

THE DOCTRINE OF KARMA: TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

It is well known that in India, over the last two thousand five hundred years or more, there has been a pervasive belief in the doctrine of Karma. Various forms and variants in which this doctrine has found expression in the multifarious texts and metaphysical systems have drawn a good deal of attention. The present paper, however, is an attempt at analysing the function of this doctrine, in the sustenance of the traditional social system, and particularly the scheme of social stratification. As we shall see, an unshakable faith in this doctrine by people belonging to all strata of society provided tremendous strength to the caste hierarchy based on birth, and ensured a secure place for the Brāhmanas and their progeny on the top of the social pyramid.

Since most of the traditional texts are the creations of the Brāhmanas, it is easy to conclude that the doctrine of Karma has been deliberately designed by them to secure the highest status and privileges for themselves. Such a conclusion may not be entirely correct. As a sociological concept, function “refers to observable

objective consequences and not to subjective dispositions.”¹ Any cultural or structural element which helps in the sustenance or adjustment of the system as a whole is said to be functional—whatever be the intentions or motivations of various actors in the situation. In fact, the noted sociologist, Robert K. Merton, has put forth the concept of latent function—those functions which are neither intended nor recognised by the members of that culture.² The function of the doctrine of Karma in justifying and strengthening the social hierarchy based on birth may well be a “latent” function.

NON-ARYAN ORIGIN OF THE DOCTRINE OF KARMA

Though the doctrine of Karma has been entrenched for long in the orthodox and heterodox religions and metaphysical systems, it seems to be of non-Aryan origin. In the R̥gveda, the dead go to live in the world of forefathers (*pitara*). There is no concept of transmigration of soul or rebirth in the R̥gveda. It is in the Upaniṣads, which were composed much later, that we find an ample and vivid exposition of the doctrine of Karma. It is likely that some of the metaphysical notions found in the Upaniṣads were taken from the pre-Aryan people with whom the Aryans had lived for many centuries by that time. These ideas became an integral part of the foundation of the traditional Indian thought.

According to the doctrine of Karma every soul's fate is determined according to the deeds performed in the past lives. The characteristics of the body, birth in a particular species, caste, or family—everything is decided by the deeds performed in previous lives. According to the Hindu view of life, every soul is rewarded or suffers as an inevitable consequence of deeds and conduct in his past lives. The ultimate aim of human life is to get rid of the cycle of birth and rebirth. This is salvation or *mokṣa*.

Though the idea of transmigration of soul is not found in the R̥gveda, the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa does say that by performing certain sacrifices by the correct procedure one can get rid of

¹ Robert K. Merton, “Manifest and Latent Function,” *Social Theory and Social Structure*, New York, The Free Press, 1968, p. 78.

² *Ibid*, pp. 114-136.

repeated deaths or *punarṃṛtyu*.³ Explicit discussion of transmigration of soul is not found in any work earlier than the Upaniṣads. The Upaniṣads mark the revolt of the princely elites against Brahmanical orthodoxy and supremacy. The Upaniṣads often assert that the Brāhmaṇas are devoid of the real knowledge. What it more, in the Upaniṣads we find some low caste persons like Raikva, the cartman, so well versed in the knowledge about the ultimate reality that even the Kṣatriya kings go to learn from them. The lower castes are categorised as Śūdras, the lowest of the four Varnas, and are predominantly of non-Aryan origin—the Dāsas of Ṛgveda. It is not surprising, therefore, that many non-Aryan ideas such as transmigration of soul and asceticism have found expression in the Upaniṣads. The Upaniṣads propound that deeds performed in previous lives determine the next life.

The idea of transmigration of soul has been deeply rooted in the Indian folk-mind since ancient times. It is a popular theme of Jātaka tales, many of which belong to the pre-Buddhist era according to T. W. Rhys Davids.⁴ These ideas seem to have influenced the Buddhist doctrine so much that though Buddhism does not believe in the existence of soul, it nevertheless maintains that Karmas or deeds continue after death and determine the next birth.

Belief in the transmigration of soul, which is an integral part of the doctrine of Karma, finds ample expression in all the later texts. It is found in the Sūtra literature; and in all the works of the era of Brahmanical revival such as the Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa and Manu Smṛti, this doctrine is accepted as a self-evident truth.

The doctrine of Karma is a common feature of all the schools of Indian philosophy excepting the materialist school of Cārvāka. Not only the orthodox schools of thought, but also the heterodox religions such as Buddhism and Jainism subscribe to this fundamental doctrine. All these schools relate transmigration of soul to the nature of deeds. They also believe, in one way or the other, in salvation as freedom from transmigration.

The idea that a soul takes many births appears to have a non-Aryan origin. This belief is widely prevalent among many

³ Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, X.4.4. 9-10.

⁴ *Buddhist India*, Delhi, Motilal Banarasidas, 1971, p. 197.

Proto-Austroloid tribes. Many of these tribes believe even now that after death the soul becomes a tree or an animal. But obviously it must have taken a lot of highly articulate thinking to build from these rudimentary ideas a refined doctrine, which on the one hand presents a cogent philosophy of the moral order and on the other reconciles the exploited sections of society to their miserable lot. The doctrine of Karma implies that the low status of the people of the Śūdra and untouchable castes is due to their own misdeeds committed in their previous births. It is because of these that they are born in the lower castes. According to this doctrine the only hope of improving their lot lies in performing properly the duties of their particular Varna and caste.⁵ The Śūdras, for instance, can hope to benefit only through serving the higher Varnas and thus becoming eligible for birth in higher Varnas in their later lives.

SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE ARTICULATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF KARMA IN UPANIṢADS

It is interesting that the idea of transmigration of soul and rebirth was introduced in the Upaniṣads which themselves are an expression of revolt against Brāhmanical supremacy. The Upaniṣads seem to have borrowed this and many other metaphysical ideas and attitudes from the pre-Aryan settlers. The Brāhmanical elites turned this doctrine into the most powerful instrument against those very people whose idea originally it was. The doctrine of Karma as developed by the Brāhmaṇa elites has had such a pervasive and firm grip that even the most exploited sections have remained almost perfectly reconciled to their lot for well over two millennia.

The Upaniṣads have meticulously worked out and propounded the doctrine of Karma. The Chāndogya Upaniṣad says, “Those

⁵ The term Varna refers to the fourfold ideal division of society mentioned in the classical texts of Hinduism, while the word caste (*jāti* in Sanskrit and Hindi) is generally used for the numerous endogamous groups which actually form the traditional social hierarchy. The Varnas are only four in number while the castes are well over two thousand, and they are a social reality in the sense that they are recognised as such and determine the flow of social interaction. However there is often a dispute about a caste's belonging to a particular Varna. It would be difficult to place neatly all the castes in the four Varnas.

whose conduct has been good will quickly attain a good birth, the birth of a Brāhmaṇa, or a Ksatriya or a Vaiśya. But those whose conduct has been evil, will quickly attain an evil birth, the birth of a dog, or a hog or a Cāṇḍāla (an untouchable outcaste)”.⁶

In the Bṛhadārṇyaka Upaniṣad we find the theory of transmigration together with the description of the supreme bliss, the unification with non-qualifiable Absolute—the Brahman:

“And as a caterpillar, after having reached the end of a blade of grass, and after having made another approach (to another blade), draws itself together towards it, so does this self, after having thrown off this body and dispelled all ignorance, and after making another approach (to another body), draws himself together towards it.

“And as a goldsmith, taking a piece of gold, turns it into another, newer and more beautiful, shape so does this self, after having thrown off this body and dispelled all ignorance, makes unto himself another, newer and more beautiful, shape, whether it be like the ancestors, or like the Gandharvas, or like the Devas, or like Prajāpati, or like Brahman or like other beings.

“That self is indeed Brahman, consisting of knowledge, mind, life, sight, hearing, earth, wind, ether, light and no light, desire and no desire, anger and no anger, right or wrong and all things. Now as a man is like this or like that, according to the way he acts and according to how he behaves, so will a man of good acts become good, a man of bad acts, bad. He becomes pure by pure deeds, bad by bad ones.

“And here they say that a person consists of desires. And as is his desire so is his will; and as is his will, so is his deed, and whatever deed he does that he will reap.

“And here there is this verse: To whatever object a man’s own mind is attached, to that he goes strenuously together with his deed, and having obtained the end of whatever deed he does here on earth, he returns again from that world to this world of action.

“So much for the man who desires. But as to the man who does not desire, who not desiring, freed from desires, is satisfied in his desires, or desires the self only, his vital spirits do not depart elsewhere being Brahman, he goes to Brahman.”⁷

⁶ Chāndogya Upaniṣad, V, 10.7.

⁷ Bṛhadārṇyaka Upaniṣad, IV, 4, 3-6.

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In this passage of the Brhadaranyaka Upaniṣad, it is explained that if a man improves his desires and deeds in the successive births he achieves the ultimate Goal, the Brahman. In the case that he desires some worldly object he inevitably attaches himself to that object and returns to this world. In this passage we also find a passing reference to the other world, probably heaven. Perhaps the Upaniṣads could not completely rid themselves of the Aryan concept of heaven; and the belief in the existence of heaven is probably sought to be reconciled with the doctrine of transmigration of soul. Before taking a new birth in this world the soul remains in heaven for some time.

The Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad explains the nature of Brahman, the ultimate Reality:

“He is the creator and knower, the destroyer of time, possessing qualities, knowing everything, Lord of Pradhāna (Material cause), of individual souls and the Gunas (Sattva, Rajas, Tamas) and of the cause of release from Saṁsāra (births and deaths), of sustaining it and of bondage.”⁸

Incidentally these basic concepts of the material cause, the threefold qualities and the cause of release, have been employed in the metaphysical theory of the Sāṁkhya system.

The Sūtras seem to have inherited the idea of transmigration of soul from the Upaniṣads. The Gautama Dharmasūtra propounds that

“Members (Brāhmaṇa, etc.) of the Varṇas and of Āśramas (Brahmacārī etc.) who are devoted to performing the appropriate duties (of their Varṇa and Āśrama) enjoy the fruit (heaven) of their actions after death and then by virtue of the residue (of their actions) they attain a new birth (in this world) endowed with a good country, caste, family, long life, learning in Vedas, character, wealth, happiness and wisdom.”⁹

This passage indicates that the concept of heaven also persisted along with the doctrine of transmigration of soul in the Sūtra period.

Similarly, the Āpastamba Dharmasūtra says:

⁸ Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, 6.16.

⁹ Gautama Dharmasūtra, XI, 29-30.

“Men of all Varnas, if they fulfil their prescribed duties, enjoy (in heaven) the highest, measureless happiness. Afterwards when (a man who has fulfilled his duties) returns to this world, he obtains, by virtue of a remainder of merit, birth in a distinguished family, beauty of form, beauty of complexion, strength, aptitude for learning, wisdom, wealth and the gift of fulfilling the laws of his (Varna and Āśrama). Therefore in both worlds he dwells in happiness, (rolling) like a wheel (from the one to the other).”¹⁰

Similarly if the men of higher Varnas commit sins they shall be born as outcastes. Āpastamba provides that a Brāhmaṇa, a Kṣatriya and a Vaiśya, who has stolen gold or killed a Brāhmaṇa, is born again if he was a Brāhmaṇa as a Cāṇḍāla, if he was a Kṣatriya as a Pūalkasa, if he was a Vaiśya as a Vaina, after undergoing torments in hell for a limited time.¹¹ In this provision, too, it is implicit that these castes are the most sinful, and their low birth is due to their own sins. Thus on the one hand this belief functions as a means of social control by supporting the traditional norms, and on the other it provides an explanation and a justification for the low status assigned to the untouchable castes. Both ways it ensures the supreme position of the Brāhmaṇas and promotes internalisation of norms and values conducive to the maintenance of their privileges.

BUDDHISM AND THE DOCTRINE OF KARMA

Even in very early times, the doctrine of Karma had become such an integral part of the life and thought of the people that the Buddhists, too, had to accept it though they denied the existence of soul. Buddhism inherited and in certain ways pushed farther the tradition of Upaniṣads. The doctrine of Karma was refined and systematized meticulously in Buddhism. In the Mahābhvagga of Vinaya texts we find the mention of Pratityasamutpāda or the doctrine of dependent origination. It says that life originates due to ignorance. This doctrine is attributed to the Buddha: “Then the Blessed one during the first watch of the night fixed his mind upon the chain of causation, in direct and in reverse order:

¹⁰ Āpastamba Dharmasūtra, II, 2. 2-3.

¹¹ Āpastamba Dharmasūtra, II, 1, 2-6.

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“From ignorance spring the *Saṃskāras*¹² or predispositions, from the *Saṃskāras* springs consciousness, from consciousness spring name and form, from name and form spring the six provinces (of the six senses, eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or touch and mind), from the six provinces springs contact, from contact springs sensation, from sensation springs craving, from cravings springs attachment, from attachment springs becoming, from becoming springs birth, from birth spring old age and death, grief, lamentation, suffering, dejection and despair. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. Again, by the destruction of ignorance, which consists in the complete absence of lust, the *Saṃskāras* are destroyed; by the destruction of the *Saṃskāras* consciousness is destroyed; by the destruction of consciousness, name and form are destroyed; by the destruction of name and form, the six provinces are destroyed; by the destruction of contact, sensation is destroyed; by the destruction of sensation, craving is destroyed; by the destruction of attachment, becoming is destroyed; by the destruction of becoming, birth, old age and death, grief, lamentation, suffering, dejection and despair are destroyed. Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering.”¹³

In the *Majjhima Nikāya* this wheel of causation is divided into those elements which are due to the past life, those elements which are due to the present life and those of the future life. Among these *Avidyā* or ignorance and *Saṃskāras* or predispositions are declared to be due to past life. *Viññāna* or consciousness, *Namarūpa* or name and form, *Śadāyatana* or the six sense organs, *Sparśa* or contact, *Vedanā* or emotion, *Trṣṇā* or craving, *Upādāna* or clinging or attachment, are due to present life. *Bhāva* or coming to be, *Jāti* or rebirth, *Jarāmaraṇa* or old age and death are of future life.¹⁴

Thus, according to Buddhism, the very human existence is due to ignorance. Ignorance is the human ego. *Saṃskāras* or predispositions follow the ignorance. They determine the rebirth. In the *Majjhima Nikāya* it is said: “It happens, my disciples, that a monk, endowed with faith, endowed with righteousness, endowed with knowledge of the doctrine, with resignation, with

¹² This word is used in the same sense among the Hindus even today.

¹³ *Vinaya Texts, Mahābhvagga, I, 1, 2-3.*

¹⁴ *Majjhima Nikāya, 140.*

wisdom, communes thus with himself: 'Now then could I, when my body is dissolved in death, obtain rebirth in a powerful princely family'; he thinks this thought, dwells on this thought, cherishes this thought. These Saṃkāras and internal conditions which he has thus cherished within him and fostered lead to his rebirth in such an existence. This, disciples, is the avenue, this the path which leads to rebirth in such an existence."¹⁵

Next follows Viññāna or consciousness from which name and form come into being:

"If consciousness, Ānanda, did not enter into the womb would name and form arise in the womb?" "No, sir." "And if consciousness, Ānanda, after it has entered into the womb were again to leave its place, would name and form be born into this life?" "No, sir." "And if consciousness, Ānanda, were again lost to the boy or to the girl while they were yet small, would name and form attain growth, increase and progress?" "No, sir. It is through this consciousness that new birth is possible?" "If, Ānanda, consciousness were not to find name, and material form as its resting place, would then birth, old age and death, the origin and development or sorrow, reveal themselves in succession?" "No sir, they would not."¹⁶

Buddhism was deeply influenced by Upaniṣads. And the ultimate goal of both is to get rid of rebirth. It is interesting that in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa also there is a reference to getting rid of Punarmṛtyu or recurring death. It is probable that belief in rebirth was prevalent among the vast body of the pre-Aryan people, and it was from them that all the three, the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, the Upaniṣads and Buddhism derived it, and refined and systematized it in their own way.

The Buddha says: "Therefore, O Bhikkhus, whatever body has been, will be, and is now, belonging or not belonging to sentient beings, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, distant or near, all that body is not mine, is not me, is not my self: this it should be considered by right knowledge according to the truth." He further says:

¹⁵ Majjhima Nikāya, 120.

¹⁶ Dīgha Nikāya, 15.

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“Considering this, O Bhikkhus, a learned noble hearer of the Word becomes weary of body, weary of emotion, weary of perception, weary of the Samskāras or predispositions, weary of consciousness. Becoming weary of all that he divests himself of passion, by absence of passion he is made free, when he is free, he becomes aware that he is free; and he realises that re-birth is exhausted; that holiness is completed, that duty is fulfilled; and that there is no further return to this world.”¹⁷

This is the state of Nirvāna or the blowing out or extinction. Though Buddhism is regarded as a heterodox system, the orthodox schools of metaphysics, specially Vedānta, were greatly influenced by Buddhism.

THE BRAHMANICAL REVIVAL AND THE LATENT FUNCTION OF THE DOCTRINE

It was during the period of Brahmanical revival that the doctrine of Karma, together with other beliefs and rituals, was given the shape that persisted till contemporary times. The Brahmanical revival sought to revive the norms established during the Sūtra period and the theory of Karma was further strengthened and elaborated by the systems of metaphysics.

In the Mahābhārata we find an interesting statement which explains the doctrine of Karma well:

“Just as the calf finds his own mother out of a thousand cows, similarly action performed in a previous life follows the doer.”¹⁸

Many stories of the Mahābhārata are inspired by a firm belief in the doctrine of Karma and transmigration. In a story, the son of an old woman, Gautamī, died of snake-bite. A hunter caught the snake and said that he would kill the snake for biting the boy. But Gautamī forbade him saying that the killing would not revive her son. Then Kāla, or time himself, came and informed Gautamī that,

¹⁷ Vinaya texts, Mahābhavga, I, 6.44, and 46.

¹⁸ Mahābhārata, Anuśāsanaparva, 7.22.

“Just as the potter moulds from a lump of clay whatever he desires, so man secures fruits of deeds done by himself; the boy’s death was due to his deeds in previous life.”¹⁹

The Manusmṛti explains the creation of the universe on the basis of the Sāṃkhya system of metaphysics. It explains that all deeds are performed by gods, men and animals because of the three Gunas, qualities of the nature or the material cause of the universe. These qualities are Satoguna or light, Rajoguna or activity, and Tamoguna or darkness. Manu says that the three qualities of nature or the material cause of the universe are responsible for the creation of gods, men and animals. Among these, gods, sages and Brāhmanaṣ etc., are created by light or the Satoguna; kings and Kṣatriyaṣ are created by activity or Rajoguna; while Śūdraṣ, elephants, horses etc., are created by darkness or Tamoguna.²⁰ The Manusmṛti further explains that

“In consequence of attachment to (the objects of) the senses, and in consequence of the non-performance of their duties, the fools, the lowest of men, reach the vilest of births.”²¹

Thus it has been emphasized again and again that persons of the Śūdra Varṇa are themselves responsible for their low position in society.

As a metaphysical theory, the doctrine of Karma has been integrated in various sophisticated ways in the traditional philosophical systems. At the same time it has been a vital part of the living faith of the vast masses in India for more than two millennia. As a belief system, unquestioningly accepted by the people of all strata, it has been exceedingly functional for the sustenance of the social order.

It has been invaluable as a means of social control in general. Social control refers to the processes which are conducive to the maintenance of a social system. Every society has its own agencies and means of social control. These include institutions like the family and the state; social codes such as custom and law; and values and belief systems. The vitality and survival of a social

¹⁹ Mahābhārata, Anuśāsanaparva, I, 74, 78-79.

²⁰ Manusmṛti, XII, 40-50.

²¹ Manusmṛti, XII, 52.

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system depends on the conformity to its norms by the vast majority of its members; for it is on this that the stability of the established forms of social relationships, and ultimately that of the social structure as a whole, depends. Belief in the doctrine of Karma implies that the consequences of all one's deeds—good or bad—are bound to be endured by the doer in this or later lives. Any deviance from the prescribed norms, whether watched or unwatched, is bound to entail automatic punishment. A deep faith in this doctrine, therefore, deters people from violation of norms.

There is another aspect also of the function of the doctrine of Karma as a means of social control. For the smooth functioning of the social organisation it is essential that conflict or confusion between various statuses and roles is kept to a minimum. Belief in the doctrine of Karma tends to ensure this by inculcating the idea that everyone gets (or is born into) his vocation in accordance with his own predispositions (Saṁskāras) based on the deeds of his past lives. He should therefore assiduously attend to the duties appropriate to his own role, and never crave for the role of someone else. As the *Gītā* puts it: "It is glorious even to die doing one's own duty. The duty of someone else is perilous."²² This is repeatedly quoted as a maxim in everyday parlance. Thus in this pervasive *Weltanschauung*, every individual—man or woman—is expected to perform to the best of his or her ability the role assigned to him or her in the traditional social structure, without being attracted by any other role, and without any concern about whether others are performing their duties or not. This explains, for instance, how traditional Indian women continue to worship their husbands despite the frequently erring behaviour of the latter. One may be distressed at the oppression that this involves, but the fact remains that it is conducive to the sustenance of the social system.

It is perhaps in the justification and legitimization of the traditional pattern of social stratification that the function of the doctrine of Karma has been most effective and telling. The firm belief that one is born into a caste, low or high, strictly according to his own deeds in past lives, has reconciled to their lot people belonging even to the most oppressed and exploited castes,

²² Bhagwat *Gītā*, III, 35.

generation after generation. This doctrine thus has been a great support to the caste system. And when we consider the deep implications that the caste system has for all aspects of social life, the significance of the doctrine of Karma is brought out in its true proportions. The caste system is not just a device for reckoning status hierarchy. Traditionally, a person's caste is related also to occupation, marriage, eating and drinking, dress, mode of worship, and almost everything else. Though there is no one-to-one relationship between caste and occupation, for every caste certain occupations are forbidden, some others are permissible, and one or more are favoured. As for marriage, there are stringent and elaborate caste norms of endogamy, exogamy, and hypergamy. In fact endogamy is the defining characteristic of a caste. Castes are endogamous groups—marriage outside one's caste is traditionally inadmissible, and even unthinkable. Exogamy too is governed by caste norms—one has to marry within one's own caste, but outside certain specified groups within it. And the regulation of hypergamy depends solely on the hierarchical sub-structures within various castes. The caste system has intricate norms concerning the sharing of food and water between persons belonging to different castes. In addition, certain foods and beverages are forbidden or favoured for different castes. Caste puts severe restrictions on social intercourse—the touch or even the shadow or the sight or people of certain castes is considered to be polluting. There are a plethora of other caste norms which cover almost all aspects of life. When caste is so pervasive in traditional Indian society, it is hardly possible to over-emphasize the importance of the social function of the doctrine of Karma which has played a vital part in sustaining the caste system.

It is rather paradoxical that the idea of transmigration of soul, which seems to have originally belonged to the non-Aryans who were settled in India before the Aryans came and overpowered them, was later turned into an effective instrument for the oppression of the lower castes who are largely the progeny of those very pre-Aryan settlers. As we have seen, the Rgvedic Aryans did not believe in the transmigration of soul. This belief seems to have been later taken by the Aryan elites from the proto-Austroloid pre-Aryan people. In the Upanisadic period this belief was refined and systematized and was given the sophisticated form of the

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metaphysical doctrine of Karma. In that period it was used by a section of the Aryan elites, namely the Kṣatriyas (warriors and rulers) as a weapon in their revolt against the overbearing priestly elites, the Brāhmanas. Eventually the doctrine received wide acceptance, both by heterodox systems such as Buddhism and Jainism and in orthodox works like the Sūtras. It appears, however, that it was in the period of Brahmanical revival that the doctrine became an almost perfect instrument for the sustenance of the social order, ordained by the Brahmanical elite. It has effectively performed this function chiefly because of the unquestioning acceptance that this doctrine has enjoyed among all sections of society. That faith in this doctrine is not confined to elite is borne out by the fact that it finds ample expression in the oral tradition of the unlettered folk as well. In fact even those religious movements which marked a revolt against Brahmanical supremacy (such as the ones led by low caste saint poets like Kabira and Raidāsa), and which gained wide popularity among the lower castes, nevertheless subscribed to the basic tenets of the doctrine of Karma.

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