



## THE CONCEPT OF KARMA IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

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### ABSTRACT :

*The doctrine of Karma derived from the Sanskrit root kṛa, meaning “to act” or “to do” is among the most enduring and unifying ideas in Indian thought. It expresses the law of moral causation, by which every thought, word and deed inevitably bears fruit, influencing one’s present and future existences. Rooted in the early Vedic notion of ṛta (cosmic order), Karma matured through the Upaniṣads, the Bhagavad Gītā and the classical systems of Indian philosophy (Ṣaḍ-darśanas). This essay examines Karma as interpreted within these six orthodox schools Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta and traces its ethical, metaphysical and spiritual implications. It also highlights parallel developments in Buddhism and Jainism, both of which re-envisioned Karma through their distinctive doctrines of rebirth and liberation. Ultimately, Karma emerges not as a fatalistic principle but as a dynamic moral law asserting human freedom and responsibility within an ordered universe.*

**Keywords:** Karma, Dharma, Mokṣa, Rebirth, Āstika Schools, Indian Philosophy, Nyāya, Vedānta.

### I. Introduction:

Indian philosophy stands apart in world thought for its comprehensive integration of ethics, metaphysics and spiritual practice. Central to this synthesis is the doctrine of Karma, the moral law that links action and consequence. Every human being, according to this worldview, is both the product of past deeds and the architect of future destiny. In the Ṛgveda the idea is embryonic, expressed through ṛta, the universal order sustaining gods and men alike. In the Upaniṣads it evolves into a moral and spiritual law governing rebirth and liberation. The Bhagavad Gītā then harmonizes Karma with Dharma, Bhakti and Jñāna, presenting action as a means to transcend action itself.



Unlike the Western theological emphasis on divine grace or original sin, Indian philosophy makes the individual morally autonomous. One's circumstances are neither accidental nor unjust; they are the precise results of previous volitions. Yet this autonomy is not absolute, for the individual acts within a cosmic order that mirrors justice and balance. Hence Karma provides both the metaphysical explanation of suffering and the ethical motivation for righteous conduct. As Śrī Kṛṣṇa declares in the Bhagavad Gītā (2.47): *Karmaṇy evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana* "Your right is to action alone, never to its fruits."

## II. Review of Literature:

Several scholars and philosophers have explored the concept of Karma as one of the most profound and distinctive features of Indian philosophy. According to Radhakrishnan (1948), Karma represents the moral law of the universe, where every action inevitably produces its corresponding result. He emphasizes that it is not merely a religious doctrine but a rational and ethical system that upholds cosmic justice. Dasgupta (1952) observes that the idea of Karma evolved from Vedic ritualism, where actions were initially linked to sacrificial performance, into an ethical and spiritual principle in the Upaniṣads and later philosophies.

The Bhagavad Gītā provides one of the most comprehensive treatments of Karma, teaching that selfless action (*Niṣkāma Karma*) performed without attachment leads to liberation (*Mokṣa*). Scholars such as Sharma (2001) and Chatterjee & Datta (1984) note that the Gītā's synthesis of action, knowledge and devotion marks a turning point in Indian moral philosophy.

Comparatively, Buddhist and Jain thinkers reinterpret Karma through their unique metaphysical lenses. According to Hiriyanna (1993), Buddhism focuses on the psychological and volitional aspects of Karma, emphasizing intention (*Cetanā*) as the root of moral consequence. Jainism, as discussed by Tatia (2007), treats Karma as a material substance that binds the soul, reinforcing the need for strict ethical discipline.

Contemporary researchers, including Mohanty (2010) and Gupta (2015), have analyzed Karma as a living concept that continues to shape ethical values and social behavior in modern India. Their studies highlight that Karma functions not only as a doctrine of moral



responsibility but also as a framework for understanding justice, accountability and personal growth in a globalized world.

### **III. Objectives of the Study:**

- 1] To explore the origin and evolution of the concept of Karma in Indian philosophy.
- 2] To examine how Karma is interpreted in the six systems (Śaḍ-darśana) of Indian thought.
- 3] To analyze the ethical and spiritual relevance of Karma in contemporary society.

### **IV. Methodology:**

The study follows a qualitative and analytical approach, based on the interpretation of classical texts such as the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Bhagavad Gītā and Yoga Sūtras. It uses both textual analysis and comparative philosophy to understand how Karma is conceptualized across different schools of Indian thought Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta and how it relates to non-orthodox systems like Buddhism and Jainism. The research relies on secondary sources such as scholarly books, articles and commentaries to support the analysis, emphasizing the moral, metaphysical and practical dimensions of Karma in guiding human life and spiritual liberation (Mokṣa).

### **V. Analysis and Discussion:**

In the early Vedic period, Karma denoted ritual acts (Yajña) intended to sustain cosmic harmony. The priest performed sacrifice believing that proper ritual would yield worldly prosperity or heavenly reward. However, the Upaniṣadic sages shifted focus from outer ritual to inner moral intention. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (IV.4.5) proclaims, “According as a man acts, so does he become.” This marks a decisive movement from external ritualism to internal ethics.

By the time of the Bhagavad Gītā, Karma had become the cornerstone of a practical spiritual path. Arjuna, paralyzed by moral confusion, learns that true renunciation (Sannyāsa) does not mean abstaining from action but relinquishing attachment to its fruits. Thus Karma-Yoga the discipline of selfless action was born. In later centuries, the doctrine of Karma



permeated the entire spectrum of Indian philosophical schools and profoundly influenced Buddhist and Jaina traditions.

### **5.1: Metaphysical Foundations:**

The Karma doctrine presupposes several interrelated ideas:

1. Moral Order (Dharma) – The universe is governed by an intrinsic moral rhythm. Actions aligned with Dharma generate harmony; those opposed produce suffering.
2. Causation (Kāraṇatva) – Every volitional act (Karma) yields a corresponding result (Phala), though the timing may vary.
3. Rebirth (Saṃsāra) – Because a single lifetime cannot exhaust the effects of all actions, the soul journeys through successive births.
4. Liberation (Mokṣa) – Freedom arises when the cycle of action and reaction is transcended through knowledge (Jñāna), devotion (Bhakti) or renunciation (Tyāga).

Hence, Karma functions both as an ethical law and a cosmological principle linking human conduct to universal justice.

### **5.2: Karma in the Six Systems of Indian Philosophy (Ṣaḍ-darśanas):**

#### **Nyāya**

Founded by Gautama, Nyāya is primarily a system of logic and epistemology. Yet it admits a theistic and moral dimension. According to Nyāya, the individual self (Ātman) performs actions motivated by desire (Icchā) and aversion (Dveṣa). These actions create unseen impressions (Adṛṣṭa), which ripen into pleasure or pain in future births. Īśvara (God) functions as the moral governor ensuring the just distribution of Karmic results. Thus, Karma in Nyāya is rationally intelligible and ethically ordered within divine justice.

#### **Vaiśeṣika**

Kaṇāda's Vaiśeṣika system complements Nyāya by providing an atomistic ontology. Every soul is distinct, eternal and associated with atoms of matter. Actions cause motions (Karma) in these atoms, producing bodies and experiences. Pleasure and pain are natural consequences of past deeds. Here too Īśvara serves as the efficient cause who connects Karmic



potential with its effects. The moral world is thus an intricate mechanism in which every cause has its proper outcome.

### **Sāṃkhya**

The Sāṃkhya philosophy of Kapila is dualistic, postulating two ultimate realities: Puruṣa (pure consciousness) and Prakṛti (primordial matter). Actions belong to Prakṛti, while Puruṣa remains the passive witness. Ignorance (Avidyā) causes Puruṣa to identify with Prakṛti, binding it to the fruits of Karma. Liberation (Kaivalya) occurs when knowledge dawns that Puruṣa is separate from all activity. Karma, therefore, operates only as long as this ignorance persists.

### **Yoga**

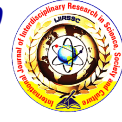
Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras extend Sāṃkhya metaphysics into a practical discipline. Karma here takes the form of Saṃskāras latent impressions stored in the Citta (mind-stuff). These impressions shape personality and destiny. Through ethical observances (Yama and Niyama), concentration, and meditation, the yogin purifies these Saṃskāras, ultimately exhausting Karmic residues. Patañjali (YS II.12) states: "Kleśa-mūlaḥ karma-āśayo dṛṣṭa-adṛṣṭa-janma-vedanīyaḥ"- "The repository of karma rooted in afflictions bears fruit in seen or unseen births." Yoga thus transforms the Karma theory into a psychology of liberation.

### **Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā**

Jaimini's Mīmāṃsā emphasizes the authority of the Vedas and the efficacy of ritual. Karma primarily means Vedic sacrifice, whose performance generates an unseen potency called Apūrva. This potency links act and result even across time. Unlike theistic schools, Mīmāṃsā does not depend on a divine overseer; the law of Karma itself ensures justice. Ethical duty (Dharma) is determined by scriptural injunctions rather than human reasoning. Hence the moral world is self-regulating through the inherent power of action.

### **Vedānta**

The culmination of Hindu philosophy, Vedānta interprets Karma through the lens of non-dualism. Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta distinguishes between the empirical world (Vyāvahārika satya), where Karma operates and the ultimate reality (Paramārthika satya), where action and



reaction cease. Ignorance (Avidyā) makes the Self (Ātman) appear as the doer; knowledge (Jñāna) reveals that the Self is ever free. Still, Karma-Yoga has preparatory value it purifies the mind (Citta-śuddhi) and prepares the aspirant for realization. Other Vedāntic schools such as Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita also affirm Karma, but integrate it with devotion to Īśvara, emphasizing divine grace in the fruition of deeds.

### **5.3: Karma in the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavad Gītā:**

The Upaniṣads present Karma not as deterministic but as educative: actions shape moral character. The Chāndogya Upaniṣad (V.10.7) declares, “Those whose conduct has been good will attain a good birth; those whose conduct has been evil will attain an evil birth.” Thus, ethical behavior has metaphysical consequence. The Kaṭha Upaniṣad (II.2.7) adds, “As is one’s desire, so is one’s will; as is one’s will, so is one’s deed; as is the deed, so is one’s destiny.”

The Bhagavad Gītā synthesizes the three main spiritual paths: Jñāna (knowledge), Bhakti (devotion) and Karma (action). Karma-Yoga teaches detachment: one should act without craving for results, offering all actions to the Divine. This transforms Karma from bondage to instrument of liberation. As Śrī Kṛṣṇa says (3.19): “Tasmād asaktaḥ satataṃ kāryaṃ karma samācara; asakto hy ācaran karma param āpnoti pūruṣaḥ”—“Therefore, always perform obligatory action without attachment; by unattached action one attains the Supreme.”

### **5.4: Psychological and Ethical Dimensions:**

Indian psychology views Karma as stored potential within the mind. Every thought and deed leaves a subtle impression (Vāsanā), which conditions future behavior. This continuum of impressions forms personality and destiny. Hence moral discipline is not external conformity but inner purification. The Yoga Sūtras describe the process by which Saṃskāras are weakened through meditation and discrimination.

Ethically, the doctrine of Karma promotes self-responsibility. Unlike fatalism, it affirms human freedom within the moral order. The threefold classification Saṃcita (accumulated), Prārabdha (fructifying) and Āgāmi (forthcoming) Karma illustrates both determinism and freedom: the past determines circumstances, but present choice shapes the future. Swami



Vivekānanda aptly observed, “Karma is the eternal assertion of human freedom... we are responsible for what we are.”

### **Karma, Rebirth and Liberation**

Rebirth (Saṃsāra) is the natural outcome of unexhausted Karma. The soul migrates through various forms until knowledge dawns. Liberation (Mokṣa) means cessation of Karmic accumulation through realization of the Self’s true nature. In Advaita Vedānta, this realization dissolves individuality; in Yoga, it halts mental modifications; in Bhakti traditions, surrender to God’s will annihilates ego and hence Karma. Thus, the aim of all spiritual disciplines is not inactivity but transcendence of the sense of doership (Kartṛtva).

### **5.5: Comparative Perspectives:**

Buddhism accepts Karma but rejects the notion of an eternal self. For the Buddha, Karma is volition (Cetanā): moral or immoral intention produces corresponding results. Since there is no enduring soul, it is the continuity of causal processes that links one life to another. Liberation (Nirvāṇa) arises when craving and ignorance, the roots of Karma, are eradicated.

Jainism develops perhaps the most rigorous Karma theory, treating it as a subtle material substance adhering to the soul. Through right faith, right knowledge and right conduct the Ratnatraya one burns away Karmic matter and attains Kevala-jñāna (omniscience).

Both traditions share with Hinduism the conviction that moral causation is universal and liberation depends on self-effort, though they differ in metaphysical assumptions.

### **Philosophical Significance**

The doctrine of Karma performs several philosophical functions:

1. Ethical Explanation: It accounts for moral inequality without appealing to arbitrary fate.
2. Metaphysical Coherence: It links the moral and physical realms through a unified law.
3. Spiritual Motivation: It inspires self-discipline and compassion by emphasizing the interdependence of all beings.



4. Epistemic Relevance: It bridges knowledge and action one cannot attain truth without ethical purity.

Modern interpreters such as Radhakrishnan and Dasgupta note that Karma integrates determinism and freedom, offering a middle path between moral chaos and predestination.

### **5.6: Contemporary Relevance:**

In contemporary life, Karma retains practical and moral relevance. In an era of moral uncertainty, it reaffirms accountability and ethical causality. The ecological crises of the modern world also mirror Karmic imbalance the consequences of human greed and ignorance returning to afflict humanity. Psychologically, the doctrine resembles the modern understanding of conditioning and consequence. Spiritually, it invites mindfulness: every action matters, not only socially but cosmically.

### **VI. Conclusion:**

The doctrine of Karma stands at the heart of Indian philosophy, embodying a moral cosmos in which justice is intrinsic, not imposed. It unites action and renunciation, individual effort and cosmic law, ethics and metaphysics. Across the six systems of Hindu thought, from the ritualism of Mīmāṃsā to the transcendence of Vedānta, Karma serves as the thread linking human conduct to ultimate reality. As Śāṅkara reminds us, action belongs to ignorance, yet without pure action knowledge cannot arise.

In essence, Karma is not bondage but opportunity: the law that enslaves also liberates when understood rightly. Through selfless work, right knowledge and spiritual insight, one transcends the wheel of Saṃsāra and realizes the eternal Self (Ātman), untouched by all action. The enduring relevance of Karma lies in this synthesis of moral responsibility and metaphysical freedom a philosophy of action rooted in the awareness that every act, however small, shapes the destiny of the soul and the cosmos alike.

### **Selected Quotations:**

“As a man acts, so he becomes.” — Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad IV.4.5



“You have the right to work, but never to the fruits of work.” — Bhagavad Gītā 2.47

“Karma is the eternal assertion of human freedom.” — Swami Vivekānanda

“Action is for the ignorant, not for the wise.” — Śāṅkara, Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya

“The doer of good becomes good; the doer of evil becomes evil.” — Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad IV.4.5

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