyur-veda:—

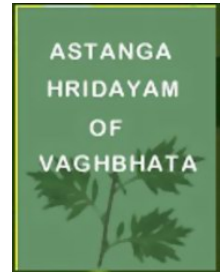
dīpanam rocanam madyam tīkṣṇoṣṇam tuṣṭi-puṣṭi kṛt sasvādu tiktakaṭukam
Alcohol improves absorption, boosts appetite, accelerates digestion and metabolism, warms up the body, pleases and nourishes body. It is bitter and pungent with a mild sweet aftertaste,

āmlapāka-rasam sāram sakaṣāyam svar-arogyā pratibhā varṇakṛllaghu
absorbed from the small intestine and stimulates bowel movement. It has a mild astringent taste, improves voice, health, imagination, complexion, and is easy to be absorbed

naṣṭa-nidrā ati-nidrebhyo hitam pittāsrād-ūṣnam kṛśa-sthūlaphitam rūkṣam
It regulates / steadies sleep, can also aggravate *pitta* and blood. It steadies weight, removes dampness from tissues,

sūkṣmam srotovo-śodhanam vāt-śleṣma-haram yuktyā pītam viṣavad anyathā
It is subtle, cleanses all bodily channels and reduces *Vāta* and *Kapha*. The above is only applicable if it is consumed with reason and common sense. Otherwise it acts like a poison.

(*sūtra 63-65, adhyāya 5, sūtrasthānam, aṣṭāṅga hrdayam of vāgbhaṭṭa*)



*na māṁsa bhakṣaṇe doṣo na madye na ca maithune |
pravṛttir eṣā bhūtānām nivṛttis tu mahāphalā || Manu 5:56 ||*

There is no sin (*doṣa*) in eating meat, drinking alcohol or recreational sex, because everyone is naturally inclined to these acts; but abstention will bring great rewards.

Contemporary Application.

Imbibing of alcohol is a common socially accepted practice of good dining and social intercourse. The drinking of a glass of alcohol with a meal and in order to be sociable is not a religious *sin* as such, but over-indulgence, binge drinking, alcoholism and drug addiction certainly lead to sever health and social consequences which are spiritually retarding.

So the problem with alcohol is addiction and not the casual drink.

The ancient cautionary prohibition was formulated before the advent of drugs, nowadays drug-use is also covered by the proscription of *surā-pānam*.

¹³ *Manusmṛiti* 11:57.

¹⁴ Yajñavalkya Smṛti 13:8

3. *Suvarṇa-Steḡa* — Grand Larceny

Steḡa is defined by *Āpastamba* as — “coveting another's property (and taking it) in whatever situation one may be (without the owner's consent)”. And *suvarṇa* is gold.

Kātāyana & *Vyāsa* define it as 'depriving a person of property¹⁵, whether clandestinely or openly and, whether by night or by day'.

The *Prāyaścitta-viveka* (p. 111) and other commentators define it specifically as the theft of a priest's gold and that the gold stolen must be at least 16 *māṣas* (15.52gms) in weight, otherwise there is no *mahā-pataka*.

So, if a person steals gold belonging to a priest which is less than 16 *māṣas* or steals gold of any weight (even more than 16 *māṣas*) from a layman he would be guilty only of a minor sin (*upapātaka*) for the purpose of expiation.

There was no guilt of theft according to *Vārsyāyana* if (*Āp. Dh. S. 1.1 0.28.2*) a person took only a small quantity of cereals ripening in pods (such as lentils) or took grass without permission for his oxen while he was travelling.

According to Gautama (12.25) one may take, (without permission and without incurring the guilt of theft) for the sake of cows and for the sake of *srauta* or *smārta* ceremonies - grass, fuel and flowers of trees and plants and the fruits (of trees and plants) that are not fenced around.

Equivalent Transgressions

Appropriating a deposit, kidnapping, stealing a horse, silver, land and gems, are declared to be equal to stealing the gold (of a priest) according to Manu¹⁶.

Contemporary Application.

Suvarṇa-steḡa is grand larceny. The taking of a pen or pad from the office is a very minor transgression, equal to stealing grass for one's cow! The modern equivalent of this sin would be the embezzling of thousands of dollars from a pension fund or defrauding mum and dad investors of their entire life's savings, internet fraud, ponzi schemes, bank robbery etc.

4. *Guru-talpaḡa* — Sexual Misconduct

Guru-talpaḡa or *Gurvanganāḡamaḡa* (sexual intercourse with the wife of the *guru*). 'Guru' primarily means the father. According to Gautama, the teacher (of the Veda) is the foremost amongst *gurus* while some say that the mother is so. According to many legal digests *gurvangana* means sex with one's own mother.

Equivalent Transgressions

Intercourse with sisters by the same mother, with (unmarried) maidens with no intention to marry them, with the wife of a friend, or a daughter in law, they declare to be equal to the violation of a Guru's bed.¹⁷

¹⁵ It must be remembered that 1000 years ago there was not a lot to steal, gold represented a person's entire savings and investments. The other items which could be stolen were stock, pots and pans, clothing, bedding, implements etc. Food was available for the asking and so was not an item of theft.

¹⁶ *Manusmṛiti* 11:58.

*Nārada*¹⁸ states:— "If a man has sexual intercourse with any of these women viz., mother, mother's sister, mother-in-law, maternal uncle's wife, father's sister, a wife of the paternal uncle or of a friend or of a pupil, a sister, a sister's friend, a daughter, a daughter-in-law, the wife of one's Vedic teacher, a woman of the same clan (*sagotri*), one who has come for protection, a nun, one's wet-nurse, a woman performing a *vrata* and a priest's wife, he becomes guilty of the sin of the violator of the guru's bed (i.e., incest).

The *Visnu-dharma-sūtra* (36. 4-7) adds a few more women to the list of *Nārada* (such as a woman in her period, the wife of a learned priest or of one's sacrificial priests or of one's teacher.

Illegitimate sex with a paternal aunt, maternal aunt, one's own sister, mother's co-wife, her sister, preceptor's daughter and preceptor's wife and one's own daughter — all these, are on a par with defiling preceptor's bed.¹⁹

Contemporary Application.

In modern western society, there are no legal restrictions on intermarriage between family members cousins, aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces etc. The only restriction is on parents and children, adopted or natural, and on siblings, adopted or natural. While marriage with one's cousin is not a crime, it would still be considered as a taboo by most Hindu communities²⁰.

The definition of this *pātaka* would still refer to acts of sexual seduction which cause harm to others, sexual exploitation, sex-trafficking, all forms of rape or coercion, child-molestation, pedophilia etc. as per the law of the land.

5. *Mahā-pātaki-samsarga* — Association with those who are guilty of the four *mahā-pātakas*.

The legal digests all suggest that the one who closely associates or cohabits with anyone of the four grave offenders mentioned above for one year, himself incurs contamination with *mahā-pātaka*.

Brihaspati speaks of nine kinds of *samsarga* (contact or association) out of which the first five were treated as light sins, but the other four were serious:—

1. occupying the same bed or seat,
2. dining with the offender,
3. taking food from the same vessel,
4. cooking food in the same pots
5. partaking of food prepared by him,
6. acting as his priest
7. employing him as one's priest,
8. teaching or learning the Veda from the offender,
9. having sexual intercourse with him

The least serious of various kinds of intercourse are conversation, touching, cooking food in the same vessel, eating food at his house, receiving a gift from him, etc.

Study/teaching — *Adhyāpana* — in order to be a great sin must relate to the Veda, and so also

¹⁷ *Manusmṛiti* 11:59.

¹⁸ *stripumsayoga*, verses 73-75

¹⁹ *Yajñavalkya* 13:9 -12

²⁰ Southerners do allow marriage with a maternal cousin.

yājana must relate to such Vedic sacrifices as *Darśa-pūrṇamāsa*, *Cāturmāsya*, *Agniṣṭoma*. Helping a *mahā-pātakīn* to perform the five daily *Yajñas* or teaching him the *aṅgas* (metrics, grammar etc.) and the *śāstras* is only a minor offence.

The medieval lawyers and commentators gradually extended the scope of *samsarga* to an insane degree in a spirit of exclusiveness and of over-emphasis on ideas of ceremonial & ritual purity!

Though many crimes do not, in so many words, come within the definitions of the *mahā-pātakas* the *smṛtis* extend by analogy the same condemnation as the *mahā-pātakas* in three ways.

1. By prescribing the same expiation as for one of the *mahā-pātakas* (*vācanikātidesa*).
2. By extending the definition to cover all similar crimes. (*tād-rūpya*).
3. The *smṛtis* declare many actions as equal to (*sama*) — in general or as equal to one of the *mahā-pātakas*. (*sāmya didesa*).

Samsarga in Kali age

A few law-givers took a more reasonable view. Parāśara did not prescribe any expiation for *samsarga* (association with those guilty of grave sins) because in the *Kali* age there is no blemish of *samsarga* and that it is on account of this, that in the enumeration of things to be avoided or not allowed in the *Kali* age (*Kali-varjyas*) *samsarga* is omitted.

Contemporary Application.

Living in a modern metropolis with firmly established laws of privacy and lack of any means of enforcement or sanctions etc. *Samsarga* is of little consequence.

The only caveat would be that intimate and prolonged association with an habitual offender (alcoholic, drug-addict, sex-offender etc.) could lead to one's own downfall.

One could use boycotting an offender as a tool for instigating change in him.

4. Upa-pātakas — Venial Sins

The different legal digests give varying lists of the *upa-pātakas* or minor sins.

According to Yajñavalkya 13 they are:— stealing a priest's personal effects, non-payment of debts, not maintaining sacred fires (by one who is initiated to do so), trading²¹, the younger sibling marrying when the elder sibling is still single (*parivedana*), abetment of *parivedana*,²² giving the post of the head priest in a *yajña*, to a man guilty of *parivedana* (a younger son married before the elder), giving one's daughter to such a man in marriage, learning from an inferior teacher (when the best teachers are available), teaching a superior person²³, adultery, usury, sale of salt²⁴, contemptuous livelihood²⁵, misappropriation of a deposit, breaking of a

²¹ All forms of trade invariably lead to some degree of cheating - whether it be of the customer, suppliers or tax office.

²² The parents who agree to the *parivedana* marriage, the siblings and the priest who performs the marriage are all guilty.

²³ Teaching the children of royalty or nobility for example.

²⁴ Salt is essential to life and health and so like water, it should not be the subject of sale.

²⁵ Any livelihood which causes harm to other beings or the environment.

vow, engaging in the meat trade, sale of a cow, slaughtering of a cow, abandonment of a parent or a friend, sale of tanks and parks, selling of a daughter's ornaments, dishonesty, causing others to break their vow, capital ventures for selfish reasons, cohabitation with an alcoholic, forsaking of one's study of Vedas and sacred fires, abandoning a child or kinsmen, perusal of unbeneficial literature, selling of oneself or one's own wife (into bonded labor), all these are *Upa-pātakas*.

The Consequences of Sin

Both the Dharma Śāstra and Purāṇas give long exhaustive lists of the consequences of moral turpitude in terms of:—

1. This life — personal misfortune, sickness, loss of opportunities, disgrace, opprobrium etc.
2. Purgatory — a period of sojourn in one of the many hell-realms until the sin has been expiated. It is very significant that there is no concept in Hinduism of a permanent stay in hell or heaven — both are due to the merit or demerit of one's actions and therefore are of a limited duration. After expiating one's sins in purgatory, one is born again on earth to continue one's spiritual evolution.
3. Karma — all our actions have either positive or negative actions on others. The effect which we have on others comes back to us, either in this life or in the next incarnation. Our genetic predisposition and circumstances which arise in life, are thus considered to be a result of our previous actions.

The Cause of Sin

The Śāstras are almost unanimous in the declaration that the causes of all sin and moral turpitude are *kāmā* — self-centered desire, *krodha* — anger and *lobha* — greed. (Gīta 3:37) All these arise in the mind due to *avidya* (ignorance) and *sanga* (attachment).

Sin is not regarded as a direct affront to the Divine but rather as a hindrance to self-knowledge (*ātma-bodha*) and an obstacle to final liberation from samsara (*mokṣa*).

The practical reasons why people sin.

Causes of transgressions	Remedial Action
1. Ignorance (<i>ajñāna</i>) — they don't know what the proper course of action is, or what is right or wrong or the advantages and disadvantages of the proposed action. They simply didn't know that it was a sin	education, instruction
2. Delusion (<i>moha</i>) — wrong expectations, lack of self-awareness, delusive ideas about self, others and the goals, misunderstanding.	education
3. Stupidity (<i>mūḍhata</i>) — unable to comprehend the implications of their choices. Lack of insight and awareness. Lacking empathy and unable to recognize the cause and effect.	support, encouragement, guidance
4. Negligence (<i>pramāda</i>) — They know what is right but failed to act because they were under the influence of peers, drugs, alcohol, temporary loss of mindfulness or caring. Perhaps due either lack of	warnings, threats, and sanctions

conviction, distraction, failure to prioritize, tiredness, depression, laziness.

5. Wilfulness (*nr̥śamsya*) — a malicious desire to either harm oneself or the other, born of arrogance and delusion. They act willfully in order to cause harm to others out of hatred, extreme prejudice, for revenge or personal gain.

punishment, psychotherapy or social sanction and rejection.

Expiation of Sin

The Dharma Śāstras all contain a section called *prāyaścitta* which gives many and very detailed forms of atonement and expiation of *pātakas*, the most heinous crimes requiring suicide! According to some authors, no priests have the authority to prescribe penances in the Kali-yuga. But a knowledgeable person is free to choose an expiation if he wishes to do so.

The general gist is that it is *not* the forgiveness of God that is required but rather self-transformation of the sinner through:—

1. Pāpa-nivedana — confession which should be done before an assembly of priests and or the sacred fire.

2. Paścattāpa — repentance and sincere feeling of regret and a firm resolve not to repeat the sin.

3. Prāyaścitta — a penance, atonement or act of restoration which can take the form of undertaking to perform —

- charity (*dāna*)
- fasting (*upavāsa*)
- pilgrimage (*tīrtha-yātra*)
- A program of several days of self-discipline or austerity (*tapas*)
- A ceremony (*yajña*)
- Chanting mantras (*japa/stotra*)

All these programs require one to sleep on the ground for the duration of the period of the penance, to refrain from sexual activities, to avoid sleeping during the day and to avoid all entertainments and distractions.

1. **Charity** — giving clothing to the poor, feeding the homeless, serving meals, cleaning the homes of the aged, volunteering for SES, caring for the sick, giving cash donations to worthy causes etc. etc.
2. **Fasting** — refraining from eating food and drink on fixed days (every Monday for example) or undertaking a more structured fast:—

Pāda-kṛcchra – 4 days.

- On the 1st day — eat only one meal during day time
- On the 2nd day — eat once only at night
- On the 3rd day — eat once at any time, if one gets the food unasked
- On the 4th day — observe total fast.

Ardha-kṛccha – 6 days

- For three days eat only food obtained without asking for it,
- Complete fasting for another three days taking only fluids

Ati-kṛccha – 12 days

- For the first 3 days eat only one morsel²⁶ of food in the morning
- For the next 3 days eat one morsel of food in the evening
- For another 3 days eat one morsel of food received without asking
- For the last 3 days observe total fast water only.

Candrāyana

This is a universal expiation for almost any sin, especially where no other specific atonement has been prescribed. In this penance, the eating pattern follows the phases of the moon.

From Purnima (full-moon)

Starting from 15 morsels of food (per day) on the full moon, the amount is gradually reduced by one morsel every day, ending in total fasting on the new-moon day. Then it is again increased, from 1 to 15 morsels, till the full moon day. This is one cycle and it can be repeated as many times as needed.

From Amavāsya (new-moon)

Starting with one morsel on the first day after the new moon, increasing to 15 morsels on the full moon, and again reducing to nil on the new moon.

3. Pilgrimage (*tīrtha-yātra*) — one can undertake any pilgrimage of one's choice to any of the famous holy sites. A pilgrimage involves a number of disciplines:—

- celibacy
- vegetarianism or veganism
- fasting – eating once a day
- not sleeping during the day
- recitation of mantras
- travel on foot where possible
- bathing in the river or sacred pool associated with the holy place.
- Acts of charity at the holy place.

4. A program of penitence (*tapas*)

Penitence has many aspects such as regular fasting, giving up a beloved food item, celibacy, truthfulness, bathing thrice a day, wearing wet clothes until they dry up (on the body), sleeping on the ground, practicing absolute non-violence to any living creature, serving the guru etc. The period may extend from one month up to 12 months, depending on the nature of the sin and one's personal choice.

5. A ceremony (*yajña*). There are a few yajñas that are recommended by the śāstras which are specifically for the restoration of transgressions such as *Gaṇa-homa*, *Kuṣmāṇḍa-homa*, *Brahma-kūrca homa*, *gāyatri-homa* etc.

²⁶ A morsel is defined as the size of a large amalaki fruit or a golf-ball.

An annual public confession and restoration ceremony called the *Upakarma* is held for all those who have been initiated with the *gāyatri* mantra and the sacred thread. It is held on the full-moon before Krishna-jayanti.

6. Chanting mantras (*japa/stotra*) — after consulting a guru one may undertake to perform the recitation of a purificatory or restorative mantra for a number of days or a number of specific counts while observing the usual disciplines of celibacy etc. There are many stotras that also claim to purify the reciter of sin after the recitation a number of times.

The Vedic scriptures declare that one who is daily practicing *Sandhya Vandana* and the other *Nitya-karmas* is not affected by *pātakas*.

Āgamas teach that one who is engaged in the regular worship of the gods and goddesses and the regular chanting of mantras is untouched by the effects of sins (assuming that a person devotionally engaged will not be in the habit of committing sin!)

The Bhakti movements based on the *Gītā* and the *Purāṇas* teach that one who surrenders to the Divine is absolved of all sins.

Purification

And since all sin involves social and spiritual ‘contamination’ the restoration process also involves a purification ceremony of varying complexity depending on the gravity of the transgression.

The principle ceremony performed is the **Udaka Śānti**. So once the expiations and atonements are done the *udaka śānti* ceremony brings closure to the process of restoration.

This ceremony involves the consecration of jars of water by a number of priests chanting various selections from the Vedas. The sacred water is then used to bathe the penitent who is then spiritually reborn and socially reinstated.

SUMMARY.

Vyāsa in the *Mahābhārata* defines and summarizes sin in one short verse —

paropakāra puṇyāya pāpāya para-pīdanam

“virtue is any beneficial act and sin is any injurious act.”

So the gist of all *pāpa* is that they are intentional acts which cause suffering to other beings, and virtue is defined as any act which intentionally benefits another living being.

- *Pāpa* is not an affront against God but rather a hindrance to one’s spiritual progress. By performing injurious acts (*himsa*) we generate negative Karma which will then cause us future suffering which will hamper all attempts at self-realization (*ātma-bodha*) thus prolonging our stay in *samsāra*.
- *Pāpa* also is a barrier to our communion with the divine — God is always available to us as our very own inner Self (*antaryāmin*), but we ourselves create the barrier to God-realization through our negative and obstructive acts. His Grace is showering down perpetually, but we need to purify and prepare ourselves like well-scrubbed receptacles.

- *Pāpa* is spiritual contamination in that our minds are like mirrors reflecting our essential nature as *sat* (Being), *chit* (Consciousness), *ānanda* (Bliss), but selfish-desire, greed and anger etc. cloud the mirror of the mind and obstruct our knowledge and expression of our true nature. Spiritual practice *sādhana* is the remedy to purify the mind and assist in Self/God-realization.

The Nine types of Sins

1. **Mental sins** — believing in false doctrines i.e. clinging zealously to unexamined and irrational views, contemplating harming another.
2. **Speech** — lying to gain advantage, slander/abuse and malicious gossip
3. **Body** — sexual misconduct, stealing, hurting other beings (creatures as well as trees etc.) not assisting others in time of need.

nāvīrato duṣcaritān nāśānto nāsamāhitaḥ |
nāśānta-mānaso vā'pi prajñānenainam āpnuyāt ||

Katha 1:24. One who has not desisted from bad conduct, who is not restrained, nor one without concentration, nor even one whose mind is not still, can not gain Wisdom even though learned beyond compare.

Loka-saṅgraha

te prāpnuvanti mām-eva sarva-bhūta-hite-ratāḥ || Gita 12:4 ||

They too come to Me alone who are always intent on the welfare of all beings.

gacchatis-tiṣṭhato vāpi jāgrataḥ svapato na cet |
sarva sattva hitārthāya paśor-iva viceṣṭitam ||

If we don't dedicate all our actions, while walking, or standing, while sleeping or awake, for the benefit of all beings then we act like animals.

paropakārāya phalanti vṛikṣāḥ paropakārāya vahanti nadyaḥ |
paropakārāya duhanti gāvaḥ paropakārāya śarīram etat ||

Trees bear fruit for the benefit of others, Rivers flow for the benefit of others; Cows produce milk for the benefit of others — This body is meant for the benefit of others.

Appendix

THE HINDU HELLS

All the great civilizations have notions of heaven and hell. The difference between the Christian/Islamic hells and the Hindu/Buddhist hells is that the latter are not eternal and are means for fast-tracking a massive accumulation of really bad Karma!! The other difference is that there is no thought crime in the Dharmic religions and in the Christian/Islamic hells it is *only* for the crime of disbelief that one will suffer and endure eternal torture, not for anything else! In Post-puranic Vedanta, hell is not a subject that is either taught or dwelt upon and for most Hindus today Hell is merely a curiosity. So for your interest and education in traditional values, we provide you with the names of the Hells and the reasons for being sent there by Lord Yama. Some of the reasons are obvious and others would be considered really bizarre today! The punishment in the hells suits the crime — for example, a person who cuts down trees and destroys the environment goes to a hell called *asi-patra-vana* — which means the 'sword-leaf hell' where he is made to wander through a forest of dense trees all with leaves like sharp-blades until he has expiated his crime, he is then reborn on earth to continue his spiritual evolution. Two versions of Hell are given.

Viṣṇu Purāṇa Book 2 Chap 6

<i>raurava</i>	False witness - those guilty or perjury.
<i>rodham</i>	abortionists, those who plunder villages and hamlets, cow-killers, stranglers.
<i>sūkara</i>	all those guilty of the five great sins (<i>pañca mahā pātakas</i>)
<i>tāla</i>	murderers, one who seduces his teacher's wife.
<i>tapta-kumbha</i>	those who commit incest with their sister, the killer of an ambassador
<i>tapta-loha</i>	the seller of his wife, a jailer, a horse-dealer, a guru who deserts his disciples.
<i>mahajvāla</i>	one who commits incest with his daughter or daughter-in-law,
<i>lavana</i>	one treats his guru with disrespect, abusive of elders, reviler of the Vedas, (or one who sells them) one who has intercourse with women who are of a prohibited degree.
<i>vimohana</i>	a career thief, and one who cavils at prescribed observances.
<i>kṛmi-bhakṣa</i>	one who is inimical to his father, the brahmins, the gods, or one who counterfeits precious gems.
<i>kṛmiṣa</i>	one who harms others through black-magic
<i>lālābhakṣa</i>	one who eats before offering food to the gods, ancestors or to guests.
<i>vedhaka</i>	an arrow-maker
<i>viṣasana</i>	a person who manufactures arms or engages in the arms trade.
<i>adhomukha</i>	a maker of unlawful gifts, one who makes unlawful sacrifices, and an astrologer who deceives his clients.
<i>pūya-vāha</i>	one who eats sweets alone, a priest who sells lac, flesh, alcohol, sesame or salt; a violent person, one who rears cats, dogs, goats, cocks, pigs or birds.
<i>rudhirandha</i>	stage-performers, fishermen, a poisoner, an informer, one who lives by

	prostituting his wife, one who attends to secular affairs on the <i>parva</i> days, an arsonist, a treacherous friend, a soothsayer, one who performs ceremonies for rustics, and the seller of soma.
<i>vaitaraṇi</i>	the destroyer of a bee-hive, pillager of a hamlet.
<i>kṛṣṇa</i>	a person who makes others impotent, people who don't attend to personal hygiene, all types of con-men
<i>asipatravana</i>	those who cut down trees or destroy the environment.
<i>vahni-jvāla</i>	shepherds, hunters & potters.
<i>sandansa</i>	the breaker of a vow, or the rules of his (monastic) order
<i>śva-bhojana</i>	the brahmachari (vedic student) who sleeps and is defiled during the day, and those who are taught by their children.

Śrīmad Bhagavatam Skandha 5:26

<i>tāmisra</i>	those who deprive others of their wealth, children, wives etc.
<i>andhatāmisra</i>	adulterers
<i>raurava</i>	one who persecutes other creatures for sustaining the body and family
<i>mahāraurava</i>	one who is unrighteous and concerned for his personal welfare alone
<i>kumbhīpāka</i>	those who eat animals alive or cut off pieces of flesh from live animals.
<i>kālasūtra</i>	those who commit atrocities against their parents, holy men, and the Vedas
<i>asipatravana</i>	those who abandon their dharma based on the Vedas, and voluntarily join atheistic groups.
<i>sūkara-mukha</i>	rulers, judges or officials who punish innocent people
<i>andhakūpa</i>	one who injures lower life forms for selfish purpose.
<i>kṛimi-bhojana</i>	those who eat food alone without offering to other creatures and to the guests
<i>vajra-kantaka-śalmali</i>	people who have sex with animals
<i>vaitarani</i>	rulers and officials who disregard the laws of ethics and moral conduct. Those who keep concubines and indulge in shameless, unrestrained sensuality.
<i>vaisasa</i>	those who organize fake yajñas and sacrifice animals in them.
<i>retaḥ-kulya</i>	those who force women to perform oral sex.
<i>sārameyadāna</i>	military personnel who pillage villages, poison wells and perform atrocities.
<i>avīcimat</i>	habitual liars and false witnesses, priests who regularly drink alcohol
<i>kṣāra-kardama</i>	pretenders to eminence who insult the wise and pious, those who are involved in human sacrifice
<i>dantasūka</i>	those who terrorize creatures, killing them or suffocating them
<i>śūcimukha</i>	misers and stingy people.