

The philosophy of karma in Amish Tripathi's Shiva trilogy

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Abstract

The philosophical notion of Karma is rooted from the Hinduism, the oldest religion of all. Traditionally India is called as *Karma bhoomi*, which means 'the land of actions.' The idea of Karma first appeared in Hinduism and later extended in Jainism and as well as in Buddhism. At the present time, the western countries started showing their interest in Karma. This paper attempts to highlight the doctrine of karma in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*.

Keywords: karma, law of nature, non-discriminatory, sowing and reaping, Hinduism, universal, perpetual

Introduction

Amish Tripathi is a successful Indian writer, who was born on 18th October 1974 in Mumbai. He is the student of IIM, Kolkata. He worked for a decade and four in finance services industry, in companies like Standard Chartered, DBS bank, IDBI Federal Life Insurance, before the commencement of his writing career. He is more interested in history than commerce. His profound knowledge is evident in all his novels, where he vividly picturizes the historical details. He is also well lauded for his interesting narration, splendid description and for his lucid language.

Tripathi, is well known for his *Shiva trilogy: The Immortals of Meluha* (2010) ^[15], *The secret of the Nagas* (2011) ^[16] and *The Oath of Vayuputras* (2013) ^[17], these are his first collective work. It revolves around Shiva, the protagonist and the war between good and the evil and the triumph of good over evil.

The philosophy of Karma plays a very important role in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva trilogy*. Tripathi has dedicated a chapter in each book to discuss about the Karma of the characters in the novels. The trilogy actually moves on the basis of Karma. Shiva, the protagonist of the novel, is a simple tribal man who rises to the stature of the 'destroyer of evil' and becomes the '*Mahadev*' [God of Gods] to the people because of his Karma.

The word Karma is derived from the Sanskrit term *Karma, Karman*, which can be roughly translated as 'actions.' The noun Karma is from the word *Kri*, which exactly means 'to do.' In Hinduism, it is widely believed that, Karma plays a key role in the cycle of cause and effect. *The Oxford Dictionary of English* defines Karma as: "Good or bad luck, viewed as resulting from own actions"

The first manifestation of Karma is in the ancient Indian literature like *Rig Veda*. Karma in *Rig veda* is referred as *Karman*. Classic Indian literatures encapsulate the philosophical hypothesis of Karma, for example, the great Indian epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Though the idea of Karma had been discussed in the earliest Indian literatures, only in the *Bhagavad Gita*, one can find serious writing attempt to explain the different folds of Karma.

The philosophy of Karma is moreover equal to Newton's third law of gravity, which is, 'for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.' Karma is often misconceived

as the synonym of fate; *The Oxford Dictionary of English* defines 'fate' as: "The course of someone's life or the outcome of a situation for someone or something, seen as outside their control". From the definition it is very clear that Karma is exactly opposite to the western concept of fate.

The notion of fate is derived from the Abrahamic religions, where it is believed that every occurrence in one's life is pre-determined and the supernatural power has control over one's life and situations. So, it wouldn't be pertinent to substitute the words like 'pre determination' and 'freewill' with Karma as they are not even remotely connected to each other.

Karma is the basic dominant concept in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, though the religions like Christianity does not have any concept like Karma, as Karma is related to reincarnation, which the latter rebuffs. But one can find the conceptions of 'sowing and reaping' in the Bible. Islam insists that one's actions are rewarded by God, not by Karma.

Tripathi represents Shiva as a *Karma yogi*, the term 'Karma yogi' means a person who ceaselessly crusades for the benefits of the others, without expecting the fruit of the action [*Karmaphala*]. Shiva's character has been painted with the colours of Karma and of a *Karma yogi*. His character is portrayed in such a way befitting the following verses from A.C. Bhakthivedanta Swami's *Bhagavad Gita As It is*: "You have right to perform the prescribed action, but you are not entitled to the fruit of action" (121).

In the beginning of *The Immortals of Meluha*, when the Guna tribes are called to migrate, Shiva's mind echoed his uncle's words: "Your destiny is much larger than these massive mountains. But to make it come true, you will have to cross these very same massive mountains" (TIMOM 04). Shiva has been described as: "The Man History awaits" (YouTube).

The Meluhans are the sturdy believers of Karma, they believe in nothing other than Karma. The reason for the peripheral position held by Vikarmas is mainly because of their bad actions/ deeds [Karma] in their previous births. Bhakthivedanta Swami defines the Sanskrit term *Vikarma* as: "actions that are performed through the misuse of one's freedom and that direct one to the lower life forms are called

Vikarma” (Sri Isnopanishad). In *The Immortals of Meluha*, Tripathi describes Vikarma as follows:

Their own karma... A woman gives birth to a still born child, why would she be punished thus unless she had committed some terrible sin in her previous birth? Or if a man suddenly contracts an incurable disease and gets paralysed, why would it happen to him unless the universe was penalising him for the sins of his previous life? (TIOM 95)

Every happening in the novels is interwoven with Karma. Unlike other rules framed by mortals, Karma is non-discriminatory. It has no friend or enemy. Daksha, the rule-follower and the Emperor of Meluha is slightly partial towards the treatment of the Vikarmas, when Shiva expresses his interest in marrying Sati, Daksha happily accepts the simple barbarian as his son-in-law and when Shiva asks him to change the Vikarma law he says:

Make a proclamation to be signed by the Neelkanth, saying that from now on any noble woman who gives birth to a stillborn child will not be classified as Vikarma. ‘No, your highness... I want the entire Vikarma law scrapped... Daksha... looked at Shiva in shock. This was unexpected. Like all Meluhans, he too was superstitious about the Vikarma. His displeasure was not with the Vikarma law itself but with his daughter being classified as one. (TIOM 282)

Karma is not partial to Sati as she was born in the noble clan. Karma does not spare Sati, just because she is the Princess of Meluha and for being the only the daughter of the Emperor. It is rightly put in the following quotation:

You and everyone else you know are connected to each other by the unseen threads of action and reaction... the web of action and reaction is all around you; it holds the world and makes the universe go around. The law of action and reaction spares no one, the highest gods and the lowest mortals are all bound by the rules of Karma. (YouTube)

Though Daksha is partial in the treatment of the Vikarmas, he is an adoring father, a true denizen and a devoted emperor of Meluha. He never has a second opinion when it comes to the welfare of his country but for Sati’s sake he would dare to violate any law and he would break any vow. His love for Sati is apparent in many incidents like, when Daksha finds that Shiva is in love with his daughter, his joy knows no frontier. Tripathi describes it as:

Daksha appeared delighted. ‘You mean the Neelkanth may actually be in love with my daughter?’... Parvateshwar... ‘I would do anything for her. Except break the law.’ ‘That is the difference between you and me. For Sati’s sake, I would not mind breaking any law. She is my daughter. My flesh and blood. She has suffered enough already. If I can find some way to make her happy, I will do it. No matter what the consequences!’ (TIOM 93)

The reason behind Daksha’s concealment of the truth about the birth of her Naga son Ganesh and the secret of her Naga sister Kali is his true love for Sati. Tripathi describes his affection for Sati as: “He is truly concerned about Sati. Whatever else he may or may not be, he is a devoted father” (TSOTN 115). His love for Sati is true and unconditional.

He separates Ganesh from Sati because he does not want anyone to point an accusing finger towards Sati and to question her royal birth. But that fatherly love turns against him and her treasured daughter. He does not want Sati to live the miserable life of a Naga woman. Daksha says how much Sati means to him:

I am your father. I have loved you all my life. I have fought the world for you... Why don’t you understand? I lied for your own good! Do you know what your life would have been like if you had been declared a Naga’s mother? ‘You are my daughter!’ screamed Daksha. ‘I have always loved you more than anyone else. I would have never allowed you to suffer in Panchavati. (TSOTN 327)

He excluded them [Ganesh and Kali] because, he believes that Sati is worthy of living a comfortable, luxurious and free life unlike the Nagas, who are hampered even to live in the Sapt-Sindu. He is ready to label her daughter as Vikarma but not as the mother of Naga. He weaves a false story about the stillborn child and the death of her husband who was drowned to death.

Daksha’s character can be balanced with the character of Dhritarashtra from *Mahabharata*; he is the father of one hundred Kaurava princes and he was appointed as the regent of Hastinapur after the untimely death of King Pandu, father of the five Pandava princes. Like Dhritarashtra, Daksha too is blindfolded by his love for Sati. Daksha’s love for Sati makes him to do many blunders. Like lying about Kali’s birth, Sati’s husband and child:

‘You said my son was still born.’ Daksha took a deep breath, looked up at the ceiling... glared at Sati. ‘Why don’t you understand? I lied for your own good... ‘I would have never allowed you to suffer in Panchavati.’... Shiva’s eyes were narrowed... ‘Did you get Chandandhwaj [Sati’s first husband] killed, Your highness?’ Daksha blanched. Fear was written all over his face. (TSOTN 328)

Dhritarashtra did not grasp the misdemeanours of the Kaurava princes because of his unrestricted love for his sons, in the same way; Daksha does not apprehend his uncanny actions due to his love for Sati. Dhritarashtra is physically blind, whereas Daksha is mentally sightless as he cannot foresee the tragedy that waits for him and for his country as well.

Whilst Veerini tries to convince Daksha to flee from Meluha to Panchavati to live a happy life with family, Daksha rebuffs her idea saying:

‘I cannot leave Sati behind.’ ‘Who’s asking you to leave her behind? All I want is to unite my family.’ ‘What?! Why should Sati live in Panchavati? She’s not a Naga. You and I have past life sins that have to atoned, which we have been punished. Why would she be punished?’ (TSOTN 339)

Daksha believes that he and his wife are the carriers of the sins of their previous life. Karma is bonded with the memory, as it is the reaction of the action in the past. Jaggi Vasudev says, “*Karma is not about something good or bad that you did. Karma is the memory of life*” (Web). *Daksha’s mind is loaded with the bitter memories of Nagas, as ‘cursed people’, ‘monsters’, ‘blood thirsty killers’ and that sour memories of Nagas haunts Daksha. Jaggi Vasudev interconnects Karma and memory as:*

Memory means an accumulated past. Memory means information. Memory means which does not exist, but acts as if it does. Memories are more real than the reality... an eye which is corrupted with memory which cannot see anything the way it is. It only sees things as it is convenient... it will not allow you to see anything the way it is. This is what traditionally we are referring to as Karma. (YouTube)

That is why Daksha fails to recognize the Nagas as they are. When Shiva praises Nagas’ skills, Daksha goes pale and uncomfortable as he is not used hearing such praises for

Nagas. Shiva eulogizes the Nagas as:

‘That was the Naga, your highness,’ said Shiva, surprised at Daksha’s hysterical response. ‘I have seen that man fight. He is an excellent. A little slow in his movements but excellent all the same. But while fighting Sati he was trying his best not to hurt her.’ The colour drained completely from Daksha’s face. Veerini glared at her husband with a strange mixture of fear and anger. (TIOM 166)

To Daksha’s disbelief, Sati gives birth to a Naga baby, whom Daksha recluses from Sati, when he was still a baby. After knowing the truth about her son and sister, Sati moves away from her father. It is aptly highlighted in *Atharva Veda*, as:

There is no flaw

In this law of Karma,

No reservation....

It is an exact and accurate regulation

Of actions and their results.

Man eats what he cooks.

That is, he reaps what he sows. (Speaking Tree)

When Sati and Kali are born, Daksha fails to accept the latter as his daughter, as she is a Naga. Tripathi describes it as: “she’s not my daughter!” ‘She is! Kali is as much your flesh and blood as Sati.’ ‘I am not discussing this again.’” (TSOTN 339).

After knowing the harsh truth about the atrocities done by Daksha to Kali, herself and her family, Sati spats at Daksha as: “I am ashamed that your blood runs in my veins,’ said Sati” (TSOTN 329). It is rightly said: “Everything you do, everything you say, every choice you make, sooner or later comes back around” (Web).

Karma is not about the past life, it is about the deeds that one performs in this life. At one point, Daksha can also be compared with the King Dasharatha of Ayodhya. He is the father of Lord Ram, and husband of Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi. Dasharatha suffers excruciating pain after being separated from his beloved son Lord Ram, just like Daksha.

Tripathi describes the agony that Daksha undergoes when he sees the loathsomeness eyes of Sati:

Daksha’s eyes were glued on a teary-eyed Sati, who had her sword inches away from her father’s throat. His face exhibited the sense of betrayal and loss he felt. Sati was the only person he had ever truly loved... tears began to flow down Daksha’s face... Daksha stood paralysed, shocked at this turn of events. (TSOTN 330)

Daksha and Dasharatha moreover share a similar Karma of separating the children from their parents. King Dasharatha, in his deathbed recalls the incident of killing Shraavan Kumara, who is the only son of the blind parents, mistaking him to be a deer. After losing their adoring son, Shraavan Kumara’s parents curse King Dhasharatha: “Just as we are dying due to the separation from our beloved son, you too shall have the same fate” (Wikipedia).

It would be more appropriate to look at it as Karma than considering it as a mere curse. According to Hinduism, there are solutions for curses; there are very many examples from *Ramayana* itself to attest this. But one cannot escape Karma, he/she to pay for his/her Karma because Karma is a giant wheel, where whatever goes up definitely finds its way back down. The curse is a form of reaction (*Karmaphala*) to the King’s action.

Akin to Dasharatha’s unintentional deed, Daksha also separates the Naga babies from their parents, in the name of rules. Karma strikes Daksha in the right time where the

situation forces him to leave Sati behind, leaving Daksha in inconsolable and intolerable distress. Tripathi beautifully describes the anguish that Daksha goes through even after a year.

In *The Oath of Vayuputras* Tripathi typifies as: “Daksha seemed remote and disinterested. He felt the intense pain of separation from his beloved daughter Sati. The terrible event at Kashi, more than a year ago, still haunted him. He’d lost his child and with it, all the love he ever felt in his heart” (08).

Ironically, Daksha does not realize that the Naga parents would feel the same piercing pain when their babies are forcefully taken away from them as the rulebook of Meluha dictates that the Nagas should not live in the Sapt-Sindhu. The emperor of Meluha does not want the Nagas in his perfect society as they are, at least according to the majority of the Meluhans, ‘imperfect’ and ‘deformed.’ They cannot endure any imperfections in Meluha; they disagree with Shiva when he called Meluha to be a ‘near perfect society.’

Daksha’s Karma does not take time to unveil itself, like how he separated Naga infants from their parents; Karma too had its pivotal role play in Daksha’s life. Similar to the fate of the Naga parents, he too ends up losing his adoring daughter, forever. Sati is not ready to forgive Daksha even when she is gasping for her last breathe. Tripathi achingly describes Sati’s last minutes witnessed by Daksha as:

... She was completely soaked in her own blood, there were cavernous wounds all over her body, and her hands were shivering with the tremendous pain she was in. Her soul must know the death was just minutes away... ‘S-A-T-I-I-I-I-I’ screamed Daksha... ‘DON’T TOUCH ME!’ bellowed Sati as she collapsed to the ground. Daksha buckled, crying inconsolably... (TOOTV 497)

Here, Daksha’s agony can be compared to that of Dhritarashtra. Like Daksha he also witnesses his beloved sons’ demise.

He does not want even the smallest stain to ruin the glorious history of Meluha, and that is the only reason the rulers and the denizens kept the different people away from their territory. Daksha plots with Maharishi Bhrigu by joining hands with the Emperor Dhilipa of Ayodhya to maliciously obliterate Panchavati, the capital city of Nagas, by using *daivi astras* [divine weapons], which has been discontinued by Lord Rudra. Tripathi reports their wily plan as:

... Bhrigu had hatched a plan to assassinate the Neelkanth, along with the entire convoy, en route Panchavati. They had sent five ships up the Godavari River to first attack Shiva’s convoy, and then move on to destroy Panchavati... it was possible only if Daksha and Dhilipa joined hands, as they together had the means as well as the technology. (TOOTV 08)

Daksha and Maharishi Bhrigu does not even want a single soul to survive the attack as they are against the *Somras*, and think that *Somras* is the source to all the rigorous plague that the entire county suffers. Amish Tripathi narrates the attack as follows:

... The astras were meant to destroy Panchavati. They planned to slaughter... easily from the ships and then sail up to the Naga capital and destroy it as well... ‘Someone wants all of us dead’ said Shiva. ‘Someone powerful enough to get such a large arsenal of daivi astras... Someone resourceful enough to get a fleet of ships with enough soldiers to attack us...’ (TSOTN 376)

Daksha and his confidants wickedly wanted to destroy Pachavati for the good of their own country, Meluha because the Nagas are against Meluha, their beliefs and their way of life. They are unaware of the fact 'what you sow, so shall you reap' [Karma]. To their shock, Shiva and his group gets hold of the *Pashupatiastra*, which literally means 'the weapon of the Lord Rudra' to destroy Devagiri, the Meluhan capital to establish peace across the country.

When Shiva finds the atrocities that the Meluhans have done to Sati, his fury knows no boundary, and he uses the *Pashupatiastra* that he never wanted to use in his lifetime. The annihilation of Meluha is beautifully captured by Tripathi as:

He released the arrow without hesitation. He saw the arrow move in a parabola, as if in slow motion. His eyes followed its path till it hit the red target, depressing it with its force. The fire immediately spread to the waiting receptacle behind the target. The *Pashupatiastra's* initial launch had been triggered... Shiva kept staring at the rapidly spreading fire behind the target... (TOOTV 545-546)

Daksha's does all offences not only for Sati but also to protect the reputation of his beloved country but at last, he too is destroyed along with his countrymen. Here his Karma has a brunt of his actions. He dies with the haunting memory of Sati and by regretting for not having listened to Veerini.

Daksha's Karma plays in three levels: physically, mentally and emotionally. Physically, by separating Sati from him and demolishing Devagiri, for separating the Naga babies from their parents, and for plotting a nefarious plan to assassinate Shiva and his convoy and to destroy Panchavati. Mentally and emotionally, ended up being hated by his beloved daughter, forced to witness the gory death of Sati for hating the entire clan of Nagas loathing his own Naga daughter, Kali.

Nobody can escape Karma, it does not spare anyone. It strikes the right person at the time. In *Evil: A guide for perplexed*, Chad V. Meister quotes from *The Mahabharata* as: "As the young calf is able to recognise its mother from among a thousand cows, so does Karma find the person destined to experience it. As the flowers and fruits of a tree, unurged by visible influences, never miss their proper season, so does Karma done previously bring about its fruits in proper time" (137)

Conclusion

Karma is non-discriminatory, it does not spare Daksha for being an emperor, and so does it to Sati, Shiva and rest of the characters in the novels. Even when Shiva is waiting for the right moment to destruct Devagiri, he sends his confidants to campaign all the honest people not to embrace death, but to live on to their Karma.

That is why, people speak well of him and worship him as 'Mahadev' [God of Gods]. He is praised for his good deeds, and Daksha is condemned for his bad deeds. Sylvester Stallone an American actor and a renowned filmmaker calls it a natural law of Karma: "There's a natural law of Karma that vindictive people, who go out of their way to hurt others, will end up broke and alone" (Web).

Karma is beyond time and it is relevant to the modern society, there are many examples one may read in newspaper, or see in person on a daily basis. Karma is not just a concept or a theory; it is relevant to the present scenario and applicable to all the generations.

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