

The universal law of cause & effect

B Mahadevan¹

Read the interview of the parents of the national rank holder in IAS or engineering entrance examination or highly competitive examinations such as CAT or JEE examination. Almost 100% of them attribute this to the hard work and native brilliance of the student. They will recount how from the early stage the person has been systematic in studies, diligence in planning etc. Very rarely people attribute it to the act of God. A person winning a game or competition, getting faster promotion in his office, getting a high paying job will also attribute this success to his hard work, brilliance etc. and seldom to the act of God.

Look another set of scenarios, which is diametrically opposite to this. A person arranged for the marriage of his daughter, painstakingly saved for his life time and spent on the marriage only to see that the marriage is a failure and the daughter returned back come in a few months. In another case, a ten year old handsome boy met with a freak accident and lost his two legs. Another situation is that a person who is pious and good natured is unfortunately poor and is constantly falling sick requiring one surgery after the other, draining his meagre financial resources and his family's peace of mind. In all these cases, the people involved will blame the system, the people around them, their friends and relatives for what they landed on. They will definitely blame God for all these. There will be suggestions that God is cruel, blind, partial etc.

The Notion of Divinity

We can summarize these alternative views as follows. When the going is good, most of us do not think of anyone around us, or the God. We believe that all these are on account of our native brilliance and hard work. If at all anything, others could avoid distracting or disturbing us. In contrast, when the situation turns bad, we blame the people around us, the system and the God. When very bad things happen we squarely blame the God, and conclude that either God is blind or heartless. Another common remark people make is, "Why is a child for no fault of it suffers by being born in a slum with abject poverty?" We even come to the conclusion that we do not have to believe in the notion of God or Divinity.

This is a very common approach by most of us, which puts the notion of Divinity in a poor light. The so called Divine force created over 6 billion human beings, millions of other creatures, very complex inter-relationships between them and awe striking and vast universe consisting of solar systems and galaxies. Mankind with all its wisdom and scientific bent of mind can at best make use of these for their living, albeit intelligently. How can such a Divine entity fail so miserably to fix an issue which appears almost like a child's play?

Lord Krishna solved this puzzle for us by addressing the logic behind all the good and bad things that we go through in our life. Let us look at two *ślokas* from chapter 5 of *Bhagavad Gītā* to make sense of these apparently illogical happenings and the role of Divinity in this.

¹ B Mahadevan is a Professor at the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore.

Actions and outcomes are one's own

We are all familiar with the maxim that “as you sow, you will reap”. The only difficulty we have is not being able to relate it to the happenings in one’s life. Otherwise why will we play the blame game involving the God? Shri Krishna reminds this to us. He first emphatically declares that Divinity has no role to play (*na lokasya srjati prabhuh*) in setting up the things that lead to outcomes which may be desirable or otherwise. These include the agency and the desire to do things (*kartṛtvam*), the actual works and outcomes (*karmāṇi*) and the binding of the work with results (*karmphala-samyogam*). The question naturally is then where from is the force emanating to do all these? Shri Krishna says that these arise from one’s own nature (*svabhāvastu pravartate*).

न कर्तृत्वं न कर्माणि लोकस्य सृजति प्रभुः ।
न कर्मफलसंयोगं स्वभावस्तु प्रवर्तते ॥ 5.14

*na kartṛtvam na karmāṇi lokasya srjati prabhuh
na karmphala-samyogam svabhāvastu pravartate*

We are not satisfied with this explanation yet, since He is only talking about who is driving you into actions, expectations etc. Therefore, to clarify things further Shri Krishna says that the outcomes of actions, the good and the bad things in one’s life (*kasyacit-pāpam caiva sukṛtam*) are also not given by the Lord (*nādatte vibhuḥ*). Therefore in a nut shell he says one’s own nature drives actions and also is responsible for the outcomes therefrom. He says, this wrong understanding that God gives us these experiences comes because people are deluded (*muhyanti jantavaḥ*) as true knowledge is enveloped by ignorance (*ajñānenāvṛtam jñānam*).

नादत्ते कस्यचित्पापं न चैव सुकृतं विभुः ।
अज्ञानेनावृतं ज्ञानं तेन मुह्यन्ति जन्तवः ॥ 5.15

*nādatte kasyacit-pāpam na caiva sukṛtam vibhuḥ
ajñānenāvṛtam jñānam tena muhyanti jantavaḥ*

The fact that one must stop pointing fingers at others when the going is bad and take responsibility for it is a logical and fair idea. It can happen only when we bring the cause – effect chain of relationship to events and outcomes. However, how can we explain a child being subjected to abject poverty with this? The infant has not yet been endowed with the freedom of choice to do things, how can it be subjected to effects such as this? This cause – effect chain is not a simple idea, it pervades deep and cuts across *janmas*.

The Universal Law of Cause and Effect

Swami Vivekananda was once asked a similar question, “Why is God cruel? He makes the poor people suffer and let rich people enjoy and even indulge in evil things”. The reply apparently was that when the heavens open it merely pours the showers irrespective of the

nature of the ground. A well prepared ground makes gainful use of it and crops are grown which may fetch revenue. On the other hand, an abandoned ground will grow more weeds and one may have to spend money to clear the weeds off the ground. The preparation of the ground is akin to developing good *samskārās* in one's life.

The universal law of cause and effect will be a robust mechanism only when we introduce the notion of rebirth. Otherwise, it is possible that one person in one birth will engage in all kinds of evil things and get away unpunished. The only way to address this deficiency is to subject that person to all punishments before he/she dies. Both these are illogical and impractical ideas. Clearly the "single birth" model is grossly inadequate to deliver this aspect of justice. Therefore, a more justifiable and a robust model is one in which one is told that he/she cannot run away from the consequences of his/her action. Our entire system of *janma* and *karma* is built on this logic and provides the continuity so that nobody can escape the cause – effect chain. Therefore illogical things such a child being born in a poor family is very much a possibility because the universal law of cause and effect is eternal and can cut across *janmas* and catch a person. Such a child might perhaps be paying for an earlier act.

The *svabhāva* that Shri Krishna mentions is this linking variable from one *janma* to the next. This linking variable carries over the credit and debit balances at the end of a *janma* and prepares the ground of action in the next *janma*. It propels an individual to engage in certain actions, throws individuals into various life situations and delivers outcomes that are consistent with the cause – effect relationships.

The need to look forward

These governing principles point to two important things to an individual. The current life and the outcomes that we face are actually sunk costs, because the chain of cause and effect is playing out. This is like a fully wound doll left on the floor, it will unwind the spring and move to a destination. Alternatively, it is like an arrow that has already been released from the bow. We cannot change the destination once the arrow is released. Therefore, we should stop lamenting about adverse things happening in this life and also stop over rejoicing when good things happen. It is a package deal already handed over to us when we descended into this earth when we were born.

The second most important implication is that viewed from this perspective, we have the freedom to influence the future. Therefore, the current life is an investment for the future (*janmas*). If we understand this aspect, we will change our focus and spend most of our time in a way that we will not end up with bad acts and choices and priorities in life. It is here the Divine grace plays an important role. If only we have the grace of the Lord, we will find a guru who, will handhold and guide us in this future investing journey.