Samatva Yoga: The Fundamental Teaching of Jainism and Gitā

Ours is the age of tremendous growth of knowledge and scientific discoveries. Paradoxically, at the same time, we can call it also the age of anxiety and mental tension. Our traditional values and beliefs have been eroded by this growth of scientific knowledge. We know more about the atom than the values needed for a meaningful and peaceful life. We are living in a state of chaos. Our life is full of anxiety, excitement, emotional disorder and value-conflicts. In this age of anxiety American people alone are lavishly draining out more than 10 billion dollars per annum on wine and other alcoholic drugs. Today, what is needed for man is the mental peace and the capacity for complete integration with his own personality and with his social environment. This can only be achieved through the practice of samatva, i.e. mental equanimity or calm disposition. The theory of samatva yoga has been preached in India more than two thousand years ago by Lord Mahāvīra and Lord Kṛṣṇa.

Concept of Samatva in General

The concept of samatva is the cardinal one of Jainism and Gitā. In English, we can term it as excellent blend of equality, equilibrium, harmony, integration and rightness. But none of these terms depict the true meaning of the word samatva and the exact sense in which it is used in the context of Indian philosophy, hence better to use it without translating it into English. The word samatva has different meanings in different contexts. Sometimes it means a balanced state of mind, undisturbed by all kinds of sorrows and emotional excitements, pleasures and pains and achievements and disappointments. Sometimes it refers to the quality of a personality, completely free from the vectors of aversion and attachment, or that with mental equilibrium (क्षेत्रम सामीमम्यत) The word samatva also denotes the feeling of equality with the fellow-beings (समानता संबंधीत) Loosely speaking, it also conveys the meaning of social equality and social integration. Ethically, the term sam or samyak suggests rightness (सत्यत्व). We must be aware of the fact that in all its different import the term samatva is associated with some kind of mental psychological state, having some impact on our social and individual adjustment.

Concept of Samatva in Jainism

In a Jaina text Vyākhyāprajñāpatisūtra there is a conversation between Lord Mahāvīra and Gautama. Gautama asks Mahāvīra: "What is the nature of soul?" Mahāvīra answers, "The nature of soul is samatva (समात्व)". Gautama again asks, "What is the ultimate end of soul?" Mahāvīra replies; "The ultimate end of soul is also samatva (समात्व)".

This view, the real nature of soul is samatva, is further supported by Ācārya Kundakunda. In his famous work Samayasāra he deals with the nature of soul. Probably, he is the only Jaina Ācārya who used the word samaya or Samayasāra instead of Ātman or Jīva. The Ācārya has purposely used this word for Ātman. So far as I know, no commentator of Samayasāra has raised the question as to why Kundakunda and used the word samaya for Jīva or soul. I think the word 'samaya' may be a Prākrit version of Sanskrit word समय: which means one who has the quality of samatva. Further, the word Samayasāra may also be defined in the similar fashion. It can be concluded, therefore, that one who possesses samatva as his essential nature is called samayasārā (समयसारवत्) Ācārya Kundakunda also equated the word 'samaya' with svabhāva or essential nature. He used the words sva-samaya and para-samaya. Sva-samaya means inner characteristics and para-samaya means resultant characteristics. Sva-samaya has been explained as an ultimate end. In this way, according to Kundakunda too, the nature and ultimate end of soul is samatva. Further more, according to the Jaina Ethics the way through which this ultimate end can be achieved is also samatva, known in Prākrit as sāmāya (सामाय) or samāhi (समाहि). In this way, the three basic presuppositions of Jaina Ethics, the moral agent (सचिव), the ultimate end (सत्य) and the path through which this ultimate end can be achieved (सत्यनार्थ), are equated with the term samatva. In Jaina ethics and means are not external to the moral agent, but part and parcel of his own nature and potentially present in him. Someone may ask: "What is the difference between a siddha and a sādhaka?" My humble answer to this question is that the difference between those two is not qualitative but quantitative in nature. It is a difference between capability and actuality. By means of sādhanā, we
can exhibit only what is potentially present in us. That is
the whole process of śādhanā is the transforming of
capability into actuality. According to the Jaina tradition,
if samatva is not our real intrinsic nature, we cannot achieve
it by means of śādhanā, because śādhanā is nothing but a
practice of samatva. The three-fold path, of right knowledge,
right belief and right conduct, depends entirely on the
concept of samatva for its rightness. The three-fold path is
only an application of samatva to the three aspects of our
conscious activities, i.e. knowing, feeling and willing.
According to the Jain Ethics, samatva should be a directive
principle of the activities of knowing, feeling and willing.

Concept of Samatva in Gitā

The Ethics of Gitā also is solely based on the concept
of samatva. The words sama and samatva and their various
forms occur in Gitā more than hundred times. The Gitā
contains many references, suggesting that the real nature of
God is sama and so on. The Gitā equates sam with Brahman,
the ultimate reality. Ācārya Śankara explained this by
showing an identity between sam and Brahman, while
Rāmānuja and others interpret that the sam is the quality of
Brahman. But for our present purpose it hardly makes any
difference. The Gitā mentions that the God the anūti (अनूति)
of which, we are anūta (अनूत), exists in the heart of every
individual as a quality of samatva. Not only this but the
way through which we can realise that ultimate reality of
God is also samatva-yoga. In this way, the three basic
presuppositions of the Ethics of Gitā- the moral agent,
the ultimate end and the path through which this ultimate end
can be achieved, are also equated with the term samatva.

Gitā as a treatise of samatva yoga

A question may be asked why samatva-yoga is to be
considered as the fundamental concept of Gitā. Among
the commentators of Gitā, there is a serious controversy; whether
it is a treatise of jñāna-yoga or bhakti-yoga or karma-yoga. Among these commentators, Śankara is the supporter of jñāna-yoga. To him the knowledge alone can lead us
to the realization of ultimate reality, the Brahman. While
Rāmānuja and others held the view that it is only Bhakti
through which we can realise God. Tilaka and Gandhi
supported a third view that fundamental teaching of Gitā
is, neither jñāna-yoga nor bhakti-yoga but karma-yoga. Dr.
Rādhakṛṣṇa and some others have tried to bring out
harmony among these divergent views. But I think the
basis on which we can reconcile these views is still missing.

How can we reconcile the views of jñāna-yoga, karma-yoga and bhakti-yoga without any common element? My humble suggestion is that only with the concept of samatva
we can reconcile these different view-points, because
samatva is a common reconciling factor. Though the
question why samatva-yoga is to be considered as the main
tHEME of Gitā? is still un-answered, I would like to submit
some arguments in support of my view that the Gitā is a
treatise of samatva-yoga.

(1) In the Gitā the term yoga has been used at many
places and in different contexts, we have only two definitions
of yoga in the whole of Gitā. The first one is 'Samatvam
yoga ucyate' (समत्वं योग उच्यते) and the second one is 'yogah
Karmasu Kauśalam' (योगः कर्मसः कौशलम्). But the second one
cannot be considered as a categorical definition of yoga it
is only a conditional or a relative definition, because the
term Karmasu shows a condition. It only tells us that with
reference to certain activity (कर्म), the skillful performance
is to be called yoga. But this is not the case with the first
one. It may be considered a categorical definition of yoga.
It simply states that mental equilibrium is to be called
yoga.

(2) Secondly, in the 6th chapter of Gitā Lord Kṛṣṇa
told Arjuna 'Thou must be a yogi because a yogi is superior
to jñānin, karmin and tapasvin'; The question is what type
of yoga does Kṛṣṇa want to teach Arjuna? It can neither be
a jñāna-yoga nor a karma-yoga for the simple reason that
here yogi is considered superior to jñānin and karmin. I
think here Kṛṣṇa is asking Arjuna to practise samatva yoga
which is the supreme yoga.

(3) Thirdly, the concepts of jñāna, karma and bhakti
interit their value by samatva only. It is the 'samatva' which
gives them value and validity. Without samatva they are
like a cheque or a paper currency, having no intrinsic value
of its own. In the absence of samatva, jñāna can be a mere
knowledge of scriptures but not jñāna-yoga, and the same
is true with karma and bhakti also.

(4) Fourthly, jñāna, karma and bhakti are the mere
means for realization of ultimate end, namely, God. But
samatva is not only a means but an end itself. It is not for
some thing else which stands outside of it. I think according
to the Gitā the sam, the brahman and God are one. Thus,
we can say that the concept of samatva is the sole basis of
the ethics of the Gitā.

Organic Basis of Samatva Yoga

What is the justification in saying that our essential
nature and our aim of life is samatva, or that samatva should be the directive principle of our life? What is the ground for its justification? To answer these questions, first of all we must understand the human nature. By human nature I mean his organic and psychological make-up. What do we mean by a living organism? By living organism we mean an organism that has a power to maintain its physiological equilibrium. In Biology, this process has been known as Homeostasis, which is considered as an important quality of a living organism. The second essential quality of a living organism is its capacity of adjustment with the environment. Whenever a living organism fails to maintain its physiological equilibrium and adjust itself with its environment it tends towards death. Death is nothing but failure of this process. It follows where there is life, there are efforts to avoid inequilibrium to maintain equilibrium.

Psychological basis of Samatva

Nobody wants to live in a state of mental tension. We like no tension but relaxation, no anxiety but satisfaction. This shows that our psychological nature is working for a mental peace or a mental equilibrium. Freud accepts that there is a conflict between our Id and Super ego but at the same time he agrees that our ego or conscious level is always working to maintain an equilibrium or for the adjustment between these two poles of our personality. It is a fact that there are mental states such as emotional excitements, passions, and frustrations, but we cannot say that they are our intrinsic nature because they do not exist for their own sake; they exist for satisfaction or expression. Secondly, they owe their existence to some other external factors. An important process of our personality is the process of adjustment and adjustment is nothing but a process of restoring peace, harmony and integration. In this way, we can say that the concept of samatva has a sound basis for its justification in our organic and psychological nature.

Samatva as a Directive Principle of Living

Some one may remark that the Darwinian theory of evolution goes against the concept of samatva. Darwin presented a theory of the evolution of life, in which he suggested that 'Struggle' for existence is the basic principle of living. Apparently, it is true that there is a struggle for existence in our world and nobody can deny this fact. But due to certain reasons, we cannot call this as directive principle of life. To the question; "Why is it so?" my humble answer is that first of all this theory is self-contradictory because its basic concept is subsisting on others, that is, 'living by killing'. Secondly, it is opposed to the basic human nature and even animal nature to some extent. Struggle is not our inner nature (सत्यवत्त लक्षण) but it is only a resultant one. It is imposed on us by external factors. Whenever we have to struggle we do it out of necessity and not out of nature, and what is done in compulsion cannot be a guiding principle of our life, for it does not emanate from our inner nature. Thirdly, it goes against the judgements of our faculty of reasoning and the concept of natural law. If nobody has right to take my life, then on the ground of the same reasoning I have no right to take another's life.

The theory of 'live on others', is against the simple rule that all living beings or human beings are potentially equal. According to Lord Kṛṣṇa the concept of equality and union of all living being (आत्मक्षाल्यसमास्थितिः) can give us a right directive principle of living with fellow-beings and according to Lord Mahāvīra the directive principle of living is not 'live on others', but 'live with others' or 'live for others' (परस्परोपराहो जीवनाः-तत्वार्थ सूत्र).