

## **The Karma Theory of Mental Illness**

**Volume: 04      Issue: 01      January 1986      Page: 61-63**

---

H S Narayanan

### Reprints request

, K S Mohan &, V K Radhakrishnan,

- *Department of Psychiatry, National Institute of Mental Health & Neuro Sciences, Bangalore 560 029, India*

---

### Key words -

**Karma,  
Belief**

Karma as a law has had profound influence on the thinking of the Indian people. It has helped the people to accept catastrophies and is a belief held from very ancient times. The 'Law of Karma' as applied to mental illness is here subjected to an enquiry in a sample population. All aspects of the Karma theory were found to be held firmly in this study further confirming the deep faith of the Indian people in the ancient tenets.

Karma is the sum of a person's actions in one of his successive incarnations and is regarded as determining his fate in the next. This is action and the consequences of action.

The belief in Karma has for long profoundly influenced the Indian people. The doctrine extends the principles of causality to the sphere of human conduct and teaches that as every event in the physical world is determined by its antecedents, so everything that happens in the moral realm is preordained. The doctrine of Karma is not fatalistic as self-determination by an individual is evident, because the causes of the actions of the very individual is due to the earlier actions of the very same individual [8]. Their causes may not all be found in the narrow limits of a single life, but it postulates the theory of samsara or the continued existence of the self jiva in a succession of lives. The idea of rebirth gives rise to the notion that if you have tried to get 'your light' in to the Almighty, then you are never born again. If you are unsuccessful, then you are born again but in a very high position, in a good family, good house with riches. From the position you left, you start from there. If you are bad, you are given the life of a "dog" or a "snake" [2].

The Karma doctrine does in no sense imply the imposition of any constraint from outside. The idea of moral retribution underlies the principle of preordination in the Karma doctrine. Whatever we knowingly do will sooner or later bring the results merited and there is no way of escape from it. The doctrine not only envisages the antecedent causes as the determining factor but also propounds an absolute justice in the rewards and punishments meted out to an individual [3].

---

## **Methodology and Results**

In order to understand the belief in Karma doctrine the authors gave a short questionnaire to a random sample of patients attending the outpatients of NIMHANS. The patients were those who had psychoses (schizophrenia or mania or depression) and had recovered with complete insight about the nature of

their illness. The questionnaire and results of the Binomial test as applied to the data are as given below :

Sample size -150

The results indicate that belief in God is widespread ( $p < 0.0001$ ) and there is no blaming God for one's illness. The belief that illness is a result of past life is also held by a significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) section of the sample population studied.

---

## Discussion

From the results we see that the Indian people have a deep conviction in God as being the creator and judge of the Universe. That God is not blamed as responsible for their illness is also in keeping with the Karma doctrine where God is not blamed as responsible for one's illness but only one's past acts are blamed. Illness as a result of past life is a belief which is widely held by the Indian people. Here also our results are in consonance with the faith in the Karma doctrine. The results of this study are in all respects in keeping with the peoples faith in the Karma theory as the causal factor in one's illness.

The 'Law of Karma' is an application of the philosophical notion of 'follows from' which states the logical notion of 'formal implication' which could be interpreted either as the relation of causality or the purely formal relation of implication. The theory of a transmigration is a necessary corollary to the doctrine of Karma. The fact of moral consciousness in western philosophy is the guarantee of personal immortality (Kant as quoted by Moore [6]) and in a similar way the 'Law of Karma' is an assurance to the truth of transmigration [10]. This perspective looks at the present conduct of a person and the good or evil that follows from it as due to his own actions done in one state of existence if not in another. Here destiny becomes another name for deeds done in previous births. As no external fate constrains man to act as he does and as he is then free to act as he does, the doctrine does not lead to any fatalistic approach [3].

In the Katha Upanishad, the 'Law of Karma' states 'Yatha Karma, Yatha Srutham' (according to deed, according to merit), or as Brihadaranyaka Upanishad states 'Yatha Karma, Yatha Vidyam' (according to deed, according to knowledge). Thus the 'Law of Karma' is based on the reality of human freedom, presupposing the notion of responsibility and the law does not state an unalterable necessity but a model possibility or a conditional relativity [8].

Fate is 'blind' and has two exactly opposite things, necessity and chance [4] but Karma is neither necessity nor chance. The foundation of Karma is neither necessity nor chance. The foundation of Karma as a law could be generalised as a formal relation of one-sided dependence and is basically the relation between the occurrence of the consequent and the occurrence of the antecedent. An interval may or may not exist between the antecedent and the consequent. The 'Law of Karma' is a principle of sufficient reason in the philosophy of Indian culture.

---

## Conclusion

One finds that the 'Law of Karma' is not a blind, mechanical law but is essentially ethical as it is justice meted out [3]. It is this conviction that there are in reality no injustices that explains the absence of any feelings of bitterness so apt to follow in the wake of pain and sorrow which is noticeable even among common people in India. When any misfortune befalls them, they blame neither God nor their neighbour, but only themselves for it. So deep is the conviction of some about the adequacy of Karma to account for the vicissitudes of life and the diversity of human conditions that they see no need to acknowledge the existence of even God conceived as the Creator of the World and as its controlling judge.

Every deed leads to pain or pleasure according to the nature of the deed done and also established a tendency in us to repeat or reject the same deed in the future. The Karma doctrine is concerned with the pain or the pleasure. The tendencies are entirely under our control and our progress depends wholly upon the success with which we direct and regulate them as they tend to express themselves in action. This double significance of Karma does not lead to any bifurcation of life's interests or conflict in its purposes. This is an explicit teaching of the Gita [3].

---

### Acknowledgements

We deeply acknowledge our gratitude to Dr. J P Balodhi, Asst Prof. in the Department of Clinical Psychology who has been guiding us and helped immensely to understand Karma. We also thank Mr. Sanjeev Balwant Sarmukaddam, Lecturer in Biostatistics for his help in statistical computations.

1. Aurobindo, *The Problem of Rebirth, Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo Ashram* 1952
  2. Carstaris G M, *The Twice Born Bloomington, Indiana University Press* Page: pp180, 1961
  3. Hiriyanna M, *The Essentials of Indian Philosophy, London Allen and Unwin* 1949
  4. Kierkegaard S, *The Concept of the Dreads Princeton University Press* 1921
  5. Max Muller F, *The Upanishads (translation) Katha Upanishad 5.7 and Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1.5.21 In: Sacred Books of the East The Oxford University Press, (reprinted by Motilal Banarasi Dass) 1965, 1969, 1975*
  6. Moore G E, *Kant's First Moral Principle London Mind, A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy. Macmillan and Co. Ltd.* 1932
  7. Neki J S, *Psychotherapy in India : Past, Present and Future American Journal of Psychotherapy* Page: 79: 92-100, 1975
  8. Nikam N A, *Some concepts of Indian Culture ( An analytical Interpretation). Simla, Indian Institute of* Page: p 27, 1973
  9. Surya N C & Jayaram S S, *Some basic considerations of psychotherapy in the Indian setting Indian Journal of Psychiatry* Page: 6(3) : 153-156, 1964
  10. Varma V K & Ghosh A, *Psychotherapy as practised by the Indian Psychiatrists Indian Journal of Psychiatry* Page: 18(3): 177-186, 1976
  11. Wilson H H, *Rig Veda : Translation and Notes Vols. I & II Bangalore, Bangalore Press* 1946
  12. Zimmer, Henrich, *Philosophies of India New York, Joseph Campbell (ed) Pantheon* 1951
-