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## **Theory of Karma as a Dogma of Indian Philosophy** S.M Rizwanah

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### **Abstract**

In classical Indian Philosophy, the doctrine of karma is regarded to be one of the most essential and fundamental doctrine. Among all the schools of Indian philosophy, it is only the C ārvāka who does not believe in the doctrine of karma. In many schools of Indian religions, karma is closely connected with the idea of rebirth. The law of karma holds that every action, physical or mental, has its own outcomes which must be faced either in this present life or in the lives to come. When we perform good deeds, it refers to good karmas and future happiness and bad karma results when we do bad actions or deeds. Karma is always maintained in the religious, ethical, cultural and philosophical thoughts of the Hindus, the Jainas and the Buddhas. These systems utilize this doctrine so as to elaborate different instances that are found both in the living and the non-living worlds. They admit that the root cause of bondage is karma and ignorance. In all the system of Indian Philosophy i.e. both in the orthodox and the heterodox schools, the doctrine of karma differs. Thus, in this paper I am going to discuss about their characterization of the doctrine of karma that differs from one school to another.

**Key words:** *karma, dogma, Indian philosophy, Ātmā, saṃsāra*

### **What is 'Karma'?**

In Sanskrit, the term 'Karma' means 'action' and this term is used to indicate those action that are done by personal choice as well as the forces that emerge from these acts. In corresponding to classical Indian philosophy, the term karma is responsible for the whole chain of rebirth, causes and effect. Also, the notions of *Samsāra, mukti*, rebirth are closely connected with the doctrine of karma. Under the law of karma, the evil, the hardening influence of repetition which undermines the effective freedom of the self in the conscious, sub-conscious and unconscious mind of human beings are included. So, the human mind lacks the ability to locate himself free from the effects of their actions. The past life is the beginning of the present as well as for the future. But karma differs from one person to another. Thus, these arguments imparts that how people are bound to clear their all actions of destiny or the joyfulness that the person is receiving pleasure is the result of his own karma. In the light of Pratiṭyasamutpāda i.e. dependent origination, Buddha also tries to explain that "whatever we are is because of past action" Buddha gave this theory to show the non-eternal character of the world i.e. attachment is the cause of all miseries.

### **Concept of Karma in Buddhism**

Buddhism believes largely in the doctrine of universal change and impermanence ( *Anityatā* )<sup>1</sup>, doctrine of momentary (*Kṣaṇabhāṅgavāda*)<sup>2</sup> and the doctrine of non-existence of soul. They negate the concept of a permanent soul. It propagates that

<sup>1</sup> J. N. Sinha, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, New Central Book Agency, Calcutta, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 1985, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> C.D Sharma, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*, Motilal Banarsidas, p.74

everything in anthropocentric and the non-anthropocentric world will dissipate sooner or later. Thus, the transmigration of soul is impossible. According to Buddhism, everything that exists in the world is conditional, dependent and relative and therefore, it is subject to birth and death. Also, they do not admit that karma is regulated by God because God does not determine the moral value of our actions. For Buddhism, karma is possible without involving any permanent conscious agency, i.e. *Ātmā*. In order to function the law of karma, there is no need of any external agency because it itself governs the relation of action and its fruit without involving any external agent. According to them, soul is a bundle of five *Skandhas*, i.e. matter, feeling, perception, disposition and consciousness. For Buddhism there is no identity of doer and the experiencer. It admits that a person may not get the result of his action because he is perishable. Also, it claims that a man may get some result which might not be the result of his action. So, because of this reason, allocation of responsibility cannot be fixed mechanically in Buddhism. In Buddhism, it is considered that karma is nothing but birth, death, pleasure, pain. It also admits that so far as karma operates no one can proclaim to be free from all these sufferings. Since there is no freedom in any of the actions, it has to be got rid of. So, as soon as true knowledge emerges, all karmas are abandoned and become non-existent and are not likely to appear again in future.

#### **Perception of karma in Hinduism**

So far as the theory of karma is concerned, the perception of Hinduism and Buddhism are quite same. For Hinduism, Karma designates a person's deeds which may be good or bad. Thus, a person is responsible for a series of causes and effects and Lord Krishna discussed this philosophy in Bhagavad Gītā. Further, it admits that karma determines the rebirth and reincarnation. In this context Hinduism points out that rebirth proceeds from a man's desire to enjoy the worldly pleasure and satisfaction. Thus the soul which is immortal goes by leaving one body and enters another. Hinduism states that the person seeks salvation after many births. Hinduism differs from Buddhism on the concept of rebirth as the latter negates the existence of an immortal soul or 'ātma'.

#### **Jainas concept of Karma**

Jainism believes that the concept of karma does not rely on any moral administrator of the world i.e. God. It admits that the concept of karma is an impersonal law which acts by itself without involving any external agency. So, there is no need of any divine agency to produce karma *phala* because karma *phala* automatically follows from karma without needing any agency. The Jainas consider that through the action of body, speech and mind, karma is produced technically. In contrast with Buddhism, Jainism admits that the agent of action i.e. self is permanent and also it is beyond production and destruction in its essence. The fruits of karma do not decrease before its doer experiences it. The doer of action receives the fruits of his action sooner or later. The Jainas state that an individual is entirely responsible for his birth, death and suffering because whatever the individual receives is because of his past action. The person who performs good action gets good result and the person who performs bad action gets bad result. So far as the theory of karma is concerned Jainism differs from Hinduism. For Jainism, karma is a subtle matter which is not perceptible and which demolishes the soul from its spiritual height. But for Jainism and Hinduism, karma is not a subtle matter and it can be understood as non-material or without form. The Jainism holds that in the name of karma *phala* whatever we suffer or enjoy is something as material pain or pleasure. According to Jainism, karma is considered as a special kind of material particle which is real but not metaphysical. Karma enters into the soul and binds it with the body. It also admits that karma particles enter into the souls and gather in it depending upon the good and bad actions. Jainas also consider that the soul in its intrinsic nature has infinite faith, infinite knowledge, infinite bliss and power. All the souls have consciousness but depending on the obstacle of karma the degree of their consciousness differs. For Jainism, it is impossible to perform an action without a doer. When we destruct karmic particles of the soul, there is possibility of *Mukti* in Jainism but still, the soul dissociation from karma is never conceived as impossible. Through right knowledge, right faith and conduct the soul can be dissociated from karma and body. Jainism admits that when the soul gets fatigued from the karmic particles by means of right knowledge and

action then it is consider that the soul reflects light of infinite knowledge, power and bliss. Thus, the soul goes beyond the world i.e. at the highest part of the world and resides there.

### **Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and Mimāṃsā views on the concept of karma**

Sāṅkhya accepts the difference of *kartā* and *bhokā*. It indicates that this school coincides with Buddhism but it disagrees from the other Indian school like Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Mimāṃsā, and Vedānta. Sāṅkhya admits that *prakṛti* i.e. and unconscious being, performs an action but it does not obtain the result of her action because the result of her action is fulfilled by a conscious being i.e. *Puruṣa* or self who is not capable of performing an action by giving its own nature. For this school, karma is the function of *Guṇas* of *prakṛti* and it does not matter whether the karma is good or bad or indifferent. It also admits that on one hand a man who performs good action goes to heaven and on the other those who performs bad action goes to hell. Also it states that karma does not lead to liberation but it always leads to bondage. This is because liberation is not possible by karma but it is also possible through knowledge and it does not matter whether the action is performing in an attached manner or unattached manner. So far as theory of karma is concern Yoga differs from Sāṅkhya. Yoga point out that God is not governed by karma because God is higher than the law of karma. But God does not preserve a moral order of the entire universe because God does not punish or reward us based on our merit or de-merits of action. In this regard, yoga accepts Buddhism, Sāṅkhya and Jainism but it disagree with *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika*. For *Nyāya Vaiśeṣika*, God is the moral administrator of the universe. They also admits on the doctrine of karma cannot function itself, so it depends on God. So, it is the God who maintained a moral order of the entire universe and he reward or punish according to our merits or de-merits of actions. The word “karma” is something used to denote not only to an action but it is also used to denote the result of action. These two words i.e. action and the result of action are not separable even if this two words differs from each other. The relation between them is a constant relation and the fruits produce by them are of three fold. So, it provides the agent a suitable reward or punishment and also it prescribes the doer’s nature. In classical Indian philosophy, those action which puts impression or tendency in the doer is called as *saṃskāra* and here mimāṃsā calls it as *Apūrva*. For Mimāṃsā, *Apūrva* is an unseen power and they believe in the theory of karma as an *Apūrva*. Mimāṃsā conceived *Apūrva* as a link between the action and its result. So, in the action, *Apūrva* is the causal potency which directs to its fructification. Thus, on the one hand it may be regarded as the imperceptible antecedent of the fruit and on the other, it may be regarded as the after state of the act. So far as the existence of God is concerned, Mimāṃsā does not believe in the existence of God as the mediator between the action and its fruits. But they are of the opinion that the result or fruits of action automatically comes from karma and also without involving God, karma has a causal potency to generate its karma *phala*. Mimāṃsā, in this regard, approves with Jainism, Buddhism, and sāṅkhya-yoga. Mimāṃsā also admits that karma and ignorance is the root cause of our bondage. In this context, Mimāṃsā maintains out that if the impediments of karma are not removed, then it is impossible for the soul to be dissociated from the senses, body and the mind and thus, it cannot reflect in its real nature.

### **Advaita Vedānta on the doctrine of karma**

Like, Sāṅkhya, Advaita Vedānta admits that through karma, *mokṣa* is impossible. It points out that it is only possible through knowledge. It says though karma enables us to purify our mind but it does not direct us to liberation. Also it admits that *mokṣa* is possible without karma but *mokṣa* is not possible without knowledge. According to Rāmānuja, due to ignorance and karma the soul gets united with the body. He also says in order to get liberation, the soul must be free from all the obstacles of karma and it is possible only when there is a harmonious combination on action and knowledge. He admits that we can get liberation only by the grace of God. So, for him no liberation is possible without the grace of God. Also he added that even if we perform our action in an unattached way, there is no possibility of liberation if there is no God’s grace.

### **Karma and transmigration in the schools of Classical Indian Philosophy**

Among the schools of Indian Philosophy it is only the C ārvāka who does not believe in karma, rebirth and afterlife. According to them, all the attributes like fatness etc are resided in the body. They do not believe in the transmigration of soul including karmic particles. This is because according to Cārvāka everything that constituted the world including the human and the non-human is made up of four elements i.e. air, fire, water and earth. Most of the other thinkers hold that the world is made up of five elements i.e. ether, air, fire, water and earth. But, they reject ether and this is because for them, neither inference, nor verbal testimony can be proved to be reliable, so they regarded perception as the only valid source of knowledge. Thus, in this respect, the existence of ether cannot be perceived as it has to be inferred. So, they reject ether and admit that the material world is made up of four elements. They also point out that all the living beings are different manifestation of the similar pattern of mechanical combination of these four elements. So, they conceived consciousness, body, senses and objects and they arise from the different combination of elements. Cārvāka as they reduced self to distinct fusions of elements, they elaborate the phenomena of action entirely in terms of physical elements by not believing in the permanent self and its transmigrations from one life to another life in addition to the karmic residues whose believe is to be possess by the self through action. But in this regard, Sāṃkhya differs from Cārvāka .Sāṃkhya admits that self is distinct from *prakṛti*. This is because Sāṃkhya hold that *prakṛti* performs the action and not the *Purusa*. For cannot perform an action because it is inactive and it does not matter whether it is good or bad actions. So this school elaborates the phenomena of actions with respect to functions of *guṇas* of *prakṛti*. This means that *purusa* is neither bound nor it is liberated and also it does not transmigrate. So, all bondage, liberation and transmigration belong to *prakṛti* only.

Sāṃkhya does not believe in the transmigration of soul from the transcendental point of view but it believe in the transmigration of the bound self and karmic residues from the phenomenal point of view. According to this school, phenomenal self is the ego which transmigrates in addition to karmic particles which get from one birth to another birth. S āṃkhya also admits that ego is defined as the one which evolutes the *prakṛti*. So transmigration and karma is a part of *prakṛti* and not of *puruṣa* but this notion is not consistent with the theory of karma. This is because so far as theory of karma is concerned it is the doer not the *prakṛti* which is to be moved from one life to another life and also the theory of karma believes not only in the transmigration of karmic particles but also the transmigration of self which constitute the karmic particle. As S āṃkhya rejected the above views, Sāṃkhya is inconsistent with the theory of karma.

Advaita Vedānta also does not believe in the transmigration of self because according to this system it says that it is due to our ignorance we believe that the self is placed to the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Despite of the difference between the nature of self and karmic residues, Jainism, and Nyāya Vaiśeṣika believes in real transmigration of self and karmic residues. For Jainism, the self differs in both the quality and quantity. The self transmigrate the entire living world through various domains. But for school, consciousness is considered as an accidental character of self and also they admits that all the living beings including the human beings and other organisms have the similar self which is liable to transmigration and subject to the law of karma. Mimāṃsika agrees the view of Nyāya Vaiśeṣika that all the living beings have the similar self and transmigrate from the entire living world through various domains. But so far as transmigration of soul is concerned Buddhism is against this view. But Buddhism believes in the transmigration of karma in the form of Sa ṃskāra. This school also admits that there is a possibility of the transmigration of karmic residues without the transmigration of self from birth to birth. For Buddhist, action is just the psycho-physical events which does not have any permanent self and proclaims to be performing the results of good or bad, from one life to another, karmas. Also in the opinion of Buddhism, the idea of identity is a wrong idea. So, for them there is no soul which goes from one life to another life in order to gather the fruits of karmas. Thus, according to Buddhism, karma is that which transmigrates from one life to another life.

So, far as the law of karma is concern, “it is sometime interpreted as an extension of the law of causation to the sphere of human conduct as teaches that, as every event in the physical world is determine by its antecedent, so everything that happens in the moral realm is preordained.”<sup>3</sup> So, “it signifies that events of our life are determined by their antecedent causes, but also that there is absolute justice in the reward and punishment that fall to our lot.”<sup>4</sup>

It means that all our rewards and punishments are regarded as a cause and effects of our actions. Hiriyanna also claims that “the law of karma is not a blind mechanical law. It is essentially ethical.”<sup>5</sup> It means that for Hiriyanna, the law of karma is not mechanical in character but it is immutable. But for Sri Aurobindo the law of karma is more than a mechanical law of antecedent and consequent. Das Gupta also writes “whatever action is done by the individual leaves behind it some sort of potency, which has the power to ordain for him joy or sorrow in the future, according as it is good or bad.”<sup>6</sup> It means that an action gives power to an agent some sort of pleasure or pain and then the law performs in a way that the agent of action receives what he earns because of his act. So, every act that a man performs has its effects in the entire universe and thus, it becomes the basis of our future deeds.

Unlike Sāṃkhya and Vedānta, when some of the school of Classical Indian Philosophy namely Jainism, Buddhism, Mīmāṃsā believes that the freedom from chain of birth, death and rebirth is impossible through knowledge alone. This is because for them, it is not that knowledge is the only important thing but right action is also required. So this means that there are some schools in Classical Indian Philosophy which gives importance to right knowledge and some to right action. Those school of thought which gives more importance to right action regards that right knowledge begins only when we entertains right action and those who gives more concern to right knowledge admits that right action is impossible without right knowledge. One thing is that it does not matter which one is more important but what matter is that both the right knowledge and the right action are important in order to get freedom from the cycle of rebirth.

We cannot understand the doctrine of karma if we do not examine the notion of karma and the karma phala. The doctrine of karma is related with the notion of *samsāra*, transmigration. We cannot assert that those who accept the theory of transmigration of soul preserve the soul in its essence it neither born nor does it die. This is because, they called ‘birth’ to those who become existent from not being on the one hand and on the other they called ‘death’ to those who become non-existent from being. It is only the Cārvāka who is against all these views. Cārvāka admits that if we cannot prove the existence of soul from its body then, it is impossible to prove its immortality. Also this school points out death of the body means the complete end of the life of the individual. Thus, for them all the question about karma, karma *phala*, previous life, after life, rebirth becomes impossible.

In this theory of karma, we find out that the doctrine of karma is related with the idea of conscious agent. If we are a real believer of karma we will lead to a responsible life and we will understand that each and every moment of our life is the creation of our own. So, we will become responsible for our own life and also for our actions. At the same time, we will not blame for our problems and difficulties to others. We will also know that there is nothing which we cannot do about our own past life because we can neutralize the effects of our own karma and we will create a new future for ourselves through our present actions or by searching God’s grace.

<sup>3</sup> M.Hiriyanna, *The Essential of Indian Philosophy* ; London, George Allen and Unwin, 1949, p.46

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.48

<sup>5</sup> Rajendra Prasad, *Karma, Causation and Retributive morality*, Munshiran Manoharlal Publishers Pvt.Ltd., New Delhi, 1989, p.220

<sup>6</sup> S.N. Das Gupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol.1, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p.71

### Conclusion

The doctrine of karma is conceptually connected with the idea of activity i.e. *kriya* and the idea of activity is also conceptually connected with the idea of a conscious agent. So, karma is impossible without the activity and the activity is also impossible without the conscious agent. The doctrine of karma and its assertion believes in the transmigration of soul and the karmic particles. Those who believe in the transmigration of soul and the karmic particles also believe in *samsāra*. This is because transmigration of soul and a karmic particle are possible only in *samsāra*. We also find that the doctrine of karma is not only fundamental thoughts of Hinduism but also of Buddhism and the Jainism. To them, the law of karma is conceived as a moral law which corresponds to the law of causation. Each and every thought words and acts of a person are judge in the scale of eternal justice. So, our present life is the result of the karmas of our past life and also it will figure out our future life too.

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