

Comments on the article entitled 'Yajña and the Doctrine of Karma: A Contradiction in Indian Thought and Action' published in the *JICPR*, Vol. VI, No. 2

Professor Daya Krishna in the Chapter 'Yajña and the Doctrine of Karma' in *Indian Philosophy: A Counter Perspective* New Delhi, 1991 points out that *yajña* is actually performed by the priest but the fruit thereof is received by the *yajamāna*. Professor Krishna considers that this leads to a serious anomaly: the actual doer of the *yajña karma*, the priest, does not get the fruit of his *karman*, and the *yajamāna*, who does not actually perform the *yajña karma* is the beneficiary of the fruit of *yajña karma*. This anomaly is similar to that also found in the *śrāddha karma*: *śrāddha* is performed by the descendants of the deceased but benefit of the food offerings goes immediately to the *brāhmaṇas*, who conduct the ceremony but eventually to the *pitr*, the departed soul of the deceased ancestor. In this article we explain that this *prima facie* anomaly arises because we do not distinguish between moral acts and ritual acts, between *puṇya* and *pāpa karma* on the one hand and *yajña karma* and *śrāddha karma* on the other.

VEDIC YAJÑA KARMA AND THE CLASSICAL DOCTRINE OF KARMA

Yajña as prescribed in the *Yajurveda* and the *karmas* or more precisely the *yajña karma* prescribed in the *Brāhmaṇas* are fundamentally, rather geneti-

cally, different from moral or ethical *karma*, *punya*, and *pāpa*, *sukṛta*, *duṣkṛta*, as propounded in the *upaniṣads*, Buddhism and Jainism and the later *sāstras* except the *Pūrvamīmāṃsā*.

Yajña Karma is ritual *karma* or an amoral act which has to be performed strictly in accordance with the prescribed procedure (*vidhi*) in the *Brāhmaṇas* and with the prescribed instruments and with the offering of the specified sacrificial materials: the sacrificial altar or *vedi* on a selected piece of land and built of bricks to prescribed dimensions: special wood has to be used for making the fire which has to be kindled in the manner laid down. Offerings of materials, including *bali* or sacrifice of animals, have to be made by qualified priests to the recitation of *vedic mantras*. The *Brāhmaṇas* or the manuals of rituals lay down when, where, and how to perform and who is to perform a *yajña karma*. The ethical or moral *karmas*, on the other hand, are essentially mental and physical acts which do good or ill, help or harm to fellow creatures. There is no regulation as to when, where and how the ethical acts are to be performed.

The fruit of *yajña karma* is a beneficial potential, known in *Pūrvamīmāṃsā* as *apūrva*, which is received by the soul of the *yajamāna*, the person who performs or arranges performance of *yajña*, after death in *svarga loka*, heaven.

The fruit of ethical *karma*, the *kārmic potential*, which may be beneficent or malefic, is also enjoyed by the *kartā*, that is, the doer of the act/acts in subsequent rebirths in different *yonis*, forms of existence, men, animals and plants, in this *loka*, *bhūloka*. In fact the quality of *karma*, good or evil, determines the *yonī*, form of rebirth and the happiness and suffering an embodied soul experiences. Later the potential produced by ethical acts or *karmas* came to be known as *adrṣṭa* as distinct from *apūrva*, the beneficial potential of *yajña karma* or ritual acts.

KARTĀ OF RITUAL AND MORAL KARMA

The *kartā* of *yajña karma* (ritual act) is the *yajamāna* though it may actually be performed by priests; the *kartā* of moral acts is the person who actually does the act.

An analysis of the structure of *yajña karma* will establish the author of that *karma*.

- (a) *Yajñānta*, the end or purpose of sacrifice, such as attainment of heaven (*svarga kāmo yajeta*), birth of a son (*putreṣṭi*), averting harm etc. Therefore, the *yajñas* are propitiatory, expiatory (*prāyaścitta*), purificatory, supplicatory (*kāmya*) and protective. They may be for the benefit of a person or an individual, a family, *grhya yajña* or *agnihotra*, or public, ruler and the community, *śrauta yajña* such as *rājasūya* (consecration of the king), *aśvamedha*, (territorial expansion), for rain to avert drought etc.
- (b) *Yajamāna*, the sacrificer, the patron who organizes the performance of the sacrifices. He pays for the entire operation—construction of the fire or sacrificial altar, the materials or things to be offered as sacrifice, the remuneration to be paid to the *ritviks*, who actually perform the sacrifice on behalf of the *yajamāna*. He is the *svāmin* or *yajñapati* the lord, principal, of the sacrifice.
- (c) *Ritviks*, the professional priests who actually conduct the sacrifice. The public or communal sacrifices were very complex involving knowledge of procedures for construction of sacrificial altar, the materials to be offered as sacrifice, the *mantras* to be recited during the performance etc. So these sacrifices required the employment of 16 priests: *adhvaryu*, who recites the *yajus*; the *yajurvedin* who also makes the sacrificial altar, the utensils and the sacrificial materials, kindles the fire and kills the animals to be sacrificed; the *hotri* who pours the oblation; the *Ṛg Vedin* who recites the *mantras* of the *Ṛg Veda* and offers the oblations of sacrificial material to fire; the *udgātri*, the *sāmavedin* who chants or sings the verses from the *Sāmaveda*; the *brahman*, a *trivedī* who knows the three *vedas*, supervises the performance to ensure that it is strictly in accordance with the rules of the sacrifice and there are no procedural errors. He has been called the 'physician' of the sacrifice.

Each of these priests could be assisted by three juniors who are specialists in the respective *veda*.

Thus there are a minimum of 4 and a maximum of 16 priests employed for performance of *śrauta* sacrifices (4 priests in *iṣṭis*, 5 in *caturmāsya*). Optionally a 17th priest, *sadasya* could also be appointed. His function appears to have been similar to that of the *brahman*.

Only in the case of domestic or *grhya yajña*, *agnihotra*, either the *yajamāna* may perform the *yajña* himself or employ one *ritvik*, the *adhvaryu*.

The duration of a sacrifice may vary from 1 day to many days. A *sattra*, a community sacrifice, may last from 12 days to 100 days or even more.

- (d) *Dakṣiṇā*, the fees payable to the officiating priests by the sacrificer, the *yajamāna*.
- (e) The Vedic *devatā*, god, to whom the sacrifice is offered through *agni*, fire.

From the point of view of the effectiveness of a *yajña* in achieving its purpose, the core ingredients are:

- (i) the *devatā* to which the sacrifice is offered.
- (ii) *tyāga*,¹ offering, surrendering, renunciation of the sacrificial material (*dravyam*) to the *devatā*, e.g. *agnaye idam na mama*: this is for Agni, not for me. Similar formulae are uttered for other *devatā*, substituting the name of the particular *devatā* in place of Agni, as the case may be.

It would be evident from the structure of *yajña karma* that *yajamāna* and not the *ritviks*, is the *kartā*, the doer of the ritual *karma*. The *ritviks* perform the *yajña karma* as the agents or proxies of the *svāmin*, the principal, who is the *yajamāna*. That is why the *ritviks*, as agents, receive *dakṣiṇā* or fees for their services, and the *yajamāna* gets the spiritual benefit, *apūrva*, in heaven.

The relation between the *yajamāna* and the *ritviks* was that of 'master and servant', of the 'hirer' and the 'hired', of 'principal and agent'. This is conclusively established by the *Jaimini Sūtras* and the *Śābara Bhāṣya* thereon.

Jaimini Sūtra III 8.1 says: *svāmikarma parikṛayaḥ karmanastadarthatvāt*. It is the work (duty, responsibility) of the master (*yajamāna*) to hire (*parikṛayaḥ*, purchase, buy) the *ritviks*, as the *karmanā* (*yajña karma*) is for the master's purpose (benefit). Further *Jaimini Sūtra* III 8.26 affirms that the fruit of the *yajña karma* accrues to the *Yajamāna*: *svāmīno ... tadarthatvāt*—(it is) performed for the purpose or benefit of the master (*svāmin*, *yajamāna*).

The *Śābara*² *Bhāṣya* on this *sūtra* discusses the question: 'Are the priests (*ritviks*) to be purchased by the Adhvaryu (the principal *ritvik*) or by the master (*yajamāna*)? In reply, the *Bhāṣya* enunciates the *siddhānta*: 'The purchasing (hiring) is the function of the Master ... as the performance is for his purpose (benefit), i.e., it is the sacrificer (Master of the sacrifice) who desires to obtain the results (that are to follow from the performance of the sacrifice); in ordinary practice when a man desires to obtain certain results from the performance of an act, he has to do that act himself; ... if he

purchases (secures on payment) the services of other persons (to help him in the performance) he is regarded as doing it himself. Under the circumstances, if he were not to do the purchasing (and if it were done by someone else), he could not be doing the main act himself ...' Likewise in the case of simple ritual acts like the domestic *agnihotra* or where the *yajamāna* is qualified to perform a *yajña* such as a *rājaṛṣi*, or sages like Viśvāmitra and Janaka, no *ritvik* needs to be engaged to perform the ritual acts. Hence no *dakṣiṇā* becomes payable to anyone; the *gr̥hapati*, the lord of the household, is both the *ritvik* and the *yajamāna*.

Again if the *yajamāna* does not give the *dakṣiṇā* or the *dakṣiṇā* is inadequate, the *apūrva*, of the *yajña karma* is destroyed (*prakṣāma*, burnt). According to *Manu* XI 38–41, failure to give adequate *dakṣiṇā* results in loss of the *yajña phala*, fruit of sacrifice. If the *tyāga* of the oblation were to result in renunciation of the *yajña karma phala*, that is *apūrva*, in that case *yajamāna* would be under no compulsion to pay the *dakṣiṇā* to the *ritviks*. This proves conclusively that *tyāga* in the course of performance of ritual *karmas*, involves only parting with, giving away, the offerings only and not of the beneficial potential that is likely to accrue. Professor Daya Krishna treats ritual acts or *yajña karma* as *pari materia* with ethical *karma*, *punya* and *pāpa karma*. This leads to another serious contradiction in the classical doctrine of *karma*: the *ritviks*, priests perform the *yajña karma* but the *phala*, *apūrva*, accrues to the *yajamāna* who pays for the performance of the ritual *karma* but does not actually perform that *karma*. To quote Daya Krishna: 'The hard core of theory of the *yajña* is that one can reap the fruit of somebody else's action, while the hard core of the theory of *karma* denies the very possibility of such a situation even arising in a universe that is essentially moral in nature.'³

There is clear scriptural evidence to show that *yajña karma* was considered to be fundamentally different from ethical *karma*.

The *upaniṣadic* doctrine of *karma* was an assault on the *brāhmaṇic* doctrine of *yajña karma* or ritualistic *kriyās*. It denounced the utility of performing *istāpūrta*, that ritual knowledge leads to darkness and not enlightenment, and postulated that ritualistic *karmas* were an impediment to liberation. In fact the *upaniṣads* condemn *yajña karma* as useless.

It would be evident that the hardcore of the *vedic yajña karma* is the performance of rituals to produce beneficial potential, *apūrva*, which can be enjoyed by the soul of a deceased *yajamāna* who had performed it, in *paraloka*, heaven. The *kartā* or doer of ethical *karma* produces a potential which fructifies or

is experienced by the doer after rebirths in this *loka*. Again the actual performance of ritual *karma* was done by *ritviks* as proxies of the *yajamāna*, whereas an ethical *karma* is performed by the person who actually does the action. The two types of *karma* are entirely different.

For a fuller understanding of this issue, it is expedient to consider the new forms of *yajña karma* (ritual *karma*) which the Mīmāṃsakas had evolved after the cult of *vedic yajña karma* declined when the *upanishads* and Buddhism and Jainism denounced them as useless and as impediment to achievement of *mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa*.

The Pūrvamīmāṃsakas were the inheritors of the *vedic* Brāhmanical cult of *yajña karma*. It is also called Karmamīmāṃsā inasmuch as it taught the supreme importance of the performance of ritual acts for attainment of the material goals of life and of *mokṣa*. After the *vedic* Brāhmanical cult of *śrauta yajñas* was discarded, the Mīmāṃsakas evolved the rituals of *nitya* and *naimittika* and *kāmya karmas*. These *karmas* are mandatory *karmas* enjoined by the scriptures. They have no ethical content. They are a post-*vedic* version of the *vedic yajñas*. Their performance was the primary duty of the *grhasthas*, householders, belonging to the three high castes. Ethical *karmas* are performed by all members of the society; they are not caste and *āśrama* based. The *dhārmika* or *śāstrika nitya, naimittika, and kāmya karmas* are the neo-*yajña karmas*. The performance of *naimittika* and *kāmya karmas* may generally necessitate the engagement of a *purohita* (priest) to ensure conformity to the *vidhi*, manual of rites, and recitation of the relevant *mantras*. These *karmas* are, so to say, the *śāstrika* or *paurāṇic* form of the *vedic yajña karma*. Their *apūrva* is the neo-*iṣṭāpūrta* of the *vedic* sacrificial *karmas*.

The relevant point is that the *purohita* is just an intermediary, an agent acting on behalf of the person who arranges the performance of these *śāstrika karmas*. The *purohita* gets his *dakṣiṇā* but the *kartā*, the principal, receives the *spiritual benefit*.

Another category of ritual *karmas* is the *śrāddha karma*, more precisely the *piṇḍapitr yajña*, the *vedic* ritual of ancestor worship involving offering of *piṇḍas*, oblations of food balls, to provide nourishment to one's deceased ancestors. This rite was performed monthly on the new-moon day and was in the nature of *śrauta karma*. It was the later-day post-*Vedic* *pitr śrāddha*, classified as *naimittika karma*. The ancestors so worshipped are solicited to give health and wealth, in return, to the decendants.

Here again *śrāddha* is actually performed by *brāhmaṇas* on behalf of the kinsmen of the deceased; the *brāhmaṇas* also consume the offerings of food

and drink meant for providing nourishment to the *preta*, the unembodied soul of the deceased.

Here also the *brāhmaṇas*, who perform the *śrāddha* rites, act as the agents of the kinsmen of the deceased who make offerings of food and drink to appease the *pretas* of their forefathers.

In brief we must distinguish between ethical *karmas*, good and evil, *punya* and *pāpa*, on the one hand and amoral ritual *karmaṣ*, *yajña karma* and *śāstrika* (*nitya*, *naimittika*) and also *śrāddha karmas* on the other. In the case of ethical *karmas*, the doer bears or enjoys the consequences of those *karmas*. In respect of ritual *karmas*, the priests, who may perform them, get *dakṣiṇā* from the person on whose behalf they perform them and the latter receives the spiritual benefit.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The doctrine of *niṣkāma karma* of the *Bhagavadgītā* (*B.G.*) also speaks of *tyāga* of a person's *karma phala* (fruit of action). It is considered expedient to distinguish between the *tyāga* in *yajña karma* and *tyāga* of the *B.G.* The word *tyāga* is derived from the root \sqrt{tyak} or \sqrt{tyaj} (left, abandoned). The word *tyāga* means leaving, abandoning, forsaking, giving up, resigning, gift, donation. It does not mean *karma phala tyāga* of the *Bhagavadgītā*.

In the context of *yajña karma* the word *tyāga* merely means that the *yajamāna* or the *ritviks*, on his behalf, renounce(s) in this birth the sacrificial material, *dravya*, in favour of the *devatās*; there is no renunciation of the fruit or beneficial potential of *yajña karma*, which is *apūrva*.

Karma whose *phala* is surrendered or renounced in the *Bhagavadgītā* is not ritual *karma*; it is *sukṛta* or *punya karma*, moral act and renunciation is of the *adrṣta* in future birth or births.

The postulate of *niṣkāma karma* or more precisely *karma phala tyāga* is the unique contribution of the *Bhagavadgītā*. All schools of Indian religions and philosophy, except the *Cārvākas*, believe that all *karmas*, good or evil, are a source of bondage of the soul. The results or fruits of accumulated *karmas* must necessarily be experienced in a soul's subsequent births or embodiments in different forms of life which themselves are determined by the *karmas*. In consequence, accumulated *karmas* are responsible for a soul being bound perpetually to death and rebirth, *mṛtyu* and *punarjanma* and suffering inherent therein. To attain *mokṣa* or *mukti*, liberation from birth and death, a person has to cultivate *trṣṇā nirodha*, abandoning desire, and *karma nirodha*, abandoning *karmas* or *kārmic* activity. The *Bhagavadgītā* recognized the impracticability of the philosophy of inaction. The *Bhagavadgītā* also recognized that man

cannot remain inactive constitutionally—it is inherent in the nature of man that he must always be doing some *karma*. So the *Bhagavadgītā* postulates that if a man does *niškāma karma* in place of *kāmya* or *sakāma karma*, his *karman* will be sterile and there will be no bondage to *karma* necessitating rebirth: he will attain *mokṣa* or *mukti* from rebirth through *karma phala tyāga*. The *tyāga* of oblations or sacrificed material in *yajña karma* is not in the nature of *karma phala tyāga*; it is not *tyāga* or renunciation of the *apūrva*, the result of a *yajña karma*.

2. Ganganath Jha: *Śābara Bhāṣya*. Translated into English, Baroda, 1973, Vol. I, p. 659.
3. Daya Krishna: 'Yajña and the Doctrine of Karma' in *Indian Philosophy: A Counter Perspective*, New Delhi, 1991, p. 175.

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