

Death Beliefs in Hinduism: An Analysis of Hindu Sacred Texts

Dr Veenat

The sacred literature in Hinduism has been written since the coming of Aryans and collected over centuries and composed for so many years later also. Majorly, the entire literature is categorized in two parts, *Śruti* (heard/revealed) and *Smriti* (remembered). *Śruti* literature evolved in the early phase of Hinduism and the major themes in Hindu philosophy that are prevalent even in present times emerged from the *Śruti* canon. And, gradually, in the later phases, as the *Smriti* literature was written, the variety of practices and rituals for various aspects of life and righteous code of conduct for Hindus emerged. *Śruti* literature is called 'heard literature' because for centuries it survived orally. The teachings were transmitted by *guru* (teacher) to *shishya* (disciple) verbally. It is believed that the ancient seers were endowed with such powers that when they would get deeper into their inner self, the truths of the universe would appear in their conscious mind miraculously. Thus, *Śruti* literature is the revelation which is acknowledged as the *sabda* (the eternal word), the word which is not composed by humans or even different Gods, but 'heard' by ancient *rishis* (sages). Majorly, *Śruti* literature is the collection of four *Vedic Samhitas*; each *Samhita* has its own collection of the *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads*.

Vedic Samhitas (books of hymns) comprise four branches: *Rig*, *Sama*, *Yajur* and *Atharva*. All four contain hymns and verses to be chanted while performing *yajna* (sacrifice) to please the deities of different realms of universe; namely, *sva* (sky), the *bhuvaa* (atmosphere) and *bhur* (earth). The *Brahmanas* are the manuals for the *Brahmins* (priests). During the *Vedic* times, the *Brahmins* (priests) mastered the exact way to perform the sacrifice, so they documented the intricacies of the same. These texts provide the base for the construction of Hindu *samskaras* (rites of passage). For instance, the *Satapatha Brahmana* has prescribed the *Upanayana* (initiation rite)

ceremony for Hindus. The *Aranyakas* (forest books) and *Upanishads* (collection of philosophical doctrines) brought the philosophical transformation in Hindu tradition. From an actual sacrifice to abstract symbolism; for instance, in *Brihadaranyaka*, a very popular, *Vedic* sacrifice, *ashvamedha*, which involved actual sacrificing of a horse, is explained in the light of mediation. In *Upanishads* the emphasis is placed on inner, mystical experience, called as an 'internalization of the sacrifice' than performing the actual sacrifice¹. *Upanishads* have contributed in laying the philosophical foundations of Hinduism. Philosophies on universe, birth, death, doctrine of reincarnation, transmigration of souls and salvation, etc. have emerged from *Upanishads*.

Smriti literature contains the whole body of sacred wisdom remembered by *rishis* (sages) based on their interpretation of *Śruti* texts. However, *Śruti* literature is considered superior and it is written that in case of any contrast, between *Śruti* and *Smriti*, the former should prevail². Largely, literature in the *Smriti* canon consists of:

- *Vedangas* (texts on subjects of astronomy, astrology and grammar etc);
- *Sastras* (law books like *Manusmriti*);
- *Eighteen Maha-Puranas and 18 Upa-Puranas* (mythological stories for conveying the religious code to laity);
- *Epics: Ramayana, Mahabharata: Srimad Bhagavad Gita* (The Sacred Song of God);
- Books on *yoga, tantras, mantras* and cosmograms etc. based upon the teachings of different *rishis*.

Smriti literature has contributed in the formulation of righteous code of conduct for a Hindu. *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* is believed to be the crux of *Vedic* teachings. *Puranas* (thought old, yet it is new) are the collection of tales in ancient times. The *Puranas* became the medium for conveying *Vedic* teachings to the laypersons especially, the unlettered, comprising the sections from lower castes and women, who were denied the access to education. Therefore, such a huge spectrum of sacred literature that

* Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, P.G.G.C.G-11, Chandigarh

accumulated over centuries has led to the development of assorted beliefs and practices that prevail in Hinduism even in contemporary times.

Death Beliefs in Hinduism

Hindu death philosophy also did not emerge in one shot but has accumulated in different phases of Hinduism. Therefore, potpourris of ideas that explain the meaning of death and offer guidelines to deal with it prevail in Hinduism. Substantial death philosophy evolved in *Upanishads* and was reinforced in *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*. In addition, the detailed account of life after death and funeral rites is prescribed in *Garuda Purana*.

Reflecting upon the manifestation of entire creation, Hinduism explains that death is inevitable but not the complete annihilation of a being. It is a transitional moment that leads to something new. It is explained that all life forms are manifested from one common source and are dual in character. Every creature carries a physical body and an underlying self (soul). Death is a temporary moment that separates the soul from the body. The physical body, which is just the cover, gets destroyed and the soul moves on. It wanders in its disembodied state for some time and is born again in a new physical form. This new life too has a fixed time span and is bound by death. So, the soul lives through endless life-death cycles.

According to the *Vedic Samhitas*, in the beginning of the universe, there was an infinite emptiness, *Hiranyagarbha* (golden seed).

*Death was not then, nor was there aught immortal: no sign was there, the day's and night's divider. That One Thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever.*³

Metaphorically, 'that one', is revered as Lord Prajapati by *Vedic* seers. It is explained that all life forms manifested from this latent mass of energy. Death is re-conversion of a life-form back to its latent state at the will of Lord Prajapati. Though, in the *Vedic* hymns, literal meaning of death is not explained but its unavailability and prayers meant for keeping death at bay and requesting for prolongation of life are found.

Go hence, O Death, pursue thy special pathway apart from that which Gods are wont to travel

*To thee I say it who hast eyes and hearest: Touch not our offspring, injure not our heroes*⁴

Divided from the dead are these, the living: now be our calling on the Gods successful.

*We have gone forth for dancing and for laughter, to further times prolonging our existence*⁵

Here I erect this rampart for the living; let none of these, none other, reach this limit.

*May they survive a hundred lengthened autumns, and may they bury Death beneath this mountain*⁶

And as we human beings, O Adityas, are akin to death,

*Graciously lengthen ye our lives that we may live*⁷

Thus, according to *Rig Veda*, death is inevitable as these hymns are the prayers for postponement of death and prolongation of life and there are no hymns in *Rig Veda* that portray 'no-death' at all.

Further, philosophy on death and the act of dying can be found in the *Katha Upanishad* and was reinforced in *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*. Two major narratives that contributed in defining the most prominent themes on death are: 1) the dialogue of Nachiketa and Lord Yama in *Katha Upanishad* and 2) the conversation between Lord Krishna and the warrior Arjuna in *Bhagavad Gita*.

Katha Upanishad belongs to the *Yajurvedic Samhita*. It has a story of a young child, Nachiketa's encounter with the Lord of death, Yama. In *Vedic* times, performing *yajna* (sacrifice) was considered as an essential religious practice. In order to get the religious merit, offering something very precious was considered meritorious. One day, Nachiketa, son of the king Vajasravas, noticed that his father was performing *yajna* but was offering the possessions that were not worthwhile (cows that were too old and weak). He objected to this and said, "Father, I am your best; offer me". At this, the king got annoyed and yelled, "Nachiketa, I will give you to death". On hearing this, Nachiketa got inquisitive and decided to visit death. Thereafter, he started his journey to meet Yama. For many days he faced hardships, struggled without food and water but he went for miles in search of the Lord. Yama got impressed with the strength and determination of the child, so he appeared in front of him and blessed him by granting him three wishes.

In order to encash this opportunity, the excited Nachiketa requested Lord Yama that he should be bestowed with a good relationship with his father; secondly, the Lord should teach him the righteous way to offer sacrifice, so that he may earn merit; and thirdly, he asked him to reveal the secret of death. On hearing these demands of Nachiketa, Lord Yama fulfilled his two wishes but was hesitant about the third. So he tried to lure him with earthly pleasures but on seeing Nachiketa's eagerness, he granted the third wish also and explained Nachiketa the meaning of life and death.

Lord Yama told Nachiketa that under the physical body there is a never-dying self (*atman*). When the body dies, the *atman* does not die! The secret of death is to realize the presence of this underlying self. This is possible not only by performing sacrifice but one has to learn to dwell inside through meditation. Lord Yama explained this

secret of death by using the analogy of chariot. One's physical body is chariot: *atman* is the lord of a chariot; intellect is the charioteer; mind is the reins; senses are the horses; and one's desires are the roads travelled. When the person lacks determination and discipline, the horses run out of control. But when the mind rests in *atman* (self), the charioteer reaches the supreme goal of life and will never fall again in the jaws of death⁸. And, those who die unaware of the self are either reborn, or return to a lower evolutionary state as determined by their life actions. Those who die aware of the self are released from the cycle of birth and death and rest in eternal peace forever. Therefore, in *Katha Upanishad*, themes like *punar janam* (reincarnation), *karma* (action) and *moksha* (salvation) evolved.

These themes were reinforced in *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* (Sacred Song of Lord). This is a book of discourse between the charioteer and a warrior in the historic battle of Mahabharata. *Bhagavad Gita* elaborates that in the battlefield, Krishna (the incarnation of Lord Vishnu) was the charioteer of the great warrior Arjuna, who was in the state of despair. Arjuna, who was battling with his own kin, refused to fight because he did not wish to kill his kinsmen and didn't want to destroy his entire kingdom. Lord Krishna who was his charioteer, said:

It is not indeed that I did not exist at any time, nor you, nor these kings;

nor that we all shall not exist hereafter;

even as the embodied self attains in this body, childhood, youth and old age, so does it attain other body; the wise man do not get deluded at this.

These bodies of the eternal, imperishable, immeasurable, embodied self are said to have an end; therefore fight, O descendent of Bharata⁹

He who thinks it (self) to be slayer and who thinks it is slain,

both are ignorant of truth;

It (self) neither slays nor is slain.

It is not born and it does not die at any time.

It is birth-less, constant, eternal and ancient; it is not slain when the body is slain¹⁰

Thus, from these two narratives, it emerged that there are three fundamental principles of all existence; namely, *Paramatman/Brahman* (Transcendental Supreme Self), *atman* (soul/self) and the body. 'That One' and Prajapati in *vedic* hymns is similar to an idea of abstract *Paramatman* in Upanishads. *Paramatman* is defined as the one who is without a beginning and an end, who is beyond the mind and senses, whose nature is absolutely blissful. It exists in all beings and all creatures are manifested from

this infinite source. All the living creatures manifested from this *Paramatman* have two aspects: body, which is composed of different *tatvas* (elements) and *atman* (soul). While body is the material aspect and subject to evolution, devolution and change, the soul is the microcosmic part of the infinite *Paramatman* and has the same qualities as *Paramatman*. *Atman* is neither the material limb nor an organ of the body. It is not located in any particular part of the body but permeates through the body and mind. Like *Paramatman*, the soul too is absolutely unitary, undifferentiated and without qualities; not subject to any change or alteration; and not participating in any action. This soul remains latent in the material body. The ultimate goal of human beings is to make this soul transcend the earthly plane and merge with the *Paramatman/Brahman*, so that it gets back to its purest form. Thus, death according to Hinduism is a moment that either gives a new life to the soul or an opportunity to free oneself from the ongoing chain of life.

Afterlife Journey

Hindu sacred texts have reflected upon the journey of soul after death. *Vedic* seers could foresee the limitlessness as the ultimate destiny for every soul. So, in *Vedic hymns* there is not much focus on afterlife but there is mention of terms like, *pitri* (ancestor) and *pitrilok* (realm of ancestors). These terms indicate the journey of the deceased after death. On death, when the physical body ceases, an underlying essence leaves the body and joins the *pitrilok* (realm of ancestors), whose deity is Yama. In earliest hymns of *Rig-Veda*, Lord Yama regulates this process of death at the discretion of Lord Prajapati. Lord Yama is portrayed as a generous God, who nurtures and protects the ancestors in *pitrilok*.

In the Tree clothed with goodly leaves where Yama drinketh with the Gods,

The Father, Master of the house, tendeth with love our ancient Sires.¹¹

Go hence, depart ye, fly in all directions: this place for him the Fathers have provided.

Yama bestows on him a place to rest in adorned with days and beams of light and waters.¹²

Agni (fire) is an important element for *yajna* (sacrifice) performance and it served as a medium to send the offerings to the deities. Similarly, in order to make the deceased reach the realm of ancestors, it is offered in *yajna* to fire. The body of the deceased is placed on a pyre and lit. This is the rationale behind the cremation process, which is the popular method of body disposal amongst Hindus across the globe even in the present times.

Burn him not up, nor quite consume him, Agni: let not his body or his skin be scattered.

*O Jātavedas, when thou hast matured him, then send him on his way unto the Fathers*¹³

To ensure that this journey is smooth and the disembodied self doesn't deviate from the path, certain other *yajnas* are also prescribed in the *Vedic* texts. From *pitrilok*, there is another possibility for the disembodied self to reach *devlok* (realm of Gods). To ensure one's prolonged presence in the *pitrilok* and ascend to *devlok*, some *yajnas* (sacrifices) are prescribed that are to be performed while alive. The benefit obtained from performing these *yajnas* is called *sukrta* (immortal food) that ensures one's lifespan in the *pitrilok* and eventually in *devlok*. The immortal food, earned through hard *yajnas* keeps the disembodied self well nourished and helps in retaining the immortal state in *devlok* but its depletion leads to *punarmrityu* (the repeated death)¹⁴. This implies that death occurs at *pitrilok* and even at *devlok*. Although *Vedic* texts do not elaborate on what happens after this *punarmrityu* but it has connection with rebirth on earth to give another opportunity to replenish one's immortal food. In *Yajur Vedic* hymns, there are hints of *pitris* falling back to earth like shooting stars¹⁵.

Nevertheless, an elaborate account of the afterlife journey of the soul is given in *Garuda Purana*, which is one of the *Vishnu Puranas*. It comprises the dialogue between Lord Vishnu and *Garuda* (the king of birds). *Garuda Purana* explains that at the moment of death, the messengers of Yama reach the dying person and drag the soul out. It is an extremely painful experience for the deceased.

*The man of the size of a thumb, crying out 'oh, oh', is dragged from the body by the servants of Yama, looking the while at his own body.*¹⁶

The distance to *yamloka* (Yama's abode) is colossal and the entire way is full of torments. Interestingly, all painful and unpleasant experiences are quoted as per the standards of earthly life. There is mention of immense darkness, huge mountains to be climbed, lakes of blood, puss and excrement, etc. that the soul has to cross.

*Yamllok is The extent of the way of Yama measures eighty-six thousand Yojanas, without Vaitaraṇī, O Bird.*¹⁷

*In one place there is pitch darkness; in another rocks difficult to climb over; in others lakes filled with pus and blood, and with excrement.*¹⁸

In addition, there is mention of an extravagant river that the soul has to cross in order to reach the *yamlok*. A very dreadful account of this river is presented in *Garuda Purana*.

In the midst of the way flows the terribly horrible Vaitaraṇī River, which when seen inspires misery, of which even an account arouses

fear. Extending a hundred yojanas, a flow of pus and blood, impassible, with heaps of bones on the banks, with mud of flesh and blood, Unfordable, impassible for the sinful, obstructed with hairy moss, filled with huge crocodiles. Aand crowded with hundreds of dreadful birds. When it sees the sinful approaching, this river, overspread with flames and smoke, seethes, O Tārکشya, like butter in the frying-pan:

Covered all over with dreadful throngs of insects with piercing stings, infested with huge vultures and crows with adamantine beaks, filled with porpoises, with crocodiles, with leeches, fishes and turtles, and with other flesh-eating water-animals.

*Covered with many scorpions, and with black snakes,—of those who have fallen into the midst of this, there is no rescuer whatever...*¹⁹

Swarg (Heaven) and Nark (Hell): The Temporary Halts

According to the *Garuda Purana*, on reaching *yamllok*, the soul temporarily halts till it gets a new body. Heaven (celestial) and hell (place of torments) are the two sectors of *yamllok*. In line with the pain and pleasures of life on earth, heaven is portrayed as a place of abundance, joy, flowers, music, fragrance and food delicacies, etc; hell, on the other hand, is a prickly, painful, suffocated and stinky place. Depending upon the merits and demerits earned while living, soul is placed in either of the two, by Lord Yama. In *Pauranic* texts, even the portrayal of Lord Yama changes from a helping God of *Vedic* Hymns to a terrific personality.

*large teeth, wide mouth, frowning eyebrows, face twisted into a frightening shape, Lord for innumerable disabilities, a long hand holding the rod (of authority) and another holding the deadly noose (to catch the erring) he directs good and bad deserts for all creatures going there.*²⁰

Garuda Purana also prescribes the rituals that have to be performed by the kin of the deceased to keep *atman* nourished on its way to *yamllok*. Along with the prescriptions there is also a detailed account of the terrifying repercussions that may happen to the deceased and its kin on non-compliance of these rites.

Reincarnation and Transmigration

The word reincarnation has different elements: *re* (again) + *in* (into) + *carn* (flesh) + *ate* (cause/become) + *tion* (process). So reincarnation is a process of coming into flesh again.

*"Even as a man casts off worn-out clothes, and puts on others which are new, so the embodied casts off worn-out bodies, and enters into others which are new"*²¹

As per the discretion of Lord Yama, having stayed in heaven/hell, the soul gets a new body. However, this new body ceases again after a fixed span and soul gets another life. This cycle goes on till it attains salvation by merging with its source of origin. In Hindu texts, it is stated that

divine incarnations remember their previous births. Pure-minded saints, who achieve mastery in *samadhi* (meditation), can also recall their past lives. Narratives of human beings who remember the traces from their previous births have been researched and documented.

Hinduism proposes that reincarnation is certain, as it is the only theory that adequately explains certain phenomena that are otherwise not explainable. For instance, extra-ordinary intelligence of a child, which cannot be explained by genes and heredity theories, is justifiable by the doctrine of reincarnation. Texts prescribe that reincarnation gives a person an opportunity to grow spiritually. The various valuable experiences that a soul gathers in numerous reincarnations bring it nearer to the liberation.

The word reincarnation is often interchangeably used with the term transmigration, a process of moving across, from one to the other. While reincarnation refers to rebirth of soul in human body only, transmigration means rebirth of soul into any other living form. Hindu texts preach both. It is stated that the soul may not always get a human body, it can also transmigrate into different species like plants, insects, fish, birds and mammals, etc. *Smriti* literature elaborates on many permutations and combinations for rebirths in different forms. It is also written that rebirth can take place in any of the planes as the universe is infinite and life is not just limited to planet earth.

*Action which springs from mind, from speech and from body, produces either good or evil results; by action are caused the various conditions of man, the highest, the middle and the lowest. A man obtains the result of a good or evil mental acts in his mind, that of a verbal act in his speech, that of a bodily act in his body. As a consequence of many sinful acts committed with his body, a man becomes something inanimate, as a consequence of sins committed by speech, a bird, or a beast and in a low class.*²²

Who becomes What? The Law of Karma Decides

The law of cause and effect in materialism is called the law of *karma* in Hinduism. It implies that human beings are the architects of their own fate. Every act performed in life, leaves an impression on the soul just as saffron leaves an impression on a cup, after it is emptied. When the soul leaves the physical body, it takes these impressions attached to the astral body in the journey ahead and these materialize into rewards or punishments. The sum total of everything that one sees, hears, does and thinks creates an internal impression on the soul. These *karmic* impressions on the soul are the cause of good or bad situations in life. On death, one can leave behind weaknesses, excellences, merits, demerits but cannot nullify the *karmic* impressions of soul. In Hinduism, the

prevailing heterogeneity is explained in the light of *karma*. Some people are born rich, others are born poor, some are born sick, disabled, and others are born healthy, some are born genius and some are born with low intelligence. This differentiation in Hinduism is explained in the light of the law of *karma*. The proponents of doctrine of *karma* argue that accumulated *karmic* impressions create certain conditions for human beings.

Despite the fixed conditions, the scope of free will also persists. Analogy of a cow explains this phenomenon. Man's freedom is like that of the cow tied to the post. Although the cow cannot go beyond the length of the rope, yet it can gaze, lie down, stand up or sit down and do many other things within its reach. Similarly, *karmic* impressions create conditions for humans but it's the consciousness and element of free will which enables human beings to deal with the situations and create new impressions on the soul. The *Bhagavad Gita* also emphasizes on the importance of deeds and its relation to death and rebirth. Lord Krishna convinced Arjuna to fight for the sake of performing his *karma*:

Perform the prescribed duties: for action is superior to inaction;

moreover, if you are inactive, even the maintenance of your body will be impossible.

*This world is bound by action other than that for sacrifice; therefore perform actions for the sake of that, O son of Kunti (Arjuna), free from attachment*²³

In the context of the extent to which the effect of *karma* can be mitigated, the Hindu texts offer the following typology of *karma*:

- a) *Sanchita Karma*: It is the sum total of past *karma*, that is yet to be resolved. It is stated that some actions because of their inherent nature, yield results very slowly. They mature so late that a life-time period falls short, so they are carried forward to the next life. The way term deposits get accumulated and fructify after a specific period, likewise *sanchita karma* yield fruits after a specific time span.
- b) *Prarabdha Karma*: This refers to the portion of *sanchita karma* that is being experienced in the present life. When the *sanchita karma* gets activated from its potential state and starts affecting, it becomes *prarabdha karma*. It is the *prarabdha karma* that causes a person's birth and determines one's life span. This *karmic* force is responsible for the pleasures and pains that one experiences during the course of life. When this force is exhausted, the body dies. This *karmic* force is believed to be so powerful that even the spiritually enlightened souls have to bear its fruits, till it is fully exhausted. Analogy of bow and arrow is offered to explain this phenomenon. *Sanchita karma* (potential state) is like a

hunter's quiver, full of arrows. *Prarabdha karma* (kinetic state) is like a shot arrow; once it is out, it cannot be reverted. Just like a shot arrow is no more in the control of the hunter, similarly the impact of *prarabdha karma* cannot be reverted or stopped.

c) *Kriyamana* or *Agamin Karma*: The actions being done in the present life are called *kriyamana* or *agamin karma*. These are the actions that have immediate *karamphala* (results). By and large, the fruit of *agamin karma* is borne in the same life itself. Conversely, the *kriyamana karma* that do not fructify in the same life get accumulated as *sanchita karma* in the storehouse of *karmic* forces.

Hindu sacred texts explain that the impact of *sanchita* and *kriyamana karmas* can be nullified to some extent as they are in potential state but *prarabdha* cannot be stopped. It resolves only after its fructification. Thus, *karma* theory is retributive. The individual himself/herself is accountable for the on-going conditions (sufferings and pleasures) in life and of the future.

***Antyeshthi* (Last Sacrifice): The Funeral Ceremony**

Hinduism prescribes sixteen *samskaras* (sacraments)/rites of passage for various stages of life from birth to death. The last one is *antyeshti*. Based on the death philosophy discussed above, rituals on anticipation of death, preparation of a corpse, body disposal, rituals for afterlife journey and prosperous rebirth of the soul, etc. are prescribed in the Hindu texts as part of the funeral ceremony. These practices started emerging in *Śruti* texts and got accumulated in the later texts over centuries and passed on as a tradition. A brief account of these practices is discussed as follows:

- **Rituals on Anticipation of Death:** Donating grains, sugar, soap, cotton, everyday essentials, *diya* (an earthen lamp), piece of land, and silver or a gold coin to *Brahmins* on anticipation of death is prescribed in the texts²⁴. *Gaudan* (gift of cow) has been given utmost importance. It is prescribed that an ornamented cow, donated to the *Brahmin*, assists the deceased in crossing all the obstacles in afterlife journey including *Vaitaraṇi*²⁵. There are references of *anustarani* sacrifice in the early texts where cow was sacrificed for the better prospects of the deceased. However, in the *Puranic* texts, donation of cow is prescribed instead of sacrifice. It is emphasized that donations are meritorious if done by the deceased, if death is anticipated. Otherwise the sons (or kin) should do the needful in the name of the deceased. In addition, it is prescribed that the dying person should be laid on the floor with head towards south (*Yama's* direction) and sacred verses should be chanted. Feeding *tulsi* leaves and *Ganga jal* to the dying

person is considered auspicious and beneficial for him/her²⁶.

- **Rituals for Preparation of Corpse:** On death, lighting an oil lamp near the corpse and specifications to wash and dress the body are prescribed. The protocols for the eldest son, who acts as a chief mourner are also mentioned. Before the body is taken for disposal, offering of *pindas* (balls made up of rice/barley flour) is mandatory. This practice is repeated during the funeral and for twelve days after death as *shraddha* rites. *Pinda* means body, so the rationale behind *shraddha rites* is to provide temporary body to the disembodied self in its afterlife journey²⁷.
- **Body Disposal:** In Hindu texts, cremation is the method prescribed for disposing of the corpse. In *Vedic* times, fire was the only element that acted as a mediator between humans and the God. Oblations in the name of different deities were offered to the fire. Similarly, to ensure that the disembodied self reaches the abode of *Yama*, the corpse was given to the fire. Even during the cremation, there are prescriptions in the texts about the offerings to be made, wood to be used, *mantras* to be chanted and direction in which the body has to be placed. *Kapalkriya* (smashing the skull) of the half-burnt corpse is another prescribed ritual. It is performed to permit the exit of the last *prana* (breath) from the body, the *dhananjaya vayu*²⁸.
- **Post-Cremation and Other Rituals:** After the body is burnt, the left-over bones are collected (*asthi-sanchayana*) and immersed in flowing water, preferably in the Ganges.

The virtuous one, whose bone floats on the water of Ganges never returns

from Brahmaloaka, to the world of the mortals.

Those whose bones are thrown into Ganges by men,

*live in heaven for thousands of Yugas.*²⁹

The moment of death and onwards is considered as *aswach* (impure) phase for the kin of the deceased. In this phase, they are vulnerable to the attacks from evil spirits such as *pisacas*, *bhutas* or living wizards. The *aswach* phase has a varied timeline for different caste groups; and depends upon the gender and age of the deceased. Considering the span of *aswach* phase and to express grief, various restrictions like abstaining from cutting of hair, beard, not washing and combing the hair and practicing celibacy, etc. are prescribed for the close kin of the deceased. Recitation of *Garuda Purana* is prescribed for 10 days after death. The funeral ceremony is concluded with *kiryakaram* on the thirteenth day after death. This is done by feeding the *Brahmins* in the view that the

deceased has rejoined the ancestors after performing *nav-sraddha*, *ekadasa* and *samyojna sraddha* on tenth, eleventh and twelfth day after death.

Death by Choice

Inevitability of death is clearly reflected in the Hindu texts. However, one cannot choose to die with one's own wish. Egoistic suicide (*atmahatya*) motivated by one's personal interests is considered as a sinful act. The person who commits suicide, his/her soul wanders aimlessly until the fixed time span is over and thereafter experiences the torments in hell and is sent back to earth in a new physical form for accomplishing the fruits of previously accumulated *karma*³⁰. However, altruistic suicide which is spiritually motivated and committed as an act of self-sacrifice is permitted. In Hindu tradition it is carried out by *sanyasins* (renouncers) through *agnipravesa* (self-immolation), *prayopavesa* (death by slow starvation), and *samadhi* (sitting in a particular posture for long time and suspending breathe in the state of self-absorption)³¹. In addition, in the light of the doctrine of reincarnation and *karma*, euthanasia is not permitted in Hinduism. If a person is in irreversible medical condition, it is because of his/her *prarabdha karma* and therefore must be allowed to exhaust fully without intervening in the natural process of dying. Those who participate in such an act, also have to bear the fruits of this *karma* in the near future.

Conclusion

In the nutshell, death and dying in Hinduism are complex phenomena. Death related beliefs started developing at a very early stage of *Vedic Samhitas* and gradually concretized in *Upanishadic* literature and got reinforced in *Puranas* and *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*. Hinduism explains death as a transitional event that finishes the physical body and not the soul. The aim of human life is to reach back to its source of origin, *Brahman* and attain *moksha*. Human beings are the only species bestowed with an element of consciousness with which they can attain *moksha*. If the soul doesn't merge with its original source, it reincarnates or transmigrates. Interestingly, the decision where the soul is going to be born is not taken by any supreme God or third party. The human being himself/herself through his/her own actions constructs one's future. Adventurous journey of the soul starts immediately after death. It halts at the temporary stations of hell or heaven and in accordance to the deeds performed, it gets a new body. In the light of this death philosophy, *antyeshti samskara* is prescribed and considered as an essential *samskara* for Hindus.

Interestingly, Hindu view of death has a dual aspect. On the one hand, death appears to be just a transitional moment that assures coming back to life again or an opportunity of attaining *moksha* (salvation). It implies that death should not be feared. On the other hand, in Hindu texts, the element of uncertainty is attached to death. There is no definite timeline of the afterlife journey. Questions like how long the *atman* will wander in its disembodied state; when and where exactly the rebirth will happen, etc. are unanswered. This uncertainty is enough to instill a sense of fear amongst the followers of Hinduism. Such fears lead to an attitude of rejecting death as a negative phenomenon. Thus, the death beliefs in Hinduism correspond to Robert Kastenbaum's approach to death anxiety which propounds that it is not that people always do not fear death or that the death anxiety is always very high but the fears and joys are influenced by one's social environment³². And, religion has a significant role in creating one's social environment.

Notes

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4. *Rig Veda* (10.18.1)
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10. *Bhagavad Gita* (2.19)
11. *Rig Veda* (10.135.1)
12. *Rig Veda* (10.14.9)
13. *Rig Veda* (10.16.1)
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15. *Ibid.*
16. *Garuda Purana* (1.32)
17. *Garuda Purana* (1.56)
18. *Garuda Purana* (2.14)
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