CHAPTER III

REBIRTH - THE COROLLARY TO KARMA

The doctrine of Karma remains half and incomplete without the theory of rebirth (punarjanma). They are the two sides of the same coin. The theory of rebirth is almost as ancient as the thought itself and its origin is unknown. It is known in different names such as reincarnation, transmigration, metempsychosis, pre-existence, palingenesis samsāra etc. We may according to our pre-possessions accept it as the fruits of ancient psychological experience always renewable and verifiable and therefore true, or dismiss it as a philosophical dogma and ingenious speculation; but in either case the doctrine, even as it is, in all appearance as old as human thought itself, is likely to endure as long as human beings continue to think.¹

The Indian philosophers have not tried to prove this doctrine since they have taken it as a postulate of their philosophies and objects of intuitive experience. Rebirth of the soul is only a corollary of the principle of Karma. If Karma is to be exhausted, a series of births have to be taken, as it is not possible to exhaust all accumulated Karma in one single life. Even prophets like Buddha had to take a series of successive lives to exhaust the Karma accumulated in the past, after getting a glimpse of enlightenment about the highest truth. The first Tirthankara Rṣabha had to go through ten lives to become a Tirthankara after the enlightenment. Vardhamāna Mahāvīra the twenty fourth Tirthankara went through thirty six lives after getting a glimpse of truth ... These principles of Karma and rebirth are universal principles accepted by the majority, although the advancement of knowledge in empirical sciences has given rise to
fashionable agnosticism in respect of these principles. Yet there is something very impressive in the unanimity with which man, from the beginning of his planetary existence, has refused to see in death, the end of his being and activities. In a still remoter past, the caseman of the Paleolithic age laid their dead reverently to rest with the same belief in future lives. Explorations recently made in France, have brought to light a number of instances of ceremonial internment, exhibiting the excavated grave, the carefully disposed skeleton with offering of food and implements laid beside the body for its use in the life beyond.  

One cannot establish this belief in rebirth on logical basis. Sri Aurobindo says:

"The arguments which are usually put forward by supporters and opponents are often sufficiently futile and at their best certainly insufficient either to prove or to disprove anything in the world."  

But this belief is widespread from the primitive times and has also been held in the philosophical world in the East and West. Apart from the prevalence of belief in the primitive races of the world, the modern minds have been trying to find out justification in the fields of Extra Sensory Perception and parapsychological phenomena. The universality of this widespread belief points to the fact that there must be some truth implied in it. Indian seers have mentioned it as an act of faith and as an intuitive knowledge of enlightened men. Therefore we shall make a brief historical survey on the origin and development of this theory of rebirth.
A. A HISTORICAL SURVEY

All the arguments put forward on the origin and the development of Karma hold good to Rebirth too, since these two are closely dependent ones. Karma presupposes the cycle of births, and the cycle of births accumulates the Karma on the soul. These theories of Karma and Rebirth primarily and necessarily presupposes the existence of a soul.

Prehistoric Evidences

Even in the pre-historic times man had a vague awareness of the life beyond. In the tribal religion— we find traces of ghost-worship and totemism which have their roots in animistic conceptions. James Frazer holds that there is a necessary connection with the forms of worship and the belief in immortality. Among the savage people, the life after death is not a matter of speculation and conjecture or of hope and fear. It was taken as a practical certainty that man continued to live even after death.

The primitive man found that in sleep man is not aware of himself and yet after getting up, he is in the same body. Similarly death is only a long sleep. This helped him also to make a distinction of something other than body in man. This 'distinction of something' led man to reach the 'soul' later. As James Frazer says the primitive man was least bothered about the rational justification for the existence of soul. For him, life after death was an ascertained truth within the limits of human experience. There have been customs of keeping necessary equipment and food for the persons even after the burial. Some Neanderthal skeletons have been found deposited in graves and equipped
with materials useful for the dead in the other world. On the basis of these burial practices we may say that even the Neanderthal man must have had a belief in an after-life.

Though the primitive man did have some idea of a life after death it was not purely a spiritual idea. Soul was considered by them as an ethereal image of the body and has the power of flashing about quickly from place to place. As to the nature of after life, we do not find a coherent system in savage belief. There is a general belief that after the burial of the body, the soul (spirit) hovers about in the neighbourhood of the body. The unburied dead are supposed to be condemned to wander forever, aimless and miserable. But some rites seem to imply the belief that soul inhabits the grave or lingers in its vicinity. The Australian aborigines believed that the spirit of the dead continued to haunt their native land, specially some important places like a pond of cool water, or a solitary tree. These are crude beginnings of the concept of the immaterial nature of soul and survival of soul after death. However there is no belief in immortality in the strict philosophical sense although we are approaching towards it. Here we do not find the idea of retribution and rebirth, but a continuance of the life. The theories of retribution and rebirth are of later origin and of deeper experience. In this, there is the need for a moral life. These elements of moral life and retributions are found in the religious beliefs of the Hebrews and the Greeks.

**Egyptians**

The ancient Egyptian religious practice had three different ideas referring to the change in the personality: (a) the union with God, (b) transmigration of the soul into
other species of life, and (c) a voluntary metamorphosis of the person into another for his own benefit. The belief in transmigration is not very explicit in the Egyptian text; but the judgement-scenes seem to assume this idea. However the belief in metamorphosis was very common among them as a magic process.

Ancient authors like Plato, Plutarch and others also agree with the above-mentioned stand. However, this is being questioned today by some Egyptologists. It is easier to question the things than to establish them. Also there is sufficient ground to conclude from the study of "The book of the Dead", "Popular stories of Ancient Egypt" and from the names of the kings of XX dynasty, that the Egyptians were reincarnationists. The names of the kings of XX dynasty show us this belief clearly. Amonemhat I's name was "He who repeats birth". Senusert I's name was "He whose birth lives". Setekhy I was "repeater of births".

In the "Popular stories of Ancient Egypt", there is a tale supporting this reincarnation-belief. In this book, Sir. G. Maspero, the French Egyptologist translates a tale concerning Horus, a magician, son of Panishi, who realising that Egypt was being menaced by an Ethiopian invader, caused himself to be reborn as Senosiris, the son of Princess Mahituaskhit, in order to save his country. According to the story, Horus had lived in Egypt fifteen hundred years prior, and so had the Ethiopian invader. In this new incarnation Horus retained the acquirements and consciousness of his former life, and returns to the heavenly region after victoriously accomplishing his self-imposed task.

"The sermon of Isis to Horus" gives some idea of soul and its re-incarnation:
Horus: How are souls born male or female?

Isis: Souls, my son Horus, are all equal in nature ... There are not among them either males or females. This distinction exists only between bodies, and not between incorporeal beings ...

Horus: Thou hast given me admirable instruction, O my most powerful Mother Isis ... but thou hast not yet shown me whither souls depart when set free from bodies ...

Isis: O great and marvellous scion of the illustrious Osiris, think not that souls on quitting the body miss themselves confusedly in the vague immensity and become dispersed in the universal and infinite spirit, without power to return into bodies, to preserve their identity, or to seek again their primeval abode. Water spilt from a vase returns no more to its place therein, it has no proper locality, it mingles itself with the mass of waters; but it is not thus with souls, O most wise Horus. I am initiated into the mysteries of the immortal nature; I walk in the ways of the truth, and I will reveal all to thee without the least omission ...

Souls do not, then, return confusedly (to the after death states), nor by chance, into one and the same place, but each is despatched into the condition which belongs to her. And this is determined by that which the soul experiences while yet she is in the tenement of the body, loaded with a burden contrary to her nature ... The law of equity presides over the changes which take place above, even as upon earth also it moulds and constructs the vessels in which the souls are immured.
Hebrews

Among the Hebrews too there was this belief of Rebirth in one form or other, though vague. In the Old Testament this is not very explicit. But in Zohar and other Kabbalistic writings we can find a clear treatment on this.

"The Hebrew word 'Kabbal', means 'to receive', and its derivative 'Kabbalah', signifies 'a thing received', viz., 'tradition', which, together with the written law, Moses received on Mount Sinai, and we are distinctly told in the Talmud, ... 'the words of the Kabbalah are just the same as the word of the law. In some other places we find that the Rabbis declare the Kabbalah to be above the law. The Kabbala is said to represent the hidden wisdom behind the Old Testament, derived by the Rabbis of the middle ages from still older secret doctrines."

Most souls being at present in a state of transmigration, God requires man now for what his soul merited in a bypast time in another body, by having broken some of the 613 precepts ... Thus we have the rule:

'No one is perfect unless he has thoroughly observed all the 613 precepts. For, even the lord of the prophets, Moses our Rabbi - peace be on him! - had not observed them all. ... He who neglects to observe any of the 613 precepts, such as were possible for him to observe, is doomed to undergo transmigration (once or more than once) till he has actually observed all he had neglected to do in a former state of being'.

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The sages of truth (the Kabbalists) remark that Adam contains the initial letters of Adam, David, and Messiah; for after Adam sinned, his soul passed into David, and the latter having also sinned, it passed into Messiah.

Know thou that Cain's essential soul passed into Jethro, but his spirit into Korah, and his animal soul into the Egyptian. This is what Scripture saith: "Cain ... shall be avenged sevenfold" (Gen. iv.24) ... i.e. the initial letters of the Hebrew word rendered "shall be avenged", form the initials of Jethro, Korah, and Egyptian ... Samson, the hero, was possessed by the soul of Japhet, and Job by that of Terah.

All souls are subject to the trials of transmigration; and men do not know the designs of the Most High with regard to them; they know not how they are being judged, both before coming into this world and when they leave it. They do not know how many transformations and mysterious trials they must undergo; how many souls and spirits come to this world without returning to the palace of the divine king.

The souls must re-enter the absolute substance whence they have emerged. But to accomplish this end they must develop all the perfections, the germ of which is planted in them; and if they have not fulfilled this condition during one life, they must commence another, a third and so forth, until they have acquired the condition which fits them for reunion with God.

To the minds of the Kabbalists, transmigration is a necessity on the grounds of their particular theology, and it is a vindication of Divine Justice to mankind. It settles
the harassing query which all ages have raised: Why has God permitted the wicked to flourish while the righteous man is allowed to reap nothing but sorrow and failure? The only way for reconciling the fact of child-suffering with the belief in a good God, is by saying that pain is a retribution to the soul for sins committed in some of its previous states. The Jewish literature on this subject of transmigration is an exceedingly rich one.  

Greecs

Among the Greeks also we can find this common belief in rebirth. The doctrine of transmigration and rebirth is very prominent in the Platonian system of thought. His dialogues like the _Phaedo_, _The Meno_, and _The Republic_ present this theory in various forms. He gives a number of arguments to establish the pre-existence of the soul and the continuity of life. In his dialogues we can find a rather systematic picture of the soul and its destiny. Belief in the divinity and the immortality of the soul is a primary conviction in the dialogues of Plato. Soul is immortal because it is simple and eternal. It belongs to the world of pure ideas. Because of their rational nature they pass into the human form. Their second incarnation depends on the kind of life they have led in their first earthly period of probation and each subsequent incarnation is similarly determined by the preceding life. Socrates also had a somewhat similar idea about the soul and its life after this. That is why he instructed his disciples to have great care for the souls and to consider her next to gods before whom she has to give an account of her life in the world.

Christianity

It is generally regarded that Christianity in general
and Catholicism in particular do not subscribe to the belief in Rebirth. True, the fifth Ecumenical council of Constantinople has anathematised the doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul and its rebirth. However this may be, one can find many passages in the New Testament, which have clear references to rebirth. Also we find that many of the early Fathers of the Church did hold the theory.

From the Kaballist texts, we have seen that many Jews believed in this theory and in the periodical returns of their great prophets. According to their belief, Moses was the reincarnation of Abel and Messiah was to be the reincarnation of Adam himself. It is not strange then that the closing words of the Old Testament (Malachi 4:5) recorded this prophecy: "Behold I will send you Elijah, the Prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord." Elijah had already lived among the Jews. The New Testament has repeatedly referred to this and thus has linked Old Testament and New Testament on the idea of rebirth.

"When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying: Who do men say that I, the son of man am? And they said, some say that thou art John the Baptist; some, Elias; and others Jeremias, or one of the prophets." This can be found repeated almost word by word in Mark and Luke.

John the Baptist is approached by priests and others from Jerusalem and "They asked him ... Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. —------." John Baptist replied in the words of Isaiah 40:3: "I am the voice of one crying in
the wilderness; make straight the way of the Lord." Does this imply that John Baptist did not know that he was reappearance of Elias? However may be, Jews of the times of Jesus Christ did expect the rebirth not only of Elias but also of other prophets.

Once a born blind man was brought before Jesus; the disciples not knowing why he was thus punished, asked Jesus: "Lord, who sinned, this man or his parents, for him to have been born blind?" This is a clear expression of the belief in re-incarnation. It is obvious, this born-blind-man has not caused any sin in this life nor has he sinned in the womb of his mother. Naturally this points to prior existence. If this theory was wrong, Jesus had the opportunity to deny this doctrine. He did not do so, although in the instant case he said the blindness was for other reasons.

In the writings of the Fathers like Justin the Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, St. Augustine and others there are expressions supporting rebirth. In the confessions of St. Augustine he makes an earnest request to God to reveal him the true nature of the soul before this life:

"Say Lord to me ... say, did my infancy succeed another age of mine that died before it? Was it that which I spent within my mother's womb? ... and what before that life again, 0 God my joy, was I anywhere or in anybody? For this I have none to tell me, neither father nor mother, nor experience of others nor mine own memory."24

Coming to the Council teachings, in the year 553, the Council of Constantinople condemned this theory of
pre-existence. But once when we study the historical background of this Council even the Catholic scholars differ on the validity of this anathematization and many hold that it was not in the mind of the Church to curse this theory. It so happened due to the instigation of Emperor Justinian to condemn the teachings of Origen. The Catholic Encyclopedia gives some rather astonishing information concerning the above Council, permitting the conclusion on at least technical grounds that there is no barrier to believe in reincarnation for Catholics.

According to "The Oxford Dictionary of Christian Church", "metempsychosis" was implicitly condemned by "the Councils of Lyons (1274) and Florence (1439) which affirmed that the souls go immediately to heaven, purgatory or hell." This does not nullify rebirth theory, for most reincarnationists teach that after death the soul undergoes a purgatorial condition before it is pure enough to experience heaven. Many of the protestant churches explicitly hold this theory saying that "General Councils may err and sometimes have erred, even in the things pertaining unto God." Though Catholic Church has condemned many theories which it deemed to be unorthodox and heretical it has changed its attitude in recent times and have started its dialogue with all communities and religions to bring about better mutual understanding and sharing. As a result, studies and researches are being made in this field of reincarnation too.

In the Catholic Church there are Fathers who accepted this theory of reincarnation in recent days and seem to hold that such a stand is in no way against the dogmas of the Church. Archbishop Passavalli (1820-1897) was a pious and learned Catholic Prelate. He accepted the reincarnation theory at the age of sixty four and held that it is not
condemned by the church and that it is not at all in conflict with any Catholic dogma. He died at the age of seventy seven with the hope of returning to the earth in another birth.  

Cardinal Mercier (1851-1926) is a Belgian Cardinal and a Scholastic Philosopher. According to him under the term "metempsychosis" or 'transmigration' of souls, a great variety of ideas may be understood: (a) either a series of births under twofold conditions that the soul maintains consciousness of its personality and that there is a final unit in the series of rebirths; (b) or a series of births without any final unit and yet the soul maintains consciousness of its personality; (c) or an endless series of births without consciousness of personal identity ... So far as the first assumption is concerned we do not see what reason, if left to itself, would declare this to be impossible or certainly false. From this it is clear Cardinal Mercier does not deny the possibility of rebirth.

Islam

In the Islamic tradition also there are many who believe in rebirth. In their sacred books there are clear references indicating rebirth. We shall see some scriptural texts relevant here:

"As the rains turn, the dry earth into green thereby yielding fruits, similarly God brings the dead into life so that thou mayest learn."  

"And He sent down rains from above in proper quantity and He brings back to life the dead earth, similarly ye shall be reborn."  

"(Those who
doubt immortality) are dead and they do not know when they will be born again. Your God is peerless and those who have no faith in the ultimate have perverse hearts and they want to pose as great men."31 "And you were dead, and He brought you back to life. And He shall cause you to die, and shall bring you back to life, and in the end shall gather you unto Himself."32

E.G. Brown in his monumental work, 'Literacy History of Persia', says that the Muslims have three aspects of rebirth:

i. **Hulul** - the periodical incarnation of the perfect man

ii. **Rij'at** - the return of the spiritual leader, and

iii. **Tanasukh** - the incarnation of ordinary men.33

The above account does give us enough matter to conclude that Islam too has this notion of rebirth, though an orthodox Muslim of today may brush aside this idea.

**Hinduism**

After the survey of the ancient religions of Egyptians, Greeks and Hebrews followed by the study on this theme in the universal religions of Christianity and Islam we shall proceed now to the Indian religious thought concerning rebirth.

In Hinduism we find, right from time immemorial, this belief in rebirth, though some may disagree with this. There are evidences for this in Scriptures right from Vedas.
Dr. Radhakrishnan states in his 'The Principal Upanishads' that elements of reincarnation can be found even in the earliest of the Vedas, i.e. the Rg: 

"The passage of the soul from the body, its dwelling in other forms of existence, its return to human form, the determination of future existence by the principle of Karma are all mentioned. Mitra is born again. The Dawn (Usas) is born again and again. 'I seek neither release nor return. The immortal self will be reborn in a new body due to its meritorious deeds.'"  

Regarding the Brāhmaṇa-that portion of the Vedas intended for the guidance of the Brahmans in the use of the Vedic hymns Radhakrishnan states that "rebirth on earth is sometimes looked upon as a blessing and not an evil to be escaped from. It is promised as a reward for knowing some divine mystery."  

The Upanisads abound in this rebirth theory. This concept is very explicit and clear even in the earliest Upanisad, the Brahadāranyaka, e.g. IV. 4.4: "As a goldsmith, taking a piece of gold, reduces it to another newer and more beautiful form just so this soul, striking down this body and dispelling its ignorance, makes for itself another newer and more beautiful form like that either of the fathers, or of the Gandharvas or of the Gods, or of Prajāpati, or of Brahma, or of other beings."  

And in the later Katha Upanisad we have, "He, however, who has not understanding, who is unmindful and ever impure, reaches not the goal, but goes on to sāṃśāra (reincarnation)."
It is in Bhagavadgītā that we find the best expression of Rebirth. Here Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Lord, reveals the great truth to Arjuna, the representative of the whole mankind when he asks:

Arjuna: Now, O Kṛṣṇa that I have beheld my kindred thus standing anxious for the fight, my members fail me, my countenance withereth, the hair standeth on end upon my body, and all my frame trembleth with horror! Even Gandīva, my bow, slips from my hand, and my skin is parched and dried up. I am not able to stand; for my mind, as it were, whirls round, and I behold on all sides adverse omens. When I shall have destroyed my kindred, shall I longer look for happiness?

Kṛṣṇa: Whence, O Arjuna, cometh upon thee this dejection in matters of difficulty, so unworthy of the honorable, and leading neither to heaven nor to glory? It is disgraceful, contrary to duty, and the foundation of dishonour. Yield not thus to unmanliness, for it ill-becometh one like thee. Abandon, O tormentor of thy foes, this despicable weakness of thy heart, and stand up ... I myself never was not, nor thou, nor all the princes of the earth; nor shall we ever hereafter cease to be. As the Lord of this mortal frame experienceth therein infancy, youth, and old age, so in future incarnations will it meet the same. One who is confirmed in this belief is not disturbed by anything that may come to pass ... "As a man throweth away old garments and putteth on new, even so the dweller in the body, having quitted
its old mortal frames, entereth into others which are new.  

**Jainism**

Though Jainism is a trans-theistic religion it has developed a very coherent system of Karma and rebirth. Accordingly our present life is nothing more than a link of the great chain of transmigratory circuit. The doctrine of Karma is meaningless in the absence of a fully developed doctrine of transmigration ... The soul that runs through various stages of birth and death is not to be understood in the shape of a collection of habits and attitudes. It is in the form of an independent entity to which all these habits and attitudes belong. It is a spiritual and immaterial entity which is permanent and eternal in the midst of all changes ... To put it in psychological form, personal immortality is indeed an impossibility. But individual immortality is one of the deepest truths of life.

**Buddhism**

Buddhism is a non-theistic system. Also it does not believe in the existence of a permanent soul. Life is an unbroken stream of successive states of consciousness. This stream of consciousness extends backward and forward and makes the past, present and future lives continuous. This soul is replaced by this continuous stream of consciousness. The illusion of a permanent soul causes attachment and this in turn brings about birth and death (Jaramarana). In Dhammapada the most popular and canonical literature of Buddhists we find the following words of Buddha:
"Him I call a Brahma who knows the mystery of death and rebirth of all beings, who is free from attachment, who is happy within himself and enlightened. ... Him I call a Brahma who knows his former lives, who knows heaven and hell, who has reached the end of births, who is a sage of perfect knowledge and who has accomplished all that has to be accomplished." 

Contemporary Thought

Coming to the modern age many philosophers, scientists, writers, poets and statesmen consider this doctrine more convincing than the explanations of the Orphic religions. David Hume the famous Scottish philosopher holds that soul is immortal, spiritual and incorruptible.

"What is incorruptible must also be ungenerable. The soul, therefore, if immortal, existed before our birth: And if the former existence no way concerns us, neither will the latter ... The Metempsychosis is, therefore, the only system of this kind, that philosophy can hearken to." 

Sir William Jones (1746-1794) a famous British Orientalist and Jurist in one of his letters to Earl Spencer, dated September 4, 1787 states:

"I am no Hindu; but I hold the doctrine of the Hindus concerning a future state to be incomparably more rational, more pious, and more likely to deter men from vice, than the horrid opinions inculcated by Christians on punishments without end."
J.W. Von Goethe (1749-1832) a well-known German poet expresses himself in a letter to his friend Charlotte Von Stein: "How well it is that men should die if only to erase their impressions and return clean washed." In his song of the spirits over the waters he writes:

"The soul of man is like to water;
From Heaven it cometh
To Heaven it riseth
And then returneth to earth,
Forever alternating." 43

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) the Poet Laureate of England addresses to an infant as follows:

"Oh, sweet new-comer to the changeful earth,
If, as some darkling seers have boldly guessed,
Thou hadst a being and a human birth,
And wert erewhile by human parents blessed,
Long, long before thy present mother pressed
Thee, helpless stranger, to her fostering breast." 44

Victor Hugo (1802-1885) the great French Author in his poem, "The Return" has narrated a story. A mother had a beloved son, who succumbed to a fatal illness at the age of three. The mother was inconsolable. Later she bore another child. At the sight of this second child she cried out with anguish: for her thoughts were more on the absent child. The poet presents that scene thus:

"My angel in his grave, and I not at his side!"
Speaking through the babe now held in her embrace
She hears again the well-known voice adored:
"Tis I,-but do not tell:" He gazes at her face." 45
David Lloyd George (1863-1945) the famous British Prime Minister (1916-1922) has marked in his diary on September 3, 1919 as follows:

"When I was a boy, the thought of Heaven used to frighten me more than the thought of Hell. I pictured Heaven as a place where there would be perpetual Sundays with perpetual services, from which there would be no escape, as the Almighty, assisted by cohorts of angels, would always be on the look-out for those who did not attend. It was a horrible nightmare. The conventional Heaven with its angels perpetually singing, etc., nearly drove me mad in my youth and made me an atheist for ten years. My opinion is that we shall be reincarnated ... and that hereafter we shall suffer or benefit in accordance with what we have done in this world."  

Mahatma Gandhi in a letter to a disciple, Madeleine Slade, writes:

"The more I observe and study things, the more convinced I become that sorrow over separation and death is perhaps the greatest delusion. To realize that it is a delusion is to become free ... What you say about rebirth is sound. It is nature's kindness that we do not remember past births. Where is the good either of knowing in detail the numberless births we have gone through? Life would be a burden if we carried such a tremendous load of memories. A wise man deliberately forgets many things, even as a lawyer forgets the cases and their details as soon as they are disposed of. Yes, "death is but sleep and a forgetting."
Ian Stevenson (1918- ) the famous American Psychiatrist has written a vast literature as a result of his scientific studies and researches on rebirth. In his book "Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation" he states:

"In the international census of cases suggestive of reincarnation which I have undertaken, I now have nearly six hundred cases listed. Of these, my colleagues and I have personally investigated about a third ... The twenty cases presented in the volume provide a representative sample of the cases I have investigated at first hand ... I believe that the evidence favouring reincarnation as a hypothesis for the cases of this type has increased since I published my review in 1960."^48

From the above brief account, (which could be extended any further) we can conclude that the belief in reincarnation is a rather universal phenomenon finding in all times, and in all places. However, one cannot deny the fact that this concept is primarily Indian and that India has developed this theory most consistently. Therefore we shall now try to see the Indian Theory of Rebirth in some details with its fundamental assumptions.

B. **THE MAJOR ASSUMPTIONS OF REBIRTH**

We have seen in the second Chapter that "the determining conditions under which the mobile soul re-enters the world are conditions relating to the conduct of the person in his previous life and that conduct can include intellectual, devotional and/or moral life."^49 According to this description of the doctrine of Samsara, there are
four major assumptions in theory of rebirth. Though
the above description is Indian in appearance, some Indian
systems may disagree on the precision of its wording.
True, the terminology may not be precise and accurate;
however, the main theme proposed will not be objected by
many rebirth theory holders. The main assumptions of
rebirth are:

1. There must be something to be reborn. We can
call this assumption as 'Soul-Theory'.

2. There must be some place for this something
(soul) to come from and go to. Let this be
called as 'Soul's-residence-theory'.

3. There must be provision for soul's movement;
call this as 'Soul's-movement-theory'.

4. There must be some rules to govern this
movement. Since this movement is always
determined by the Karma (actions) of the
souls in the previous life, this assumption
 can be called 'Karma theory' which determines
the future rebirth of the soul.

These are assumptions, precisely because they are not
proved or argued herein. Assumptions, generally cannot
be proved nor disproved, but they are taken for granted and
accepted on grounds of sheer usefulness alone.

1. The Soul Theory

The Indians have many different names for what we
loosely call 'Soul' e.g. jīva, pudgala, ātman, puruṣa,
sūksma śāriṇa etc. The westerners have expressed this
concept of soul by the words such as spirit, person, ego, self, psyche, individual etc. Some have distinguished each of these from others. Some have identified ego with self, some others spirit with self. A similar approach can be found in the Indian intellectual history too. Prof. S. Dasgupta says:

"All the Indian systems except Buddhism admit the existence of a permanent entity variously called atman, purusa or jīva. As to the exact nature of this soul there are indeed divergences of view. Thus while the Nyāya calls it absolutely qualityless and characterless, indeterminate unconscious entity, Saṃkhya describes it as being of the nature of pure consciousness, the Vedanta says that it is that fundamental point of unity implied in pure consciousness (cit), pure bliss (ānanda) and pure being (sat)."

But all systems agree that this permanent entity is pure and unsullied in its nature and that impurities of action or passion do not form a real part of it.

The Buddhists may not agree with the above statement, since they seem to deny any permanent entity. Karl Potter has summarised the Buddhist attitude in the following words:

"... what is a human being? The Buddhist answer to this is unequivocal: there is no self in the sense of an enduring substance underlying change; what we ordinarily call the "Self" is a group of events. The author of the Abhidhammakosa admits (that) the flux of momentary forces is arranged in patterns (saṁtana). He holds that there is a
ubiquitous sort of force called assimilation (pra.pti) which holds events past, present and future together in a single series.51

The fact of these patterns allows us to hold that the Buddhists have a "Soul theory" however odd it may be. This patterned phenomena of the Buddhist is different from the Hindu permanent entity. We shall call these two "souls" Soul-B and Soul-H.

The Soul-B doctrine is well presented by Nagasena, a Buddhist monk, in his attempt to explain Buddhism to the Greek King Milinda:

The King asked: 'Is there such a thing, Nagasena, as the soul?' "In the highest sense, O King, there is no such a thing." Nagasena replied

The King then poses the next most obvious question regarding rebirth:

The King said: 'Is there any being Nagasena, who transmigrates from this body to another?' 'No, there is not ... this name-and-form commits deeds either pure or impure, and by that Karma another name-and-form is reborn'.52

Nagasena goes further and says that there is a continuity though there is no identity. He explains it with the analogy of a burning lamp. It is like the lighting of a lamp from another lamp. Here there is no question of one lamp passing to another. So also, the flame of the one and the same lamp is ever changing from moment to moment, yet there is a continuity through time of various fire-moments
even though the flame proper is never the same. Nagasena comments:

"Just so, O king, is the continuity of a person or thing maintained. One comes into being, another passes away; and the rebirth is, as it were, simultaneous. Thus neither as the same nor as another does a man go on to the last phase of his self-consciousness."53

This sense of Soul-B doctrine is underscored in the Visuddhi-Magga where it is said:

"It is only elements of being possessing a dependence that arrive at a new existence; none transmigrated from the last existence, nor are they in the new existence, without causes contained in the old. By this is said that it is only elements of being, with form or without, but possessing a dependence that arrive at a new existence. There is no entity, no living principle, no elements of being transmigrated ... nor, on the other hand, do they appear in the present existence without causes in that one."54

Sir Charles Eliot has stated regarding this doctrine as follows:

"One must not suppose that the man’s self is continued or transferred in this operation. There is no entity that can be called soul and strictly speaking no entity that can be called body, only a variable aggregation of skandhas, constantly changing. At death this collocation disperses
but a new one reassembles under the law of Karma which prescribes that every act must have its result.\textsuperscript{55}

Some problems of interpretation arise here. According to Buddhists, if there is no self, but only heaps of desires and impulses, the identity of a self will become a great problem. If there is no identifiable self through time and space, religious and moral life becomes meaningless. This in turn means that anybody can get unjust rebirth. That is why Edward Conze remarked that \textit{Anatmavāda} has to be seen as an attempt by the Buddhists themselves to smuggle self or personality back into the main stream of their basically non-self philosophy:

"All these theoretical constructions (by the Sautrāntikas with their āśraya, substratum; by the Mahāsaṅghikas with their mūla or basic consciousness; by the Samkrāntikas with their prapti and Saṁtana; and by the Sammitivas and Pudgalavādins with their pudgala: all are rather subtle concepts for a 'self') are attempts to combine the doctrine of 'not-self' with the almost instinctive belief in a 'self', empirical or true."\textsuperscript{56}

Though the Buddhists have had problems in squaring their intuitive beliefs with their doctrinal theories, the fact remains that with their theory of the self as a pattern of psychophysical forces, they could establish a soul theory quite different from Hindu substantial soul theory. For, according to reincarnation there is no soul substance that moves from one body to another retaining its self identity in the moving.\textsuperscript{57} This soul-B and reincarnation represent one extreme of a rebirth continuum.
The theory of transmigration of souls is the other extreme theory among the rebirth theories. This soul theory is such similar to the rebirth philosophy of Plato. In this soul-H theory there is some vagueness regarding what or who transmigrates, the subtle body or the lord or Atman. Here Plato remarkably is clear and consistent in maintaining that it is the psyche or self that moves about. According to Plato their psyche has the memory of the past deeds and it desires future states of itself, and would seem to carry a certain positive identity in virtue of those memories and desires that distinguish it from other selves. There is an interesting story of a youth told by Plato in his "Republic". The youth named Er was thought to be dead for ten days and after the tenth day he returned from the world of the dead and narrated his experience:

"He said that when his soul went forth from his body ... to a mysterious region ... two openings side by side in the earth (appeared), and above ... in the heaven two others and judges between these ... righteous to the right and upward through the heaven (travelled) ...; unjust ... to the left and downward ... (from the other hole) three came up from the one earth, souls full of squalor and dust, and from the second there came down from heaven ... souls clean and pure ... they had paid their penalty ... the punishment ten times the crime."\(^{58}\)

After the rest of seven days in the underworld Er witnessed the souls, choosing their future bodies. Lachesis, one of the three Fates, (of Greek myth) says that the soul must choose for itself how it will live in its next life.
Souls that live for a day, now is the beginning of another cycle of mortal generation where birth is the beacon of death. No divinity shall cast lots for you, but you shall choose, your own deity. Let him to whom falls the first lot select a life to which he shall cleave of necessity. ... The blame is his who chooses. God is blameless. 59

According to this, it is the soul which makes its free choice. This soul theory of Plato we shall call soul-P in our further discussions.

Coming back to the transmigration soul-H, it lies somewhere between soul-B and soul-P. The controversy is this: How much personal essence does the soul contain? Is it more soul-P which is personal or is it like soul-B which is impersonal?

Some hold that 'soul' is impersonal and absolute Brahman, and hence Brahman is the transmigrant. Śankara seems to hold this view. Ramanuja on the other hand holds that soul is more personal, capable of individuality, personality and memory. In modern times, A.K. Coomaraswamy seems to hold the first view following Śankara, and Aurobindo adheres to the second, going after Ramanuja. Both groups claim to be giving the correct interpretation of the Hindu tradition. This only points out the possibility of divergent interpretation on the nature of the transmigrating soul. We shall just see, in brief the views put forward by Sri. A.K. Coomaraswamy and Sri. Aurobindo.
A.K. Coomaraswamy

A.K. Coomaraswamy in his paper "On the one and the only Transmigrant" quoting Sankara states:

"Sankaracharya's dictum, 'Verily, there is no other transmigrant but the Lord' (Br. S. Bhāṣya 1.1.5) ..., startling as it may appear to be at first sight, for it denies the reincarnation of individual essence, (is) amply supported by the older, and even the oldest texts, and is by no means an exclusively Indian doctrine."

To support and confirm his thesis that the soul is Brahman he turns to śruti and smṛti:

"... it is the undivided and never individualised self that having now re-collected itself (atmānām upasamharati, cf. B.G. 2.58), and free from the 'ignorance' of the body (with which it no longer identifies itself) transmigrates ...

Swamy summarises his interpretation thus:

Swamy summarises his interpretation thus:
"The thesis of the present article is that the omnipresent omniscient is 'the only transmigrant'; and that in the last analysis this 'transmigration' is nothing but his knowledge of himself expressed in terms of duration."  

Sri Aurobindo

In his most famous work called 'The Life Divine' Sri Aurobindo has set forth his theories regarding life, man, God and the World. He has his own specific man, God and the world. He has his own specific contributions on the ideas of soul, Karma and Samsāra. His chief concern with regard to rebirth is to solve a particular problem involved in the popular mind regarding the doctrine of rebirth. He finds an inconsistency in the doctrine of rebirth which follows from the belief in a static and unchanging soul which has no chance of real liberation except a temporary relief in heaven or hell. According to the popular view of the soul there is no eternal liberation from Samsāra. Attacking this view Sri Aurobindo writes:

"In the popular ideas which derive from the religions that admit reincarnation, there is an inconsistency which after the manner of popular beliefs, they have been at no pains to reconcile. On the one hand, there is the belief, vague enough but fairly general, that death is followed immediately or with something like immediateness by the assumption of another body. On the other hand, there is the old religious dogma of a life after death in hells and heavens or, it may be, in other worlds or degrees of being
which the soul has acquired or incurred
by its merits or demerits in this physical
existence. ..."64

He has beautifully blended this antinomy in his
doctrine of the evolution of the soul. Concerning the
above two beliefs he writes:

"Our belief in the birth of an ascending soul
into the human form and its repeated rebirth
in that form, without which it cannot complete
its human evolution, rests, from the point of
view of the reasoning intelligence, on the basis
that the progressive transit of the soul into
higher and higher grades of the earthly existence
and, once it has reached the human level, its
repeated human birth composes a sequence necessary
for the growth of the nature; one brief human
life upon earth is evidently insufficient for
the evolutionary purpose."65

In Aurobindo's thought, heaven and hell of popular
belief are transformed into higher or lower levels in
which the soul can move toward perfection and eventual
union with the Divine. In his long process of evolution
the soul has to throw off its various sheaths such as
body-sheath, mind-sheath, life-sheath etc. But even after
casting off these sheaths "The essence of the personality
and its mental, vital and physical experiences would
remain in latent memory or as a dynamic potency for the
future." According to this soul seems to possess illimited
potency. To see the soul in the limited and static manner
is to deprive rebirth or both spiritual utility and its
meaning. Sri Aurobindo seems to hold a mixed theory of soul-H and soul-P. Hence we shall call this 'soul-HF-theory'.

We have seen now all the relevant soul-theories. All these theories can stand as assumptions in the rebirth theories. However, by and large I think that we Indians cling more to a kind of soul-HP theory. Now we shall pass on to the next assumption.

2. Soul's Residence Theory

In the Rebirth theory, whether it be transmigration or reincarnation, (this distinction we do not intend to deal in this thesis) the soul must have a place for residence. This place of residence need not be in time and space being real in the ontological sense. Discussing this theory of soul's residence, Plato is the first thinker who has presented it clearly. Among the Indian systems, Jainism too has a somewhat clear expression.

Plato

In 'Phaedo' it is written that the souls of the dead must exist in some place from which they are reborn; and this conclusion follows hard upon the famous myth in the Phaedo which Socrates has already recounted:

"There is an old legend, which we still remember, to the effect that they (souls) do exist there (in another world), after leaving here, and that they return again to this world and come into being from the dead."
Also it is stated in 'Republic' that the good souls will be rewarded and the bad ones will be punished. Regarding the punishment of the wicked, in Phaedo, there is an elaborated account: "Of course, these are not the souls of the good, but of the wicked, and they are compelled to wander about these places (tombs and graveyards) as a punishment for their bad conduct in the past. They continue wandering until at last, through craving for the corporeal ... they are imprisoned once more in a body. And as you might expect, they are attached to the same sort of character or nature which they have developed during life."57

In 'Phaedrus' there is a detailed description and it has spelled out the nine separate bodies to which the soul can return. Accordingly a human babe can be born into a Philosopher, lover, king (statesman), athlete, Priest, poet (or artist), farmer, sophist or a tyrant. Further the wicked men can be born as beasts.

The entombment theory of the soul seems to be common belief of the west in the past right from Pythagoras. This is also found in the Mediterranean religions. There are three possible interpretation to this entombment theory.

1. Souls are human; but they are imprisoned in various bodies. In this interpretation the humanness of the soul is always maintained, even when it is imprisoned in animal bodies. Thus it is said that Pythagoras could recognise the soul of a former friend in a dog. Here one is reminded of the previous births of Buddha, as elephant, Jackal, tiger, etc. Good dogs can inhabit human bodies in the next life.
ii. Souls are neutral and they are imprisoned in various bodies. According to this second interpretation the souls are not inherently human or beastal. What they become, depends more on the surroundings than in themselves. They are static and not distinguishable from one another. This static theory has been attacked by Sri Aurobindo.

iii. The third interpretation is a via media between the above two extremes. The soul is essentially human. When the human element is overcome by the appetitive beastly element, the soul’s human rational part remains in potency, without being actualised. By the mechanism of soul-besmirchment, the soul is contaminated, and loses its rational power and is temporarily prevented from its exercise. Thus a soul can take higher or lower forms of existence.

Indian Systems

Among the various Indian systems Jainism has the best formulated theory about soul, its places and other assumptions necessary to a theory of rebirth. In its metaphysics, Jainism is a substantial dualism. The soul (jīva) and matter (ajīva) are the two main elements. The latter flows into the former and bondage occurs. Hence liberation (mokṣa) can be attained by the stoppage of this flow.

The souls are two kinds: worldly and liberated. Worldly souls can be with mind and without mind. Again the worldly souls are further distinguished as mobile and immobile. Immobile souls are earth-bodied, water-bodied, fire-bodied, air-bodied and vegetable-bodied. Mobile souls are those with two or more senses up to five. Thus souls
have different places of inhabitation. The liberated souls have their abode beyond this world. In this world the souls have to struggle to free from the bondage of matter. In this respect (of imprisonment) Jainism has some resemblance with Plato's theory. However, Plato did not believe that vegetables are capable of liberation.

Here, it seems that Jaina thinkers are greatly influenced by the old Vedic texts. The orthodox Indian systems generally, hold that the worldly souls are imprisoned in bodies human or animal, but not in the vegetative world. Modern philosophers like Aurobindo has extended the abode of the soul to higher planes. He writes:

"A survival of the material body by the personality implies a supraphysical existence, and this can only be in some plane of being proper to the evolutionary stage of the consciousness or, if there is no evolution, in a temporary second home of the spirit which would be its natural place of sojourn between life and life ..."^69

On these extra terrestrial planes he believed that the evolution of the soul can proceed unimpeded.

Buddhism has a peculiar approach to soul theory. They hold that world is in a state of constant flux. Hence it is difficult to identify anything much less the residence of the non-existent soul. However they do hold in the patterns of desire which we can rightly call the Buddhist soul theory, and this must have existence somewhere and in turn some abode. In the lamp analogy regarding soul, through the flame changes, the places of the flame is relatively constant; and the flame must have a lamp as its place.
In short, all rebirth systems seem to hold to places for souls to be, though places may vary. It can be human, subhuman, superhuman etc; and also it can be in time and space or without time and space. But nonetheless some place or residence is there. Generally we understand 'body' as the residence or the abode of the souls.

3. Soul's Movement

The third assumption is that the souls are capable of moving from one place to another. Many of the vedic and brahmanic texts we analysed will ever stand as clear evidence for this assumption.

Coming to the soul-body relation there can be three possible stand. First, soul can stay with the body and can never leave it; the soul dies out finally with the body. This is a materialistic view and it is held by the Carvakas. Second, a soul can never enter a body. Instead it moves here and there without touching the body. In other words, it is possible for souls never to have bodies even when there are bodies to enter. The third possibility is that souls can enter bodies and leave them freely or they can do so according to some rules. The first two explanations cannot help rebirth theory, since habitation of the body by the soul is the essential part of the rebirth theory. So only the third stand can fit in for the rebirth system either with rules or without rules. According to the third interpretation even Christianity (which believes in the resurrection of the bodies) can espouse such a system. Now when one accepts this third interpretation or stand with rules, it becomes necessary to specify what are the conditions governing which souls move where. Here the rebirth systems
might meet various problems. Yet any rebirth system has to assume that its soul can move only in a specified manner.  

4. **Karma Theory**

This is only but a necessary corollary to the above assumptions. If there is a soul and it has some place of residence and it moves from place to place, then it must have some rules to govern this movement. This governing principle is the law of *Karma*.

This is as old as *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* and is regarded as a great secret not to be spoken of in public. In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* we read:

"Accordingly, those who are of pleasant conduct here the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a pleasant womb, either the womb of a Brāhmaṇa or the womb of a Kṣatriya, or the womb of a Vaiśya. But those who are of stinking conduct here — the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a stinking womb, either the womb of a dog, or the womb of a swine, or the womb of an outcast."

Franklin Edgerton writes of this 'law' thus:

"The relative excellence of any new birth is rigidly determined by the net balance of good and bad actions in previous births. This is the famous law of 'Karma'. It is a law of nature and works automatically; it is not administered by any God or superhuman agent... It is man's relation
to propriety or morality, dharma, which alone determines. For more than two thousand years, it appears that almost all Hindus have regarded transmigration, determined by 'Karma', as an axiomatic fact. 'By good deed one becomes what is good; by evil deed, evil.'

Karma is considered as an 'axiomatic fact' since rebirth and Karma are enjoined by the Upanisads. Here one can raise many objections. However it has an orthodox assent among the Indians.

Here one has to ascertain what is right and wrong under law of Karma. According to this law, an act can be good, bad or indifferent; so too the results respectively. Since the law is considered just, what each man gets are only his due, no more and no less. Some mistake here not knowing the reason of the suffering of the innocent and the prosperity of the wicked. But if we make a distinction like short-term justice and long-term justice the apparently unproportionate compensation can be convincingly understood. Living under the law of Karma, the feeling of justice will outweigh the insecurity in action that the law produces. But to believe that one may be every moment of every day gathering Karma with every snort, blink and scratch is somewhat exhausting. This follows from the uncertainty to judge what is wrong and what is good.

The law in the law of Karma

The law of Karma is a curious blend of descriptive and metaphysical elements. On the one hand it predicts the future. But one does not know when; yet it is absolutely
sure of the moral results, bad for bad, and good for good. We cannot give any empirical or statistical data for this relationship. It is an a priori metaphysical lay. Many think this to be metaphysical postulate. However, given the law of Karma one can explain the past events and predict the future.

Since the law of Karma is not grounded empirically we cannot be sure that we have real cases of this law coming from repeated observations. Hence we cannot compare this to a natural law. This law is more like the principle of causation that every event must have a cause. Commenting on this, Karl Potter writes:

Thus the "Law of Causation" is not a law at all, but a principle. As such it serves an extremely important function; it formulates a basic presupposition of scientific inquiry ..."

If the Law of Karma is to be thought of as parallel in function to the "Law of Causation", it, too, must be viewed as a principle, a principle which formulates a certain programme for moral inquiry."74

Both these causal and Karma principle have exhortative functions. The causal principles urge us to keep looking for explanations of physical phenomena and the Karma principle urges us on to seek explanations for moral occurrences. It "commits us to seeking a deterministic order beneath the quantum order or whatever other completely determined order science may arrive at through further investigation."75 To be more precise, Karma urges us to seek out the cause of bondage and the release from it. It is assumed more a
principle than a law and reason can justify its acceptance. However Karma cannot be proved beyond objections.

Though Karma is considered to be an assumption and that it cannot be proved beyond objections, yet, it cannot be warded off as a 'fiction' as Eliot Deutsch does. After a superfluous analysis of the pramanas of Advaita Vedanta, he seems to conclude that the 'law of Karma is undemonstrable. There is no other go than to say that Sir Eliot Deutsch has been quite hasty and merciless in reaching this unfortunate conclusion. We shall analyse his viewpoint in the next chapter.

Although there are objections to the theory of Karma and that many western thinkers have levelled these objections quite mercilessly and crudely yet, Karma is an accepted doctrine in the Indian religions. Regarding its autonomy there is dispute. Jainism, Buddhism, Sāṁkhya and Mīmāṁsā systems hold that the principle is autonomous. But Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika hold that the principle is under the guidance and administration of God. Because adṛṣṭa which is unintelligent by itself cannot lead to the proper and just effects that the principle is supposed to bring about. Thus an intelligent God is postulated as a necessity to bring about justice and control the whole process. However this is not the general stand of the Indian thought. The impersonal and mechanistic operation of Karma is the most popularly held belief of Indians, as rebirth itself.

Even modern philosophers like Sri Aurobindo and others hold also the automatic operation of the principles of Karma and rebirth, with some modifications from the traditional understanding.
To conclude, any rebirth system to be rational, it must have certain rules governing the relations to the souls to the bodies and places. The rebirth system must necessarily assume four things: i.e. the existence of soul, the soul in some body, the mobility of the soul and the rules governing this mobility.

Having seen the essentials of the theory of Karma and Rebirth, we shall now proceed to its analysis in various aspects.
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