

Claims of Reincarnation: A Sociological Study

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This thesis explores the intriguing idea of reincarnation and its impact on social relationships, focusing specifically on case studies from Haryana and West Bengal, India. This study explores how beliefs in reincarnation influence family dynamics, caste relationships, and social mobility in these regions. This thesis delves into the personal and collective experiences of reincarnation, seeking to understand how the belief in rebirth shapes individual identities, family relationships, and societal conventions.

Grasping the Context and Goals

Reincarnation is the belief that when we die, our soul moves on to a new body to live in. This belief has been significant in many religious and philosophical traditions, particularly in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. In India, where caste and social hierarchies play a significant role in society, the belief in reincarnation often aids individuals in understanding their positions within these structures. This thesis delves into two areas—Haryana and West Bengal—where accounts of reincarnation have been documented and studied. In Haryana, the tight-knit village communities, marked by deep family ties and caste differences, frequently witness claims of reincarnation leading to unique forms of family relationships. Individuals who claim to have experienced reincarnation frequently develop and foster relationships with both their present and previous families, resulting in a fresh perspective on family dynamics. In West Bengal, tales of reincarnation often challenge conventional caste norms, as individuals recount their experiences of being born into different castes over the course of their lives. These cases offer insight into how reincarnation can challenge and transform social boundaries, facilitating upward mobility or social integration beyond caste divisions.

This study will explore the following research questions through qualitative research methodology and the case study approach:

- i. What are the features typical subjects making reincarnation claims?

- ii. How the claims of reincarnation is affecting an individual's self and identity?
- iii. Why Reincarnation Claims are being made?
- iv. How Reincarnation Claims are being made?
- v. What are the functions of Reincarnation claims for individual and Society?
- vi. How Reincarnation claims affecting the nature of kinship and social relationship?

Objectives of the study

- i. To find out reincarnation cases that are being reported in present days.
- ii. To find out how people using reincarnation as a tool to define their situation and circumstances.
- iii. Why people using reincarnation to define their situation and circumstances.
- iv. To find out about the nature of social relationship and bond created by these cases.

Theoretical Framework

This thesis is based on sociological theories that help us understand the concept of reincarnation in connection with broader social structures. Peter Berger's concept of the "sacred canopy" illustrates how religious beliefs, such as reincarnation, provide a significant framework and affirmation for our social structures. Berger proposes that religious narratives act as a shield, assisting individuals in managing life's chaos by providing a stable viewpoint on existence. The belief in reincarnation helps individuals understand and make sense of their place in society, particularly in relation to caste and family dynamics.

Erving Goffman's frame analysis allows us to examine how individuals interpret their experiences of reincarnation by considering the socially accepted narratives surrounding it. The belief in reincarnation is shaped by personal experiences as well as the cultural and social environments surrounding them. This thesis explores how individuals influence their experiences, highlighting the ways they navigate their identities and social roles over the course of their lives. This thesis also includes Sudhir Kakar's idea of meta reality.

Approach

This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing case studies, in-depth interviews, participant observation, and narrative analysis. The fieldwork was conducted in Haryana and

West Bengal, selected for their distinct cultural backgrounds and the historical importance of reincarnation claims in these regions. The researcher collected narratives from individuals who felt they remembered their past lives, and also drew insights from their families and communities. These case studies provide detailed and engaging stories about how reincarnation claims are integrated into everyday life, influencing social connections while also being influenced by them. The research findings show the significant impact of reincarnation beliefs on social relationships in Haryana and West Bengal, while also highlighting how these beliefs are shaped by the social structure and cultural context of both regions.

1. The idea of rebirth and the understanding of identity - This thesis explores the idea of reincarnation and its profound influence on how we perceive ourselves, encouraging a more dynamic and layered view of identity that goes beyond a single lifetime. Individuals who recount memories of previous lives frequently explore the link between their current selves and their former identities, blending their roles, experiences, and social positions from various eras. This viewpoint allows for a wider understanding of our identity, indicating that it isn't fixed but evolves over time through various experiences. This change affects the way we relate to one another, move through social frameworks, and interact with caste systems. In Haryana and West Bengal, the idea of reincarnation enables individuals to transcend conventional social roles, transforming their identities within their families and communities through a significant narrative of continuity and change.

2. Reincarnation and Kinship Ties: In Haryana, the belief in reincarnation often leads to the formation of dual kinship systems, where individuals maintain relationships with both their present families and those from their previous lives. This scenario encourages us to reconsider the concepts of family and kinship, as individuals take on roles and responsibilities that connect various generations. A child who thinks they were an adult in a past life might interact with their previous family as if they were the older one, anticipating a degree of respect and authority that typically wouldn't be given to someone so young.

3. Caste and Social Mobility: In West Bengal, the concept of reincarnation often questions the traditional caste, community and religious structures, as people recount their experiences of being born into different castes, religions and diverse communities across various lifetimes. These claims challenge the rigid caste system by suggesting that social status is not fixed at birth and can evolve over time. Occasionally, individuals talk about reincarnation as a means

to ascend the social hierarchy, implying that their higher standing in a past life validates their ambition for a superior caste in this life.

The study shows that beliefs in reincarnation foster community connections, even in societies marked by deep caste and class divisions. When individuals see relationships as profound connections that transcend this life, they can form bonds that might otherwise be restricted by societal norms. Reincarnation tells a spiritual tale that inspires greater openness in forming connections that transcend caste and class divisions.

4. Reincarnation is also related to fluidity of gender identity. When individuals claim their past life in a different gender than their present gender identity and when in present life their behaviour is inconsistent with their gender they are explaining the inconsistency through spiritual and parapsychic phenomena like reincarnation. This in short project that how religious and spiritual phenomena can be used to make sense of inconsistent behavior and also creates fluidity in fixed binary categorization of gender.

5. The Significance of Astrologers and Spiritual Guides - Spiritual guides play a significant role in supporting beliefs about reincarnation, acting as reliable sources that bridge the metaphysical world with our daily experiences. In many communities, these individuals are seen as protectors of spiritual knowledge and are often approached to confirm claims of past-life experiences. Their backing or rejection of these claims can shape societal perceptions, impacting how families and communities respond. By exploring reincarnation through well-known religious or spiritual perspectives, these guides provide affirmation and assist individuals in engaging with rituals or practices that reinforce their beliefs, integrating concepts of reincarnation into the broader context of spirituality and culture.

Conclusion

This thesis provides a comprehensive analysis of how reincarnation beliefs influence social relationships, caste dynamics, and social mobility in Haryana and West Bengal. The findings suggest that reincarnation acts as a powerful social force that challenges traditional notions of kinship, caste, and family. By offering a spiritual framework for understanding social relationships, reincarnation enables individuals to navigate and redefine their place within the

social hierarchy, fostering both social cohesion and mobility.

The research contributes to the broader sociological understanding of how religious beliefs shape social structures and relationships. By examining reincarnation through the lenses of social construction and frame analysis, this thesis offers new insights into how individuals use spiritual narratives to negotiate their identities and social roles across lifetimes. The study also opens up avenues for further research on the intersection of religion, kinship, and social mobility in other cultural contexts.

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Signature of the Supervisor

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