The Upanisadic concept of Karma

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The Sanskrit term Karma means ‘action’, ‘work’ or ‘deed’. A doer of the action is one who performs actions brings about changes in the existing state of affairs. The notion of karma essentially involves in it the notion of a conscious agency in the sense that without a conscious agency no karma is possible. The theory of Karma holds that all actions good or bad produce their impressions, which has the power to ordain for him happiness and sorrow in future depending on whether it is god or bad.

Since the earliest times, karma theory has vibrated the minds of Indian intellectual society. When we try to find out the origin of karma theory in Indian thought, it is in the Vedic concept of Rta, the rudiments of karma theory lies. The principle of Rta is understood as responsible for the order and regularity in the universe. A more advanced view of karma is found in the Upanisads.

The Upanishads are the later portions of Vedas, mainly dealt with metaphysical problems. In this period, we find that the thinkers resorted to forests, where they found time to think about the problems concerning human life and the world. They believed that happiness does not lie in the performance of ceremonial sacrifices or rites, but in the bliss of inward meditation which could be carried on in the solitude of forests. The Vedic idea that death leads to permanent bliss in heaven was opposed and, instead believed that death came to be known as transition into other births.

According to the Upanisadic seers the perplexing anomalies and imperfections in the world are held to be the result of actions. On the problem how the effects of actions can be annihilated, the investigations into the nature of action reveal that ultimately it is desire which makes man fails to recognize the true nature of things and it is the cause of rebirth. The man is full of desires. As he desires, so he wills, as he wills so he works, as his work is done so it happens.1 According to Mundaka Upanisads,2 he who cherishing the objects desires them, is born again here and led by these desires, and he who has no desires, who has freed himself from all desires, is satisfied in his desires and in himself. Desire is the root cause, which determines the patterns of life. When the self continues to desire and act, it reaps the result and comes again to this world for performing acts. The desires that are in the hearts of man, if put into an end the mortal becomes immortal and attains Brahman here. This gives a passive support to the idea that it is desire that should be at the root of life on earth and not karma3. Karma however, does not become irrelevant altogether on that account. It still remains as the connecting link between desire and rebirth, since the fact is that human actions have their roots in will and will in desire.
In the Upanishads karma comes as a connecting link between desire and rebirth. Whatever a man desires he wills, and whatever he wills he acts. It is only in the Upanisads that the terms papa and punya are used to describe the unethical and ethical acts respectively. In Vedic Samhitas, the word papa means diseases, witch craft, suffering and distress. But none of the complexities of the karma doctrine which we find later on in more recent developments of Indian philosophical thought can be found in the Upanisads. The whole scheme is worked on the principle of desires, and the actual effects desired and willed by the person.

It is held that in the Upanisadic period the karma doctrine had to face the competition of conflicting and doubtless other views, which could never be brought into real coincidence. Kausitaki Upanisad says about how the man who attains the Brahman, after passing by the river of immortality casts away his good and evil deeds, which his friends and enemies duly share. There is no reference of reaping of the fruits of actions here. In the periods of Upanisads when the karma doctrine was far from being a fixed dogma, it is not surprising that many traces of conceptions inconsistent with the karma belief should appear. Of these the most obvious is the belief in the power of Atman by special grace to manifest itself which is found in Katha and Mundaka Upanisads. But the equally important is the belief that in the son the father is continued in such a manner that the son takes over all that his father has, including his karmas.

These ideas clearly declare that in the son the father is born again, an idea which is in itself not strictly reconcilable with the view that the soul transmigrates on death. It seems that there is nothing more, which could transmigrate at death. Thus in fact we have three diverse ideas more or less blended, that is, the birth of the father in the production of a son, the handing over by the father on the death to the son of his whole personality and migration of the father’s soul into some new existence. And also the references of passing over the sins of father to the son, apart from the action of the child in previous births and saving grace of God avail to break the chain of karma.

There may be some actual reasons for the prevalence of conflicting views which are inconsistent with law of karma in the Upanisadic period. It is held that the theory of karma would be decidedly disadvantageous to the sacrificial Priests. They might have thought that if the moral quality of an action solely and irrevocably determines the future, man becomes the captain of his own destiny and then the priest and sacrifice cease to be indispensable. These would be the anxious thoughts which the theory of karma must have raise in the minds of more thoughtful priests like Yajnavalkhya. They feared that the goals tended to become no more than the souls born in certain station and even subject to the dominion of karma. The opposition of karma and Divine freedom of grace revived at a higher level when the conception of supreme deity became important. The solution they found was to deny the ultimacy of the freedom of the humane beings and to state that the ultimate source of all karma is God himself.

As a corollary of the karma theory, the belief in rebirth has persisted at any rate from the time of the Upanisads. It is natural developments from the views of the Vedas receive articulate expressions in the Upanisads. However, in the Upanisads there is advance recognition on the Vedic conceptions of rebirth, though there is no consistent theory about it. According to the Upanisads, he who is liberated has no rebirth. The root cause of rebirth is the unfulfilled desires for worldly enjoyments.

References
1. Das Gupta, S N. A History f Indian Philosophy vol 1, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1975
3. Mittal, K K. (ed.), Perspectives of karma and rebirth, Department of Buddhist Studies, Delhi University, 1990.
4. Pande Govind Chandra, Studies in the origins of Buddhism, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1974

Foot Note:-
1. Das Gupta, S N. A History f Indian Philosophy vol 1, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1975, p55
2. Mundaka upanisads, III:2.2
3. Mittal K K. (ed.), Perspectives of karma and rebirth, Department of Buddhist Studies, Delhi university, 1990, p86
4. Kausitaki Upanisad 1.4
5. Kausitaki Upanisad II.15
6. Katha Upanisad II.15
7. Pande Govind Chandra, Studies in the origins of Buddhism, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1974, p257