

The Concept of 'Karma' in the Philosophy of B.G. Tilak and Swami Vivekananda

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Abstract – The concept of 'Karma' is one of the most important concepts of the religious, ethical, cultural and philosophical thoughts of India. It is considered to be the foundation stone of entire Indian philosophical outlook. Etymologically, the term 'karma' is derived from Sanskrit 'Kr'. It means to do something. Thus, karma literally means action of any kind done by human beings. And metaphysically, karma means which of our past actions were causes of our present states of affairs. Moral value is also associated with karma. It is also used to mean an imperceptible force that shapes the destiny of a living being. The criteria of karma is not a mechanical principle but a spiritual necessity. "Every act, every thought is weighted in the invisible but universal balance scales of justice. The day of judgment is not in some remote future but here and now and none can escape it." [The Hindu View of Life: S. Radhakrishnan, p. 73]. The accumulated result and the force arising from an act can be called karma. The view of karma as found in Indian philosophy presupposes that any karma is bound to produce some result positive or negative.

Keywords: Karma, Philosophy, Vedic

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INTRODUCTION

Classical Indian Philosophy is based on Vedic and Upanisadic World-views and also in the Bhagavad Gita. The concept of karma is primarily the slogan of Bhagavad Gita. In the Bhagavad Gita, Bhagawan Krishna says, "Na hi Kaccid Khanamapi jatutisthyatya karma krit." [The Gita chapter III, karmayoga, Sloka No.5]. It means no one can remain inactive even for a moment.

According to the Upanisadic view of karma there is nothing uncertain in the moral world – we reap as we sow. In the Vedic philosophy, the law of karma has been recognized in the form of the doctrine of Rta. It stands for law and justice. In the Bhagavad Gita 'Niskama-karma or disinterested action' is the central teaching. According to it this is the best way or the best principle which brings together the attainment of the best here and thereafter, empirical goodness and transcendental goodness.

The doctrine of 'karma' is one of the significant characteristics of Indian Philosophy. All the schools of Indian philosophy save Carvaka accept this view. According to them, the results of karma or karmaphala are always with us in the form of impressions and they direct the course of our life. Thus, the world is a stage, where everybody is preordained to perform his part according to his karma. As a matter of fact, the Upanisads hold that we can be free from karma only by social service.

The contemporary thinkers also accept the doctrine of karma but with a difference in their interpretation about it. Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Swami Vivekananda, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Aurobindo Ghosh, Mahatma Gandhi are the chief exponents of contemporary Indian Philosophy. These modern Indian thinkers are very liberal and dynamic in their outlook. For them, the law of karma is not only a postulate of morality but also it is consistent with the social service, social sacrifice, social sympathy which helps social solidarity as well.

Among these thinkers B.G. Tilak and Swami Vivekananda have special emphasis about the concept of karma. Tilak's 'Gita – Rahasya' is a prominent work in which the concept of karma has been described in a very dynamic and liberal way. The 'Gita – Rahasya' is one of the great masterpieces written by him in jail. It is a strong philosophical and moral-religious support of the idea of selfless activity dedicated to the liberation.

Tilak has put the whole emphasis on the Gita's concept of 'karma yoga' and tried to apply the same for the upliftment of humanity as a whole. The most religious percept of Bhagavad Gita was a characteristic feature of Tilak's teaching. He realized in absolutization of karma yoga. According to him, the message of the Gita correctly interpreted and earnestly followed can lead to man's complete happiness and fulfillment. Tilak holds that the role of philosophy of karma, as

expounded in the Gita is pivotal in Indian thought through the ages. Though Tilak accepts the moral teachings of the Gita, he defined 'karma' in terms of 'karma yoga'. Thus he gives a new interpretation of the philosophy of 'karma'. He gives more importance to the value of karma yoga and it is well described in his own work entitled 'Gita –Rahasya' or the 'karma yoga sastra.'

According to Tilak 'yoga' means some special skill, intelligent method or graceful way of performing actions. Tilak holds that the doctrine of karma yoga should discuss the questions like the role relating to action, the effects of action and while action is to be performed even after the purification of mind. Tilak classified karma as 'Nitya karma', 'naimittika karma' and 'kamya karma'. Nitya karma means daily duties. It includes those works which must be performed everyday, such as bathing and offering prayers at twilight are called nitya karma. By performing these, no special purpose (artha-siddhi) is achieved when nitya karma is being performed. It gives no result, but non-performance of it is a sin. The naimittika actions are such as have to be performed because some occasion necessitating them has arisen. In addition to these, there are certain actions which we very often perform because we desire a particular thing and for acquiring that thing, as enjoyed by the Sastras. These actions are called 'kamya karma', e.g. sacrificial ritual for causing rain or for obtaining a son. In short, "all the actions, a man performs from eating the contemplating or performing sacrificial ritual are included in the word 'karma' whether they are bodily (Kayika), vocal (Vacika) or mental (manasika). [Gita – Rahasya: B.G. Tilak, p. 75].

For Tilak 'yoga' means control of mental impulses by breath control or mental absorption or meditation. It is well described in the Gita itself as 'yogah karmasu kausalam'. [The Gita p. 50], that it means some special skill or graceful way of performing actions. The cause of bondage is only the desire of the mind for the reward and not the karma as such. In karma yoga, the objects of pleasure are not given up after the purification of mind. And karma is creation itself, so it cannot be given up. Action done without the desire for the fruit or as a dedication to Brahman becomes a sacrifice (yajna). So, the karma yogi performed all duties appropriate to his status, desirelessly and enthusiastically till his death. After realization, the karma yogi takes sannyasa or renunciation, in the shape of abandonment of the fruit of action. He performs his duties enjoyed in the scriptures with the peaceful frame of mind till death, for the purpose of universal welfare or lokasamgraha. (Gita Rahasya B.G. Tilak, p. 495].

Tilak defines the universal welfare as 'making wise', those persons who behave recklessly as a result of ignorance and keeping them together in a happy state and putting them on the path of self-improvements. Tilak states that the karma yogi is to be started by controlling the organs according to

one's capacity. For a karma yogi, it is necessary to spend sometime of everyday in solitude. It does not mean that one should give up the activities of life. Such moments spent in solitude enable man to increase his controlling power in order to perform the activities of life with a desireless mind. Therefore, man must not lose his courage to perform his duties desirelessly.

CONCEPT OF 'KARMA' IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF B.G. TILAK AND SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

According to Tilak, for the attainment of Swaraj, karma is needed, for the fulfillment of man, Swaraj is needed; therefore for the fulfillment of man's destiny 'karma' is needed. He has put the whole emphasis on Gita's concept of karmayoga and tried to apply the same for the upliftment of humanity as a whole. Thus, Tilak, the life long fighter for Indian freedom became a karma yogi himself. By his whole life, Tilak endeavoured to show the importance of the karma yoga for the attainment of political as well as spiritual liberty. Tilak wrote 'Gita – Rahasya' because he wanted the people to become purusharthas and activities and join the freedom struggle. Karma is also the motto of his life. As a true follower of karma yoga, he maintains that 'the merit of karma yoga is higher than that of Renunciation or Non-Action. [Gita Rahasya: B.G. Tilak p. 457].

With a deeper study of the Bhagavad Gita, Tilak realized that he need not look up to the west for an emphasis on social duties. The Gita preached the ideal of action for 'lokasamgraha', i.e. for promoting the stability and solidarity of society. The Gita had unequivocally pointed out the social content of the spiritual ideal, and taught the gospel of karma yoga and not of sannyasa. Tilak did not believe in the fulfillment of an individual's destiny apart from society. Tilak has also realized the significance of social ethics, with his study of the western philosophers. But he felt that the materialistic basis of this ethics would lead to a society of self-interest. According to him, ethics could not be separated from metaphysics. Thus, Tilak pointed out that those who thought that the universe could be explained in terms of natural and physical sciences they advocated materialistic ethics in which self-interest was the end of man's efforts. And those who took an agnostic position in metaphysics, agreed that there were degrees of happiness and that mental happiness was superior to physical happiness.

The metaphysics of the Gita was spiritual and consequently its ethics too were spiritual, though its content was social. The action that advocated in the Gita was altogether different from self-aggrandisement and because it was performed in a disinterested manner it created no bonds. Thus,

the action performed in the interest of society implied self-effacement. Therefore, Tilak accepted the metaphysical position of Shankaracharya, "Brahman-satyam-jagan-mithya, jibabrahmaiva naparah." According to him the absolute reality is Brahman which is non-dual, attributless and actionless. But Tilak differed from Shankara in ethical matter. Because Shankaracharya considered ethics from the point of view of individual emancipations and hence advocated Sanyasa. Whereas Tilak thought of ethics in terms of social duties and hence advocated karma yoga.

But Shankara has strongly refuted 'jnana-karma-samuccaya' as the means of realization of the non-dual Brahman. Ramaswamy Sastri blames Tilak for having reduced the Gita 'into a pocket amalgam of philanthropic and patriotism and scientific speculation. The modern trend is to worship humanity with the society serving as the contemporary idol. But the Gita, as Sastri has pointed out that does not aim at the service of the perishable bodies of man. According to Sastri by exalting karma yoga Tilak has utilized the Gita to the practical needs. Karma yoga is the mere performance of the enjoyed karma with a sense of dedication to God. But Tilak regards philanthropic and patriotic action as an independent means to release.

Ram Gopal in his 'Lokamanya Tilak' p. 355 pointed out the core of Tilak's conception of karma yoga. In Tilak's view at a time when the country was under the domination of a foreign power. Working for Swaraj was the best performance of duty, as propounded by karma yoga, just as the message of the Gita enabled Arjuna to fight. Tilak infused new spirit and asked his countryman to jump into the field of action and do their duty for the motherland.

Side by side the two great Sadhakas Sri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi, commented on the Gita – Rahasya. Aurobindo remarked that "Tilak's work on the Gita, no mere commentary, but an original criticism and presentation of ethical truths, is a monumental work." And according to Mahatma Gandhi, "No one in his lifetime, no even now, could claim deeper and vaster knowledge of the Sastras than Tilak possessed. His masterwork commentary on the Gita is unsurpassed and will remain so far a long time to come. Nobody has yet carried on more elaborate research in the question arising from the Gita and the Vedas." [Lokamanya Tilak – A Biography, p. 631-632.]

Though the critics of the Gita – Rahasya have given importance to the major issues some of them point out the constituencies and self-contradictions in Tilak's definitions of Samkhya-yoga and karma yoga, that have led to his conclusion that the Gita is a 'karma-yoga-sastra'. Tilak conceived yoga as different from marga, the means of bhakti and jnana. He gives a formula of karma yoga as equal to niskama-karma added to samkhya-yoga as a means

and karma yoga as an end. Karma yoga consists in the performance of a right action without any type for its result or dedicated to the Lord. According to Tilak the subject matter of the Gita is karma yoga as it expounds the two doctrines of acquiring the equability of reason by the realization of universal identity of Atman in all beings either by jnana or bhakti marga being engaged in action. Secondly, continuing the performance of one's duties even after realization without renouncing all actions. So, karma nistha is the best path of life and thereof should be highest goal of a man.

It may be pointed out that the Gita justifies only karma yoga and describes it to be superior to samkhya yoga. But for Tilak, karma yoga is the sum of samkhya yoga and niskama karma. They are the worship of the imperceptible (jnana-marga) and of the perceptible (bhakti marga). He passively stated that niskama karma or desireless action itself is devotion or bhakti. Jnana-yajna or sacrifice of knowledge is the best of all yajnas and the worship of the imperceptible in jnana-marga or the path of knowledge. But the Gita considers all the three i.e. jnana, karma and bhakti as the best means for the realization of the highest goal which is called liberation or Moksha.

Like B.G. Tilak, Swami Vivekananda also has a special consideration about the concept of karma. Vivekananda is one of the great thinkers of the contemporary Indian thought. He is a Vedantin. Though Vivekananda accepts Vedantic principles theoretically, he stresses more on its practical side. According to Vivekananda from the epistemological and metaphysical standpoint, karma yoga and the law of karma are like the two sides of the same coin. The thinker's ideal was a karma yogin, a selfless, bold, strong and manly character, ordained to deal mostly with practical problems of everyday life. Thus he says that selfless action is the motto of life. For him, if we want to judge the character of a man, we should not look at his great performances but we should watch the most common doings of that man which are the real characteristics of his life. Vivekananda also says that, if man does action without any selfish desire and never thinks about the result of action gets the highest. For him, a man ought to live in his world like a lotus leaf which grows in water but is never moistened by water.

DISCUSSION

According to Vivekananda, karma means actions and effects of actions both. Every good action leads to the highest idea of eternal and entire self-abnegation, where there is no 'I' but only 'thou'. Karma yoga leads to this end and thus jnana, bhakti and karma come to the same point. In karma yoga work is not done as duty, which implies attachment. The karma yoga works as a free being, being unattached and considers his duties as

God's duties. Duty is sweet only when love greases its wheels to avoid friction, and love shines alone in freedom. The secret of work is the identity of means and end.

Karma yoga is the path of actions which leads to identity of one's self with Brahman. It is a system of ethics and religion pursued for the attainment of freedom. The goal of karma yoga is the realization of freedom through unselfish work. Thus, for him, an atheist may be a karma yogi. Though the cosmic process will go on forever we can free from it and enjoy eternal bliss.

Most of the greater Indian thinkers of the new and modern time took an indirect or a direct part in the struggle for national independence. Naturally they all had to deal with the problem of end and means. Like them, Swami Vivekananda also interpreted it in his own manner. With Vivekananda the virtue of non-resistance to evil is a high but in contiguous abstract ideal to be aspired for by all men, still in practical life one's duty is to withstand evil. According to him, "The karma yogin is the man who understands that the highest ideal is non-resistance and who also knows that what is called the resisting of will is but a step on the way towards the manifestation of this highest power, namely, non-resistance. Before reaching this highest ideal, man's duty is to resist evil, let him work, let him fight, let him strike straight from the shoulder. Then only when he has gained the power to resist, will non-resistance be a virtue" [Karma yoga, ch. 2, Vol. 1, p. 39].

For the independence of the nation he gave preference frequently to the principle of non-violence. He says that "we ought not to hate anyone. This world is always continued to be a mixture of good and evil. Our duty is to sympathize with the weak and to love even the wrongdoer. The world is a grand moral gymnasium wherein we have all to take exercise so as to become stronger and stronger spiritually [Karma yoga, ch. V., Vol. 1, p.78]. Thus, we see that Swami Vivekananda had in mind when he spoke of resisting evil with spiritual power acquired in man's striving to selflessness, to the realization of Atman and unification with the Divine Self.

According to Vivekananda, karma yoga is mainly meant for the householders. He can achieve mukti through his moral deeds done in the spirit of detachment. He lives amidst temptation of beauty, health and pleasure, yet remains unattached with them. Vivekananda says that to be an ideal householder is a much more difficult task to be an ideal Sannyasi. Karma yoga is the discipline of practicing detachment of the spirit while working in the world. A karma yogi enjoys the beauty of the cosmos and yet remains un-identified with them. Karma and freedom are related to each other. According to him, all social and humanitarian works, all works of self abnegation, we helpful for realizing

man's freedom. The good works done for others welfare are one's own self purification. By performing selfless acts we realize eternal bliss.

Karma yoga, according to Swami Vivekananda, is not only to be practiced in individual life, it is to be sincerely practiced at national level also. Therefore he said, "In whatever you do, for a particular person, a city, or a state, assume the same attitude expect nothings in return. [Basis of Swami Vivekananda's Nationalism, p. 72]." In this respect Vivekananda has made a distinct contribution to the ideal and practice of karma yoga. To do one's duties surrendering the fruit of actions to God in, of course an indirect way of worshipping him. He wants that man should see God in his fellow – beings and worship God directly through service to them.

Explaining karma yoga, Vivekananda pointed out that every man is the architect of his own destiny. Others cannot make him happy unless he tries to make himself so. By dint of karma one makes himself happy and prosperous. Without karma life is bound to suffer. It is only out of ignorance that we blame others or our fate for such suffering. Thus Vivekananda accepts the Upanisadic view – "we reap what we sow" means we are the makers of our own fate. He said, "Our karma determines what we deserve what we can assimilate, we are responsible for what we are, and whatever we wish ourselves to be. We have the power to make ourselves." [Religious philosophy of Vivekananda – p. 153]. And according to karma yoga, the action one has done cannot be destroyed, until it has becomes its fruit. No power in nature has the capacity to stop it from producing its results. One does an evil action, a wicked deed, he must suffer for it. In the same way if one does a good action, there is no power on this earth which can stop its bearing good results.

For Vivekananda, work is worship, duty is God. Duty of any kind is not to be slighted. It has been pointed out, "The man who does what is considered a lower work, is not, for what reason alone, a lower man than he who does what is considered a higher work." He also pointed out that even the lowest form of work is not to be despised. Hence, a man is not to be judged by the nature of his duties but the manner, which he does them or the purpose for which he does them – whatever they confirm to the ideals of karma yoga or not. But every duty is holy and devotion to duty is the highest form of worship to God. Even Vedanta teaches that we should not avoid work. Work or duty is really worship. To serve the human being is to serve God. If one sees God in poor, needy really it is worship."

The Bhagavad Gita is essentially a treatise on karma yoga. And Vivekananda is highly influenced by the theory of Niskama karma or work without desire or attachment. As the Gita says, "Man has

right to work but not to aspire for any result." [B.G. ch. III, Sloka – 47]. And in the light of this version he held that man should leave all result to God, but he should be his work with utmost sincerity and devotion. According to him, non-attachment is the essential hallmark of karma yoga. It implies that every man should work for work's sake. He should not be deluded by any attachment to work. Because it come from expectation of a reward or fruit. Vivekananda also said that works must be performed with a spirit of sacrifice or service for the community. He also said that through selfless work the mind gets purified. And when the mind becomes pure, there arise knowledge and devotion in it. Knowledge is the very nature of the self but being covered with ignorance it is not manifest. The object of selfless work is to remove this covering. As a matter of fact knowledge dawns as soon as the mind becomes pure.

So, we can say that karma yoga is the attainment through unselfish work of that freedom which is the goal of all human nature. When the passion is less, the work will be better. Under the calm and peaceful atmosphere, it is sure that we can work more in less time. Thus, the karma yogi should be like a lotus flowers which is under nip of water but detached. And Vivekananda has given much stress on karma and attainment of liberation through it. He was a karma yogi himself and as Lord Krishna preached to Arjuna to take up the war, to fight taking it as worship. So, Vivekananda denounced inactivity, idleness and advised to work and work. The work itself is worship. The Bhagavad Gita recommends the performance of one's duties in a spirit of selfless service and detachment. What we have to do is to perform all the duties that pertain to our station in life without any desire or concern for the consequences of our action.

Finally, Vivekananda says that, man lives through action. Actions prepare his path for moksha or salvation. But all sorts of work cannot lead man to moksha or salvation. Only the Niskamakarma or disinterested karma or work without attachment entitles him to salvation. He also says that he works best who works without any motive neither for money, nor for fame, nor for anything else. And when a man can do that he will be a Buddha. Most of the people now-a-days think that working without any motive means not to be affected by any pleasure or pain but this is not true. As Vivekananda said, if that were its real meaning then heartless brutes and the walls would be the best exponents of the performance of the 'Niskama karma'. It will make man stony hearted and the worst criminals will have to be considered saints. Thus karma yoga preaches that a man who has no religion, no faith in God but who always acts for others without attachment is the ideal man. And all mankind would stand in reverence before the karma yogi.

Thus we see that both Tilak and Vivekananda sought support for their active civics and moral positions in

the Vedic category of karma yoga. But they interpreted differently from the traditional doctrine, especially from the ethics of Shankara's Advaita – Vedanta. According to them, karma yoga is the best preferable path of self-perfection. The only difference is that Vivekananda considered the path of karma yoga most fitting in Kaliyoga, while Tilak preferred it absolutely. Both of them emphasized action in the general meaning of the term, connecting it mainly with setting actual tasks, with individual's socio political activity. Tilak, a patriot, and a leader in fighting for Swaraj. And naturally, the thesis about practical activity being a means of realizing the ideal of freedom in life must have seemed specially attractive. He realized absolutization of karma yoga as an independent and the best means of karma yoga, particularly the selfless actions as a quite definite socio-political form.

CONCLUSION

Although both Tilak and Vivekananda have accepted the philosophy of karma as generally understood in Indian philosophical tradition, they have a distinctive style of approach to the issues related to karma. Their emphasis on the metaphysical and religio-philosophical aspects of the doctrine of karma is somewhat revolutionary. Their emphasis was more on the practical relevance on the philosophy of karma than on its mere theoretical speculation. For Vivekananda life is a karmabhumi, karma or action is the religion of man. And work of karma is the only way to reach the goal, i.e. freedom. He also believed that activity should be directed at assuring social welfare of the country and of labouring masses. As well as Tialk connected selfless activity with organization of movement for Swadeshi and preparation of the people's revolt.

In the conclusion we can say that if one understands and accepts the law of karma, one would be able to accept the good and the bad with equal spirit. If one continues to make God responsible for everything one does, it means that one is doing nothing save committing further mistakes and preparing to get into trouble sooner or later. Therefore, the simplest way is to own responsibility for all one's karma and keep away from misdeeds. One must think no evil, speak no evil and do no evil. This begins with the individual human being, who is the centre of the world of good and evil – the world of ethics and morality.

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