

The Hindu Doctrine of Transmigration: Its Origin and Background*

In¹ 1873 W.D. Whitney, the pioneer of American Indology, called the origin of the doctrine of transmigration “one of the most difficult questions in the religious history of India” (p. 61). Richard Salomon (1982, 410) denotes it as “the single greatest problem of Indological studies” in a review of *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions* (edited by Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty) in 1980. The latter publication was the outcome of three conferences held in 1976–1978 on the subject. These conferences raised rather than solved problems. I quote from the Introduction of the mentioned book: “Much of our time at the first conference ... was devoted to a lively but ultimately vain attempt to define what we meant by karma and rebirth. The unspoken conclusion was that we had a sufficiently strong idea of the parameters of the topic to go ahead and study it, in the hope that perhaps *then* we would be able to see more clearly precisely what we had studied (rather like the woman who said to Abraham Lincoln, ‘How do I know what I think ’til I hear what I say?’)” (p. xi). Indeed a very practical approach.

The next problem raised by O’Flaherty’s colleagues was the question of “Abstract Theory versus Historical Explanation” (p. xii). After lengthy discussions they decided to follow both approaches. Again a very pragmatic solution. However, O’Flaherty’s survey of the discussions on “The Historical Origins of the Karma Theory” (6 pages) shows that a solution of the problem was hardly reached.

The historical origins were only treated in the first conference. O’Flaherty concludes her survey of the divergent views with the resigned statement: “Rather than looking for one central ‘source’ which was then embroidered by ‘secondary influences’ like a river fed by tributary streams, it would be better to

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1 This paper is an adaptation of a lecture published in Dutch several years ago: *Oorsprong en achtergrond van de Indische wedergeboorteleer*, Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, Mededelingen van de Afdeling Letterkunde, Nieuwe Reeks, Deel 55 no. 6, Amsterdam–New York–Tokyo, 1992, pp. 3–19 [225–239]. An abridged version was read at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (St. Petersburg Branch) in September 1996.

picture the intellectual fountainhead of ancient India as a watershed consisting of many streams—each one an incalculably archaic source of contributing doctrines—Vedic, Ājīvaka [i.e. materialistic], Jaina, Dravidian, and tribal” (p. xviii). This metaphor actually amounts to the conclusion: “God may know what is the origin.”

Then Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty instigated the American Herman W. Tull to publish his thesis of 1985 in 1989 in a series edited by her, under the title *The Vedic Origins of Karma*. After reading this book my conclusion was that more than a century after Whitney’s statement the problems still were not satisfactorily solved.

I will not waste time with theoretical definitions. Rebirth or transmigration (Sanskrit *samsāra*) belongs together with *karman* (the deeds which cause this rebirth and determine its nature) and with *mokṣa* (the release from the cycle of rebirths) to one complex of concepts which mostly are studied together. So I cannot confine myself to the origin of rebirth as an isolated phenomenon.

The origin and background of this complex have raised several questions. It will be clear that I cannot answer all of them. Was the doctrine of *karman* originally a theory of causality which explained how every action has results? Did it function as a theodicy, an explanation of the evil in this world? Why did pessimism about life on earth arise, whereas originally the Vedic Indians liked this life? And above all: how did one arrive at the idea that man would return on earth? Many Indologists have regarded the repeated return of sun and moon as the basis of rebirth.² However, this phenomenon is too universal. The typically Indian concept of cyclic time and of cyclic mundane periods (the *yugas*) is later than the doctrine of rebirth and therefore cannot serve as its starting point.

What have been the opinions of Indologists during the last thirty-five years?

In Gonda’s handbook (1960, 207) we find an incoherent enumeration of possible origins, introduced with the statement “Über die Ursprünge dieser für die ganze Folgezeit äußerst wichtigen Lehre lassen sich nur Mutmaßungen äußern” and concluded with “alle diese Faktoren haben zu ihrem Aufkommen

2 See e.g. Gonda (1960, repr. 1978², 207), who mentions “Das zyklische Denken, das geneigt ist, die Periodizität des Naturgeschehens auf das Dasein des Menschens und den Weltlauf zu übertragen” as one of the possible explanations. See also Horsch (1971, 115–116), who admits that the cosmic cyclism implies an eternal return of the same, which would not agree with variable rebirth based on variable *karman*, but still holds that cyclical return may at least have formed a catalysator for the development of the doctrine of transmigration.