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The Description of 'Death' in Hindu Traditional Historical Scriptures

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Preface

Death has been described in Hindu Vedic scriptures since ancient times. The descriptions in scriptures are multidimensional wherein the gods of death, types of death, the mind preparation about death, various beliefs to avert the death, the belief on time and place of death, the thoughts on happenings after death etc are included in the varied descriptions. Along with the religious concepts like death, soul and god- five elements, wellness, way of living etc tangible aspects are also deliberated in the scriptures. The abstract concept History studies cognitive and non-cognitive aspects. With this perspective, the research on references of Hindu scriptures on death is presented here. The selective scriptures are included in the research.

Introduction to the Concept and Conceptualisation

Death is a reality; it is not merely a concept. The contemplations on death in the long journey of Hindu history is presented in the given research. The research is done in the view of Hindu as a way of life (not just a religious view). The chosen scriptures have mostly been impacting and directing the Hindu life. The topic-Death, that has posed a challenge to modern science and has been an omnipresent curiosity in every human, is studied from a historical stance.

The Purpose of the Research

While doing research some objectives were determined; to throw light on the 'Death' concept presented in Hindu scriptures, to take cognizance of Hindu way of life by compiling varied and versatile elucidations and descriptions of death. These are the prominent objectives of the research. It was vital to evaluate the ancient traditional approach in modern times.

Premises of the Research

A few hypotheses were determined at the beginning of the research.

- Hindu scriptures, time and again, have contemplated on the concept death.
- The death has been taken as an important topic by varied Hindu philosophers.
- The intellectual epoch of the respective era is reflected in the scriptures.
- The impact of the concept of death described in Hindu scriptures has been seen in the Hindu way of life.

Scope and Limitations

The research is drawn on Rigveda, Samved, Atharvaved, Yajurved, besides the modern analysis of Ramayana and contemporary analysis of Bhagavad Gita. Additionally, *Upnishads*, *Smrutis*, *Purans*, etc are also brought in for the research. The scriptures brought into play are mostly associated with ancient india. No medieval and modern scripture are incorporated in the research. *Samhitas* are Hindu sacred books. The one limitation of the research is- the sacred scriptures and writings chosen for the research are only of theist thoughts.

The Depiction of Gods of Death

Rigveda was the first Hindu scripture. Initially along with it other three vedas (Yajurved, Samaveda and Atharvaved were preserved orally. In the later period they were conserved in written form. In Rigveda ‘Death’ was believed to be God; hymns and couplets (*ruchas*)are found in Rigveda illustrating it.

“परं मृत्यो अनु परेहि पन्था यस्ते स्व इतरो देवयानात
चक्षुषमते शुण्व ते श्रवीमि मा न रू प्रजा रीरिषी मोतवीरान ”

param mrutyo anu parhi pantha yaste swa etro devyanat.
*chsushmte shunvate te srvidmi ma naha prajam ri rishi mot viran.*¹

“It means O God of Death, your path that is distinct from the path of godly vehicle, you go on that path. (We are on the path of heaven, your path leads to the world of the dead; we don't have to do anything with that). Don't do violence to our children and dependent for you have eyes and ears. This is the perspective found since Rigveda period to distant from death.”

The important god of death was ‘Yama’. It is said in Rigveda-

“यस्य दूतरू प्रहित एव एतत तस्मै यमाय नमो अस्तु मृत्यवे ”

“*Yasya doota prahit evam etat tasmai yamay namo astu mrutyve.*”²

It means - “The one who has sent his messenger owl and pigeon to us, we bow to him, we do salutations to Yama.” Some scholars believe that death and Yama are one and the same god.

‘Som’ was another important deity of death. It is written in Rigveda-

“मो पु णरू सोम मृत्यवे परा दारू पश्यम नु सूर्यमुच्चरनाम ”

“*Mo punnaha som mrutydo para daha pashyam nu suryamucchrnaam.*”³

It means- O Som God, don't give us away to death. The wandering suns in the sky, let us see them for a long time.

Welcoming Death

It is found that Indians have welcomed death for salvation that is attained on death. It is written in Bhagavata, “The one who has taken birth, with their body the death has also appeared; today or hundred years later, the death of all living beings is definite.”⁴ This comprehension had death welcomed.

In Yog Vashishta Samhita the death is believed to be a ‘benediction friend’. It is written in Yog Vashishta, “If death is the end of everything and there is no life after death, can anything be more beneficial than that? Because one gets completely freed from all kinds of worldly sorrows once and for all.”⁵ It is also stated in Yog Vashishta that new body, new life is acquired on relinquishing old body, new life is bestowed in a new body is per se a delightful aspect. In short, a new birth after death may occur or may not occur, in either way death is a happy event. It is written in Bhagavad Gita- “Death is as loving and giving as a mother; it takes you under its wings, irrespective of you venerating, worshipping and remembering it.”⁶ In the days of Bhagavad Gita, death was viewed as inevitable and was looked forward to embracing it in positive emotion; by virtue of it, the fear of death, worry, stress, frustration, insecurity were believed to be kept at bay.

Types of Death

In ancient Hindu tradition, death was believed to be definite and inevitable. It is found out from several references/descriptions that the death was known to be of two types-

1. Untimely Death (*Akal Mrityu*) - accident, poison, black magic, war, etc cause untimely death; it can be averted by the mantra, occult techniques, medicines, *rasayans*. The best way to avoid death was believed to be the worship of the conqueror of death - Lord Shiva.

2. Death by Nature (*Kaal Mrityu*)- It is believed to be a natural death. In old age strength of life prana and body, organs is weakened and gradually death takes place (akin to shedding off a dry leaf).

In Atharvaveda, 101 types of death are described; the only definite one is a natural death, rest can be forestalled. In Bhagavata Purana two rarest kinds of deaths are described: “ One of them is - connecting to supreme consciousness, taking complete command on life prana, leaving the body by uniting with the infinite Brahma (*Brahmadharana*). The second type is to die on the battlefield by leading the troop and bearing the wounds of enemies.” ⁷ By renouncing body supreme work is made possible; such a death is believed to be ‘Supreme Death’.

Hindu believed that rebirth was the result of karma and vile deeds; sufferings were caused. Liberation by stepping into the order of Sannyasa (ascetic) after going through three natural orders of life- Brahmacharya (celibacy), Grihasthashram (householder), and Vanprasth(forest dweller), was the ordinance of a person’s life.

It is written in Manusmriti- “Akin to the tree on the bank of the river, when it collapses, the birds seated on the tree abandon the tree, an ascetic with nonattachment, when the body perishes, he is freed from the world.” ⁸

To Avert Death

In Atharvaveda several mantras are given to prevent unnatural death. In Ramayana it is stated that The demons like Hiranyaksha, Hiranyakashipu etc, desired for immortality and severe penances were done by them to get rid of death, yet in the end they fell prey of death. Death is inevitable for all.

It is stated in Bhagavata Purana that a wise person can apply their intellect to prevent unnatural death. The rishis of ancient India strove to attain immortality, to find out the nectar. The gods like the sun, moon, fire, air, etc. don't die like creatures and they are immortal; to have immortality like them, the gods were invoked by performing holy fire rituals. One of the rishis spoke on immortality in Rigveda- “ O Fire God, I am mortal and You in your flame of amiability , You are immortal. You and I be one.” ⁹

To counter death Mahamrityunjay Mantra was born-

“ ॐ त्रयम्बकम् यजामहे सुगन्धिम् पुष्पिर्वर्धनम् ।
उर्वारुकमिव बन्धनान् मृत्योर्मुक्षीय माऽमृतात् । ”
“om tryambakam yajāmahe sugandhim puṣṭi-vardhanam
urvārukam iva bandhanān mṛtyor mukṣīya mā 'mṛtāt” ¹⁰

A reference from Chikitsa Prabhakar of Ayurveda Kosh writes, “ Even after the death of a person, their organs are alive for a while, however, the life energy (mental awareness) that keeps them going has left the body. Modern medical science has progressed to keep the organs of the dead human body alive, yet the question remains to regain the earlier life energy or mental awareness of the dead body...An experiment of bringing back life to dead is given ‘ Rasratnasamucchyaat’ by our aaryavaidyas (ayurvedic experts)that can be done by the wise.” ¹¹ In fact, more light must be thrown on the unpublished, unknown tradition or scripture that describes establishing the life prana in the body again. However, the history doesn't have any example elucidating the result.

For long life, longevity, prolonging death to optimum time period, to cultivate long living life, several descriptions of endeavours are located in scriptures. In brief, they are-

- To eat certain food and not to eat certain food (harmful)
- To consume special herbs
- To oil the body with specific oil
- Fasting and to do penances to enhance tolerance
- To perform holy fire rituals regularly
- Kayakalp- ritual (descriptions are found in yog, siddha, tantra, buddha scriptures)
- To do yoga pranayama and meditation spiritual practices.
- To do the spiritual practice of worshipping of five elements of nature, to keep five elements in the body joyous.

The experiments were practiced to avert death and gain longevity; they are found in the descriptions of many scriptures.

At death

Death is also called grand sleep, perpetual rest, and eternal sleep. In natural death, the body organs and senses, one after another, turn unconscious and perpetual sleep (death) occurs, is believed by yoga and tantra philosophy. It is believed that ancient physicians, yogis, and Siddhas had insight into the time of death (*kaaldnyan*)....

* While dying- The legs turn cold (the life prana starts pulling out from the legs).

* When pinched no reaction occurs (organs one after another turns lifeless).

* The breathing becomes slow and subtle.

Similar descriptions are found: in **Ayurveda Samhita**; distinct chapters are included on the symptoms of death.

According to Yog Samhita, Buddha Scriptures, Secret Yog Scriptures, the body is comprised of five sheaths (gross body, life prana body, mind-body, intellect body, and bliss body); While dying the sheaths disintegrate one after another and finally only being (Jivatma) remains, that embarks the journey ahead.

According to Yog Vashishtha - at the time of death, the sinner- ignorant is in pain and meritorious- knowing one does not suffer. At the time of death, every person experiences unconsciousness; to them the unconsciousness seems to be like the night of great dissolution (*Mahapralaya*).

In Kathopanishad it is believed that “ The human body is a town with eleven doors, one of the doors gives way to prana to exit. The blessed ones, according to the merits of their deeds, exit in the life prana through higher doors and mediocre exits in the life prana through middle doors.”¹² The same belief is found in Bhagavad Gita.

Bharat Muni describes minutely about death,- “ Death that arrives by disease-the gradual depletion of the body, it arrives with closed eyes hiccup or the breathing is forceful, the words turn unclear and stretched out, the hands and legs go twisting, eventually the whole consciousness lighter and lighter and disappears and in the end the body drops listless.”¹³

It is written in Bhagavad Gita, " To restrain all the doors, seize the heart in mind(*sayanm and Nirodh*), doing the complete concentration (*Yoga dharana*) freeze the life-air,prana in the soul state (*Murghdesh*) ...leave the body chanting Om and remembering the supreme lord, thus one goes into the supreme state (*paramgati*) after death.”¹⁴

In various scriptures some aspects of death are described, in brief, they are-

- The preliminary practice of Shavasana (corpus pose of yoga), must be kept while dying.
- Have a quiet mind and goodwill at the time of death.
- Keep on remembering the thought and resolution “ I am soul, I am part of the supreme god.”
- Pray to God, converse with God, (like mother and father).
- Realise the divine sound of breathing So...hm(existence of god in the self).
- Keep on uttering the name of god or Om.
- Look at death as a witness.
- preparatory practice is vital.

In Hindu tradition, spiritual practice of ‘ Samadhi’ (total annihilation of a separate self and merging into supreme consciousness), has existed. The ancient hindu scriptures guide that - have it in you the realisation while dying that the god is liberating you from the body and receiving you in Himself; God is bestowing salvation to you.

The place and Time of Death

In Hindu tradition, the place of death was also thought to be significant. The descriptions in Hindu scriptures look upon death occurring at sacred pilgrimage sites as holy and liberating .

The time and state of death would determine rebirth or salvation. It is said in Bhagavad Gita-

“ Moksha conducive elements are sacred fire, burning flames, day time, the days of ascending moon phase and six months of Sun *uttarayan* i.e the northward movement of the Earth. Even death of a yogi in smoke, at night, during the descending moon phase or Sun *dakshinayan*-southward moment of the Earth, leads him to the moon world (*Chandralok*) to be born again in a meritorious body.” ¹⁵

It was believed that the death occurring on ekadashi (eleventh day in Hindu calendar) and shivratri lead the soul to Vishnu Plane(*Vishnu Loka*) and Shiva Plane (*Shiv Loka*)respectively.

After Death

In Atharvaveda along with the concept of rebirth, life after death is also described. It conveys that the rebirth after death is the next episode(to experience fruits of good and vile deeds), of the previous life, lived on the earth.

According to Yog Vashishta, after death, the Jiv i.e. being, remain in the cycle of birth and death with the existence of their resolutions. The yogis, divine beings, siddhas, sants are believed to be liberated after renouncing the body. The belief is that in accordance with karma- salvation or rebirth is accorded. Bhagvat Gita says- “ The body acquires childhood, youth, and oldness, and another body is also acquired. The intelligent one does not keep attachment, and ordinary human relinquishes the old worn and torn clothes to put on new garb, the soul relinquishes the garb of depleted body and puts on a new body.” ¹⁶

Conclusion

The deliberation on selected scriptures bring forth a few conclusions-

1. Hindu scriptures have presented the essence of experiences derived from the deep, intense, prolonged, and subtle contemplations on the striking unchangeable reality of ‘Death’; the imagination is expanded into it.
2. The positive and welcoming belief about death is found in Hindu scriptures; it can also be said that with the positive acceptance of death , fear, anxiety, insecurity, stress are reduced.
3. The varied endeavours and experiments to avert death have contributed to nurturing wellness and prolonged life.
4. The scriptures guide about the necessary and useful state of mind while embracing death.
5. The thoughts put forward about life beyond death and soul (theist view) are complimentary, although denied by atheist scriptures.

Epilogue

The Hindu way of life is an exceedingly ancient path of living. The long journey of the Hindu way of life has been extensive; *aadikal*, age of ved, a period of epics, Upnishad, Smriti-Shruti age, a period of Puran, and successive periods. In this prolonged time journey, scriptures and books produced during the specific age, reflect comment and analyse human life and death. Life has been impacted by the commentaries in the scriptures as well. The contemplations have been taking place with varied experiences-realizations-experiments and various scriptures, books have kept on interpreting life.

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