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Karma and Other Explanation Traditions in a South Indian Village

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There are many places an anthropologist can look in the South Indian village of Konduru to discover the meanings and uses of the concept of karma in the lives of the people. One could turn to the village religious leaders and pundits who bridge the great and little traditions of Hinduism, and for whom karma is a key concept in ordering the events of life. For example, Goldsmith Lakshayya has published several religious tracts arguing that abstract meditation rather than asceticism is the best means to eliminate one's evil karma and achieve moksha. Brahmin Ramachari, the temple priest, while not directly disagreeing, contends that for most people the path of simple devotion and offerings to God is the best. Sambayya, also a Brahmin and a family priest, stresses the need for proper family rituals and devotional services.

Elsewhere one finds karma playing an important role in the numerous myths that form the heart of popular village Hinduism. These stories are reenacted in temple rituals, celebrated in village festivals, dramatized in street dramas, sung by bards in the street performances and by mothers to their children, and retold in the summer evenings. Here the meaning of karma is learned, not by philosophical discourse, but by illustration from the lives of gods and demons, saints and sinners.

Finally, one may turn to real life situations that demand explanation and action, and listen to people as they deal with the incongruities and uncertainties of life. As Babb, Beck, and S. Daniel point out, elsewhere in this volume, karma is only one of a number of explanation traditions people use to account for and respond to the experiences of life. Here karma plays a surprisingly unimportant role even though it is deeply rooted in the world view of the people.

How can we account for this diversity in interpretation and use of karma in village life? To answer this we need first to develop a taxonomy outlining the various explanation traditions used in the village and the relationships between them.

Village Explanation Traditions

Konduru villagers use a number of explanation traditions to account for their experiences. These range from natural explanations, such as attributing pain to the dropping of a rock on the foot, to explanations involving planets, female goddesses, transcendent deities, fate, and karma. For analytical purposes we will use a two-dimensional model to examine both the differences and the relationships between these explanation traditions (Fig. 1).

The organic-mechanical continuum. Some village explanation traditions are based on organic analogies. In these the world is seen in terms of living beings of one or more kind in relationship to each other. Konduru and its vicinity is inhabited not only by people and animals, but also by ghosts, by rākṣasas, dayāmulu, apsaras, and many other types of spirits, and by more than a hundred different female goddesses who reside in trees, wells, fields, and the nearby forest. In addition, Hindu gods and their consorts leave their heavenly abodes to minister to their devotees in the temples and shrines. All of these beings influence human affairs in certain ways. Spirits possess humans, driving them mad. Female apsaras lure men into their lairs and draw out their life forces. Goddesses bring plagues of disease, drought, and fire. And high gods punish people in their anger. Human responses to these beings are analogous to interpersonal relationships, and include offerings, confessions, supplications, and prayers.

Other village explanation systems are based on mechanical analogies. In these, impersonal forces, whether natural or supernatural, determine the course of events. These include the forces of stars and planets, magic, karma, and nature. In themselves these forces are deterministic and amoral, but people who know how to control them can use them for good or evil.

The immanent-transcendent continuum. Konduru explanation traditions distribute themselves along a second continuum, namely that of scale. On the lowest level are natural explanation systems that account for the world in terms of directly observed cause and effect. Villagers know that a fire untended can cause a house to burn, and that a
cantankerous wife can ruin family relationships. These folk natural and social sciences are often codified in proverbs and aphorisms such as these:

A reviling wife, a vengeful friend
A proud and spiteful son, a house full of snakes
These certainly lead to death.

For the most part, folk sciences deal with immediate events—immediate not only in the sense of time and place, but also of experience.

On a second level are explanation traditions that appeal to trans-empirical but this-worldly beings and forces. These include ghosts, spirits, and gods and goddesses whose ultimate abode is this earth, as well as planetary and magical forces. For the most part, explanation traditions on this level are codified in rituals and activities associated with immediate human problems and crises.

Explanation traditions on the highest and most comprehensive level appeal to gods and other worlds, and to forces such as karma that transcend this universe. They entail within them the lower systems of explanation. In folk religions these traditions are codified in myths, and among the religious elite in abstract philosophical treatises.

Relationships between explanation traditions. What are the relationships between these different explanatory traditions? It is obvious that they do not all belong to the same level of analysis. Consequently, they are not necessarily in direct competition with one another. Like different research traditions in science (cf. Laudin 1977), many of them bring different questions and methods of inquiry to bear on the same set of human experiences.

For the most part, the folk sciences deal with immediate problems in the empirical world which can be handled by natural means. Middle-level traditions (trans-empirical but this-worldly), as Pugh points out, often deal with problems related to the uncertainties of the future (should I marry my daughter to this man?), to knowns of the past (who stole the gold?), and to immediate crises that cannot be solved by natural means, such as plagues, droughts, earthquakes, and repeated misfortunes. High-level explanation traditions raise questions of the ultimate nature of the universe, and meaning and purpose of life. They provide answers by dealing with questions of origin and destiny, and by affirming the order of the universe.
Villagers use one or another of the explanation traditions, depending upon the questions being asked and the purposes for which the answers are sought. Moreover, two or more may be used simultaneously without a sense of contradiction or cognitive dissonance. Where contradictions do exist between explanation traditions according to their purposes, villagers must choose between the alternative explanations that emerge within any given tradition, for it is on this level that direct confrontation occurs (Fig. 2). For example, if they agree that one of the local village goddesses played some role in the current crop failure, they must decide whether it was Maisamma, Mutyalama, or Pōshamma if they are to take remedial action. As E. V. Daniel shows in his essay, it is on this level of selecting between specific theories within an explanation tradition that divination becomes important. Divination is normally not used to select between explanation traditions in the determination of cause or consequence.

Finally, villagers can and do use several explanation traditions simultaneously to account for human experiences, for as we have seen, they ask different questions of the data. For example, Shepherd Sayanna returned one day with a deep gash in his foot. His ax was dull, he said, and besides this, Maisamma was angry with him for not having given her a new sari though he gave his wife one. There are no contradictions in the two explanations, for one described the immediate or instrumental cause and the other the mediate or sufficient cause. With further questioning he would probably agree that the ultimate cause for both Maisamma’s anger and his injury was either his bad karma earned in some previous life, or God’s predestination written on his forehead (talavṛatha).

Karma as Folk Explanation Tradition

What specific function does karma serve in village life? We need to differentiate here between the two major functions of explanation traditions—between what Clifford Geertz calls models or explanation traditions of the universe, and models for human action (1979:81). We will look at the latter of these first.

Models for. One of the functions of explanation traditions is to provide people with directions for solving the problems of life. Babb refers to this as the “therapeutic” function of explanation traditions. For the most part, ordinary problems in the village are solved by natural means. A carpenter knows how to fit rims onto cart wheels, and a mother knows how to make her child obey. But there are crises that cannot be dealt with in this fashion. Frequently, in such situations, villagers turn to middle-level solutions—to the placation of spirits, ghosts, and goddesses, or to magic and astrology. The results of therapeutic actions on the lower and middle levels are generally direct and immediate.

Sometimes lower- and middle-level solutions fail, and the villager must turn to a higher-level explanation—to gods or karmic forces—to deal with crisis. Farmer Muggayya, the village magician, put it this way.

When you run off the road to avoid a runaway cart and still get hit, or if you do everything you can and still have no children, that is your handwriting [divine predestination]. Only God can change that. But if you are careful, but have not done all you can, then you are in part to blame. For instance, if you only run to the side of the road and get hit by the cart, that is your karma, and karmic forces can be countered to some extent by magic and medicines.

But the use of karmic theory for therapeutic action has its problems. Actions designed to counter one’s bad karma take time to come to fruition. By then the disaster may have occurred. Karmic action can change the general states and long-range directions of life. It is not surprising, therefore, that people turn to other therapeutic means to deal with the immediate crises of everyday life.

Models of. If karma is rarely mentioned as a solution to the immediate problems of life, it is common in the village lore that provides people with their models of the world. As we have seen, it provides the grist for the philosophical debates of Lakshayya, Ramachari, Sambayya, and the other village philosophers. For the most part, they draw upon Upaniṣadic and ḍhakti texts, and debate the philosophical issues common to the Hindu great tradition.

Karma is also a common theme in the village myths that are the cosmic charter for popular Hinduism in the village. Here the central question is not how karma is accrued and transmitted, but how it works itself out in the lives of people. The answers are given in the form of stories drawn from Purānic sources and from local histories. The former include a great many Sīhala-purāṇas (mythical accounts of local towns and places). As Rājārao points out (1963:vii):

There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich sīhala-purāṇa, or legendary history, of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed
by the village—Rama might have rested under this pipal-tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one, by the village gate. In this way the past mingles with the present, and gods mingle with men.

An example of local history is the myth that has emerged in southern Telengana surrounding the 1956 accident in which a train plunged into a river and many were drowned. This is now published as a street drama and is cited as an example of karmic action.

One common theme in village myths is the corporate nature of karma. Philosophers tend to view karma in highly individualistic terms. Each person reaps the rewards of his or her own previous actions. Little is said about how events that happen to one person because of his karma affect those around him. In village myths this is a central question. It is interesting to note, for example, that husbands and wives in successive lives are rarely married to other partners even though they reappear in different conditions—and occasionally with sex reversals. An example of the outworking of karmic consequences within the dynamics of human groups is the story of the ascetic, the butcher, and the cow.

The Ascetic, the Butcher, and the Cow

There once was an ascetic who lived in the forest in constant meditation. One day a butcher brought a cow to slaughter in the forest. “Ah, you are going to kill me!” thought the cow, so it broke the rope and ran. In its flight, it passed the ascetic. Shortly thereafter the butcher came running. “Have you seen my cow?” he asked. The ascetic, pledged to silence, gestured with his clasped hands and pointed the direction the cow had gone. As a result of this the butcher found the cow, slaughtered it, and sold the meat for profit.

In time both the butcher and the ascetic died and were reborn on this earth, the butcher as a merchant and the ascetic as an ascetic. The cow was reborn a woman. It came to pass that the merchant married the woman, and the couple became known for their hospitality to passing beggars and ascetics. One day the ascetic passed through the village and stopped at their home to eat (so the three were joined together again). After feeding the ascetic and giving him a mat on which to sleep, the wife retired to the next room to join her husband.

In the middle of the night the wife, enamored of the handsome ascetic, stole into his room and asked him to sleep with her. “I am a stranger, an ascetic, and your guest! How can you ask me to commit so heinous a sin?” he asked. “You must!” she insisted. “Your husband is sleeping in the next room and will catch us. Don’t force me into this,” he replied. “If my sleeping husband bothers you, I will kill him,” she said. “No! Don’t do it!” he cried, but before he could stop her she had plunged a knife into her husband’s heart. Thereupon the ascetic raised a row, and when the neighbors came to investigate he told them what had happened.

The next morning both were taken to the king, who examined the case. “Take the ascetic to the forest, and cut off his hands,” he ordered, “and put the woman to death.”

On the way to the forest the ascetic prayed and asked God, “What was my fault? Why am I punished when I committed no crime?” God had pity on him and said, “In your previous life you were an ascetic meditating in the forest when a butcher came by seeking his cow. When he asked you, you pointed where it had gone with your clasped hands. This led to the death of the cow. Therefore your hands have been cut off. Had you spoken, you would have lost your head. The cow became the woman who married the butcher and killed him. Now you must repent of your previous sin.”

The ascetic repented of his wicked deed, and God restored his hands. The king was astonished at this miracle, and asked the ascetic what had happened. Whereupon the ascetic told him the whole story. The king ordered the woman set free for she was not to blame for killing her husband. Both the ascetic and the butcher suffered on account of their previous sins, but not the woman, who was only gaining revenge when she killed her husband.

A second common theme in village myths has to do with mitigating the evil consequences of one’s bad karma. Most Konduru villagers believe that one cannot change one’s headwriting. Only God can change it, and only when he is persuaded through vows and sacrifices. But karmic consequences can be altered through magic and medicines and, above all, by preventing the consequences if these can be known. For example, a king who knows through divination that his heir will be killed by a knife before the age of five may banish knives from his kingdom to prevent this from occurring. The following story from the Neelethastraamu (Lessons on Righteousness) illustrates the dynamics of karma and of human efforts to alter its consequences.

It should be noted here that there are some problems in reconciling the explanation tradition involving karma with that involving headwriting. The former is basically mechanistic and the latter depends upon the conscious decisions of God. Most villagers readily appeal to both. But some of the village philosophers deny the credibility of headwriting and argue, at least in a philosophical context, only in terms of karma when it comes to answering ultimate questions. They cite sources such as the famous Telugu poet Venama, who says:

Face written on the forehead is easily erased,
Whether that be of gods or common men,
Simply rub the forehead, and it will come off.
The Careless Mother

There once was a devout man whose barren wife longed for a child. After long penance, they were blessed with a son. One day the father took his son to the graveyard and asked the infant why it had come to earth (within the first year or two of life, infants taken to a graveyard can talk and can reveal the conditions of their previous lives). “I have come to collect the money you owed me in our previous life,” said the son. When the father repaid the debt, the son died. After burying the body, the man returned home. When his wife asked where their son was, he said, “This child was not really our son. He only came to collect a debt we owed him in a previous life. Had he been our son, he would have remained with us after it was repaid.”

In time a second son was born, but he lived only a month, leaving when he too had collected a debt from a previous life.

When a third son was born, the father took him to the graveyard and asked the same question. The infant replied, “In your previous life you were a merchant, and I your debtor. I then owed you fifteen thousand rupees. I have come back to repay you.”

Determined to keep this son, the father warned his wife never to take any money from their son lest he repay his debt and leave. So they raised their son, saying to each other, “As we raise him, he is even more in our debt. If we marry him and establish him in business, he will owe us yet more. Then he can pay off his debt by supporting us in our old age.”

The couple raised their son, arranged his marriage, and set him up in business, all of which put him much more in their debt. The son prospered in his business, but they would not take any money from him.

One day when the father was away, the son said, “Mother, I must go to the city on business. Please give me some food to take along.” Mounting his horse with all his money in a sack, he started to leave. Suddenly he stopped and said, “Mother, I have forgotten something in the house. Please hold my money until I get it.” Without thinking, the mother took the money as he dismounted. Thereupon the horse kicked him and he died.

When the father returned, the mother told him what had happened. “I told you never to take money from our son,” he said. “But I didn’t think of this as taking the money. I just wanted to help him,” she cried. “It was your karma,” he replied.

Now the meaning of the story is this: The son did not die on account of his karma, for he was not sorry to leave the world and its sorrows. Rather, it was his headwriting to return to earth, for God had sent him back to repay his debt. Nor did the son die because of the father’s karma, for the father had not taken the money, nor had he craved a son. He was content with whatever happened to him, with having a son or not having a son. The death was due to the mother’s karma, for it was she who wanted a son, and who lost her by negligence.

One lesson of this story is that a person can avoid the consequences of his bad karma, but this requires a knowledge of its consequences and persistence in thwarting them. The former can sometimes be known through divination. The latter requires unbroken discipline. But in most people there is a moment of neglect or weakness, and then bad karma comes to fruition.

The main function of these stories is to reaffirm the people’s belief that despite the seeming chaos of everyday life the world is indeed orderly and meaningful. Death and suffering bring sorrow, but if they can be explained, life is not meaningless. As Geertz has pointed out, the greatest of human fears is the loss of a sense of meaning (1979:83–85). By fitting all human experience, even the most tragic, into an orderly framework, these myths provide the villagers with a model of the universe that renders it meaningful.

This order-affirming function of karma, and indeed of most Hindu beliefs, can be seen in the rituals in which they find expression. For the most part, Hindu rites and festivals are cyclical. Their timing and
order of ceremonies are highly predictable. The underlying issue in Hindu rites and myths is that of good and evil, but evil in the karmic sense is as much a product of order as is good. Karma therefore provides an answer to the question of theodicy by fitting evil into a greater cosmic order. In contrast to Hindu rituals, those associated with the goddesses and with magic and astrology are crisis rites designed to stave off chaos that renders the world not evil but meaningless (Fig. 3).

Karma provides the people of Konduru not so much with an explanation tradition or model for solving the immediate problems of everyday life, as with an explanation tradition of an orderly universe that brings meaning and purpose to life itself. It is not surprising, then, as Babb quotes Sharma (1973:358) as suggesting, that "while karma is rarely the first explanation a villager might give for misfortune, 'it is generally the last which he will abandon.'"

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