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The Concept of Karma in the Vedas

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Abstract: *The Vedas are a significant body of ancient Indian Sanskrit literature. They are regarded as eternal truths, revealed and transmitted orally for thousands of years before being documented. For this reason, the Vedas are called Śruti (that which is heard). Karma and rebirth are important doctrines of Indian philosophy. In the mantras of the ancient Ṛg-Veda, the word karma signifies "ritual action," through which individuals may attain all forms of welfare, including communion with God and entry into heaven. This initial concept of karma persists in subsequent post-Buddhist and Upaniṣadsic writings, which further elaborate on popular Hindu concepts of rebirth. This article provides a brief outline of how the concept of karma first emerges and develops in the ancient Ṛg-Veda.*

Keywords: Karma, Ṛta, Vedas, Ṛg-Veda, Rebirth.

1. Introduction:

The Vedas, as a whole, provide the earliest information regarding Indian thought (Hiriyanna, *Essentials* 9). The roots of Indian philosophy are found in these ancient Sanskrit texts (Warder 13; Bose 1). Vedic knowledge primarily consists of myths, divine accounts, rituals, and traces of early human history merged with myth (Warder 4). Amid these elements, philosophical inquiry emerges in the texts through expressions of doubt, occasionally even concerning the existence of certain gods, prompted by inconsistent accounts of deities such as Indra (4, 17–18). The key concern is cosmogony, or "the theory of the origin and development of the world" (4). The Ṛgvedasaṃhitā contains several contradictory creation theories, which, as Warder notes, led thinkers to seek a single rational explanation, thus giving rise to philosophy (4). While early explanations were largely mythical or ritualistic, later Vedic writings, especially the Upaniṣads, developed these ideas more systematically, thereby laying the foundation for Brahmanical philosophy (4).

The philosophical roots of the doctrine of karma can be traced to the ancient Vedic concept of Ṛta, which is derived from the root ṛ, meaning "to go" or "to move" (Warder 7). Warder interprets Ṛta as the "order," "nature," or "truth" of the universe, a principle that often carries moral implications by denoting the "true order" or "proper way" (17). This concept anticipates the later doctrine of karma (Radhakrishnan 109; Sinha 3). In its earliest form, however, Ṛta was not associated with the idea of rebirth (McClelland 146; Obeyesekere 1; Hiriyanna Essentials 13). The primary objective of this article is to examine the concept of Ṛta in the Ṛg-Veda and to investigate how the doctrine of karma originated from this conception.

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Karma and rebirth are prominent and widely discussed concepts in Eastern and Western philosophy. However, for the present essay, the discussion will be limited to the general concepts and origins of karma in Indian philosophy. To achieve this goal, the paper will first outline the traditional concept of karma within the Indian philosophical context and then describe the Vedas, including their contents and classification. Subsequently, an attempt will be made to analyze the ancient concept of Ṛta and explore its connection with karma. In this context, the essay will also examine whether the Ṛg-Veda mentions rebirth or the immortality of the soul. In conclusion, the concept of karma can be understood as originating in Ṛta, though at a rudimentary stage of development. Furthermore, there is no proof of rebirth-karma association in the Ṛg-Veda.

Since the original Ṛg-Veda is in Sanskrit, this paper relies on a translation as its primary source. Scholarly books, journal articles and online materials in English on Indian philosophy, as well as the doctrines of karma and rebirth, have been used as secondary sources. However, the research employs a qualitative methodology, so the analysis of narrative materials would be exploratory and analytical.

2. The concept of karma:

Karma is a central concept in Indian philosophy. A comprehensive understanding of karma was first developed in India and later spread throughout Asia through the efforts of Hindu and Buddhist missionary activities (McClelland 5). Indeed, the concept of karma represents a key distinction between Indian philosophy and European philosophical traditions (Wadia 145). Literally, karma refers to work, action, or deed, and it also signifies the universal or cosmic law of causation (McClelland 136). According to this law, the essential soul of a human undergoes continuous transmigration across successive lifetimes. This cyclical process persists until the attainment of liberation. The goal of liberation is to achieve *moksha* (freedom from rebirth) by ceasing the accumulation of karma and ending the continuation of existence. As McClelland observes, “Soul rebirth is primarily the vehicle for manifestations of karma. Indeed, even spiritual liberation is subordinate to karma” (136). In this context, the concept of karma is inextricably linked to several other ideas, including causality, the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*), and liberation (*moksha*). As an ethical philosophy, it also incorporates the principle of moral responsibility (ethicization) as it motivates individuals to seek and live moral lives.

The account of karma has several different interpretations within Indian systems of philosophy. In the orthodox systems, karma is an eternal chain of cause and effect that determines the excellence of each life. These consider God as the moral administrator and offer all karmas to Him to attain *moksha*. Karma and rebirth are central to the eschatological beliefs of both Buddhism and Jainism (Obeyesekere 1). In both Buddhism and Jainism, the law of karma operates independently of a Supreme Being. It is the root cause of bondage and suffering (*dukkha*). A soul can be released from *saṃsāra* by freeing itself from karmic actions, thereby attaining salvation. In Buddhism, karma refers specifically to intentional ethical actions, whereas in Jainism, it denotes a subtle form of matter that adheres to the soul. According to Sikhism, birth is determined by one’s karma, but salvation is attained through God’s grace. In contrast, the Cārvāka school rejects the orthodox conception of karma and maintains that release from pain and grief depends solely on human endeavor.

3. The Vedas and their contents:

The Vedas, the earliest extant scriptures of divine knowledge, are generally recognized as *Śruti*, meaning "that which is heard" (Apte 887; Flood 3; Radhakrishnan 128). They consist of eternal sacred truths composed in archaic Sanskrit, whose authority is independent of any other religion. The Lord revealed these truths to the primordial Ṛiṣhis (seers or sages), who are regarded not as the creators of this divine knowledge but as its discoverers. Although the precise period of the Vedas' composition is not definite, M. Hiriyanna notes that the Vedas, together with the Upaniṣads, are older than the Buddha, who died in 480 B.C. (*Essentials* 9). A. K. Warder, Radhakrishnan, and Jadunath Sinha assign them to the fifteenth century B.C. (Warder 13; Radhakrishnan 67; Sinha 1). Most scholars, however, date the Vedic era from approximately 1500 B.C. to 600 B.C., a period often referred to as the epic era (Roy 161).

The Vedic literature reflects the cultural heritage of the Aryan people, who established themselves in India following the defeat of the earlier non-Aryan civilization located around the Indus River (Warder 13). As Warder observes, "This literature spans a considerable period, from about 1500 B.C. onwards over about a thousand years, allowing us to see the gradual development of ideas" (13). He questions whether the Aryan civilization actually formed a philosophical tradition and contends that the ancient Vedic literature demonstrates a clear 'mythopoeic' approach, concerned primarily with religion, myth, and mystery (13).

The word *Veda* means knowledge or wisdom, derived from the Sanskrit root *vid*, which means "to know" (McClelland 274). Warder explains that this "knowledge" largely comprised myths and narratives about the gods, various rituals intended to achieve specific purposes, and elements of early human history that were gradually integrated into mythic tradition (4). The Vedas reflect different phases of religious thought, including polytheism, organized polytheism, henotheism, monotheism, and ultimately monism (Sinha 1). Scholars refer to the religion that originated from the Vedas as the Vedic religion, which, over time, developed into the tradition now recognized as Hinduism (McClelland 274). All the different schools of Indian philosophy that trace their origins to the Vedic literature are classified as Vaidika (Vedic) schools (Warder 4). However, each school interprets the Vedas through its own distinctive philosophical framework (4).

The Vedas contain the earliest recorded expressions of the human race in the form of poetry, with some passages in rhythmic prose (Bose 1). The Vedic hymns outline paths to spiritual perfection for both the general populace and the intellectually inclined. They provide knowledge of Brahman, the origin and evaluative processes of the universe, as well as abundant information about life and the early development of the human mind. S. N. Das Gupta points out that the teachings of the Vedas govern every aspect of life (social, legal, domestic, and religious) either directly or indirectly (Gupta 11). Indeed, all major philosophical systems of India, except Buddhism and Jainism, which emerged in later periods, trace their roots to the Vedic tradition (Warder 4). Furthermore, Buddhism and Jainism developed, in part, as a response to challenge Vedic authority and beliefs (McClelland 274).

4. Different types of Vedas and their parts:

There are four types of Vedas: the Ṛg-Veda, the Yajur-Veda, the Sāma-Veda, and the Atharva-Veda. The first three are considered the original Vedas and together constitute the triad (*trayī*)

(Sinha 1). The Ṛg-Veda is the most ancient and significant of the Vedic texts. It is regarded as the grandest treasure of the Indo-Aryans, which represents the religion of an unsophisticated age (Radhakrishnan 69). The simple and naïve style of language of the Ṛg-Veda expresses the mysteries of the world and the truths of ultimate existence. As Radhakrishnan observes, the Ṛg-Veda captures the earnest reflections of early yet profoundly poetic minds striving to find meaning beyond the limitations of sensory experience and the external world (71). And he notes that the hymns possess a philosophical quality because they seek to understand the universe's mysteries not through divine revelation or supernatural insight, but through the power of human reason alone (71).

The Yajur-Veda is a collection of arranged formulas, partly in prose and partly in verse, designed to fulfil the requirements of formal religious rituals. The contents of the Sāma-Veda are entirely liturgical, and its messages are almost similar to those of the Ṛg-Veda, which were sung in sacrificial ceremonies. The central theme of the Atharva-Veda is sorcery and magic. In contrast to the Ṛg-Vedic hymns of devotion, the Atharva-Veda reflects a world of superstition. For this reason, it did not attain the same stature as the other Vedas for a long period (Radhakrishnan 65).

Each Veda includes three parts: (i) the Mantras (verses), (ii) the Brāhmaṇas, which are discussions of mantras or religious rituals, and (iii) the Upaniṣads. The earliest portions of the Vedas are the Saṃhitās, a collection of mantras (the hymns or religious songs). And the earliest of these is the Ṛgvedasaṃhitā. It dates back about 1500 B.C. to 1000 B.C. (Bose 1; Flood 37; Roy 162 and Warder 13). The text comprises 1,017 hymns or sūktas (1,028 if the fictional valakhilya hymns 8.49–8.59 are included), covering approximately 10,600 mantras (stanzas) classified into ten books (maṇḍalas) (Radhakrishnan 67; Müller 41). Although it is said that the hymns are allegorical, they are indispensable for understanding the subsequent systematic development of Indian thought. Moreover, a conscious study of these hymns is necessary to comprehend the later philosophical discussions (Radhakrishnan 66).

The Brāhmaṇas, the second part of the Vedas, are a body of prose texts intended to guide people performaning of sacrificial rites. Following the Saṃhitās, they focus on explaining rituals and the use of sacred hymns (Warder 19). According to M. Hiriyanna, "The word, which is derived from *brahman*, meaning 'prayer' or 'devotion,' signifies an authoritative utterance of a priest, relating particularly to sacrifice; and the Brāhmaṇas are so called because they are the repositories of such utterances" (*Essentials* 14). They represent a period probably after B.C. 1000; a pivotal transitional phase in Vedic literature (Warder 19). The Brāhmaṇas effectively bridge the gap between earlier mythological narratives and the subsequent speculative-philosophical inquiry of the Upaniṣads (Warder 19). They include sacrificial liturgies suitable for householders, and in them we find the earliest declaration of human duties divided into five: (1) duties to the gods, (2) duties to the seers, (3) duties to the manes, (4) duties to other humans, and (5) duties to lower creation (Radhakrishnan 131). The Śatapathabrāhmaṇa, a Yajurvedabrāhmaṇa, is the most important Brāhmaṇa among all the ritual texts of the Brāhmaṇas. It gives diverse evolutionary theories of creation (Warder 19-20).

The Āraṇyakas are the ending section of the Brāhmaṇas. They come before the Upaniṣads and connect the sacrificial rites of the Brāhmaṇas with the philosophical inquiries of the Upaniṣads. They are the forest treatises that expound the symbolism of the complex rites and give

philosophical interpretations of these. The Upaniṣads, which contain philosophical discussions, are the most important part of the Vedas. Their magnificent philosophy reveals the truth of existence, the identity of the individual soul and the Supreme Soul, the nature of the universe, and man's relationship to it.

All three parts of the Vedas originally represent successive phases in the development of Vedic literature, though each addresses distinct subject matter. The Mantras and the Brāhmaṇas form the Karma-Kāṇḍa (the action section), which deals with various sacrificial rites. The Āraṇyakas form Upasana- Kāṇḍa, which deals with the forms of worship. And the Upaniṣads form Jñāna-Kāṇḍa (the knowledge part), which deals with the supreme knowledge of Brahman. According to Radhakrishnan, "The hymns form the foundation of subsequent Indian thought. While the Brāhmaṇas emphasise the sacrificial ritual shadowed forth in the hymns, the Upaniṣhads carry out their philosophical suggestions. The Bhagavadgītā is only an idealisation of Varuna worship. The great doctrine of karma is yet in its infancy as Ṛta" (116).

The mantras (sacrificial hymns) of the Ṛg-Veda place a high value on ceremonial rites. They state that the ritual actions required to perform Vedic sacrifices must adhere to the cosmic order (Sinha 3), as these actions are done to ensure that one stays on the correct path (the moral order). In the next section, we will examine what Ṛta means in the Ṛg-Veda and how this principle of cosmic order relates to the ritual concept of karma.

5. The concept of karma in the Ṛg-Veda:

The word karma originally had a purely ritual meaning—namely, the performance of sacrifice—in Vedic (pre-Buddhist and pre-Upanishadic) thought (McClelland 146; Obeyesekere 2). In the Ṛg-Veda, the foundation of the theory of karma is rooted in the concept of Ṛta, which etymologically signifies "course" and originally denoted "cosmic order" (Hiriyanna, *Essentials* 12). Although it is difficult to determine the precise meaning of the term Ṛta, Warder shows that it is related to the Avestan concept of *aśa*, which emphasizes "truth," "justice," and similar ideas (17). He also suggests that Ṛta has an ancient Indo-Iranian origin (17). Radhakrishnan and Hiriyanna also shared the same viewpoint while searching the history of early Indian religion (Radhakrishnan 74-75; Hiriyanna, *Outlines* 32-33). Hiriyanna states that the term Ṛta, with its roots in pre-Indian culture, initially referred to consistency in the natural world or the structured progression of events. And in the Mantras, it carries the same meaning along with moral order (*Outlines* 33).

According to the Ṛg-Veda, the outside world is perceived as a structured whole governed by Ṛta. It is the immutable cosmic order of nature, the constant route on which the universe is established and becomes integrated by evading all anarchy. A verse from the text highlights this principle: "Firm-seated are eternal Law's foundations in its fair form are many splendid beauties. / By holy Law long lasting food they bring us; by holy Law have cows come to our worship" (R.V. 4.23.9). The cosmos consists of three parts: the earth, heaven, and the atmospheric realm (Hiriyanna *Essentials* 13). Each part contains its own divine entities, who offer guidance and uphold the balance of creation. The creation of the different deities is intended to explain the world's cosmic nature. While there may be numerous gods, there is only one world to rule over and one universal law to adhere to. This concept of oneness in multiplicity develops over time. In this way, Ṛta

paves the path for monotheism, which in turn leads to monism (Sinha 3–4; Hiriyanna, *Essentials* 14–16; Hiriyanna, *Outlines* 37–43; Radhakrishnan 89–99).

Ṛta thus functions as the fundamental principle of cosmic harmony, governing all natural phenomena and ensuring universal order. It serves as an antecedent to the law of karma, with Varuṇa, the Vedic god of the sky whose name comes from the root *var*, meaning "to cover" or "to encompass," acting as its divine guardian and regulator (Radhakrishnan 77). All things in this world that are in motion and evolving slowly adhere to the structured course of Ṛta. It governs the cycle of seasons, the course of the stars and the planets and the rhythms of life. Consequently, Ṛta is often regarded as the "father of all order," from which all phenomena flow (79). The Ṛg-Veda declares: "Hither let Indra come from earth or heaven, hither with speech from firmament or ocean; / With Maruts, from the realm of light to aid us, or from a distance, from the seat of Order" (R.V. 4.21.3). The Ṛg-Veda further states in verse 1.156.3 that "Viṣṇu is the embryo of Ṛta," and in verse 10.121.1 that "Heaven and earth are what they are by reason of the Ṛta" (qtd. in Radhakrishnan 79). Moreover, Ṛta not only signifies the path of the sun (R.V. 1.24.8) but also represents the righteous path of human beings (R.V. 10.133.6).

To explain the concept of Ṛta, A. K. Warder observes: "An important concept in the early Veda which, with a change of verbal expression, remains a basic idea in later Indian philosophy is that of ṛta, the 'order' or simply the 'nature' or 'truth' of the universe, or sometimes rather the 'true order' or 'proper' way, with moral implications" (17). In this second sense, with its moral connotations, the Vedic gods are regarded as the maintainers of the world, preserving both its physical stability and moral integrity. They are thus conceived as the protectors of moral law. In this respect, Ṛta also signifies 'rightness,' implying that there is harmony in the world, governed by moral authorities. As Warder states that the concept of Ṛta can be understood both as the natural order of things and as the moral standard of how they ought to be; however, it is best interpreted in the moral sense, acknowledging that even cosmic forces such as Heaven, Earth, and the Sun follow the correct path due to their inherent perfection as exalted deities (17). Hence, one may observe in the conception of Ṛta a progression from the earthly to the divine.

Thus, Ṛta, as a law of order, is not restricted to the physical world only. It also encompasses the moral and spiritual realms, being intrinsically linked to truth and justice. It is called *satya* (truth of things), the standard of morality through which one can determine both vice and virtue. Ṛta is opposed to An-Ṛta (the opposition of truth), which means disorder or chaos. At the end of the Vedic period, the term Ṛta is replaced by dharma (Warder 17). Indeed, every means of life (secular, moral, religious) in the present-day world is included in this term, and the diverse uses of this term explain the vagueness, though sometimes fulfil the need of time (Hiriyanna, *Outlines* 109-10). In this way, the cosmic law is unified with the moral law, as Ṛta, which governs the universe through natural order, becomes the law of morality, righteousness, and harmony. Within this framework, Varuṇa emerges as the "guardian of Ṛta" (gopa ṛtasya), serving as the upholder of justice against wrongdoing (*Outlines* 34). As the true upholder of the cosmic order, Varuṇa has maintained the sixfold harmony of the earth since the beginning (R.V. 7.87.5). He presides not only over the physical order but also over the moral realm. His principles are enduring and incapable of being violated, and his all-knowing nature ensures that no transgression, however minor, escapes his attention (Hiriyanna, *Outlines* 34).

So, everyone, including the gods, must follow the rule of Ṛta; otherwise, the violation of this principle will bring calamity in every sector of life and the world. It is the supreme power of which everyone is merely a servant (Warder 5). The righteous accept this law and follow the path of Ṛta consistently, while the wicked do not; this path, known as Vratāni, is exemplified by Varuṇa—described as dhṛtavrata, the perfect follower of Ṛta who upholds the fixed rules of conduct (Radhakrishnan 110). As Bose notes, "The man of faith is really one who has understood and accepted the Eternal Law (Ṛta); and the atheist is one who does not believe in the eternal values, and does not stand for goodness and oppose evil, according to Eternal Law" (44). Belief in this law, moreover, enables one to realize the true purpose of existence by removing disorder and uncertainty, thereby fostering confidence and security. Radhakrishnan emphasizes this moral assurance: "Whatever might happen, we feel that there is a law of righteousness in the moral world answering to the beautiful order of nature. As soon as the sun rises to-morrow, virtue will triumph. Ṛta can be trusted" (80). Similarly, the Ṛg-Veda affirms, with verse 5.51.15 highlighting the importance of ethical conduct and community: "We will follow the path of righteousness like the sun and the moon: / We will associate again with the liberal, the kind, the knowing" (qtd. in Bose 243).

By the end of the period described in the Ṛgvedasaṁhitā, the Indian religion had become dominated by ritual. Ritual actions, or sacrifices, were regarded as the most significant aspect of worship. The gods were only the receivers of these offerings (Warder 15-16). The effectiveness of an offering is dependent on performing the ritual properly. In fact, people understood the universe and all its elements through the framework of these rituals. However, rituals were not considered permanent; one could make progress in ritual performance through actions in accordance with time (Bose 289). As ritualism grew in prominence, Ṛta came to be regarded as synonymous with Yajña—the sacrificial ceremony. Through sacred rites and devotion, Ṛta, originally the concept of truth and justice, evolved into the concept of sacrifice (Yajña). "Yajna is the Vedic ritual of offering libation or oblation on the sacrificial fire, lighted on an altar" (Bose 61). It represents the holy law of worship, calling upon humankind to dedicate their lives for the sake of God and humanity, as exemplified by the sage Bṛhaspati and Yama (293):

> He chose death, for the sake of Gods,
> and for men's sake, he chose not immortality.
> They made a sacrifice of Brihaspati, the sage.
> Yama gave up his own dear body. (qtd. in Bose 293)

6. The concept of rebirth and the immortality of the soul in the Vedas:

In the Vedas, we find a positive, happy picture of life. The Vedic sages accepted the different aspects of life and reality so optimistically that we do not trace any proof of sadness, depression and inequality in the Vedic hymns. As Bose observes, "Vedic sages are positive in their acceptance of life and death and life's struggles and imperfections; positive, too, in their acceptance of the ultimate values—of truth, goodness, beauty—and of Eternal Law (Rita), and the Ultimate Reality" (2). Consequently, Vedic poetry expresses a lively and joyful spirit grounded in devotion and trust in the divine (Bose 2). The Ṛg-Veda states that people should learn to live life to its fullest with joy and vigor, as verse 10.18.3 illustrates:

These living ones are divided from the dead;
blessed be our call to God to-day.
We have gone forth for dance and for laughter,
prolonging our lives to further times. (qtd. in Bose 226)

From this perspective, one can clearly observe the active, optimistic, and worldly outlook of the Vedas (Bose 247). According to Reat, Vedic verses originally exhibited no association with rebirth; instead, the Ṛg-Veda presents a simple view in which the soul, upon departing the body at death (R.V. 10.16.1, 10.18.2), proceeds to heaven (R.V. 9.113.2, 10.16.4), hell (R.V. 4.5.5, 9.73.8, 10.152.4), or an eternal state (R.V. 9.113.2), a destination determined by one's sacrificial offerings (Reat 163). He further notes that one's final fate depends largely on the favor of the gods, influenced by prayer and sacrifice (163). McClelland adds that in the oldest texts and discourses of the Hindu tradition, there is no clear conception of rebirth; these texts primarily focus on the actions required to complete Vedic sacrifices and do not reflect belief in reincarnation (146). In fact, there are almost no mentions of rebirth in the Vedas and Brāhmaṇas (Obeyesekere 1). As Hiriyanna states, "Nor does there yet seem to have arisen any belief in transmigration" (*Essentials* 13).

The Aryans were not anxious about death and accepted it as a reality. They loved to live delightfully by receiving the worldly aspects of existence. However, this does not mean that they didn't realize the distinction between life and death, or between the body and the spirit. They had a faith that departure from the physical world was not the end at all. As Hiriyanna observes, although the early mantras contain no explicit reference to transmigration, the survival of the individual after death is acknowledged in the Vedas (*Essentials* 13). He further explains, "Death does not mean destruction, but only the continuance of existence elsewhere, where happiness or misery results according to one's desert" (*Essentials* 47). Radhakrishnan concurs, noting that "rebirth is still at a distance. The Vedic Aryans were convinced that death was not the end of things. After night, the day; after death, life. Beings who once had been could never cease to be" (114).

This belief in continuity after death indicates that the soul was conceived as immortal in the Vedas (Hiriyanna, *Essentials* 13–14). Many hymns of the Ṛg-Veda also suggest the existence of another world, in which the soul experiences the consequences of its past deeds (Radhakrishnan 69, 114). Dasgupta observes that in early Vedic thought, the fate of the soul was determined by sacrificial practices and moral actions, which laid the basis for the later doctrine of transmigration (25). Accordingly, sacrificial offerings and prayers to the gods were regarded as essential means of attaining heaven, the realm of light and joy. Hiriyanna confirms this view: "That is to say, the soul is conceived as immortal; and the good and the pious, it is believed, go after death to heaven where they lead a life of perfect joy in the company of the gods" (*Essentials* 13). The fate of the wicked, however, is less clearly described, though they too are thought to survive after death, often being portrayed as condemned to "abysmal darkness" in contrast to the "white light" reserved for the virtuous (13). This moral duality underscores an early Vedic conception of cosmic justice, in which ethical conduct in life shapes the soul's posthumous destiny.

7. Conclusion:

It can therefore be argued that the hymns of the Ṛg-Veda place a greater emphasis on Ṛta as a fundamental principle of cosmic order and regularity, more than the concept of karma. Nevertheless, in its broader sense, since Ṛta encompasses truth, righteousness, and justice while ensuring that individuals cannot escape the consequences of their actions, the Ṛg-Vedic notion of Ṛta can be seen as laying the conceptual groundwork for the later development of karma. Furthermore, this immutable law of nature, though not fundamentally ethical (Obeyesekere 2), establishes a moral standard for both the righteous and the impious, as Varuṇa is believed to consign the wicked to the world of darkness and the virtuous to heaven according to their deeds. Here too lies the opportunity for individuals to correct their wrongdoings through sacerdotal or ritual performances, which indicates humanity's capacity to restore balance and harmony within the cosmic order. As Bose observes, "There is confident faith in man's capacity to follow Ṛta in making order prevail against disorder, cosmos against chaos. The existence of evil is recognized, but it is believed that evil can be fought and fought successfully, within us and without us" (51).

Thus, as McClelland asserts, the concept of karma originated in India (146), yet in the early Vedic traditions, it remained in its initial stages. Later, this conception, along with the doctrine of rebirth, was fully developed in heterodox religions, specifically Buddhism and Jainism, and subsequently integrated into mainstream Hinduism (Obeyesekere 1; Wadia 146). The progression from the Ṛg-Vedic concept of Ṛta to the doctrine of karma reflects a conceptual shift in Indian philosophical thought in which an impersonal cosmic order transforms into a moral law that determines human destiny. The concept of rebirth, however, was not prevalent among the early Aryans. McClelland notes that most Western scholars acknowledge that karma originated in Vedic teachings but do not see an association between rebirth and karma; the early belief in rebirth linked to karma as a moral principle is primarily advocated by scholars who support the Hindu minority (146). The Ṛg-Vedic hymns only infer that after death, the soul obtained divine reward in accordance with his performance of sacrifices offered to God. In the Upaniṣads, specifically the Brhadaranyaka Upaniṣad, we encounter the first significant references to ethical action in relation to rebirth (Obeyesekere 4; Tull 13; Wadia 146).

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