

The Doctrine of Karma and Dr. A. G. Hogg

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It is not without interest that we come to know about the genesis of the book *Karma and Redemption* by Dr. Hogg. In the issue of the Madras Christian College Magazine, August 1904, there appeared an article on Hindu Philosophy by one Subramanya Sastri, in which the writer claimed the doctrines of Karma and transmigration as cardinal principles of Hindu Philosophy. Mr Sastri drew many comparisons between Indian and European Philosophies in this article. This challenged the young missionary, Dr. Hogg, who undertook the task of replying to Mr. Sastri in five separate articles in the subsequent issues of the same magazine, which were later published as a book with the above title. Recalling this incident in 1947, Hogg writes:

'Hinduism possesses in its doctrine of Karma and transmigration an accredited solution of a problem which the Christian Church regards as an insoluble mystery—the problem of unmerited suffering. That controversial challenge sent me to a study of Hindu thought about Karma. . . It sent me to a study in which I sought not merely to criticise but to learn. Also, it made me study afresh the Biblical revelation'.¹

His keen researches into the doctrine of Karma² revealed to him that (1) Karma doctrine in India has been an apparent solution for the problem of suffering, (2) it appears to provide a very plausible reconciliation of the facts of life with the claims of abstract justice (3) it bravely recognises the actual disproportion of suffering to present relative merit postulating a moral order and proclaims a gigantic hypothesis as a sober fact, and (4) it has in certain respects a real moral value as well.³

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¹ "The Christian Message to the Hindu" by A. G. Hogg. Published (1st and last chapters) in *The Theology of Hogg*, E. J. Sharpe, pp. 223-4.

² Hogg made a careful study of the basic tenets of Hinduism to trace a fundamental contrast between Christianity and Hinduism and such a contrast he found only in the doctrine of Karma.

³ A. G. Hogg, *Karma and Redemption*, pp. 11-12.

The Doctrine of Karma Criticised

The doctrine of Karma,⁴ was subjected to scathing criticism by Dr. Hogg, which speaks not only of his wide knowledge in Philosophical Hinduism, but also exhibits a high degree of logical acumen. The following are some of his important criticisms levelled against the doctrine:

1. *Karma theory is deterministic and fatalistic*

In his scrutiny, Hogg found that a man's possibilities of good and ill fortunes in the present life 'are unalterably determined, not by a benignant Providence, but by a Karma force, dispensing mechanical justice'.⁵ Further, he points out that despite its merits, in its practical results, the belief in Karma often leads to a fatalistic temper of mind.⁶ The modern Hindu thinkers deny that Karma is either deterministic or fatalistic. Dr. Radhakrishnan, an old student of Hogg, writes:

The principle of Karma reckons with the material or the context in which each individual is born. While it regards the past as determined, it allows that the future is only conditioned. The spiritual element in man allows him freedom within the limits of his nature . . . We can use the material with which we are endowed to promote our ideals. The cards in the game of life are given to us. We do not select them. They are traced to our past Karma, but we can all, as we please, lead what suit we will and as we play we gain or lose. And there is freedom.⁷

For Radhakrishnan, Karma is not a mechanical principle, but a spiritual necessity and an embodiment of the mind and will of God.⁸ Karma doctrine, according to him, became confused with fatality in India, turning it into a message of despair. Such a philosophy of despair, he says, is by no means the necessary outcome of the Karma doctrine.⁹ Though in theory the doctrine does not give any place for fatalism, so far as the practical results are concerned, one will have to agree with Dr. Hogg's criticism.

2. *Belief in Karma leads to narrow and selfish individualism*

Dr. Hogg finds in Hinduism and its sects an exaggerated and selfish individualism resulting from Karma theory. He points out that a man, according to Karma doctrine, can modify his destiny and win

⁴ For his critical examination, Hogg took the definition of the doctrine of Karma according to the Advaita Vedanta as stated in *The System of Vedanta* by Paul Deussen.

⁵ *Karma and Redemption*, p. 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁷ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*, p. 54.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53. Some scholars like Prof. A. B. Keith regard Law of Karma as *modus operandi*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

by meritorious deeds a happier lot for himself in a future embodiment, but he cannot alter another man's destiny either for good or for ill. Consequently, even virtue finds a selfish motive laid ready to its hand. The asceticism of Hindu ethical thought also is prompted by the desire to amass merit, thus becoming narrowly self-centred.¹⁰ Even the *nishkama karma*—the so-called desireless or motiveless action of the Bhagavadgita, in the opinion of the missionary, is an exaggeration, for he thinks that it is vain to attempt to eradicate all desires, in view of the fact that a motiveless life is empty and worthless, though he finds *nishkama karma* to be significant and unselfish.¹¹

Further says Dr. Hogg, the doctrine contradicts the scientific theory of evolution which takes into consideration the influences of external nature on the individual. He finds fault with the doctrine for lacking the meaning of history, thereby denying the influence of other individuals on one's destiny.¹²

This criticism of Hogg can be found reflected in the views expressed by Swami Iswarananda,¹³ who refers to this popular doctrine of Karma as *Svakarmavada* (individual Karma theory), which does not take into account the effects of the deeds and influences of others on the individual's karma, other than his own merits and demerits. In contrast to this, the Swami proposed *Tritiyakarmavada* (three-fold karma theory) which takes into account the three factors—one's own deeds, the effects of the deeds of others on the individual and the effects of the natural forces, to determine the destiny of the individual. The *Tritiyakarmavada* apportions the cause of happiness and misery and leads to a balanced view, making way for social morality and improvement of human environment for better happiness.¹⁴ The Swami, like Hogg, points out that the popular Karma theory has overemphasized the causal efficiency of one's own deeds to the neglect of the external influences on the individual.

The Karma theory recognises the individual's birth into the world as due to his own past deeds, and hence salvation according to this theory can logically lead only to individual salvation, however selfish it might appear. Hindu philosophy accepts universal salvation through individual salvation and not corporate redemption as under-

¹⁰ *Karma and Redemptions*, pp. 37-38.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

¹³ In 1964 Swami Iswarananda, President of Ramakrishna Mission at Vilugan in Kerala, wrote a book entitled *Does the Soul Incarnate?* challenging the validity of the doctrines of Karma and Re-birth. The Swami rejected the theory of Re-birth and suggested a modified view of the present Karma theory (*Svakarmavada*) on the basis of Three-fold Karma theory (*Tritiyakarmavada*) proposed by him. Dr. Hogg also rejected the doctrine of re-birth and suggested a modified view of the popular Karma theory.

¹⁴ *Indian Philosophical Annual*, 1965, pp. 14-15.

stood in Christianity. The doctrine of redemption in Christianity recognises both the individual and corporate redemption and these find their support from the Biblical passages.

3. *Karma theory is ethically defective for it substitutes a judicial system for a moral order*

While examining the moral aspect of the Karma doctrine Hogg discovered that it (a) provides a theory of punishment and also (b) offers an explanation for the inequalities among mankind.¹⁵ Now the missionary turns the whole discussion towards the question whether the purpose of the Law of Karma was judicial or moral.

(a) In the theory of punishment, the Karma-system presupposes that sin does not deserve more than a finite penalty, so that every punishment might be bearable by the individual. Dr. Hogg questions how far such a view can be true. As a Christian, he believes that sin deserves infinite penalty—'the wages of sin is death'. Hence he thinks it nearer the truth to say that all sin (of mankind) deserves an infinite penalty. But for a Hindu, the deserts of sin under no circumstances can become infinite. Sin for him can only be individual sins and not collective sin as in Christianity. Collective sin and infinite penalty does not find a place in the Karma system.

Then, questioning the very principle on which one can decide that the standard of punishment must be finite, Hogg points out that the choice of a finite standard of penalty is a flaw in the symmetry of the Karma-concept. This in his opinion is due to the moral insufficiency of the Karma-system, since it substitutes a mere judicial system for a moral order. The doctrine of Karma fits beautifully into a system which recognises no purpose in life other than expiation, but there is no room for it in a universe the purpose of which is moral, not judicial, says Dr. Hogg.¹⁶

Prof. R. K. Tripathi offers some explanation to the above criticism.

'Contrary to the views of Western scholars and missionaries, the Law of Karma and the doctrine of re-birth make man responsible and morality meaningful. It is true that morality is not given an ultimate value here, but that is because our ultimate goal is to attain something eternal and that cannot be attained by Karma'.¹⁷

The divine purpose in creation is the Kingdom and not the judgment seat. No religion, says the missionary, accentuates the judgment of God more than does Christianity and yet the exercise of God's judicial functions is thought of as incidental to His purposes of grace.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Karma and Redemption*, p. 58.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁷ *Indian Philosophical Annual*, 1965, p. 92.

¹⁸ *Karma and Redemption*, p. 56.

(b) According to the explanation offered by the Karma doctrine for the inequalities of the human lot in life, the sufferings allotted to human individuals do not correspond to the deserts accumulated by each in the present life and so they must correspond to deserts accumulated in previous embodiments. Karma theory does not find a place for unmerited suffering, which Christianity regards as a privilege and honour, but not an outrage or an injustice. The source for such a striking contrast between the two religions, the learned doctor traces to what he has already stated: that while Christianity represents phenomenal life as a moral order, the doctrine of Karma represents it as a judicial system. The contention of Dr. Hogg is that 'individually unmerited suffering so far from being a mysterious ethical anomaly, is precisely what cosmic justice requires in any universe into which sin has entered'¹⁹.

Prof. P. Nagaraja Rao attempts to answer this important criticism of Dr. Hogg:

'As for the Christian criticism of Karma, we have to note the differences in the two standpoints. To the Hindu, there is no problem, because there is no undeserved suffering. The suffering is of our own making. There is nothing that is not governed by the Law. Suffering is not uncaused or caused by God. To the Christian there is the fact of undeserved suffering because there is sin in it. The presuppositions of the Hindus and Christians are opposite. One feels that the universe is a moral order and unmerited suffering is an ethical anomaly in the world. The Christian feels that it is right that there should be undeserved suffering. The standpoints differ. In short, the view-points start from different premises. Unmerited suffering is an iniquitous phenomena for the Hindu.'²⁰

But Dr. Radhakrishnan takes a different view of the whole conception of unmerited suffering and considers it as a self-sacrifice.

'The Cross is not an offence or stumbling block to the Hindu, but it is the great symbol of the redemptive reality of God. It shows how love is rooted in self-sacrifice. The story of Hinduism has many instances of rishis and Buddhas, who have . . . suffered more than they deserved, for the sake of the world. This unavoidable suffering is not the result of past sins'²¹.

Such a view raises many questions. If undeserved suffering is not the result of past deeds, what is it? How are we to account for

¹⁹ "Christian Message to the Hindu" by Hogg, Pub. in *The Theology of Hogg*, p. 243.

²⁰ *Indian Philosophical Annual*, 1965, p. 142.

²¹ Quoted by Bishop A. J. Appasamy in *The Gospel and India's Heritage*, p. 238.

the sufferings and fasts of Mahatma Gandhi for the sake of Harijans, Hindu-Muslim unity etc.?

The Doctrine of Karma Re-in-terpreted

After a thorough criticism of the doctrine, Dr. Hogg presented a revised law of Karma, interpreting it in the light of the Christian doctrine of redemption. According to this interpretation, Karma doctrine shall be simply the idea of causality applied to the ethical realm. This ethical law of causation recognises two important factors²².

(1) The evil consequences of sin, though they fall on others besides the sinner, do not fall on all in the same way; but the nature of the effect will depend in part upon the individual, on the person affected. The evil consequences which the sins of others bring upon him are in themselves simply misfortunes. But for a true child of God such misfortunes are swallowed up in the joyous consciousness that they come to him through his Father's ordinance, considering them at the worst, a mystery to be accepted in patient faith and at its best, the pains that can be gloried in as a privilege and an honour. But the same evil consequences become the seeds of a new crop of evil in the case of a man living in alienation from God. Such evil consequences provoke discontent and rebelliousness and make him fall a victim to fresh temptations.²³

(2) Karma, as a law of ethical causation, should also recognise that the nature and the effect of evil fruits of sin upon the individual whether personally innocent or guilty depend not upon himself alone, but *upon others*. The parable of the Prodigal Son serves as the best illustration, says Dr. Hogg. The young man has wasted his means in prodigality and his health in licentious living. The fruits of his deeds have begun to ripen and he attains a mood of penitence. The Father cannot undo what he has done. He cannot revoke the ethical law of causation. Yet, the way in which that law works in his son's case depends largely upon his action. If he refuses to forgive, his son very likely will grow desperate. If he forgives and restores him to the standing of a son, his penitence will become more real.

Hence according to the revised law of Karma, the fruit of deeds is no longer merely an individual but a social burden and is subject to modifications owing to the attitudes and conduct of others also. Good Karma cannot wipe out bad karma, but by its own causal efficiency can alleviate the total result, says Dr. Hogg. To him, a hope for redemption is possible only through such an interpreted view.²⁴

The Doctrine of Redemption Re-stated

Dr. Hogg not only re-interpreted the doctrine of Karma, but also felt the necessity of restating the Christian doctrine of Redemption in the light of the Karma theory and the Hindu way of thinking con-

²² *Karma and Redemption*, p. 92.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

cerning the way of release. The incarnation of God, according to him, was the product of a moral necessity of the divine nature to react against sin to the extent of a complete forth-putting of itself in the effort to generate human goodness afresh. Hence, if God was to express Himself freely, the missionary thinks it necessary that the universal order must contain at least two inviolable laws. (1) The first is the Karmic Law which maintains that, if sin enters the phenomenal system, penalty must also enter. (2) The second is the law of salvation, according to which, if sin enters the phenomenal system, God shall be compelled by all the moral forces of His nature to throw the whole infinitude of His being into the phenomenal system, i.e., to incarnate Himself to abolish sinfulness²⁵.

The Karmic order which is the system of inevitable but modifiable punishment, reveals that sin is opposed to divine intention. The Karmic fruit is the consequence of sinful acts. But the Karmic order does not attempt to secure the realisation of the divine purpose of good in the light of human sin or to provide scope for the full reaction against sin. Only the perfect moral nature which can put forth all its potentialities can alone be adequate to convert sinfulness into goodness. Christ revealed His love through His life of patience and sorrow, full of penalties of the world's sin (karma). But His work signifies more than this. The incarnation of God in Christ was the product of a moral necessity of the divine nature to react against sin. Jesus suffered undeservedly the Karma of sin. When men come to know that this sufferer was none other than God, incarnated for the divine purpose of winning them to goodness, His life becomes charged with a power of regeneration for humanity. However, God's reaction of Divine love against sin, by sharing the Karma of humanity, is not done out of sheer pity. In the face of sin, God cannot but sacrifice Himself to the uttermost in the struggle to abolish sinfulness.

The above restated doctrine does not take into account the juridical theories or maintain God as the judge, but seeks to explain redemption by emphasizing the incarnation and love of God for sinners, without

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

In their theological writings and speeches, Sadhu Sunder Singh and Bishop A. J. Appasamy made a clear mention of Karma theory, though they both rejected the theory of transmigration. The Sadhu does not believe that God judges sinners, but only sin judges them. According to him, it is the result of our sinful actions which he calls Karma, that cast us into hell unless we avail ourselves of the salvation offered in Christ. 'There is suffering in the world, often being the penalty for sin, but God is not the author of that penalty, and His only desire is to save the sinner.' (R.H.S. Boyd, *Indian Christian Theology*, p. 101).

Bishop A. J. Appasamy who stated the doctrine of Karma clearly in his theological writings, says that those who believe on Jesus and who find union with Him, are freed from their Karma. But those who reject Christ continue to be subject to the Law of Karma, which is all the time judging them and awarding them the consequences of their deeds. (*Ibid.*, pp. 131-132).

using terms like cross or blood. This seems to be very appealing to the educated Hindu. Justice P. Chenchiah, a convert from Hinduism said:

'I hold that this construction of Christianity, making law, obedience, sin, cross, propitiation, judgment, misses the beauty and newness of the gospel. A piety that stresses love, resurrection, service, communion, sonship gets us nearer to the Master (Christ).'

Conclusion

Dr. Hogg's exceptional erudition in the field of philosophical Hinduism surprises the Hindus when they read his book *Karma and Redemption*. The doctrine of Karma came under the rigorous philosophical analysis of the idealistic philosopher, who pointed out its main defects clearly. While criticising the doctrine of an alien religion, the learned doctor was aware of the limitations of the doctrine and also conscious of the severity of his criticisms. Hence, he was not unduly critical of this doctrine. His re-interpretation of the doctrine of Karma in the light of the Christian doctrine of Redemption, is original and novel.