CONCEPT OF KARMA AND RE-BIRTH EXTOLLED IN THE UPANIṢADS

Dr. B. Chandrika

The concept of Karma and Re-birth postulated by our great sages provides a substantial ground to the philosophical discipline in India that characterises the introspective sensibility in a notable and fantastic way. Both of these concepts are Anādi and are concerned with the view of life. Unless we accept this the various types of births and diverse enjoyments will never occur. These are the pointing marks to re-birth. The discerning factor is that the experiences which we enjoy in this life are all nothing but the fruits of their respectable actions done in the previous births. In all these variety of births especially the human birth the respectable actions are fruitful as both *Bhogayoni* and *Karmayoni*. Another credit for human birth is that only in this birth one can attain liberation with concerted efforts. The same thing is addressed by the great Advaitin Ādi Śaṅkara:

जन्तूनां नरजन्म दुर्लभमतः पुंस्त्वं ततो विप्रता।
तस्माद्वैदिकधर्ममार्गपरता विद्वत्त्वमस्मात्परम्।।[1]

There are so many instances in the Upaniṣads which applaud the existence of Re-birth. The travel of the Jīva towards the phenomena of death, the dissolution of the senses in the *Liṅgaśarīra*, the upliftment of the Jīva from the body, the absorption of the Jīva into another body, the facticity of karma which causes re-birth, the ways of Jīva to good and evil actions, the association of Jīva with good and evil bodies in various worlds, the transcendence into various types of worlds for those who do good and evil actions, the occurrence of death and re-birth etc are intelligibly explicated in the Upaniṣads. There are some informations regarding Karma and rebirth which one can explore in the Upaniṣads. Till the unique experience of liberation, each Jīva acquires mellifluous types of births like the spokes of a wheel. To quote Śaṅkara's verse:

पुनरपि जननं पुनरपि मरणं पुनरपि जननीजठरे शयनम्।
इह संसारे बहु दुस्तारे कृपयाऽपारे पाहि मुरारे।।[2]

Till liberation Jiva is forced to travel from birth to death. Whether good or Evil, Jiva has to acquire consequential births again and again for the enjoyment of the fruits of one's own action. The description of the individual soul that enjoys the fruits of one's action and that of the Supreme soul in the

body is well pictured in the Mundakopanisad thus.

द्वा सुपर्णा सयुजा सखाया समानं वृक्षं परिषस्वजाते।
तयोरन्यः पिप्पलं स्वाद्वत्त्यनश्नन्नन्योऽभिचाकशीति।।[3]

From this we can come to the conclusion that till one gets liberated, he has to take births after births for enjoying good as well as evil fruits of his action. Nobody will be spared from this.

Action-the cause of re-birth

In the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad third and fourth chapters are more important for the content. The third chapter establishes the aforesaid truth with proper *Upapattis*. This has nine Brāhmaṇas. Here Yājñavalkya is the chief exponent. The first Brāhmaṇa named as the Āśvala Brāhmaṇa begins with a narration. King Janaka performs a sacrifice, in which he has to give away all his possessions. For this, he brings so many cows and horses having golden ornaments on their hoofs and horns and he exclaimes: 'Those who are having the knowledge of Brahman can take away all these ornamented animals.' But nobody turned up to take them. Then Yājñavalkya asked his disciples to take away all those to his hermitage. Then the audience one by one stood up and tested the knowledge of Yājñavalkya. In the Āśvala Brāhmaṇa the Question of Āśvala is included. Then many questions were put forward by many persons and all those names were given to that Brāhmaṇas. The seventh Brāhmaṇa is only named after the Subject which it was dealt with it. All the questions were answered by Yājñavalkya, intemperate. Here he concluded that all the names and forms are nothing but the Supreme unconditioned Brahman. Here we can see the ṚgVedic verse *'Ekam Sadviprā:* -----' is seen explained satisfactorily .There is a narration. It goes on like this Yājñavalkya, Arthabhāga said again., tell me, when a man dies, what is it that does not leave him? His name replied Yājñavalkya. A man is without limit, and that all Gods are without limit. Limitless also is the world he wins by it.[4]

Being asked thus Yājñavalkya says: 'That means men live on Karma', or it is only that karma alone makes the senses carry. Even if everything leaves us, Karma will not. We are living upon the Karma. Karma is the basis of the Jiva. More than this if one does prescribes duties one gets good Yonis and performance of evil deeds leads to evil births. From this it is clear that an individual has re-births. The cause of this rebirth is nothing but one's own Karma. The doctrine of Karma is the basic stone on which the theories of rebirth stands. One's Karmas - evil or good - are the cause of their birth in evil and good Yonis.[5]

The status of the Soul of the dying man

In the fourth Chapter fourth Brāhmaṇa *śārīra Brāhmaṇa* of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka the re-birth of Jīva is dealt within detail. At the time of one's death the Jīva withdraws himself all his sensory objects and itself rests in the heart. Then all his *Vāsanas* of Senses mind etc come to the form of a subtle body and leaves the gross body here. Later it takes another body which suits for his earlier actions and *Vāsanas*. The actual cause of all these *Samsāra* is nothing but the *Kāma*. If one attains the knowledge of the Self, he will not get impregnated with any kind of desire, since he had acquired all that is to be acquired. So he will be a Jīvanmukta. Then, there will not be any further birth for him. He, being devoid of all kinds of *Eṣaṇas* like Son, Wealth and Worlds ie *Putraiṣaṇa, Vittaiṣaṇa and Lokaiṣaṇa* hence will not be affected with *Puṇya, Pāpa, Dharma or Adharma* and he will attain *'Abhayam Brahma'*.

At the time of death the mind becomes feeble. It begins to fade first. At that time the whole Prāṇa as well as sense-organs will merge in the mind. At that moment the five motor organs and the five *Jñānendriyas* leave their works. It is because the individual Soul retrieves the powers from all those senses and remains in the heart, which is the resting place of all the powers of the senses. For example the eyes which were indulged in seeing the objects, cannot see the objects. To be clearer, because the Soul has become introvert, its quality of extravertedness begins to fade away. That is the energy which the eyes possess i.e., the part of the sun, which is due to the Karma of the individual is serving him by residing on the eyes. When death reaches near the soul, that part of the Sun stops helping him and attains its own nature and thus the Soul stops seeing things.[6] In consequence the people surrounding such a body will exclaim that he cannot see the objects.

When the five sense organs merge in the Liṅgaśarīra, the people near the dying man would exclaim that he cannot see, touch, smell, taste or think. At that time the Nādi named Hita, which till then remained in the top part of the heart will go deep in to the heart and all other sensory *Nadis* will also come close to the heart. Lastly the *Vijñānamayakośa* will come out from the heart.[7]

The exit of the Prāṇa from various parts of the body

In the Praśnopaniṣad, sage Aśvalāyana asks sage Pippalāda: When Prāṇa gives up the body and enters into another body, from which part of the body will Prāṇa exit? Then Pippalāda answers:

यथा सम्राडेवाधिकृतान् विनियुङ्क्ते एतान् ग्रामानेतानधितिष्ठस्येत्येवमेवैष प्राण इतराणां प्राणान् पृथक् पृथगेव सन्निधत्ते।[8]

There is a space in the heart and the Jīva dwells in that space. There is a passage from Talu to the breast; this path is the yoni of the Jīva. Like Yoni is the passage for the exit of Garbha, for the released Soul; Suṣumnā Nāḍī came out from the Kāku which will struck the Kapāla. This is the place through which the Jīva comes out from the body.[9] When the Jīva goes out through this place, it will become liberated.[10] The same thing is said in the Aitareya too: 'So he split open the head at the point where the hairs part and entered through the gate. This gate [*dvāra*] has the name [split], [vidṛti] and that is the heaven of pleasure [*nandana*]. He has three dwellings three levels of sleep-this is one dwelling, this is another and this is the third.'[11]

There is an example of bedbug for explaining the attachment of Jīva to another Yoni It is like this: 'As a caterpillar, when it comes to the tip of a blade of grass, reaches out to a new foot hold and draws itself into it, so the Self, after it has knocked down this body and rendered it unconscious, reaches out to a new foothold and draws itself into it.'[12]

Attachment of various forms due to one's action

Bṛhadāraṇyaka explains that a man's acquiring of his body is in accordance with his desire. In the fourth chapter there is the detailed description regarding the very same idea thus. This self is made of perception, mind, sight, space, light and the lightness, desire and the desire less, anger and anger less, righteous and the unrighteous; this self is made of everything. Hence there is the saying: 'He is made of this. He is made of that.' What a man turns out to be depends on how he acts on and on how he conducts himself. If his actions are good, he will turn into something good. If his actions are bad he will turn into something bad. A man turns into something good by good action and into something bad by bad action. And so people say: 'A person here consists simply desire. A man resolves in accordance with his desire, acts in accordance with his resolve and turns out to be in accordance with his action.'[13]

Desire – the sole cause for birth

The cause of Jīva's birth is nothing but one's desire. The mind is the cause of this, for Liṅgaśarīra, mind is predominant. The people who do actions with an intention to gain the desired wish certainly will get bound to the same. Bṛhadāraṇyaka:

'A man resolves in accordance with his desire, acts in accordance with his resolve, and turns out to be in accordance with his action'.[14] From this one can conclude that it is the desire which is the cause of Samsāra. Muṇḍaka

also illustrates the same thing: Chāndogya also conveys the very same message.[15] Praśna also supports this view.[16]

The person who had fulfilled his action

One who hankers after desires in his thought, is born here and there through his desires, but when ones desires are fulfilled and one's self is made perfect, all his desires disappear in this way[17] For him there will be no work and no Samsāra. There is a simile described in this regard in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka thus: 'As a snake's slough, lifeless and discarded, lies on an anthill, so lies this corpse . But this non-corporated life birth is nothing but Brahman, nothing but light immortal.'[18]

There is no birth for a *Brahmajñānī*

For those who know Brahman there will be no birth. He will never be born in this earth. Those who seek the self by means of austerity, chastity faith and knowledge, on the other hand proceed by the northern course and wins the sun. Clearly, it is the abode of life breaths; it is the immortal free from fear; it is the highestcourse; from it they do not return; and so it is the final stopping.[19] Muṇḍaka also agrees with this statement.[20]

The Journey of the Brahmajñānī

Two ways are illustrated in the Upaniṣads for those who migrates after death i.e. Tejomārga and Tamomārga or Arcirādi and Dhumamārga or Devayāna and Pitṛyāna. A man who performs duties in the forest till death live as a Tāpasa, even though the last rites are not performed, will attain liberation, through the way of Tejomārga. From there he goes through days to śuklapakṣa and then to Uttarāyana in the duration of six months, from Uttarāyana to Samvatsara and then to the sun and from there to moon and from there to lightning. From lightning, a glittering man will appear and take him near to visinity of Brahman. This path is called Devayāna-the path of Gods. Those persons who go through Devayāna will never return to Earth to attain another Yoni.

Journey of the Jīva through *Iṣṭāpūrtakarma* i.e. the path of *Pitṛyoni*

Chāndogyopaniṣad describes the status of the Jīva after death in the following way. After the thunder cloud has formed, it turns into rain clouds, and after a rain cloud has formed, it rains down. On earth they spring up as rice and barley, plants and trees, sesame and beans, from which it is extremely difficult to get out. When someone eats that food, and deposits the semen, from, him one comes into being again. Now people here whose behavour is

pleasant can expect to enter a pleasant womb, like that of a woman of Brāhmin, the Kṣatriya,or the Vaiśya class. But the people of foolish behavior can expect a foolish womb, like that of a dog, a pig or an outcast women.[21]

The gradation of re-birth

Those people who perform Iṣṭa Karmas i.e. *Vaidika* karmas like Agnihotra and *Pūrta* Karmas like making wells, hospitals etc i.e. making buildings for the well-being of the public and those people who do charity works owing to his own capacity, will go through the way of Dhūmamārga, from there to night from night to kṛṣṇapakṣa and live there for six months and go through south to the sun. They will not reach the Samvatsara and will go away from Pitṛloka, from there to the ākāśa and from ākāśa to the Moon and will remain there till the exhaust of their Karma. From the world of the Moon and the exhaust of all their good deeds the Jīva will come back to the Earth through which it attains the Moon. First he attains ākāśa from there attains Vāyu, becoming Vāyu, he attains Dhūma from Dhūma to the clouds, from there to Megha from there becomes rain.[22] That soul become grasses.

The triad births of men

The Aitareya explains the birth of men elaborately. Once these deities were created, they fell in to the vast ocean here. It affected him with hunger and thirst. Those deities then said to him. Find us a dwelling in which we can establish ourselves and eat food. He brought a cow up to them, but they said,That is totally inadequate for us. Then he brought a horse up to them ,but they said That is totally inadequate for us. Finally he brought a man up to them and they exclaimed, now this is well made for man is indeed well made.

Then he told them Enter each in to your respective dwelling. So the fire become speech and entered the mouth; the wind became one-breath and entered the nostrils; the sun became sight and entered eyes; the quarters became hearing and entered the ears; plants and trees become body hairs and entered the skin; the moon became mind and entered the heart; death became the breath and entered the navel; the waters became semen and entered the penis.[23] Not only in this Upaniṣad Muṇḍaka also explained the birth of men. Deeming sacrifices and gifts as the best, the imbeciles know nothing better. When they have enjoyed their good work, atop the firmament, better. They return again to this abject world.[24] This part also extols how a Jiva after enjoying the fruits of his Puṇya karma again came back to the Earth.

The *gati* of the Jīva who does good action

Those who do good action and then go to the other world and come back from there attain good Yoni, immediately for his new birth. They enter

into the Yoni of Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, and Vaiśya owing to his deeds. Likewise if one does absurd deeds will attain the Yoni of Caṇḍāla. Kauṣītaki explains Citra continued when people depart from this world, it is to the moon that they all go. By means of their life breaths the moon swells up in the fortnight of waxing, and through the fortnight of waxing it propels them to new birth. Now, the moon is the door to the heavenly world. It allows those who answer its question to pass. As to those who do not answer its question, after they have they become vain, it rains them down here on earth, where they are born again in these various conditions as a worm, an insect, a fish, a bird, a lion, a boar, rhinoceros, a tiger, a man or some other creature-each in accordance with his action and his knowledge.[25] Not only Kauṣītaki, Kaṭhopaniṣad also says the very same thing.

Come I will tell you this secret and eternal formulation of truth [Brahman]; and whathappens to the self, Gautama when it encounters death. Some enter a womb by which an embodied self obtains a body, others pass into a stationary thing-according to what they have according to what they have learned. The people who do good actions will attain good Yoni and those do evil actions will attain evil Yonis and those who consider both evil and good actions alike will attain human Yonis and for those evil deeds excels good deeds will born in this earth as Sthāvaras i.e. trees grasses mountains etc. This means for the enjoyment of Jīvas, the Supreme soul creates so many things, including *Sthāvara* and *Jaṅgamas.*

The fate of the Evil doers

Iśopaniṣad and Bṛhadāraṇyaka explain that the ignorant people who commit suicide and plunged in ignorance and for those who are plunged in ignorance may be named as Ātmaghāti. Actually failing to understand their own status, they follow certain evil things and enjoy silly happiness and thereby discarding the limitless happiness.

Those people who are bounded to the veil of ignorance, are also named as Ātmaghāti. They will never realize their self. They will enjoy happiness in meager happiness, and like the Kastūri deer wander here and there and fails to see his real nature, for the same reason he is named as *Ātmahantā*. Those people reach the world of demons, where there is darkness everywhere. Asura means *'Asusu* ramante iti' ie who sees happiness in worldly pleasures. Another derivation is that *'Asavaḥ Prāṇaḥ budhīhi vā asti eṣām* [*asu*]' ie those who have Prāṇa having body that means those who think that their body is the foremost thing. The actual meaning is that those people who

are always bothered about the body only see pleasure in acquiring bodily pleasures. In the Kaṭhopaniṣad there is a passage: 'Look ahead! see how they have gone, those who have gone before us!. Look back so will they go, those who will come after us. A mortal man ripens like grain, and like grain he is born again.[26] which also describes the same idea.

Thus exploring the nature of various philosophical thoughts in ancient India one can come to the conclusion that the base for rebirth is solely the inevitability of fructification of karma. If one does an action whether it is good or evil, he has to enjoy the fruit of it. The very thing is said: 'Avaśyameva bhoktavyam kṛtam karma śubhāśubham.' The basis of Karma is nothing but Kāma or desire. So, finally, the foundation of all these rebirths is Kāma alone. Jīva according to its wish imagines the way of action. Likewise, according to one's action he has to take birth in various Yonis.

Wheel of life

The human body may become week or thin due to old age and diseases. When one reaches the end of his life, his senses begin to leave one by one, like a mango fruit or any other fruit that begins to loose its freshness, when plucked from the tree. The components of the body start to discard the body one by one to attain its original source. This is clearly signified in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka.[27] To be clearer, it can be said that as a Jīva attains the walking, dream and *suṣupti* stages in succession, the soul begins to migrate into another. There is an excellent simile explained in the same Upaniṣad: 'At the time of the arrival of the king everybody from the servant to the magistrate will be keenly waiting for the arrival and when the king leaves the palace all of them will also leave the palace, likewise at the time of death all the senses will leave the Jīva one by one and the wheel of life goes on without the end.

Reference

1. Vivekacūḍāmaṇi 1
2. Mohamudgara
3. Muṇḍaka 3.1.1.
4. Ṛgveda 3.2.12.
5. Ṛgveda 3.2.13.
6. Br. 4.4.1.
7. Bṛhadāraṇyaka 4.4.2.
8. Praśnopaniṣad 3.4.
9. Taittirīya 1.16.

10. Kaṭha 2.3.16.
11. Aitareya 1.3.12.
12. Bṛhadāraṇyaka 4.4.3.
13. Bṛhadāraṇyaka 4.4.5.
14. Bṛhadāraṇyaka 4.4.6.
15. Praśnopaniṣad 3.14.1.
16. Praśnopaniṣad 3.31.
17. Muṇḍakopaniṣad 3.2.2.
18. Muṇḍakopaniṣad 4.4.7.
19. Prśna 1.10.
20. Muṇḍakopaniṣad 1.2.13.
21. Cha 3.4.25.
22. Chan 5.10.3-6.
23. Aitareya 2.1-2/4.
24. Aitareya 1.2.10.
25. Kauṣītaki1.2.
26. Kaṭhopaniṣad 1.6.
27. Bṛhadāraṇyaka 4.9.36.

"Many of the abstractions that are characteristic of modern theoretical physics are to be found discussed in the philosophy of the past centuries. At that time these abstractions could be disregarded as mere mental exercises by those scientists; but today we are compelled by the refinement of experimental art to consider these seriously"

Heisenberg