

THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING : SOME RELIGIO-METAPHYSICAL PERSPECTIVES

The fact of suffering is undeniable. It can be understood either as necessary suffering that is involved in the very act of living and that falls to the lot of every man, as disease, old age and death; or it can be viewed from the point of view of distribution of suffering among mankind. It is the unequal distribution of suffering that offends our sense of justice most. At the sight of undeserved and excruciating pain every one of us at one time or the other has questioned the justifiability or desirability of such suffering.

The Brāhmānical thinkers were conscious that the crux of the problem of suffering lies not in the fact of suffering, but in the apparent injustice of its distribution. The law of *Karma* is a religio-metaphysical hypothesis which seeks to explain and justify the inequalities both of men's characters and temperaments and of men's external circumstances and the joys and sufferings they undergo. In the briefest outline, the law of *Karma* is the law of universal causation, and may be likened to the natural law of action and reaction, so that no action can occur without at the same time causing the occurrence of a reaction of similar nature. The law of *Karma* expresses the strongest possible faith in the moral governance of the world. The moral quality of our deeds, thoughts and desires not only influences and moulds our future character, but so conditions the natural world order that we are thrown into circumstances best suited to materialize the experiences that our moral character deserves.¹

The law of *Karma* is the law of moral responsibility. Each man must suffer or face the natural results of his actions. Indian thinkers emphasize the universality, necessity and autonomy of the law of *Karma*. Some orthodox

systems believe in a creator God, others do not; but all agree that whatever befalls a man is the natural result of his actions (*karmas*), and neither the free will of a transcendent God nor any chance or fate decides his destiny. If the present circumstances of a man do not seem to be in harmony with his present moral character and conduct, it is to be surmised that they are the results of his past actions done in a previous life. The law of *Karma* thus presupposes the immortality and individuality of the soul and its transmigratory existence. Theistic schools of orthodox Indian philosophy believe in one supreme God and in grace as the sole means of emancipation. They also believe that it is God who distributes the fruits of action, but add that though God's will is free, He chooses to allot joys and sufferings in strict accordance to one's actions (*karmas*).

Several criticisms are levelled against the hypothesis of the law of *Karma*.² It is argued, and we agree, that the law of *Karma* is a mere explanatory hypothesis which cannot be either proved or disproved; that in the absence of memory of one's past lives, one who suffers here and now can hardly be said to be the same person; and that some of the most excruciating pains in nature seems to be out of all proportion to any imaginable crime. That the law of *Karma* leaves very little for God to do, is also true, though this fact cannot be taken as a conclusive proof against the law, as is sometimes suggested. But the criticism that equates the hypothesis of *Karma* to fatalism is very much off the mark, as the former emphasizes moral responsibility which implies freedom of will in the sense of the possibility of moral choice and meaningful voluntary action. Brāhmānical texts abound in passages advocating human effort against faith.³ It seems to us that the real weakness of the hypothesis of law of *Karma* consists in its individualistic approach which emphasizes the exclusive responsibility of man for his destiny and the aloneness of his journey through transmigratory existence,⁴ and thereby undermines the possibility of sharing of each other's sufferings. But the rigour of the law of *Karma* was very early sought to be

softened by the doctrine of the transference of one's merits for the good of others.

The Buddhists were equally firm believers in the law of *Karma* which was for them but an expression of the universal law of causation. The Buddhist explanation of the working of the law of *Karma* is very different from that of the orthodox Indian philosophies, in that the Buddhists do not believe in a permanent individual soul that experiences the fruits of its past actions and transmigrates. The Buddhist world-view is based on the three assumptions of impermanence, unsubstantiality and painfulness of life. Buddhists deny the existence of any simple, self-existent, permanent substance (*anattā*), either in nature or in human personality. There are no substances or things in nature, only changes or events which follows each other in strict accordance to the law of causation. *Karma* means action and action signifies causal change.

Suffering (*dukkhas*) is another of the most important assumptions of the Buddhist world-view, asserted through the four noble truths which form the basis, as well as the pivot, of the entire Buddhist philosophy. They refer to the fact of suffering, the cause of suffering, the possibility of redemption from suffering and the way of Buddha to redemption or *nirvāna*. Life, according to Buddhism, is full of suffering. The conditions that make life are precisely the conditions that give rise to suffering. Individuality involves limitation and limitation ends in suffering.

The very first sermon of Buddha emphasizes this fact of suffering:

“Now this is the noble truth concerning suffering. Birth is suffering, decay is suffering, union with the unpleasant is suffering, separation from the pleasant is suffering, any craving that is unsatisfied is suffering. In brief, the five aggregates that spring from craving are suffering.”⁵

The fact of suffering is constantly emphasized in a rhetorical style of Buddha and his followers:

“Which think you are more, the tears which you have shed as you strayed, wandered on the long journey, grieving and weeping because you were bound to what you hated and separated from what you loved; which are more, those tears or the waters in the four oceans? A mother’s death, a son’s death, a daughter’s death, loss of kinsmen, loss of property and sickness are what you have endured through long ages.”⁶

Suffering is explained in Buddhism in terms of universal law of causation and dependent origination (*pratityasamutpāda*). The chain of dependent origination consists of twelve relatively abstruse links. Suffering is seen here as an integral part of transmigratory existence and is regarded as caused by man’s craving or thirst for life (*tanhā*), which in its turn is traced to ignorance. Roughly speaking, ignorance of the unsubstantiality and impermanence of all things and all selves results in clinging or thirst for life, which in turn is said to result in birth, old age, death and suffering. Each series of dependent causation, we call individual life, is beginningless, expressed by the concept of wheel of existence.

The third noble truth asserts that though beginningless, it is possible to put a stop to this chain of dependent origination consisting of suffering. According to it, the destruction of ignorance results in the destruction of craving for life which gradually results in the discontinuation of the entire chain and its concomitant suffering. This part of Buddhist philosophy is sometimes compared to Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy of the will to live. Both regard the negation of the will to live as the basic condition of freedom from suffering. But it is to be remembered that unlike Schopenhauer; Buddhism does not regard the negation of thirst for life as an end-in-itself, but as a means of realizing *nirvāṇa*. Hence the characterization of Buddhism as pessimism is only partly true. It takes into consideration only the first two noble truths regarding suffering and the cause of suffering and entirely neglects the last

two regarding the possibility of, and the way to, redemption from suffering. Buddhism does emphasize suffering, but at the same time looks forward to a state beyond suffering, and more important, this state is realizable, in theory atleast, by each living being. This leads us to the concept of *nirvāṇa* which is too complex and abstruse a concept to be discussed here. But it must be remembered here that the possibility of *nirvāṇa* is in integral or rather most important part of any Buddhist discussion of suffering; and that *nirvāṇa* is also *bodhi* or realization of truth which is a state of perfection here and now. The Buddhist world-view, thus, need not be regarded as pessimism, but it does tend to over emphasize the fact of suffering; and in as much as its goal of *nirvāṇa* transcends the world of change and suffering, it may well be understood as world-and-life negating. Also, it seems to us that Buddhism in its eagerness to assert the universality of suffering, neglects to discuss the most important aspect of the problem of suffering, that is, the unequal distribution of suffering among mankind.

The Semitic world-view is diametrically opposite to the above. Semitic religions are basically theistic and believe in the omnipotence and righteousness of God. If there is a creator God, then it makes sense that He must be responsible for whatever there is and whatever ever happens anywhere in his creation, and that includes not only the joys and sufferings of man, but all his acts and moral goodness or sinfulness. Just as the doctrine of *Karma* seeks to trace all that happens to a man, to his own action (*karmas*), the doctrine of God's omnipotence traces everything that ever happens to the will of God.

The *Quran* firmly believes in the absoluteness of God's will. Allah is the absolute originator or creator and there is an unconditional recognition in the *Quran* of Allah as the supreme Power, the Lord, the Master of life and death.⁷ Man is made to realize that his whole being, not only his life, but every thing, every event in it, is caused and determined by God. God is present as the determining cause of

every act of human will and even every passing thought of human heart.⁸ He raises up whomsoever He wishes and He leads astray whomsoever He wants to be lowly and evil. What is more, he whom He sends astray can have no redress.⁹ God is thus the absolute cause, the sole agent of all actions, and by implication of all suffering, though the problem of suffering is not at all taken up in the *Quran*. This is the doctrine of predetermination in its most rigid form.

The *Quran* also refers to the Divine retribution, or the awarding of rewards and punishments to men by God. But these are awarded by God after death, whereas the problem of suffering refers to life here and now. The present life of man, according to all Semitic religions, is not the result of man's own actions; its sufferings and evil are either attributed to the fall of Adam, or are supposedly willed by God.

Job, the prophet of the *Old Testament*, rebels against God when he becomes a victim of a series of extreme calamities and is subjected to unbearable mental and physical pain. Why, questions Job, has he been made to suffer so much when he had all through been an obedient and righteous servant of God? Jehovah himself rebuffs him for his impertinence telling him of the Creator which nobody can equal, and therefore nobody can question. In the end Job recants and Jehovah once again showers good-luck upon him.¹⁰ The emphasis on the supremacy, omnipotence and unquestionability of God's will in the *Old Testament* is very similar to that of the *Quran*.

Christ did not discuss pain and suffering, though there is a definite tendency in him to glorify suffering. This attitude is reflected in the Christian glorification of the Cross as the embodiment of God's redemptive love. Suffering is exalted and not explained in Christian thought. We think that the original Christian thinkers understood the problem of suffering on the lines of *Old Testament*. To quote St Paul.

“What shall we say then? Is there injustice with God? Never may that become so. For He says to Moses: I will have mercy upon whomsoever I will have mercy. So it depends not upon the one wishing, nor upon the one running, but upon God who has mercy. . . . So then upon whom He wishes He has mercy, but whom He wishes He lets become obstinate.

“You will therefore say to me: ‘Why does He yet find fault? For who has withstood his express will?’ O man, who then really are you to be answering back to God? Shall the thing moulded say to him that moulded it, ‘why did you mould me this way?’ What? Does not the potter have authority over the clay to make from the same clay one vessel for an honourable use, another for a dishonourable use?”¹¹

St Augustine’s doctrine of Predetermination is a development of the above approach. It refers to the problem of sin and not suffering, but it can be applied to the problem of suffering also. According to it, the entire mankind has forfeited its right to God’s grace due to the original sin of man which has permanently corrupted human nature. Still God showers his grace on men, not because any man deserves it, but as a free gift from him. Now justice also demands that some atleast should suffer for the original sin. And therefore there are some who are permanently condemned, while there are others who are chosen to be the recipients of God’s grace by a free act of his will. We can apply this doctrine to the problem of suffering. If some suffers, it is because the entire mankind deserves punishment for the inherited sin, and if some enjoy excessive felicity it is because they have been chosen to be the recipients of God’s grace. This doctrine was accepted by the Church officially. Though the doctrine of Predetermination, when presented in this extreme form, may not be acceptable to the modern man, in its milder form, as expressed by St Paul, the doctrine expresses a profound moment of religious experience, that of soul’s sense of absolute dependence on the Creator, characterized as creature consciousness by Friedrich

Schleiermacher, and the soul's unconditional surrender to its master's will.¹²

Modern western scholars do not prefer to talk in terms of predetermination. So they rely exclusively on the Christian affirmation of God's love. Thus the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* contends that suffering did not create any problem for Jesus, as it did for Job, as he knew that God's love encompasses the entire creation and goes on to say that love has won an eternal victory in the sacrifice of Christ and so it will be victorious in human suffering and that God or Christ is present in all suffering or pain and he suffers in all sufferings.¹³ But unless you believed first, you could not be convinced of the eternal victory of God's love. It also does not answer the basic question as to why there should be so much suffering, and the even more crucial question, as to why some people should suffer much more than the others. The external victory of God's love offers a poor solace to the man who suffers here and now. Also this view seems to present the conception of a finite God who loves his children, suffers with them, but cannot relieve them of unnecessary suffering.

We do not agree with the assertion of the *Encyclopaedia*, that the fact of suffering does not offer any challenge to theism. We feel that all theism is faced with a very natural objection, given in the *Encyclopaedia* itself, that if God cannot prevent suffering he is impotent, if he can, but does not, he is malevolent. Theism cannot accept either alternative, and so it can only take shelter in the faith in the absoluteness and unquestionability of God's will; or alternatively it can assert its faith in the love of God; and find hope and solace in that faith. While the idea of predetermination expresses the *tremendum* of God, and the religious moment of awe and complete unconditional surrender to the will of God; the idea of the love of God expresses the *fascinosum* of God and express love and hope on the part of the creature. Both are the responses of the creature towards the Creator, and though they are ap-

parently quite different, the attitude of self-surrender to God's will is common to both. They suggest the mystery of the absolute will and being emotional responses do not presume to answer any questions about human existence, including the problem of suffering.

It is interesting to note that the *Encyclopaedia* dispenses with the Buddhist approach as mere pessimism, criticizes the Stoic approach, does not even mention the Islamic and the Brāhmānical approaches to the problem; and goes on to suggest that the Christian emphasis on love is the only possible explanation of the problem of suffering. We feel that it is an entirely misguided attempt, in that it searches for an explanation of the fact of suffering in a largely emotional faith, and not in the facts of life itself.

On the other hand, both the Brāhmānical and Buddhist approaches seek the explanation of suffering not in the mystery of the Transcendent, but in the individual himself. The law of *Karma* expresses faith in the moral order of the world and believes man to be solely responsible for his lot. It also exhorts man to do good in order to deserve good. Its merit lies in its emphasis on the individual's moral responsibility. But it is vitiated by a heavy reliance on the unprovable hypothesis of transmigratory existence. Though Buddhism shares belief in the law of *Karma*, its philosophy can be so interpreted as to exclude any reference to transmigratory existence. Buddhism traces all suffering to the thirst for life and suggests that one can mentally transcend not only this thirst for life, but also all ideas of me and mine. Its doctrine of no-self (*anattā*) helps man to overcome his susceptibility to pain and suffering and paves the way for compassion (*karuṇā*) by denying all distinctions between various selves. The Buddhist approach can be termed existential, while the Brāhmānical law of *Karma* is a metaphysical explanation, and the Semitic, specially the Christian, approach is a religious one. All of these explanations are more interested in developing a correct attitude to suffering and not in explaining the fact of suffer-

ing. Perhaps the mystery of suffering, like the mystery of life itself, is not amenable to any explanation, and the solution one offers is mostly a matter of personal preference and not of intellectual proof.

303, Sector IV,
Ramkrishna Puram,
NEW DELHI.

SARAL JHINGRAN

NOTES

1. *Bṛhadārṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV-4.5-6 (*The Upanishads*, transl. by Swami Nikhilananda, London; George Allen, & Unwin, 1963); *Manu Smṛti* XII.73-81. (*The Dharma Sastra*, transl. by Manmath Nath Dutt, New Delhi; Cosmo Publ., 1978).
2. See Steinkraus, *Some Criticisms of the Karmic Law*, in *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, (formerly *The Philosophical Quarterly*), Vol. XXXVIII, No. 3, October 1965, pp. 145-153.
3. "As a chariot cannot move on a single wheel, so destiny cannot accomplish its end unless it is aided by human endeavour or manliness."
Yajñavalkya Smṛti I.351.
cf. *Manu Smṛti* VII.205 (op. cit.).
4. "Man is born alone, he dies alone and alone does he experience the good and bad fruits of his merits and demerits."
Manu Smṛti IV.240; cf. *ibid.* IV.239, 241, 242; VII.17 (op. cit.).
5. *Dhammacakkapabattana Sutta*, quoted in Hajime Nakamura, *Buddhism in Comparative Light*, (Bombay: Islam and the Modern Age Society, 1975), p. 35.
6. *Samyukta Nikāya*, quoted in Sir Charles Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism: A Historical Sketch*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 201.
7. *The Holy Quran* II.117; XXXVI.80-81; LXXX, VII.1-5, (*The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, transl. by Marmudka Pickthall, Delhi: World Islamic Publications, 1979).
8. *Ibid.*, XV.23; XXXVII.96 (op. cit.).
9. *Ibid.*, VI.39; VII.95-99, 186; XIII.34; XIV.4; XVI.93; XXXV.8 (op. cit.).
10. *Old Testament, Book of Job*.
11. *To the Romans* 9.14-21.

12. Jehovah himself has given and Jehovah himself has taken away.

Let the name of Jehovah continue to be blessed "Shall we accept merely what is good from the (true) God, and not accept also what is bad?"

Book of Job 1.21; 2.9.

13. *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), Vol. 12, pp. 5 ff.

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