

KARMA AND REBIRTH – ITS IMPACT ON MODERN PERIOD.

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ABSTRACT: In the Indian philosophical tradition the doctrine of ‘Karma and Rebirth’ is considered as one of the cardinal concept. The doctrine of karma is common to almost all traditional as well as contemporary Indian philosophical and religious systems. It is accepted as the dominating force throughout the all ages. The role of karma has been significant for Indian thought and its influence on mind is profound and for reaching that it has been regarded as the back-bone of Indian philosophy. The term ‘Karma’ is derived from Sanskrit ‘Kr’ which means ‘to do’. Thus etymologically karma means deed, work or action and designated any kind of work. And the term ‘Rebirth’ means ‘punarjanma’, referring to a “succession of births”. In Indian thought karma means the chain that binds man to the wheel of birth and rebirth. Therefore rebirth is the corollary of individual actions. Thus karma and rebirth are interrelated to each other. One is meaningless without the other.

In the early periods, karma theory refers only religious offerings and sacrifices that are performed to achieve the blessings of God and also expedite for the sins of one’s own and his ancestors. But in the latter periods, karma doctrine became a full-fledged doctrine that develops itself into a logical, metaphysical and moral principle. As a logical principle, karma stood for the strict causal necessity between actions and their fruits. As a metaphysical principle, karma has established the immortality of the soul, and as a moral principle karma explained the diversity of men in regard to their character and fortunes.

Hence an attempt is made here to know the relation between karma and rebirth and the impact of them to the present day society.

KEY WORDS: karma, rebirth, good, evil, action, law, cause, effect.

INTRODUCTION: Indian philosophy gives emphasis to the importance of karma conduct. Man is a being that shapes his destiny through his own deeds, words and thoughts. Every action that he does has its own definite consequences in his personality. In the moral world the law of karma is the application of the law of cause and effect. No action is exhausted without producing its effects both in the body and the mind. According to Dr. Radhakrishnan, “sometimes the law of karma is interpreted as the law of conservation of moral energy.”(Indian philosophy, vol -1, p-244) Again it is said that karma is the law of conservation of moral values, merits and demerits of action. This law of conservation means that there is no loss of effects of work done and that there is no happening of events to a person except as the result of his own work. Sri Aurobindo states that “karma is not merely a mechanical law of antecedent and consequence. Karma is action, there is a thing done and a doer and an action, consequence, and these three are the three joints, the three locks, the three ‘Sandhis’ of the co nexus of karma.”(The Problem of Rebirth, p-118)

The origin of karma and rebirth is found in the Vedic concept of Rta. The principle of Rta is understood as responsible for the order and regularity of the universe. In the Upanishads we find a more developed view regarding karma and rebirth. The doctrine is merely discussed in the Chandogya, Bridaranyaka and Katha Upanishades. According to the Upanishads, karma means the connecting link between desire and rebirth, that desire is the root cause of rebirth. And in the Bhagavad Gita, we also find reference to this doctrine. According to the Gita, karma is the cause of bondage and it is through the niskama karma one can get liberation.

Regarding the belief in this doctrine of “Karma and Rebirth”, we see that almost all the orthodox and heterodox schools save Carvaka materialists, have deep belief in it. They all believe that karma is the only cause of rebirth. Man is reborn for the fulfillment of karma. According to them, good actions secure a higher and better position in the next birth. On the other hand, bad actions secure a lower position. They also said that the human actions are held to generate force, which is the motive power behind the wheel of rebirth and death. But the Carvaka materialists have no specific theory on karma and rebirth, because for Carvaka, the only means of knowledge is perception. In that sense, everything beyond the direct sense perception is not acceptable to Carvaka. But the Buddhist formulated to

definite and precise view on karma and rebirth, even without accepting a permanent soul. According to the Buddhists, rebirth is an appearance of the continuation with a particular form that has laid down. Therefore it is in terms of law of karma that this continuity is explained by the Buddhists. Jainism maintains that merely karma does not mean a deed or work or a mystical invisible force.

Like the traditional thinkers, modern thinkers also discuss about this doctrine. For them, karma is the only cause of the repeated rebirths. According to the traditional thinkers the concept of karma, rebirth, immortality of soul etc. are beyond the grasp of ordinary experience or of the intellect. On the other hand, modern thinkers keep on relating these notions to actual life and experience.

Among the modern thinkers Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Dr. Radhakrishnan, Mahatma Gandhi are main. Vivekananda accepts the doctrine of karma that has been followed by rebirth. He said that the cause of all diversities and inequalities which we see in our world is due to our karma. According to Mahatma Gandhi, “whatever a man sows, that shall be reaped.” For him, the doctrine of karma with its corollary rebirth is only an application of the theory of means and ends. Thus both of them are equally important.

According to Sri Aurobindo, there is a necessary relation between karma and rebirth. He wrote, ‘The ancient idea of karma was inseparably connected with a belief in the soul’s continual rebirth in new bodies. And this close connection was not a mere accident, but a perfectly intelligible and indeed and inevitable union of two related truths, which are needed each other’s completeness and can with difficulty exist in separation. These two things are the soul side and nature side of one and the same cosmic sequence. Rebirth is meaningless without karma and karma has no rational and moral justification if it is not an instrumentality for the sequences of the soul’s continuous experience. If we believe that the soul is repeatedly reborn in the body, we must believe also that there is some link between the lives that proceeded and the lives that follows and the past of the soul has an effect on its future.’

Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, like the other modern Indian thinkers is another exponent of this doctrine i.e. karma and rebirth. Radhakrishnan maintains that if the law of karma is a fact, then rebirth is a necessity. If the self is not produced by the body, it need not end when the body is destroyed. The death of the physical body does not mean dissipation of the self and also discontinuity. If everything else in nature arises from something continuous with it and passes into something also continuous with it, the self is also not an exception to the general scheme. He also said that the mechanism of rebirth is difficult to understand fully. For him, man cannot exhaust all the potentialities of life in a single life. It is also true that nothing is to be left. Thus man has to enjoy the fruits of his present deeds. Therefore he has to take birth after birth for the realization of the fruits of all his deeds performed.

Hence we see that the traditional thinkers as well as the modern thinkers have firm belief in the doctrine of karma and rebirth. Their comments are almost same but the way that they present it is different. Now a question may arise that is there any relevance to this doctrine of karma and rebirth in the present day society or in the day of technology? Regarding this question we can say that this doctrine has relevance today. And from various perspectives, this relevance is discussed. They are religious, moral, metaphysical and social. It is obvious that the impact of the doctrine of karma and rebirth is not only in the modern society but in the past history also. The philosophy of this doctrine is so common and popular among masses and its vitality is such that it moulds the pattern of individual and social action irrespective of caste, creed, education, status of life etc. to which the people belong.

The doctrine of karma and rebirth is considered as the basic tenets of religion. The basic assumption of this doctrine is that the soul’s immortality is one of the targets of the metaphysicians. This doctrine touches the pulse of the common man very effectively i.e. as he sows, so he reaps. Karma and rebirth allows the freedom of action, which is one of the subject matter of ethics. This doctrine makes man subjective in determining his destiny. It glances back into the past, while considering present as the result of the past and it looks forward to a bright future, while considering that future will be the result of the present. It teaches us to adopt a spirit of resignation for the past and hope for the future. It preaches us that ‘let the past bury it is dead and urges’ act in the living present. Though we are helpless in relation to past, we are masters of the future. The fruits of the past are there to bind and obstruct us, but we should go on destroying them by our present deeds. We are responsible for what we are, and whatever we wish ourselves to be we have the power to make ourselves.

The physical environment of our present life is like the game of cards. Because we cannot choice the physical environment in which we have been placed. But we can make the best use of it. The cards in the game of life are given to us, we do not select them. They are sketched to our past actions, but we are free to play them in whatever manner we like. It depends on us or on our will. We can play it either properly to win this game or wrongly to lose it. In the same way we are provided the opportunities to make our life sublime and to rise up. But on the other hand if we misuse these opportunities, we are alone responsible for it. Therefore we can say that the doctrine of ‘karma and rebirth’ make us responsible and enlighten us in our duties.

Moreover, karma-rebirth doctrine brings hope in our life as it encourages us to endure our sufferings and evils with the belief that our misfortunes are the results of our own past actions. According to this doctrine, if present actions within our knowledge do not seem to have caused us then our past actions are accounted for that responsibility. In this situation we are able to bear the sufferings with all courage and confidence also. Again this doctrine teaches us that it is not karma that rewards and punishes us, but it is we who rewards or punishes ourselves. Nothing can be created or designated by karma, only we can plan and perform everything. It also maintains that every moment we are making our character and shaping our destiny. Thus it is evident that for empirical existence this doctrine is considered as quite stimulating and encouraging.

Regarding the social and ethical relevance, this theory tries to make an order out of the divers and confusing manifestation of the world. Hence it attempts to place the strong foundations of ethics. The karma-rebirth doctrine is based on a comprehensive and consistent view of human personality that comprising its present, past and future. This doctrine inspires us to

undertake efforts to improve our future conditions that mean to perform good actions. In order to acquire good results in the next world, a man should undertake various works of the public importance. On the social side, this doctrine encourages the spirit of non-violence in society. This doctrine suggests that by injuring others, we injure ourselves means we have to face the consequences of this bad action. Therefore, people refrain from killing or eating any animal, because they fear that they might not be reincorporated with the same treatment in the next birth. It also attempts to end the vicious circle if begun and promotes brotherhood in the society.

In the modern period, we are getting much more materialistic in thought and deed day by day. Therefore in this materialistic situation, everyone becomes more and more selfish. In these days artificial wants are being created. Even the purer sections of the society desires to have these wants satisfied, but when it cannot; it struggles and dies in struggles. The karma-rebirth doctrine can prove to be of significant help, that it presents a proper ideal for the people to follow. It allows the materialistic enjoyments to occupy only the due place in society and has the vitality of producing purer and gentle society. Thus, the significant role of this doctrine is that it helps in producing the sage type people by purifying the minds of the people from all sorts of impurities. Therefore we can boldly say that in the present day situations the karma-rebirth doctrine has definite relevance. Hence we cannot deny it.

CONCLUSION: When we discuss about the doctrine of karma we find a harmonious reconciliation between freedom and determinism. Here we do not find any adequate ground to hold that freedom is incompatible with the law of karma. The law of karma does not accept the argument that there is no possibility of free actions. Those who claim that karma is incompatible with that the former as a causal doctrine and thereby maintains that causality is incompatible with freedom. In agreement with the results of modern science and philosophy, we do not hold causal relation as a necessary, relation. But we do admit that there is an element of necessity relating to cause and effect on which the entire scientific knowledge is based. For example, in quantum theory, individual events do not always have a well-defined cause. The jump of an electron from one atomic orbit to another or the decay of a subatomic particle may occur spontaneously without any single event causing it. We can never predict them as to when and how such a phenomenon is going to happen. We can predict its probability only. It means that there is no necessity behind cause-effect relationship. At the same time, this does not mean that the atomic events occur in a completely arbitrary fashion. It means only that they are not governed by local cause. Since we do not know these connections precisely, we have to replace the narrow classical notion of cause and effect by the wider concept of statistical causality.

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