

CONCEPT OF “KARMA” IN THE *PURANAS*- A BRIEF DISCUSSION

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ABSTRACT: The doctrine of Karma is a study in philosophy and religion in Indian philosophy. It is considered to be the foundation stone of entire Indian philosophical thought. It is one of the important issues of Indian philosophy right from the Vedas to the Vedanta and the modern Indian thinkers too.

There is a wide discussion about karma in the Puranas. According to the Puranas, present birth is due to one's past deeds. If he does good deeds then he would be born as a good person otherwise bad. In the Puranic age, karma has greatest impact on the lives of human beings. They believe in the law of KARMA as well as rebirth in the same. The Puranas also discuss about hell and heaven relation to karma. According to them, heaven is the form of reward and hell is the form of punishment. Hence, one who does good karma he will be rewarded and if he does bad deeds he must be punished. Therefore, we find in the puranas here and there records of actual nature of karma.

In the discussion of the law of karma, there is a relation of karma and moksa in the puranas. It shows that the nature of karma whether it is sinful or virtuous or neutral it decides the ultimate journey for moksa from all kinds of pain and suffer according to Hindu tradition. An attempt is made here about the puranas interpretation of karma.

KEYWORDS: Karma, Purana, Heaven, Hell, Fate, good, evil, karma-bhumi.

I. INTRODUCTION

The word 'karma' is derived from 'kri' dhatu of Sanskrit. Literally it means to do something. Metaphysically, it means which of our past actions were causes of our present states of affairs. The principle which determines 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 some remote future but here and now and none can escape it. In an action there is a thing done and a doer and an active consequence. These three factors are the locks of the philosophy of karma.

There are several numbers of Puranas and all of them accept the doctrine of karma. The Garuda purana, known as the Pretakalpa, deals with the very embodiment of karmic ambivalence. The puranic interpretation of karma mostly related to the concepts of death and birth, heaven and hell etc.

According to the Agni Purana, there are two forms of experience body, one is good and the other is bad. The good one has the form of a god, but the bad one is hideous to look upon. Whatever form he used to have when he was a man, the body resembles that form somewhat. Then he leaves the body and goes to heaven, and when there is only a little karma left, he falls from heaven. If some evil remains, then when he experienced heaven he takes a second experienced body for evil. And having experienced the evil he then experiences heaven afterwards. When he falls from heaven, he is born in the house of good, pure people. But if merit remains, then he experiences the evil, and when that body has been eaten he takes a good form. And again, when a little karma remains, the soul is released from hell and is born as an animal womb. There he does not experience any evil. Thus, it says about rebirth of the soul.

The subtle body means the jiva is the carrier of karmic deposit. It is identical with the linga-sarira and also called the ativahika body, the body 'swifter than wind'. The karmic chain does not end with the ativahika body. It involves the world of pretas which is the central figures in the Vedic antecedents of the karma theory. Although the sequence of action is not entirely clear, it is evident that the man of mixed karma has one experience body in heaven and another one in hell. If evil predominates, apparently, he goes first to hell, then to heaven and then from hell to an animal womb. If good predominates, he first goes to heaven, then to hell and then from heaven again to a good birth among humans.

In the Visnudharmottara Purana, the birth process is described as “wind, fire and some always develop the body of embodied creatures. The jiva, impelled by karma, enters into the embryo, taking the form of wind, abandoning all experience bodies as it comes from heaven or hell or from an animal womb. Thus, the Jiva enters the embryo because of the chain of karma.” (Visnudharmottarapurana 2.112) The newborn child is unaware of his accumulated karma. A creature in the mortal world is born because of his own karmas, his life-span, karma; wealth learning and death are born with the embodied creature in the womb. In the Padmapurana, it is also stated that by his own karmas a creature becomes a god, man, animal, bird or immovable thing.

The concept of fate is also closely linked with the concept of karma in the puranas. Yet karma and fate are often said to work together, or even to be the same. Sometimes it is stated that the gods are free of karma. “There are no acts prescribed or forbidden for the gods, no acts which give good or bad fruits”. (Matsya purana 4.6) But a clear distinction is made between the power of fate and the power of karma. It is also said that the gods are not only separate from fate but in its sway. In the Devibhagavata purana, it is said that, in His various avatars, Vishnu was under a curse, and he did his various actions always in the power of fate. The gods may also escape punishment for their sins by blaming this same power of karma. When Indra had raped a pregnant woman and hidden in shame, Brihaspati (who had committed the same act, and even with the same woman) consoled Indra by saying, “don’t worry, this entire universe is in the sway of karma”. (Skandapurana, 2.7.23.8-40)

II. THE CONQUEST OF KARMA:

According to the puranas, if one can reverse fate, he can certainly reverse karma. As the doctrine of Yoga entered the Puranic mainstream, Yoga became another means of deliverance. After setting up the inexorable karma process, the Markandeya purana proceeds to undermine completely with a long chapter. Here it is stated that the practice of Yoga releases people from karma. In the Linga-purana, similarly it is stated that meditation and renunciation are equally effective as karmic antidotes (1.86. 15-21).

Later as, pilgrimage begins to unrup the Brahmin’s monopoly on deliverance, the Puranas narrate chapter after chapter of glorifications of shrines. It means tirthamahatmya-bathing at any one of which is guaranteed to wipe out all one’s past bad karmas. Thus, when Parvati asks Siva “how evil that has been accumulated in a thousand former births can be worn away. Siva replies that this evil is worn away when one enters the Avimukta shrines at Benaras”. (Matsya Purana, 181.10, 17-18) According to the Brahmavaivarta purana, by the worship of Visnu, one can “dispense” with karma; karma is conquered by those whom Krishna loves. Thus, it is apparent that each of the major religious systems that appear in the puranas has developed a sure-fire antidote to the disease of karma. Karma and rebirth are even used to explain textual, variants and multiform. When the sage tells one version of a story, and the listeners object that they heard it differently, he may retort that it happened to the man twice, in two different lives.

Karma is a metaphor for the effects that human beings have upon one another in this life and even across the barrier of death. This function is based on the idea of merit transfer. This transfer takes place between any two animate creatures. It is particularly likely to arise in relation to transactions involving food and sex. Thus good karma accrues to anyone who feeds guests, particularly Brahmins and bad karma to one who does not. Brahma says, “One must never mistreat a guest, for the guest then takes the good karma of the host and leaves his own bad karma behind.” (siva purana, 4.12 26-27) Thus, the feeding of a Brahmin guest is highly recommended way to get rid of one’s bad karma. The most significant transfers take place within the family, between husband and wives, siblings and parents and children. The wife’s chastity is an integral part of her husband’s karma, the chaste wife can release for her husband from his sin.

III. THE FLOW OF KARMA:

The motif of personal devotion or bhakti flows against the current of impersonal karma and the ‘ocean of rebirth’ like a stream of fresh water flowing back out into the ocean. In any social interaction karma is transferred as by the action of a siphon when two vessels of unequal height are suddenly connected by a tube. Because of this fluidity in social interaction, it is difficult to pinpoint an individual’s karma as distinct from that of everyone else. We have seen how the karma of parents and children merges, and that of husbands and wives.

Karmic forces flow constantly between people, and between gods and animals. Two great exceptions to this rule are the realms of Hindu asceticism and Jainism. In Hinduism all life processes are reversed, all body substances held in. And in Jainism, an extreme effort is made to reduce the flow and an almost obsessive concern with boundaries leads to a minimizing of transactions. Here, the soul moves up, while karma pushes down. Without the basic sraddha model, there can be no true exchange. But in Hinduism, Vedic or Puranic,

spirit and matter constantly flow in and out of each other. Even in the creation myths, Prajapati alternates between the creation of physical entities means men, beast's trees and abstractions- the year, and hunger and space itself. Here is true relativity, matter and energy in constant fluid transformation.

IV. HEAVEN AND HELL:

In the Puranic discussion of karma, they refer again and again to the Svarga or Naraka, or Heaven and Hell. It is in the sense of places where pious or wicked souls are sent regularly in order to experience the consequences of their actions. In a general sense Svarga or heaven is a place for enjoyment of various kinds of pleasure, as a result of a life of good action or pious thought on earth. Similarly, Naraka or Hell is supposed to be place of intense torments and sufferings as a result of wicked thoughts and deeds of impious persons. According to the Puranas, good actions lead to a heavenly life and evil actions to a life in hell, of course for a limited duration according to the quality and intensity of the action.

Svarga is presided over by Indra which represents heavenly life. It has a dual nature as that we have a lower heaven and also the higher heaven. Lower heaven is called Bhoga Svarga and the higher heaven called Moksa Svarga. In the Bhoga Svarga, righteous persons are rewarded with enjoyments of various kinds-long life and great powers. There is no pain to be felt on this plane. All enjoyments are sensual. People enjoy their long life, freedom from fatigue and powers of 'siddhis' of different kinds here. The higher heavens beginning with Mahabharata are all fields of Karmamukti or graduated evolution. These heavens are abode of Jivanmukta Purusas of different grades of spiritual planes.

Like heavens, there are hells also for the experience of sufferings of the sinful persons. Extreme forms of sinful acts cannot fructify on earth or in any other place. A special region has been created for them where different kinds of sufferings are experienced. These hells are under the direct supervision of Dharmaraja or Yamaraja. In the Bhagavata Purana it is described how the messengers of Yamaraja bring sinful persons to their destined places immediately after their physical death. It is believed that the souls of sinful persons immediately after death are coated with a special body which is known as Yatana-deha. The souls coated with a pain body or Yatana-deha is carried having hands and feet bound up, by the messengers. They are dragged with rope round the necks. The souls feel intense pain due to the thirst and hunger. They feel the intensity of heat in the way and suffer tortures from the messengers. In this way they have to complete the journey within a short time. Thus, after death, having arrived in Yamaloka, the sinners according to their karma, experiences numerous sufferings by this Yatana-deha.

V. KARMA-BHUMI:

After experiencing heaven and hell, a creature has to come in this world time and again. Happiness and sorrow are experienced in this world by degrees, because sorrowful and happy- both kinds of persons stay in this world. The great significance of this mortal world is that man gets the opportunity of undergoing a new effort along with experiencing happiness or sorrow. Availing of this opportunity, a human being collects good deeds for future and evil deeds by doing evil also. Hence the mortal world is called karma-bhumi.

In the Vishnu purana it is stated "the sages and the saints described India or Bharatavarsha as karma-bhumi.(ch.-iii, section-iii) It is not only for the persons going up to heaven and on the way of final liberation or Moksa,. But it is the center of everything after which the man strives even enters the way to animal life and to the hell, everything has starting point in Bharatavarsa. It is also said that it is in this country, penances are performed and sacrificial oblations are offered. The entire Jambu dvipa, Bharatavarsa alone deserves to be called karma-bhumi, while the other countries are described as Bhoga-bhumi. It is also believed that a person who takes his birth in this karma-bhumi and performs Niskama karma and dedicates all his actions to divine is most fortunate.

VI. CONCLUSION:

It is clear that the doctrine of karma has a significant place in the Puranas. All the puranas consider karma as an important issue of everyone's life. Hence puranas widely made a discussion about karma and suggested what to do and what not to do by the entire human beings. In the early periods or in the puranic age, 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. Thus, the puranas widely interprets the issues like- heaven and hell; death and birth; karma-bhumi etc. which are related to the doctrine of karma exclusively.

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.

The doctrine of karma 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.

The Indian solution of the great riddle of the origin of suffering and the diversity of human conditions is to be found in the word 'karma'. It believes that souls have been transmigrating from the beginning. They practically hold that the wellbeing or the suffering of everybody is only the result of former acts of karma. The doctrine of karma and their retribution is of great antiquity in India. It gradually broke away from Vedic naturalism, mysticism and piety. As a man himself sows, so he himself reaps, no man inherits the good or evil act of another man. The fruit is of the same quality with the action and good or bad, there is no destruction of the action. This doctrine can be called the essential element, not only of all moral theories in India but also of popular belief. If a person is born deformed or unhealthy, it must be so people say because of sins committed in his former life. It is in Buddhism, that the doctrine of karma reaches its climax and assumes a unique character. According to Buddhism, karma explains everything.

Previously it is stated that the concept 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. Though the enquiry into the nature of karma and its significance takes us back to the Vedas in Indian philosophical tradition it is still a vibrating problem in philosophy. It has not only academic value but a clear understanding of karma has a perennial impact on the life and existence even today. The thinkers of the ancient times were undoubtedly concerned with the problem and more. So the modern commentators are also giving no less value to its importance. That is why we find that modern Indian thinkers also concerned, 'may be' with a difference of approach.

In this way, as explained above an effort is being made to explain a scenario of the law of karma according to the pauranic vision. And wind up this presentation with the Upanisadic view "AS WE SOW –SO WE REAP".

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