CONCLUSION TO PART I

It is contended by many who have considered the theory of Karma and rebirth that it provides a plausible explanation to the problem of evil. That human life, with all its unpleasant vicissitudes, is completely shrouded in mystery is sometimes heard. But there is an insatiable thirst in the human heart to pierce the veil of mystery that shrouds the phenomena of birth and death. And the Indians have not been behind others to forge ahead in the direction of a better vision of life and its meaning. In the total perspective that has been evolved in this context, the theory of Karma occupies a very important position. As a theory in the philosophical context, or as a doctrine in the strictly religious sense, it may have a number of limitations. But, if, instead of taking out the theory from its context, we look at it as a part and parcel of the very perspective, then we can realise its full import. But this requires a consideration of the interrelationship between this theory and the other important aspects of Indian thought and religion.

As Eliot Deutsch has rightly pointed out, the theory of Karma should be seen not as merely answering the problem of evil, but as related to the most important concept of mokṣa, i.e., the goal of human beings. He goes to the extent of saying that the idea of Karma has served as a foil to the understanding of mokṣa as developed in India. Of course, this might lead to the interpretation both of mokṣa and of Karma as pessimistic and life-negating. As we have already considered this issue in the previous chapter, we now consider the other aspect involved here: i.e., of the interrelationship between mokṣa and Karma theory. Mokṣa as the ultimate goal of
man and as something man earns by his merit, (not as something that is granted to him) — this is central to the Hindu understanding. God, and His grace, is also there; but they do not affect the autonomy of the moral law, which in fact takes care of the autonomy of man himself.

Prof. E. Steinkraus opines that it is a basic belief in Hinduism that man must finally attain salvation. In this, Hinduism differs from the Christian or Semitic idea that both eternal bliss and eternal damnation are possibilities of man; — according as he chooses. Now, if moksa is understood as that state which man must attain, or rather, if man is understood as rightly and inevitably needing for his ultimate goal of moksa, then it is only natural that Hinduism also believes in 'some method' of attaining this goal. And the theory of Karma is only the explicitation of this basic conviction.

In so far as the law of Karma is understood as a moral law, and in so far as the ethical is considered as means for the religious or spiritual growth of man, Karma integrates the means (moral behaviour) and the end (moksa). This is achieved in the actual life of one who aspires for attainment and approaches the temporal realities with the right spirit that is embodied in the doctrine of Karma.

The Hindu idea of man as never really born and never dying, i.e., as infinite on both ends (unlike the Christian notion that it has a beginning though no end) also goes hand in hand with the implication of Karma theory which leaves the question of the origin of Karma to the 'ānadi' concept. Thus, the questions as to why and when man fell is not pressed beyond the reasonable limit of experience. That is, it is supposed that in any previous stage we could imagine, man
would have been born with past karmas. This must be the sense and message of the theory of Karma. It gives expression to the fundamental human condition, yet at the same time it allows for an overcoming of the situation.

The theory also emphasizes the cosmic solidarity and the ontological relationship man has with the whole cosmos. First of all, it gives expression to the interrelatedness between everything in the world: nothing gets lost, nothing is isolated and disconnected, any action has repercussions reaching to the very confines of the universe. Again, the theory elevates the whole world up to the human sphere. The karmic structure is common both to man and to the rest of the beings. In this sense we may say that it is the problem and suffering of the whole world that is attempted to be explained by this theory. This is the horizontal dimension of man. And finally it underscores the vertical or historical dimension of man cutting across the barrier of time and events. In this sense Indian thought emphasizes the historicity of being.

Just as freedom from the cycle of birth and death is the common idea of all the systems of Indian thought, they all agree that transmigratory existence is an evil and the cause of all ills of life. It constitutes what is called samsāra which is our principal bondage. Freedom from this bondage is best understood, not as putting a full-stop to this life in some way, but as transcending its temporal and spatial limitations. Similarly samsāra too is not to be taken to imply a negative attitude towards life. Samsāra is a certain conception of existence-in-time, a world-view in which existence is without beginning and without end in time. (समसार). It means, that which is incessantly in motion or flux, the world of phenomena. This conception of perpetual
existence as applied to the cosmic history of a particular human agent leads to the notion of transmigration. This is the specific aspect of samsāra in which the identity of the phenomenal self (jīva) persists through different life times. Thus the notion of Karma, samsāra and transmigration are essentially connected conceptually.

It must be clear from the foregoing that to pluck out this theory from its organic context and to question it from a different context would be a profitless, nay even harmful, effort. Such an effort would not enable us to see the meaning and purpose of the theory. This is not to say that the theory should not be critically approached, or reformulated appropriately, and as it becomes necessary. But care should be taken to prevent any misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the theory resulting, as it often happens, from a prejudiced approach or a haphazard treatment of the issue.

Again, by our insistence on studying the theory only in its context, we do not intend to deny its cross-cultural value. Because, though wrapped in a certain cultural garb, it is intended to explain a basic human situation and to suggest a way of overcoming or improving upon this situation.

But, whatever the universal appeal or scope of the theory, our purpose here is limited to the task of revealing the inadequateness of the usual handling of the theory. And we have shown how this theory exactly fits in among the various theories of Indian perspective, thus providing a plausible answer to the problems faced by man in his progress towards his goal.

At the same time we have emphasised the fact that its rationality does not consist in its provability or
demonstrability in the strict logical sense. It is a
religio-philosophical theory, and this theory performs its
functions as well as any other theory of the kind. But
ultimately the theoretical frame-work has to be transcended,
and it is in this sense that one might say that this theory
is not essential even to Hinduism as Prof. Malkani contends.
In fact, Malkani himself holds the theory as having its
rationale, because it gives a meaning and purpose to life.
Obviously he does not want to contradict himself. He would
admit that the theory is basic to Hinduism, and we may add
that it is essential to it. What, probably, is meant by
Malkani is that the theory of Karma is not essential to the
"true or ideal religion". And this implies a willingness to
admit that there may be other religions which do not and need
not hold this theory. There is something to be said for
this view.

And, in this connection let us consider another
important feature of Indian thought, and religion. It is
sometimes said about Hinduism that it is not a religion,
but a 'federation of religions'. This implies in the first
place that Hinduism should be taken not merely as a
different religion, but as a different kind of religion.
But this in turn implies that "a way of looking at religions"
is involved here. Different religions being the reality,
and the 'true or ideal religion' being an abstraction, we
can safely say that it is the many particular religions
that employ the theories for embodying some particular
understanding of the ultimate truth, and that the ideal
religion is devoid of any theory as such. Hinduism, when
understood as a 'religion of religions' can be said to tend
to this ideal of true religion. And, in so far as it tries
to grow out of itself, it will also try to discard the
theoretical ladder which particularises and limits its scope.
It makes use of theories to the maximum; but is prepared to discard it ultimately so as to get beyond the theoretical realm, to the realm of direct vision.

To sum up our discussion, in Hinduism, theory is supposed to have only a limited function, though an important function. As springing from actual life, and as being directed to a life that is to be more meaningful, the theory is of course taken seriously. And yet, the emphasis is not on the bare logicality of the theory but on the role it plays in the life and understanding of human beings. If seen in this context it will be clear why we have treated the theory of Karma in the foregoing pages in a way different from the usual methods. And it shows why we have repeatedly tried to refer the theory to its context and to life in particular. Such an analysis enables us to see that Karma gives an ultimate and metaphysical explanation to the problems of life in general and to the problem of evil in particular. It does not remove all mystery from the universe. But it goes a long way — i.e., so far as any theory can go — in making moral and spiritual life coherent and intelligible. And man becomes truly the master of his own destiny.