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Q5(e)

Karma and Rebirth.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Anthropology GS 2 · 10 marks · The structure and nature of traditional Indian social system

3.1 The structure and nature of traditional Indian social system-Varnashrama, Purushartha, Karma, Rina and Rebirth.

Core demand of the question

- Write a note on karma and rebirth
- State the doctrinal core in Indian religions
- Show social effects on caste, ethics, and tribes
- Keep the note within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Karma is moral causation; rebirth is continuation in **samsara**.

Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain systems share the pair with different views of the self.

Socially the pair has justified caste and also supported ahimsa and pilgrimage merit.

Ambedkar rejected karmic theodicy as a defence of inequality.

Tribal funerary practice may take Hindu karmic words without dropping clan ancestors.

Introduction

Karma is the moral law of action and consequence. Rebirth is the continuation of the person or subtle self in another life. Together they form a civilisational ethic in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain thought, with different metaphysics but a shared social force.

Body**Doctrine**

- In Brahmanical thought, karma binds the soul (**atman**) to **samsara** until knowledge or devotion releases it.
- Buddhism denies a permanent atman but keeps karmic continuity of the stream of becoming. The eightfold path aims at stopping rebirth.
- Jainism treats karma as a kind of matter that sticks to the **jiva**; release needs extreme restraint.
- **Purushartha** places moksha as the aim that ends the cycle; grihastha still acts, but with dharma.

Social effects

- Caste rank has been justified as fruit of past karma. **Ambedkar** attacked this as a theodicy of inequality.

- The same ethic also supports ahimsa, gift, and restraint, which **Dumont** read as a world-renouncing value inside caste society.
- Bhakti and some tantric lines offer grace that softens a strict karma ledger.
- Among tribes, **N. K. Bose** and **S. C. Roy** recorded Hindu karmic language entering Oraon and Munda funerary talk, while clan ancestors and sarna groves remained.

Anthropological point

- Karma and rebirth are Great Tradition ideas that parochialise into village fate, witchcraft accusation, and merit-making at pilgrimage sites (**Vidyarthi's** Gaya).

Flow diagram

Karma -> Samsara rebirth
Samsara rebirth -> Moksha or nirvana
Karma -> Caste theodicy
Ambedkar -> Caste theodicy

Conclusion

Karma and rebirth explain suffering and rank, and they organise ethics of ahimsa and gift. They can freeze caste as deserved, which **Ambedkar** rejected. Living India mixes them with bhakti, law, and tribal ancestor rites.

Facts & figures

Samsara

The cycle of birth and death that karma is said to fuel until release.

Jain karmic matter

Jain doctrine that karma is a physical influx on the jiva, to be shed by restraint.

Buddhist anatta

No permanent soul, yet karmic continuity of the stream; rebirth without an atman.

B. R. **Ambedkar**

Criticised karma as a religious defence of caste inequality.

Gaya shraddha

Pilgrimage complex where merit and ancestral rites stage karma in a sacred geography, as in Vidyarthi's model.