INTRODUCTION

In all ages men have pondered the question: "If a man die, shall he live again?" (The Holy Bible, Job 14:14). The span of life seems so short, the zest for life so strong, that many have proposed that life in some form must continue beyond death. From very early times men have believed in the existence of some undying part of man, something within that is immortal. Indeed, it may be said that all religions exist, partly at least, because of the attempt to find an answer to the problem of what happens when a man dies. Is death really the end of conscious life?

In order to examine properly the concept of immortality in recent Indian thought, it will be necessary to define exactly what is designated by the term, "Immortality," and also its relationship to other beliefs or factors relating to man's destiny. It will be found that some positions taken are similar or closely related, while others are markedly different. It will be necessary also to trace briefly as far as it is practical the possible origin of the belief in an immortal soul and to see how modern thinkers have amplified or confirmed the original concepts.

A brief synopsis of the positions held in recent times includes the following views:

1. Our present existence is simply the form, the part of the streambed of the continuous river of life. The soul which animates the personality is immortal, without beginning or end, and will reappear in a divergent form of body further down the stream. Just as the bed of
the river changes, so the body form changes in successive rebirths until at last the stream reaches its final destination. This destination may be absorption into the "All-Soul", the "Absolute", the Ineffable Bliss", just as the river is lost in mingling with the waters of the ocean. At this point there are divergent views. Some hold that individual consciousness is retained, and the soul enjoys the things that God enjoys, while others hold that individual identity ceases.

2. There is a belief that the immortal soul sprang into being, as a spark flies upward from the flame, to continue an independent existence for a while, only at last to fall back into the Eternal Flame that gave it birth. This concept postulates that man is part of the All-Soul, the Param Atman, and that the goal of his existence is to return at last to God, of which he is a part.

3. Some hold that man is a creature of progression and that the immortal soul continues its evolution upward to divinity, through different forms or bodies.

4. There is a belief that immortality can be achieved through bhakti, devotion. A continual fixing of the mind upon the Supreme will lead at last to the exclusion of all else, and the soul is lost in the divine.

5. The belief that by yoga, yoking, the soul is joined with God, is held by many. By means of control of the body, thoughts, and desires the individual soul becomes sublimated to the Supreme, and immortality is achieved.

6. Some believe that this world is all illusion; the only thing that truly exists is param-atman, the All-Soul, that pervades the universe. Individual identity is an illusion. When an individual realizes that he is That, namely a part of God, his identity ceases and he no-
longer is deceived by illusions. The purpose of his existence is realized, and at death his separate existence ceases as he merges with the Immortal Being.

7. There is a school of thought that holds that immortality is a reward for faithful obedience to God's laws and conformity to His will. This immortality is interpreted in two different ways. One is that the individual finds heaven in being with God, and in as close as possible relationship with Him, without actual union. The other believes in an existence somewhat similar to this world, where death, pain, and evil do not exist. The whole world will be an eternal Brindavan.

8. Some hold that God is the manifestation of the principle of love. As men come to share in love for all men, good or evil, then selfish desires for advancement above others, for position or power cease, and thus achieve immortality as they share the nature of the Divine One.

9. Others feel that immortality is achieved by the destruction or elimination of the ego, or self. This process may be a sudden "enlightenment," or inspired realization that the self has no true existence, or by a longer process of overcoming all physical appetites, and all desires, including the desire for immortality in a separate existence apart from God.

10. There are some who hold that man has always been immortal, and simply does not realize his true position. Immortality is realized by awareness that we are a part of the divine Existence.

11. Theosophists teach that man is constituted of both divine and earthly elements, plus certain semi-divine parts; at death the earthly elements are gradually shed and the soul continues an existence upward through various spheres of being until it becomes free, truly
immortal, as at last it sheds the last vestiges of the lower forms.

12. Among Christians, there are differing positions held, some very similar to Hindu concepts (as the belief of Mormons, —The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—who believe that man had a previous existence and that the progress of being is upward through new forms to divinity. Or Christian Scientists, who hold that all else is illusion except the Divine Mind or Spirit that fills the universe, and believe in our eventual absorption into that Divine Mind as we become free of the shackles of illusion). Some believe that man does not possess an immortal soul. (As Jehovah’s Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists who believe that the soul is the personality, the life, the emotions, the individual existence that comes to be when the “breath of life” animates the human organism and individual consciousness begins. This existence is held to terminate at death. The identical personality will be restored at a time of resurrection in the future, near a time of judgment "according to men’s works" that shall determine whether they shall receive the gift from God of immortality, or be destroyed to complete extinction because of evil deeds).

The majority of Christians today, however, follow the Platonic concept of an immortal soul, possibly introduced into Christian thinking through the writings of the Jewish philosopher Philo, and to some extent through the Neo-Platonists, or through such men as Augustine who reflected many of the ideas of Plato in his teachings. This immortal soul is believed to survive death and to go to a heaven (ranging in various concepts from simply being with God, to a nebulous spirit existence of delight, to a real paradise). On the other hand it may also go to purgatory or hell. (Again widely differing views picture this as a place of torture or simply separation from God. Those who believe in purgatory think of it as a place of cleansing, a fitting-up place for heaven, which it eventually will reach some day, after a
period of suffering that varies with the individual, according to the deeds). Many also believe that at the second coming of Christ to the world the resurrection of the bodies of the dead takes place, and the bodies will then be reunited with the immortal soul wherever it may be, either in heaven, purgatory, or hell. Some modernist Christians are very skeptical about any future existence after death. These feel that we make our own heaven or hell around us here, and that there is a paradise where the soul enjoys delights apart from a body of sense, at least such a body as we know.

Immortality is a word to which various meanings are given. To some it simply means never dying, or deathless existence. One definition of immortal is "destined to live in all ages." The chief difference in interpretation lies in how the life is to continue—in what form, and whether there is survival of the ego, personality, consciousness, or identity, and whether the soul existed before birth.

The true understanding of the concept of immortality involves epistemology, metaphysics, and particularly ontology, the state of being. It will be discussed in relationship to various other factors, such as Karma, works, belief, devotion, knowledge. It will be examined concerning the relationship of the individual to the Universe, God, or the Supreme. An attempt will be made to discover the means by which the various thinkers have believed that immortality is possible, such as works, self-denial, self-realization, yoga, awareness, enlightenment, devotion, concentration, evolution, mystic formulas, invocation, or whatever way. An answer will also be sought concerning whether immortality is believed possible in or at the end of this present life, or is something to be attained only by successive existence. If there is held to be a succession of existences, the relationship of the present existence to these will be discussed. An examination will also be made whether the individual consciousness is retained when immortality is attained, and whether individual activity continues, and if so, what type of being remains.
An interesting summary of possibilities of existence beyond this present life is given by Aurobindo:

Therefore all voices are joined in the great consensus that not in this world of the dualities can there be our kingdom of heaven, but beyond, whether in the joys of the eternal Vrindaban (footnote: The Varsinavi heaven of eternal beauty and bliss), or the high beatitude of Brahmaloka (footnote: The highest state of pure existence, consciousness and beatitude attained by the soul without complete extinction in the Indefinable), by beyond all manifestations in some ineffable Nirvana (footnote: Extinction, not necessarily of all being, but of being as we know it; extinction of ego, desire, and egoistic action and mentality), or where all separate experience is lost in the featureless unity of the indefinable existence.

(Sir Aurobindo, The Life Divine, Vol. 1, p.29)

The paper will discuss the positions taken by leading thinkers, beginning with Ram Mohun Roy, including also Keshub Chandra Sen, Swami Vivekananda, Sir Aurobindo Ghose, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Radhakrishnan and others. Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and Tagore will be examined in greater detail, inasmuch as they have written considerabily on related topics.

Concepts of various schools such as the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj, and Theosophy will be discussed.

The influence of Christian thinking on Indian thinking will be considered. The two chief positions of Christians will also be considered.

A brief summary will be made of the latest publications on the topic.