

KARMA-DOCTRINE AND FREEDOM

Karma-doctrine is supposedly the one which differentiates the Indian religions viz. Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism (and probably Sikhism also) from the position of *Cārvāka*. If someone calls oneself to be either a Hindu or a Jaina or a Buddha, but does not believe in *karma*-doctrine, then it makes it doubtful whether he is a real Jaina or a real Buddha. Thus, the analysis of Indian religions necessitates the analysis of the *karma*-doctrine. In this essay, however, I am concentrating on the (so-called) Hindu version of the *karma*-theory. It seems that the Hindu version of the *karma* theory does not tally with Buddhist or the Jaina version of it, in details. But the basic logical structure which I will be attacking, seems, at least on its surface, to be the same. However, this could be an object of further research, with which I am not concerned at present.

While analysing the *karma*-doctrine, I am planning to do three things. One, I want to explicate as clearly as possible, the complicated relationship between *karma*-doctrine on the one hand and freedom on the other. Many times it is held that if *karma* doctrine is true, human freedom becomes an illusion and then it is added that the unity between self and *Brahman* would give a solution of this problem. Hindu scholars of ancient Indian philosophy, in a large number, seem to be metaphysical non-dualists on the one hand, when on the other hand they believe in *karma*-doctrine. They believe that the fatalistic picture of human life provided by *karma*-doctrine, can be compensated by accept-

ing a non-dualistic framework in which *karma*-doctrine operates. Mr. B. G. Tilak, for instance, has tried to substantiate this hope of non-dualists. So the second objective of my essay is to see whether non-dualists are justified in hoping this. I have considered Tilak's argument in the *Gītārahasya*¹ as a specimen for examination.

Certain problems arise while explicating the complicated relationship between *karma*-doctrine and freedom and these problems in turn give rise to a doubt regarding the coherence of the *karma*-doctrine itself. I feel that the *karma*-doctrine necessarily leads to a paradox and this is a reason why I am inclined to reject the *karma*-doctrine. The third objective of this paper is to explain this reason for rejecting the *karma*-doctrine.

Many a time, an appearance is created that the *karma-siddhāntins* have totally eliminated the possibility of human freedom from this theory. Tilak seems to take this position and then he takes recourse to the notion of the 'Self which is free by nature' for solving the problem of bondage. Tilak distinguishes between *māyāsṛṣṭi* or *karmasṛṣṭi* (the world of *māyā* or the world of *karma*) on the one hand and *brahmasṛṣṭi* (the world of *brahman*) on the other.² Unless, he thinks, human self is regarded really to be the member of *brahmasṛṣṭi*, rather than that of *karmasṛṣṭi*, human freedom makes no sense. The problem of the bondage of *karma* can be solved or dissolved if this Self is regarded as the member of *brahmasṛṣṭi*.

Here my first point is that the Hindu adherents of the *karma*-doctrine, and also the new Vedāntins like B. G. Tilak have presupposed the fact of human freedom in a certain sense. In what sense? The fact that men are faced with alternatives like 'whether to do this or to do that' and 'whether to do or not to do' and that men enjoy, many a time, at least limited freedom of

choice has been presupposed by them. That the adherents of the *karma*-doctrine seem to presuppose this may become clear by the following consideration.

The adherents of *karma*-doctrine classify *karma* in two ways. First classification is into *sañcita*, *kriyamāṇa* and *prārabdha* whereas the second is into *nitya*, *naimittika*, *kāmya* and *niṣiddha*. The first classification³ is basically between two classes. One : past *karma*, which is subject to realization as far as its fruits are concerned. Second : the present *karma* subject to performance. The past *karma* is of two types : one : *sañcita*—which is done and stored in part, the fruits of which are yet to be realised and second : *prārabdha* the stored *karma*, the realisation of the fruit of which has begun. Since actions of these types viz. *sañcita* and *prārabdha* are only past actions—they are no more than actions—there is no possibility of freedom in the case of these types. However, the possibility of freedom seems to be there in the case of *kriyamāṇa* actions. We seem to be free either to stop or to continue the actions being done. Unless we presuppose an element of freedom in at least the field of *kriyamāṇa* actions, we cannot talk of duties, morally good or bad actions, ethico-religious permissions to certain modes of actions and so on. Thus, the second classification of *karma* into *nitya*, *naimittika*, *kāmya* and *niṣiddha* becomes meaningful only if some element of freedom is presupposed in the field of *kriyamāṇa* *karmas*. This presupposition of freedom which is present behind this second classification may be explicated as follows. *Nitya* and *naimittika* are supposed to be obligatory actions. The actions that one is obligated to perform regularly are *nitya* while those which are to be performed on specific occasions are *naimittika*. Those actions the performance of which is prohibited are *niṣiddha* *karmas*. While deciding as to which actions are obligatory, and which are prohibited, *Vedas*

and *Smṛitis* were mainly regarded as authorities. Here the obligation or prohibition is not to be construed as a sort of compulsion, although it might have acted as a compulsion with respect to certain individuals in certain contexts—may be, sometimes as an internal compulsion and sometimes as an external one. In so far as one is not under compulsion to act in a certain way, we may say, one is enjoying freedom of action. And possibility of this freedom of action was presupposed while stipulating *nitya*, *naimittika* and *niṣiddha karmas*. In the case of *kāmya karmas*, not only the socio-legal compulsion was lacking, but the socio-legal obligation also was lacking. Thus, the sphere of *kāmya karmas* is the one where man can freely act on his wish. And adherents of the *karma*-doctrine have presupposed this freedom.

Mr. B. G. Tilak also in his own way presupposes this fact of basic human freedom. This freedom is not the one which man can enjoy necessarily because he is and accepts to be the member of *brahmasṛṣṭi*, but it is prior and fundamental to such an acceptance. It is not either freedom which metaphysical Self or *Brahman* has, but it is human freedom. Tilak accepts there to be two motives in man. One is the motive of belonging to *karma-sṛṣṭi*. Let us call it the *kārmic* motive. And the second : the 'free motive of the Self.' Now according to Tilak, if on the occasions of doubt man chooses the free motive of the self and does not choose the *kārmic* motive, then his behaviour is in accordance with *mokṣa*—the absolute freedom enjoyed in the membership of *brahmasṛṣṭi*.⁴ Here, it is man, not either body or Self, that is having a doubt, and also choosing between the two motives. Thus, Tilak also is presupposing here the human freedom of choice.

On this background we have to find out if there is any logical relationship between freedom and the *karma*-doctrine.

While formulating the *karma*-doctrine the two notions, which have been frequently used in Indian philosophical literature, may prove very useful. They are *kṛtapraṇāśa prasaṅga* and *akṛtābhyāgama prasaṅga*.⁵ These two notions refer to two kinds of 'unhappy situations' (unhappy here means theoretically or philosophically unhappy) which should not be allowed to be genuine human situations by any plausible hypothesis about human actions. In other words, they are human impossibilities. (Impossibility here is not a logical impossibility but may be an ethical-cum-factual impossibility.) The term *kṛtapraṇāśa prasaṅga* refers to a situation where one performs an action but does not realise its fruit—the action is so to say, ruined. *Akṛtābhyāgama prasaṅga* refers to a situation where one is led to some result which is not the fruit of any of one's own actions. If these two are impossibilities, and thinking them as possible is to commit some serious mistake, then we get certain 'philosophically necessary truths' by negating these impossibilities. The truths are :

- 1) Whatever man does, the fruit of it has to be realised by him.
- 2) Whatever happens to a man, it has got to be the fruit of some of his own actions.

It is quite likely that *karma-siddhāntins* first conceived this two-fold rule to be applicable to all human beings and later on thought of applying it to other animals, trees etc. But in any case when the rule was applied either to rational or to non-rational animals, it must have been applied to them individually, not collectively. It also seems to be a less confused way to apply it only to individuals rather to both—individuals and groups of individuals. Tilak has tried to apply the *karma*-doctrine to both,⁶ and I think Gandhi also was subscribing to this position of two-fold application, when he held the social guilt of

untouchability responsible for the earth-quake in Bihar. But, I think, there are difficulties in holding the position of this kind. The question is, how do we decide whether a particular action has been done by a nation or a community at large and not just by particular members of that nation or community? Many a time the decision of a leader of the community is regarded as the decision of that community, whereas sometimes the decision of the majority of members of that community is treated as the decision of the community. But if a decision is not accepted by certain members of the community, then it is no more their decision. Similarly, if minority does not approve of the decision, it is no more the decision of minority. If such a disagreeing agent has to bear the fruit of the (so-called) collective decision of the community, then this is an unhappy situation of *akṛtābhyāgama* kind, because here a person is realising something which is not the fruit of his own action. But if on the other hand a community makes a unanimous decision, and also bears its fruits distributively, then this situation can well be explained in the framework of the *karma* doctrine applied to individuals. However, as a matter of fact we do find many apparently unhappy situations. For instance, the disagreeing and non-participating members of a community may come to suffer or enjoy the fruits of the collective decision and action of the community. Or where all members of a community have made a unanimous decision and equally participated in the collective action, all members may not suffer or enjoy fruits with equal intensity, or may realise diverse fruits. Although this is an apparently unhappy situation, it cannot be really unhappy in the framework of the *karma*-doctrine. On such occasions, for instance when an individual belonging to disagreeing minority has to suffer the consequences of the collective act, with the fellow beings, the *karma-siddhāntin* would ask-why does the person happen to be the member of that community at all, and

then the *karma-siddhāntin* would hold the individual's past *karma* responsible for his membership of that community in which he has to suffer.

When a child is born, it is born from a particular father and mother in a particular surrounding. It is something that happens to a child and something the child has to realise. Whatever one has to realise – or whatever is given to one, is a fruit of one's own action. By this rule even a newborn child is realising the fruits of its own action, and hence the hypothesis of previous birth. Naturally the adherents of the *karma*-doctrine have had some notion of Self (it could have been termed as *jīva*, *puruṣa*, *ātman*, *puṅgava* etc. in various disciplines) as subject to responsibility of actions and experience of fruits – in other words, as the bearer of 'attitudes towards action,' (*Prayatna*) *dharma*, *adharmā* (i. e., *adr̥ṣṭa* or *apūrvā*) and awareness. This Self is distinguished from either body, or embodied person. This transmigrating Self was capable of accepting bodies of men or animals (or trees also!), but this is not our main point. The following analysis will be significant even if rebirth is talked with reference to men alone or animals and trees as well.

If birth in a particular surrounding is itself the fruit of some previous 'action' of the Self, then since the necessary precondition of anyone undertaking action is that he should happen to be born in certain surrounding, and again *that* he happens to be born in a certain surrounding is the fruit of one's own past action, we have a beginningless series. We have to regard Self as well as its tendency towards action as literally beginningless. Here one may ask – if this tendency of action is there in the Self without beginning, how can we hope that it would come to an end? Because this tendency becomes the permanent nature of the Self, which may end with the Self itself. But there is no reason why Self should have an end, which is equally beginningless.

Here it should be borne in mind that Self and its tendency are here to be regarded as beginningless not in the non-dualist's sense. When non-dualists talk of Self and *karma* being beginningless, what they mean is that nobody can know when Self and its *karma* began; but not that they are literally beginningless. Non-dualists believe that Self is originally one with *Brahman* but at a certain moment due to ignorance it started appearing as different. Exactly when this appearance took place, one cannot say, and hence it is convenient to call the Self as beginningless. According to non-dualists there was certainly a moment on which there was neither my Self nor my tendency towards action, but on the next moment they came into existence. Which was that unfortunate moment, is hidden in total darkness. But here, a *karma-siddhantin* will pose a problem. If one accepts the basic principles of the *karma*-doctrine he has to accept Self and its *karma* to be literally beginningless, not in non-dualist's derivative sense. Because if we suppose that at some moment of time both Self and its tendency came into being, the question would be—why is the Self born in that particular surrounding with that particular tendency, at that particular time? If we say that it is due to the past actions of that Self, then Self is no more beginningless in non-dualist's sense, but it is literally beginningless. If, on the other hand, what happens to that newly born Self is supposed to have come from outside, not from the Self itself, then it is an unhappy situation of *akṛtābhyāgama* kind.

When non-dualists call Self as beginningless in their derivative sense, they seem to do this with a purpose in hand. They attempt to show that although Self is bound by its own *karma*, originally it is not so. Since by nature the Self is one with *brahman*, it is natural for it to be freed from this bondage and get united with *Brahman* again. But if my argument is correct, then non-dualists cannot both believe in the *karma*-doctrine and hope

for absolute freedom of the Self. Because on the *karma* doctrine, the Self turns out to be bound by *karma* by its very nature, and not due to any unfortunate accident. If a non-dualist still wants to hope for the possibility of *mokṣa*, he has to abandon his belief in the *karma*-doctrine. But most of the non-dualists including Tilak try to reconcile between non-dualists and the *karma*-doctrine. This reconciliation is untenable.

Self and its having beginningless bondage of *karma* is one side from which one can view the relationship between freedom and the *karma* doctrine. From the other side, we should try to understand the meaning of freedom one is supposed to enjoy while making decisions about actions. While presupposing that man is many a time free to choose amongst alternatives both *karma-siddhāntins* and non-dualists have presupposed the existence of a situation in which man is aware of different alternatives and he is not under any compulsion to choose one rather than the other. Here a question may be asked: Suppose A, B and C are the three alternatives before a person, and the person chooses B, when he could have chosen A or C instead, why does he particularly choose B and not either A or C? An answer could be: because B appealed to him the most, because he liked B, because he thought B to be the most proper. Here, the *karma-siddhāntin* would say, that the person liked B, or B appealed to him the most etc. etc., is something that happened to the person. But why did it happen to that person? It must be due to his own past actions. In other words, even the so-called free choice enjoyed by a person is controlled by his past actions. That he becomes aware of different alternatives and that he feels free to choose between them, this also is due to his past *karma*. But that he feels free to choose, happens also due to another factor, namely ignorance. That he is not really free to choose and that which alternative he will choose is controlled by his previous

actions is something he does not know, and that is why he does not feel bound, or compelled. If he would have known in advance as to what he is going to choose at what time, what he is going to decide at what time, in other words, if he comes to know every active event of his future life, then the so-called choice is no more a real choice for him, the so-called alternatives are no more the real alternatives for him. Such a person will lose his freedom of action. Thus, it is human ignorance due to which human freedom seems to make sense. An omniscient being cannot be a free being. This position is deterministic. And the *karma*-doctrine gives us a peculiar form of determinism.

But when the adherents of the *karma*-doctrine and the non-dualists presuppose human freedom, they are not clearly aware that in the frame of the *karma*-doctrine this freedom makes sense only due to ignorance. Tilak also seems not to have noticed this clearly. He accepts that from the *karma*-doctrine it follows that my present action is also controlled by my past action—it is the effect of my *prārabdha*. But again while interpreting *kriyamāṇa karma* as the one which will be done in immediate future he expresses his hope that man is free not with regard to his present action, but hopefully with regard to his future actions and thus the possibility of *mokṣa*. But in so far as the *karma*-doctrine is concerned there should not be any categorical difference between my present *karma* and my future *karma*; both are equally controlled by my past *karmas*. (Even present or future *karmas* can control my still future *karmas* when they would be 'past' relative to the future.)

Tilak says that if we think purely in worldly terms i. e., if we discuss man and his actions without considering his relation to *Brahman*, then we are inclined to say that man has no freedom of will, and he is bound by his *karma*. But our inner voice says that we can exercise our free will, use our conscience in making

a choice. In the chapter on "Effect of *karma* and free will" he proposes to answer the question whether our intuitive belief in freedom is true or false.⁷ But does Tilak succeed in answering this question? He tries to answer the question of human freedom in terms of freedom of the Self. But freedom in two cases does not mean one and the same thing. The implicit argument of Tilak namely 'since there is freedom of Self, there is human freedom' seems to be incorrect. Freedom of the Self does not mean freedom of will to act, to choose between actions or between action and inaction. Because the Self, according to non-dualists, is not really subject to will, or tendency to action or inaction; and Tilak here is assuming non-dualist stand-point. When the Self is called free (i. e., *mukta*) it is in the sense that the Self is not bound by any action because it does not really do any action, so it is free from pleasure or pain also. So the freedom of non-dualist's Self is the freedom from, and it cannot be 'freedom to,' whereas human freedom is necessarily 'freedom to' and not absolute 'freedom from'. The 'human freedom' which is presupposed both by the *karma*-siddhāntins as well as by Non-dualists, is 'freedom to'. Here we have to distinguish between the 'Self' of the *karma*-doctrine and the 'Self' of the non-dualist theory. One may think *jīva* to be a better word for the Self of the *karma*-doctrine, and *ātman* to be a better word for the Self of non-dualist theory. In that case to deduce *jīva*'s 'freedom to' from *ātman*'s 'freedom from' is a mistake, which seems to be committed by Tilak.

My last point is that if it is only due to ignorance that we enjoy freedom, if there are no *real* alternatives, and if there is no *real* choice, then the truth of the *karma*-doctrine comes into danger. Let me try to explain the principles involved in the *karma*-doctrine a bit more clearly.

When a man does something, it is very likely that it affects the external world—human or non-human. Now suppose a person A hits another person B with a stick, and B cries, we can say that, that B has pains and he cries is the effect of what A did. But if A hits B because on the earlier day B had abused A, then A would say to B—You are suffering the fruit of what you did yesterday. Normally the words effect and fruit will have different connotations especially in moral discourse. Reward and punishment for instance will be the types of fruit, not just effects. (Here it should be noted that every fruit, is an effect but not *vice-versa*.) We may say—the grammar of the words fruit *phala*, *vipāka*, reward, punishment is different from that of effect or *kārya*. There may be felt some oddity or surprise in saying that I am being punished for your guilt. We may feel that something abnormal, unexpected is happening. But there is no such oddity or surprise if we are told that A's action of hitting with a stick had a bad effect on B's body. We may feel that this is normal, when A hits B. Now whether one is justified in feeling odd and surprised in one case but not in the other, is another issue which we may tackle later. But one who believes that there is justice in the world, would reserve some words—say fruit, reward, punishment etc., to be used only in certain ways—where one is rewarded or punished for one's own actions, and not for anyone else's action. Here I am suggesting that adherents of the *karma*-doctrine use the words like *phala* in this special way. I am aware that the word *phala* also means effect. But I may submit that the use of the word *phala*, when it refers to *karma-phala*, must be distinguished from its use in the context of a causal theory. When the *phala* refers to *karma-phala* then the notion of *phala* gets immediately linked with other two notions — the notion of deserving and that of responsibility. When a claim is made that a person is getting *phala* of his *karma*, it is implied that the person deserved that *phala* because he was responsible for that

karma Thus, the notions of deserving and responsibility can sometimes be dissociated from the notion of effect, but they cannot be dissociated from the notion of *karma-phala*.

In the light of the above discussion we can reformulate the two basic principles of the *karma*-doctrine. The first principle is

- 1) Whatever man does the fruit of it has to be realized by him.

Its versions in this new context would be

1. Whatever man does, he deserves its fruit; or
2. Man is responsible for whatever he does.

The second principle is

- 2) Whatever happens to man has got to be the fruit of some of his own actions.

Its new versions would be

- 1) Man deserves only that which is the fruit of his own action,

or

- 2) Man is responsible only for his own actions.

In fact in these new versions we are bringing out the ethical import of these principles, whereas earlier versions express these principles more in the form of factual laws. The *karma*-doctrine in its essence is supposed to be both-ethical and factual.

One may say that the *karma*-doctrine becomes somewhat intelligible only if it is also presented in terms of 'deserving' and 'responsibility'. And this is the beginning of a new trouble. Because one can be held responsible for or one can deserve the fruit of one's own action, only if one has done it out of one's free will. Here the presupposition of the adherents of the *karma*-doctrine is that we do have free will, there are real alternatives and there are real choices.

But in the earlier part of the essay we have concluded that from the *karma*-doctrine it follows that there is no real choice, no real alternatives; freedom makes sense only in ignorance. Suppose someone is faced with alternatives, he uses his conscience, and chooses one of the alternatives, then he may claim that it is his free choice. If he is asked—why he chose B and not either A or C, he may refer to his use of conscience. But one may ask further, why did it so happen that he came to use his conscience on that occasion, the adherent of the *karma*-doctrine would say that it must be due to his past action (let us call it action A_1). Now the next question may be posed, was that action A_1 free, of which his use of conscience is the fruit? Because only then he can be held responsible for that action and deserve the fruit. But when the question is asked as to why the person undertook that action A_1 at all, the *karma-siddhāntin's* answer has to be that, that he undertook action A_1 must be due to his past action say A_2 ; in that case A_1 ceases to be a free-action—proper and then the person cannot 'deserve' its fruit, nor can he be held responsible for A_1 . The same argument applies to any action whatsoever, because since each and every so-called voluntary decision and voluntary action is controlled by one's past action one cannot be held responsible for it. But this result contradicts exactly with that from which we started. We started with the thesis that 'every one is responsible for each of his action' and the conclusion is that "Nobody can be held responsible for any of his actions". This is the paradox—which leads us to a contradictory result that everyone is and is not responsible for any of his actions. This is one of the main reasons why I do not believe in the *karma*-doctrine.

Determinism as such does not have this fate, but *karma*-doctrine is a peculiar form of determinism which has this fate.

Here it would be interesting to see whether one can think of a weaker form of the *karma*-doctrine which will not be internally inconsistent. There are four factors which constitute the essence of the *karma*-doctrine.

- 1) Factual aspect of the first principle.
- 2) Ethical aspect of the first principle.
- 3) Factual aspect of the second principle.
- 4) Ethical aspect of the second principle.

It seems to me that a weaker but self-consistent form of the *karma*-doctrine may be obtained if we suppress either factual or ethical aspect of the second principle. Such a weak version of the *karma*-doctrine will not be examined on purely conceptual grounds, but some other arguments will have to be advanced. I am not concerned with such possible arguments here. However, such a weaker version of the *karma*-doctrine will no more be a version of the *karma*-doctrine, because it can be presented only by violating some of the essential features of the *karma*-doctrine as it was understood by its adherents.

Another interesting area of research would be to see how different systems of Indian philosophy would adjust themselves with the basic principles of the *karma*-doctrine. Although it is apparent that all Indian systems except *Cārvāka* accept the *karma*-doctrine, the nature of Self as conceived by certain systems does not fulfil the requirement of the *karma*-doctrine, whereas that conceived by certain others does fulfil. For instance, in the classical Sāṅkhya system the Self, i. e., *puruṣa* is *bhoktā* and not *kartā*, it experiences pleasures and pains, but does not do anything, whereas the objective nature i. e., *prakṛti* only does, though it does not experience. And realisation of the truth consists in the revelation that *prakṛti* is substantially different from *puruṣa*. It is evident that this picture of the Self violates the basic principles of the *karma*-doctrine. The Self of Buddhists

also does not seem to fit in the framework of the *karma*-doctrine, because whatever the Self is, it is everchanging. On the other hand, the Self i.e., *jīvātman* of *Nyāyavaiśeṣikas* has the qualities like desire (*icchā*), aversion (*dveṣa*) and effort (*prayatna*) on the one hand and merit (*dharma*), demerit (*adharmā*), pleasure (*sukha*), pain (*duhkha*) and cognition (*buddhi*) on the other. The Self of *Nyāyavaiśeṣikas* is thus a proper candidate for the *karma*-doctrine. Any way, this is outside the plan of the present essay.

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NOTES

1. See *Śrīmadbhagavadgītārahasya athavā Karmayogaśāstra* by Mr. Bal Gangadhar Tilak. First Ed. Pune (1915). I have discussed Tilak's position on the basis of Chapter X entitled '*Karmavipāka āṇi ātma-syātantrya*'. English translation of the book is available entitled *Śrīmad-bhagavadgītā-rahasya or karmayogaśāstra* (Vols. I and II) (Tr. by B. S. Sukthankar) Published by R. B. Tilak, Lokamanya Tilak Mandir, Pune (1935). Chapter X is entitled 'The Effect of *Karma* and Freedom of Will' (Vol. I, pp. 359-415). The page numbers from Tilak's book mentioned hereafter correspond to the pages of the Translation. However, while writing the article I have used the original Marathi book.
2. Cf. *Ibid*, pp. 359-60.
3. For Tilak's discussion of this classification see *op. cit.*, pp. 374-377. I differ from him especially in his interpretation of *kriyamāṇa karma*.
4. Cf. *Ibid*, p. 387.
5. Hemacandra, for instance, in his *Vitarāḡastuti* (Verse No. 18) uses these notions for criticising Buddhists. There he tries to show that Buddhist doctrine of momentariness violates the essence of the *karma*-doctrine. Argument involving the same notions has been advanced by Udayana against Sāṅkhyaites in his *Nyāyakusumāñjali* (*Stabaka* I, verses 14-15).
6. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 373.
7. Cf. *Ibid*, pp. 370-71.