

## Swāmi Vivekānanda's *Karma-Yoga* and its Relevancy in 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Nitai Saha

Guest Lecturer, Department of Philosophy, Raiganj University, M.A, M.PHIL, NET, SET

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**ABSTRACT:** The aim of Indian Philosophy is to achieve the highest knowledge and for that purpose different ways were indicated by the Philosophers. Thus we find the ways of karma-Yoga, Jñāna-Yoga, Bhakti-Yoga etc. in Indian philosophy. Most of the Indian philosophers have accepted Mokṣa as the highest Puruṣārtha. In the Bhagavad-Gita, Lord Srikrishna had explained in detail about the necessity of niṣkāma karma which leads a man to liberation. Modern Indian thinker Swāmi Vivekānanda also gave much importance on karma-Yoga. He said that the highest ideal of life can be achieved through karma. We can reform our society and state with the help of niṣkāma karma. In the present paper I shall explain the karma-Yoga of Swāmi Vivekānanda as karma is a method to attain the highest truth.

**KEYWORDS:** Puruṣārtha, Mokṣa, karma-Yoga, , niṣkāma karma, Detachment,

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### I. INTRODUCTION:

The Bhagavad-Gita has considered *Karma-Yoga* as the *marga* or path of liberation. Swāmi Vivekānanda has described the *Karma-Yoga* of the Bhagavad-Gita in his own way. In this Chapter I shall explain the different dimensions of Swāmi Vivekānanda's *Karma-Yoga* and its relevance in our society. In 1895, Swāmi Vivekānanda gave lectures at Harvard in America on *Karma-Yoga*. Swāmi Vivekānanda has given a detailed account of *Karma-Yoga* in his book "The Complete Works" volume 1. Swāmiji has explained the *Karma-Yoga* through eight chapters which are the following: 1. Karma in its effect on character. 2 Each is great in his own place. 3. The secret of work. 4. What is duty? 5. We help ourselves, not the world. 6. Non-attachment is complete self- abnegation 7. Freedom. 8. The ideal of *Karma-Yoga*.

#### **Karma in its effect on character**

The term karma has been used in the sense of action or work. One of the aims of human being is to gain knowledge. The *prācya darsanas* tell us about this type of goal. Swāmiji thought that the ultimate goal of human life is not happiness, but knowledge. There is an end of happiness and joy. Due to ignorance human beings consider happiness as the ultimate goal of life. Due to the lack of knowledge, we are suffering in the world and we see sadness in the world. With the change of time people can understand that they are not going towards the happiness, going towards the knowledge. The happiness and the sadness both are our great teachers. We learn from sadness as well as get education from happiness. Happiness and sadness leave many different images on us. These images reform our character. The totality of these images or reforms, we called the character of human being. The character of a person is actually the sum total of the tendencies of his mind. It can be seen that happiness and sorrow are the equal components of forming his character. In some places we learn more from sadness rather than happiness. It is seen that when discussing the character of the great man of the world, in most cases sorrow has taught them more than happiness, poverty has taught more than wealth, hurting has helped them to flame the fire of their hearts.

If we gradually study our mind, we will see our smile - crying, happiness - sadness, bless-curse, and praise-reputation- all of us have been born in our mind through external sensation. Our current character is formed with them. The totality of these injuries is called action. The psychological or physical injuries that are given to express the power and knowledge of the soul are called actions. Here the work has been used in a broad sense. We are always working. For example - talking, hearing, breathing etc. That means whatever we do physically or emotionally is action. The work is leaving its image on us. If we want to judge a person's character fairly, do not look at his great deeds. When someone is doing a very little work, we have to see how he is doing. In this way the real character of the noble person is known. On the occasion of big events, the greatness was promoted to very little people. But whose character is magnificent in reality, is great, even though he is the same throughout the whole situation. According to Swāmi Vivekānanda, "**To work we have the right, but not to the**

fruits thereof. Leave the fruits alone." (The Complete works, Vol- 1. P.55). When helping someone, the person should not think about how he should feel.

### **Each is great in his own place**

In this Chapter, Swāmi Vivekānanda described the greatness of men on the basis of action. Sāṅkhya philosophy regarded nature as consists of three gunas- Sattva, Raja, and Tama. These three forces are inside in everyman. Tama is the force of darkness or inactivity; Raja expresses activity, fascination and the equilibrium of these two gunas is Sattva. When the Tama guna becomes strong, we become lazy, we cannot work, get tied up in the bonds of inertia. When the Raja guna becomes powerful, we become active and all our motions are the results of Raja guna. But when the Sattva guna increases we become happy, blissful, satisfied in action.

According to Swāmi Vivekānanda, our first duty is to believe in ourselves, after that in God. The person who does not believe in himself can never believe in God. Every person should make his life in his own way. Building the life on the basis of own ideal is better than building the life in the ideals of others. Swāmiji explained it beautifully with the help of an example. If we force a child to travel around twenty miles then either the child will die or he will reach the destination by crawling. We are treated like this with human in our society. In every society the mind of all men and women are not of the same kind. Everyone's power and capacity is not the same. But we do not have the right to ignore any person's ideals. Everyone makes effort to reach his respective ideals. It is not fair to judge someone with the ideology of another. For this reason, not everyone should be judged by the same ideal, such practices only lead to unusual struggles. As a result, people start to hate themselves and arises a special obstacle before their rightfulness and honesty. Our duty is to encourage every person in his struggle to follow his own ideal. The King of the throne is great and glorious; the scavenger is also great in his work. All the works are great. Swāmiji thinks that the weakness is always abominable and abandoned. If we read the Vedas then we will see that the word 'Avoy' has been used there repeatedly. 'Avoy' means that we should not fear anything whether it may be animate or inanimate. Fear is the sign of the weak person. These weaknesses drag people away from the way of God and as a result human beings commit sins. So Vivekānanda said that we should not think about the hatred and ridicule of the world because it is obnoxious. In his own case, every person is great.

### **The secret of karma**

In this chapter Swāmi Vivekānanda discussed the secret of action. The Bhagavad-Gita taught us to perform *niskāma karma*. *Niskāma karma* is the action which is performed without desire. It means, act without the desire of results or motive. Another way we can say that it is work only for the sake of action. Spiritual knowledge is needed at first to perform *niskāma karma*. It is the secret of action. According to Vivekānanda, helping a man is a great act. However, there is no shortage of human beings in this form of help. No person can fulfill the desires of another person permanently by helping him. For example, we can stop the hunger of a person by giving him some food, but the crisis will come again. A human being can overcome all his lacks by spiritual knowledge. It can destroy the all miseries forever. So awakening spiritual thinking is the greatest act for human being. It is the inner meaning of karma. If we want to gain this spiritual knowledge, at first it is necessary to control our senses. By the non attachment action we can restrict our senses. As a result, this non attachment comes in action and forms honest character.

A turtle folds his head and feet into shell after looking or the touching any dangerous object. In the same way, a wise person withdraws his senses from the external objects and makes himself introvert. According to Swāmiji, the restraint of senses is the nature of human being. With self-restraint and sacrifice a person can reach to the supreme ideal of his life. Such kind of action is described by Vivekānanda as the real action of the human being. Herein lies the secretes of action.

### **What is duty?**

In this Chapter, Swāmi Vivekānanda has discussed his opinion about duty. Generally the action which is done through the direction of conscience is considered as a duty. That means, the right action is considered to be a duty. If any action is deemed to be a duty then the interest in performing that action is created. But it is not possible to define duty as a universal concept. Because the knowledge about duty is depend on place, time, religion and also society. Swāmiji said that keeping in mind the consequences of action, which action leads a person towards God is called duty. That means, good action is action that leads us to go towards God and it is our duty. Bad action is action that leads us to go towards evil and it is not our duty. In this regard Swāmiji said a Sanskrit aphorism - "Do not injure any being: not injuring any being is virtue, injuring any being is sin." In the Bhagavad-Gita it is said that duty is nothing but to perform act following *varnasram*. Varna of a person was determined on the basis of his birth and action. There is only one way to improve – we should perform our duties properly until we can reach our highest position. Mother's position is the greatest position in the world. From her we can learn and practice the highest unselfishness. The love of God is better than the love of mother

and all the other love is lower. The first duty of a mother is to think about her children, then of her own self. If the parents do not do so and they think at first about themselves, then the relation between parents and children will be the same as the relation we find between the birds and their children. When the birds' children are able to fly, then they forget their parents. That man is blessed who is able to see in woman as the motherhood of God. In the same way that woman is blessed who is able to see in man as the fatherhood of God. The children are blessed who are able to see in their parents as the Divinity manifested on earth. Our duty is to work only. So we should prepare ourselves to perform any kind of duty.

### **We help ourselves, not the world**

In this Chapter Swāmi Vivekānanda has explained the importance to help others. According to him, to help others is to help one's own self. It is our duty to help others, to work for the benefit of the world. In fact the world does not need our help. The world is self sufficient because it can fulfill its own needs. We can help the world - this kind of thinking is nothing but condemnation to God. There are sorrows, pains in the world and we should do the work for their remedies. Among the all tasks, to help others is the highest work. It widens the way for a great opportunity and fortune in our lives. We should serve without selfishness for the poor people of our society. In this way the giver's heart becomes cleaned, like the worshiper's heart is cleaned by the worship of God. For ignorance we can think that we help the world. But it is wrong thinking. We should leave this kind of thinking. We can help others, but not the world. To help others is to help ourselves. It is blessed for us.

The main objects which are discussed in this Chapter are:

1. We must remember that we all are debtful to the world; the world is not owing to us. It is our great opportunity to do something for the others.
2. God is always in the world. He is indestructible, persevering, encompasses everywhere. He has been working continuously.
3. We should not hate anyone of us. Our duty is to show sympathy to the weak and to love the evildoer.
4. We should not have any fanatics, because it is opposed to love. We should not hate sinners, rather we should hate sin.

### **Non attachment is complete self abnegation.**

In this Chapter, Swāmi Vivekānanda discussed the concept of detachment. According to him, detachment means complete self sacrifice. In the first chapter of *Karma-Yoga* Swāmiji used the term karma in the sense of action. But here he added fruit with action. Swāmiji said that no work is completely good, again, no work in completely bad. Every action has the aspects of good and bad at the same time. The person who understands the good into evil deed and the evil work in good deed, only can understand the secret of karma. Therefore perfection can never be attained through action. Because evil and good both are attach with the fruits of karma. To get the fullness or perfection in life we should selflessly dedicate ourselves for others. Only disinterestedness is complete self sacrifice. Self sacrifice is the real happiness, because it purifies people's heart. In this self sacrifice, knowledge, devotion and action meet together. So Swāmiji said, "**The highest ideal is eternal and entire self abnegation, where there is no 'I', but all is 'Thou'...**". (The Complete works, vol-1, P-105)

### **Freedom**

Swāmi Vivekānanda discussed in this Chapter about the nature and the way of liberation. As a follower of *Advaita Vedanta*, Swāmi Vivekānanda explained liberation on the basis of Vedanta Philosophy. Here karma means law of causation. He thinks that people bonds up for this law of causation. This law of causation keeps people bound by rules in practical terms and causal chains. To get rid of, we have to overcome this limited life, causal relation, this body and the world of limitation. In one word the liberation means leave addiction to worldly affirms.

Vivekānanda said about two ways for liberation. One is called the 'Neti' and another is 'Iti'. 'Neti' refers to '*nivritti marga*' and 'Iti' refers to '*pravritti marga*'. 'Iti' means revolving towards and 'Neti' means revolving away. The first way is the negative way and it is very difficult. The second way is the positive way and it is possible for normal human being. The first way is the way of attaining detachment by reasoning. So it is the way of *Jnana-Yoga*. It is featured by the denial to do any action. The second path is the way of attaining detachment by action or experience. So it is the way of *Karma-Yoga*. That means, we should not refrain ourselves from doing work. According to this path, all the people in the world have to work.

### **The ideal goal of Karma-Yoga**

In this Chapter Swāmi Vivekānanda has explained the ultimate goal of *Karma-Yoga*. To work for others with disinterestedness or self sacrifice is called *Karma-Yoga*. In *Karma-Yoga* non attachment is accepted as the only way. Except non attachment, a *karmayogin* does not belief any theory and any other way. Even a

*karmayogi* will not believe in God. No question will arise in his mind about soul. His only aim is to obtain non attachment and he will reach to this state by his own help. Like the wise man can solve all problems by his knowledge, a devotee can solve all problems by his devotion; a *karmayogin* is also able to solve all his problems by his non attachment action. In this regard, Swāmi said - "**That which is selfish is immoral and that which is unselfish is moral.**"(The Complete Works, Vol-1, P-129) Swāmiji identified Goutam Buddha as the greatest *karmayogin* in the world. He is a perfect example of *karmayogin*. He was completely carried teaching of *Karma-Yoga* into practice. So we can say that Goutam Buddha represents the ideal of *karma-Yoga*.

## II. CONCLUSION

Swāmi Vivekānanda has explained various types of *Yoga* in his book The Complete Works. Among the various types of *Yoga* he preferred the *Karma-Yoga*. To explain *karma-Yoga* Vivekānanda always followed the opinion of *Gītā*. For Vivekānanda, a person's character is reflection of his will, which is shown through his works. We can understand the real nature of a man through his action. We built our character by karma, or work or action and so it is the means of our character building. Our actions or works make us what we are. The character of a person will be good if he does good action continuously and the bad actions of that person builds his bad character. Therefore it's possible for someone to change his character through his actions. Vivekānanda said that the character of a person is formed by his action. So, he gave much importance on action. If we want to see our country in the best place of the world, then our primary duty will be to insist everybody to form a good character. Only the persons who have good character are able to remove evils from the society. A society cannot be good if it is full with characterless or morality-less persons. Here karma or action plays an important role. So Vivekānanda gave much importance on *Karma-Yoga*, because through karma a person can make himself as equal with God.

Swāmi Vivekānanda revives Bhagavad Gita's ethics of *Karma-Yoga* and applied it to solve social, economical and religious problems. He evolves a new outlook of Bhagavad Gita's *Karma-Yoga* which is life based. Swāmi Vivekānanda's contributions to religious reform are undeniable. The main problem in present day India is unemployment, violence, fight among the citizens, poverty etc. So we look various types of chaos in our society. The society is going to degradation. I think Swāmi Vivekānanda's ideology, his ideal of *Karma-Yoga*, educational philosophy are very much relevant today. If we follow his theory of *Karma-Yoga*, we can build an ideal society.

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