HINDU CONCEPTS OF SIN

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 (akūśala 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 (jīvaṁtan) 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), daksīra (bad deeds), drugdhā (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 — ṛtām. 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 — Brahma 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 (adhibhūtām)
2. The correct and ordered way of the cult of the gods (yajña) (adhidīvatām)
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.
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

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1 yajña vā ṛtasya yonih (S.B.1.3.4.16) Yajña (reciprocal exchange of energy) is the matrix of Rita.
2 saha yajțaḥ prajțḥ sṛṣṭvā purovāca prajāpatiḥ ā anena prasaviyadhvam 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 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 Śūdra. 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).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>pataniya</th>
<th>aśucikara</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crimes whereby one becomes an abhiśasta(^4)</td>
<td>Cohabitation of a noble woman with commoners,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete loss (by neglect) of the Vedic</td>
<td>Cohabitation of noble men with commoners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning that one secured by study and</td>
<td>Eating the flesh of forbidden</td>
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<tr>
<td>memorization.</td>
<td>animals such as that of a dog or a human</td>
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<td></td>
<td>being or village cocks and pigs or other</td>
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<td></td>
<td>carnivorous animals,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Eating the excrement of human beings</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Partaking of food left over by</td>
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<td></td>
<td>persons other than parents or gurus.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grand larceny</td>
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<tr>
<td>Drinking of <em>sura</em> — alcoholic beverages.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Causing abortion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Incest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual misconduct — intercourse with the</td>
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<tr>
<td>female friend of one's female guru (mother etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>or with the female friend of one's guru (father etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>and with the wife of any stranger.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant commission of immoral acts (adharma).</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\(^3\) 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:—

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>pataniya</th>
<th>upa-pātaka</th>
<th>aśucikara</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Making voyages by sea</td>
<td>• Sex with a proscribed female.</td>
<td>• Gambling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Stealing the property of a priest</td>
<td>• Sex with the female friend of a female guru or with the female friend of a male guru</td>
<td>• Engaging in black magic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Misappropriating a deposit</td>
<td>• Sex with a female outcast.</td>
<td>• Subsisting by gleaning corn fallen in the field</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Giving false evidence regarding land (disputes)</td>
<td>• Practicing medicine.</td>
<td>• Subsisting by handouts after graduating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Trading with merchandise of all descriptions</td>
<td>• Officiating as a village priest.</td>
<td>• Staying for more than four months at his teacher’s seminary after graduation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Serving lower classes</td>
<td>• Earning a living through theatre and drama.</td>
<td>• Practicing astrology as a profession.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Begetting a child on a commoner</td>
<td>• Violating virgins.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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), prāssangika (due to association or contact with offenders) and upa-pātaka (minor sins).

The Viśnu-dharma-sūtra (33.3-5) speaks of nine kinds of transgressions viz. ati-pātaka, mahā-pātaka, anu-pātaka, upa-pātaka, jāti-bhraṅśa-kaṭa (social-expulsion), saṅkāri-kaṇaṇa, (drop in social status), apāṭri-kaṇana (rendering the perpetrator unworthy of receiving gifts), mala-vāha (causing defilement) and prakīṛṇaka (miscellaneous).

Manu-smriti 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. 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.

Exceptions

One important question that very much exercised the minds of ancient and medieval Dharma-sāstra lawyers is whether one can justifiably kill a brāhmaṇa ātātāyin (a member of the brāhmin 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 ātātāyin 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 woman who was in her period (ātreyi) are equal to brahmāhatyā.

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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 kārtā), 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 (anugrāhaka) 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 noprayascitta 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 Manu.

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

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

**Contemporary Application.**

Seeing that in modern western pluralistic society the pre-mediated killing of a learned priest is a non-issue, the definition of brahma-hatyā should be extended to cover all acts of pre-mediated 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 kinds, viz. that prepared from molasses (gauḍi), from grain (paiṣṭi) 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. But, according to Vishnu Dharma Sūtra a priest drinking surā of the gauḍi 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 Smriti 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.

\[\text{8 Manu 11:56.} \]
\[\text{9 Brihaspati Smriti, 68} \]
\[\text{10 Manusmriti 11:94} \]
\[\text{11} \text{Gautama II. 25} ‘\text{madyam nityam brähmanah}’ \text{and Ap. Dh. S. I. 5. 17-21);} \]
\[\text{12 The Vishnu Dh. S. (22. 83-84) specifies ten kinds of madhya (intoxicants) prepared from sugar, madhuka flowers, flour, molasses, dates, grapes, jack fruit, coconuts, honey.} \]
Equivalent Tansgressions

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 Manu\textsuperscript{13}.

Taking prohibited food, low and base acts, and kissing a menstruating woman are all akin to drinking of surā according to Yajñavalkya\textsuperscript{14}.

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 sakaśāyam svar-arogyam pratiḥār varṇakṛślaghu
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 pittārad-ūṣnam krṣa-sthūlaphitam rūṣam
It regulates / steadies sleep, can also aggravate pīṭha and blood. It steadies weight, removes dampness from tissues,

sūṣman srotov-oṣdotham vāt-ślesma-haram yuktyā pīṭam 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, sūrāsthrānam, aṣṭānga hṛdayam of vāgbhaṭṭa)

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-pāṇam.

\textsuperscript{13} Manuṣmriti 11:57.
\textsuperscript{14} Yajñavalkya Smṛti 13:8
3. **Suvarṇa-Steya — Grand Larceny**

*Steya* 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.

Kātyāyana & Vyāsa define it as ‘depriving a person of property’, 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 Vārsyāyani 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 Tansgressions**

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 Manu.

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### Contemporary Application.

Suvarṇa-steya 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-talpaga — Sexual Misconduct**

Guru-talpaga or Gurvanganāgamaḥ (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 gurvanga means sex with one’s own mother.

**Equivalent Tansgressions**

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.

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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 Manusmriti 11:58.
Nārada\textsuperscript{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, 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.\textsuperscript{19}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contemporary Application.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>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 communities.\textsuperscript{20}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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.</td>
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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

\textsuperscript{17} Manusmriti 11:59.  
\textsuperscript{18} stripumsayoga, verses 73-75  
\textsuperscript{19} Yajñavalkya 13:9 -12  
\textsuperscript{20} Southerners do allow marriage with a maternal cousin.
yājana must relate to such Vedic sacrifices as Darśa-pūrṇamāsa, Cāturmāśya, Agniṣṭoma. Helping a mahā-pātakin to perform the five daily Yajñas or teaching him the āṅgas (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,
perusial of unbenefficial 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causes of transgressions</th>
<th>Remedial Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ignorance (ajñāna) — 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</td>
<td>education, instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Delusion (moha) — wrong expectations, lack of self-awareness, delusive ideas about self, others and the goals, misunderstanding.</td>
<td>education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Stupidity (mūḍhata) — unable to comprehend the implications of their choices. Lack of insight and awareness. Lacking empathy and unable to recognize the cause and effect.</td>
<td>support, encouragement, guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Negligence (pramāda) — 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</td>
<td>warnings, threats, and sanctions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
conviction, distraction, failure to prioritize, tiredness, depression, laziness.

5. Wilfulness (nṛṣaṁsyā) — 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.

**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-kṛcchra** – 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 morsel 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 Amavasya (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 śastras which are specifically for the restoration of transgressions such as Gaṇa-homa, Kuṣmāṇḍa-homa, Brahma-kürca homa, gāyatri-homa etc.

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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 in 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 *pātas*.

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 pūnyāya pāpāya para-piṇanam*

“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 (*hiṃsa*) we generate negative Karma which will then causes 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.

\[
\text{nāvīrato duścitān nāśanto nāṣamāhitaḥ} \\
\text{nāśānta-mānaso vā'pi prajñānenāinam āpnuyāt} \]

*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

\[
\text{te prāpnuvanti mām-eva sarva-bhūta-hite-ratāh}  \]

*Gita 12:4.*

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

\[
\text{gacchatis-tiṣṭhato vāpi jāgrataḥ svapato na cet}  \\
\text{sarva sattva hitārthāya paśor-iva viceṣṭitam} \]

*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.*

\[
\text{paropakārāya phalanti vṛksāḥ paropakārāya vahanti nadyāḥ}  \\
\text{paropakārāya duhanti gāvah paropakārāya śarāram etat} \]

*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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>raurava</td>
<td>False witness - those guilty of perjury.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rodham</td>
<td>abortionists, those who plunder villages and hamlets, cow-killers, stranglers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suśkara</td>
<td>all those guilty of the five great sins (pañca mahā pātakas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tāla</td>
<td>murderers, one who seduces his teacher’s wife.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tapa-kumbha</td>
<td>those who commit incest with their sister, the killer of an ambassador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tapa-loha</td>
<td>the seller of his wife, a jailer, a horse-dealer, a guru who deserts his disciples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mahajvāla</td>
<td>one who commits incest with his daughter or daughter-in-law,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lavana</td>
<td>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.</td>
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<tr>
<td>vimohana</td>
<td>a career thief, and one who cavils at prescribed observances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kṛmi-bhäkṣa</td>
<td>one who is inimical to his father, the brahmins, the gods, or one who counterfeits precious gems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kṛmiśa</td>
<td>one who harms others through black-magic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lālābhākṣa</td>
<td>one who eats before offering food to the gods, ancestors or to guests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vedhaka</td>
<td>an arrow-maker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>viṣasana</td>
<td>a person who manufactures arms or engages in the arms trade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adhomukha</td>
<td>a maker of unlawful gifts, one who makes unlawful sacrifices, and an astrologer who deceives his clients.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pūya-vāha</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rudhirandha</td>
<td>stage-performers, fishermen, a poisoner, an informer, one who lives by</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
prostituting his wife, one who attends to secular affairs on the *parva* days, an arsonist, a treacherous friend, a soothsayer, one who performs ceremonies for rustics, and the seller of soma.

| vaśītaraṇī | the destroyer of a bee-hive, pillager of a hamlet. |
| krṣṇa | a person who makes others impotent, people who don't attend to personal hygiene, all types of con-men |
| asipatravana | those who cut down trees or destroy the environment. |
| vahni-jvāla | shepherds, hunters & potters. |
| sandansa | the breaker of a vow, or the rules of his (monastic) order |
| śva-bhojana | the brahmacari (vedic student) who sleeps and is defiled during the day, and those who are taught by their children. |

Śrimad Bhagavatam  Skandha 5:26

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