

Hinduism: It's Belief in Life and Death

Prof. Jyoti Bhatia

Asst. Professor, Department of Accounts

St. Andrew's College

Introduction

Hinduism is one of the world's oldest religions and cultural systems, predating recorded human history, and has no one particular human founder. *Sanatana dharma* - popularly known as Hinduism is heterogeneous religious tradition of India. Despite claiming that its followers worship more Gods as compared to any other religion, Hinduism sees itself as essentially a monotheistic faith. The Hinduism supporting scriptures are *Vedas* (the Universal Hindu Framework), the *Bhagvad Gita* and the *Upanishads* (scriptures reflecting integration).

Hinduism believes that Life and Death of creatures on this earth is governed by Lord Brahma as the Creator; Lord Vishnu as the Preserver; and Lord Shiva as the Destroyer.

It is a belief that there is a universal soul or God called Brahman. Brahman takes on many forms that some Hindus worship as Gods or Goddesses in their own right. Hindus believe that there is a part of Brahman in every human being called *-Atman*; supreme universal self and deepest essence of every creature. The physical portion of the human being is the human body, a vulnerable vehicle within the ceaseless *atman*.

Hindus believe that all forms of life contain a soul, and all souls have the chance to experience life in different forms. They also believe in reincarnation - a belief that the soul is eternal and lives many lifetimes, in one body after another. *Samsara* means going through the cycle of repeated births and deaths - ie a belief that existence of this cycle is governed by Karma.

According to Hindu religion, there is one thing that is certain in this lifetime: eventually we all must die. A belief in the cyclical reincarnation of the soul is one of

the foundations of the Hindu religion. Death is viewed as a natural aspect of life, and there are numerous epic tales, sacred scriptures, and Vedic guidance that explain the reason for death, the rituals that should be performed surrounding it, and possible destinations of the soul after departure from its existence on the earth. While the ultimate goal is to transcend the need to return to life on earth, all Hindus believe they will be reborn into a future that is based primarily on their past thoughts and actions.

Beliefs of Hindu Religion

The *Puranasis* collection of ancient Hindu tales about the different incarnations and the lives of saints. According to the *Puranas*, the soul is eternal but the body is temporary. So when the body is finished on death, the soul continues to exist in another body. Reincarnation is passing of the soul from one body to the next. Life is truly a circle of birth, death and re-birth. Soul never dies; it only changes its physical form during existence. There are 84 lakhs different forms of bodies; and it is believed that every Hindu has been through all of them. Being Human is the highest form of life on this earth as they can reap the benefits of good actions performed in the past. It works on the principle - You get what you deserve. No one is happy all the time or sad all the time, because everyone takes some good acts and some bad acts every day, the result of our good and bad acts will be happiness and suffering in the future in the given situation is proportionate to our acts.

According to the *Bhagavad- Gita*, Lord Krishna said:

“One who has taken his birth is sure to die, and after death one is sure to take birth again.” (Chapter 2 verse 27)

You may think that while death may come to others, you will somehow continue to live forever. You will hear about others dying, but it never comes to your mind that you could be next. The whole situation is like that of a slaughterhouse where one animal is being slaughtered and another one is busy munching grass and doesn't realize that it will be next. This is ignorance.

Lord Krishna said:

“From the highest planet in the material world down to the lowest, all are places of misery wherein repeated birth and death take place. But one, who attains to my abode, O son of Kunté, never takes birth again.”(Chapter 8 verse 16)

Material life is full of calamities. The less intelligent persons try to adjust to those calamities, as they have no information on the abode of the Lord, which is full of bliss and without a trace of calamity. The intelligent persons try to give up attachment for this material world. You may think that your life is very comfortable as you have money, house, nice cars, good partner etc. But actually there is no value of this comfortable life as one day everyone will lose everything and be slaughtered by nature. Like animals a human being cannot escape the wrath of nature. However leading a life of Human, you have a choice of either going through the vicious cycle of material life- birth, old age, disease, death or become free from material life.

The souls in the plants and animals have to go through 8 million births before they get a human birth. The humans have been through the 8 million births in the plant and animal kingdoms. After this life the sinners will take birth on one of the hellish planets and after their punishment is over they will again return to this or other Earthly planets in a suitable (human or animal) body as per the conditions of life according to their proportional acts. Only by engaging in Bhakti Yoga -devotional service of Lord Krishna a human being can become free from material life and go to the kingdom of God.

The Vedas are considered the earliest literary record of Indo-Aryan civilization containing hymns, incantations, and rituals, and the most sacred books of India. They are the original scriptures of Hindu teachings, and contain spiritual knowledge encompassing all aspects of our life. According to the Vedic scriptures, the oldest known to mankind, there is hell, heaven, and something beyond them- the spiritual universe called *Vaikuntha*. Hell and heaven are temporary but the spiritual universe is permanent.

The *Rig Veda*, The sacred scriptures of the *Rig Veda* states King Yama's promise that all who have been good will receive admission to Yama's paradise and the everlasting enjoyment of all heavenly pleasures, include the restoration of a sick body, the maintaining of family relations and the highly desired elevation of person.

Cremation is a ritual designed beyond perception of disposing the body; it is intended to release the soul from its earthly existence. Hindus believe that cremation (compared to burial or outside disintegration) is most spiritual benefit given to the departed soul. It's based on the belief that astral body will remain present despite waiting as long as the physical body remains visible. If the body is not cremated the soul remains nearby for days or months. The only bodies that are not generally burned are unnamed babies and the lowliest of castes that return to earth. The dead body is presented as offering to *Agni*- the fire which also conveys the offering to heaven.

Yajur Veda, Brihadaranyaka Upanishad IV, IV-Death and the Hereafter, 22

'This Self is that which has been described as not this, not this. It is imperceptible, for it is not perceived; undecaying, for it never decays; unattached, for it is never attached; unfettered, for it never feels pain and never suffers injury.'

The *Arthashastra*, a Hindu textbook from the second century BCE, offers a detailed description of some of the more frightening realms. Preceded by vital wind of the soul, it takes on another body of the same form, a body born of its own karma in order for the body to be tortured. The evil man becomes born as an animal; in other wombs that are evil and painful. When there is none of his evil left, and he is filled with merit, then he starts climbing up to higher castes-*Shudra, Vaishya, Kshatriya*, and so forth, sometimes eventually reaching the stage of Brahmin. Those souls or man leading a life of grace, austerity and meditation can look forward to the possibility to reach *Brahmaloka*. There is no need for them to return to earth because they have freed themselves from all material desires. They experience a sense of individuality and oneness with Brahma.

Law of Karma:

For every action you take there will be a reaction in the future. This is the law of Karma. In Hinduism your perpetual soul's future and the quality of your rebirth and progress towards liberation depend on your actions in life. The law of karma states that every event has a cause and effect, and every cause has a destiny. Death is not considered opposite to life; it is actually opposite to birth. Karma is accumulated through prior existences and defines your character, tendencies, capacities, and caste. Hindus consider life to be a journey of soul between birth and death of body. In Hinduism sound life is proportionate to soundness of body and mind. Deviation from this balance results in illness in body which is instigated by bad karma. However, many Hindus consider illness simply as part of ordinary life experience and a test from God. Hence system of karma perpetuates transmigration that results from ethical or unethical consequences.

Astrological Beliefs

Astrology Birth chart or the Natal Chart is an astrological chart which shows the position of the sun, the moon and other planets at the exact time of a person's birth at a particular place on earth.

As per the Hindu philosophy the soul existing in a much higher dimension sends a human as its instrument to gain certain experiences which are not possible in the world where souls exist. So at the end of one life the physical body is left behind, soul returns to the higher dimension and plans next life after reviewing what task is left and what is done. Physical phenomenon is governed by planets and stars. A person is born on the earth at an appropriate time in accordance with the position of planets. The horoscope of a person therefore not only contains information about probabilities of current life but also those of previous and next probable life. The Hindu *Jatak* (human being's) Birth chart, is divided into *Chakra*, the complete 360° circle of life, divided into houses, and represents our way of enacting the influences in the wheel. Each house has a significance of planets which can alter the interpretation of a particular house.

Astrologers claim that *Grahas* (planets) influence the energy bodies and minds of beings connected to the Earth. The accurate birth time is agreed upon as the first breath and location are necessary for the calculation of the exact degree of the signs that are rising, setting, culminating up, and culminating down, known respectively the ascendant, descendant, *medium coeli* (or “midheaven”), and *inumcoeli* (or “lower midheaven”). These degrees, also known as the angles, are essential for mapping the positions of the native’s twelve houses. The person’s death occurs according to the planetary positions in the universe at the time already reflected in the Birth chart on his existence. The astrological birth chart also reflects the manner in which the person will end his life, cause of death and reason for his existence on this earth.

According to astrologers, *panchak* constellations (last five *Nakshatras* in the almanac) are inauspicious as due to their nature, any work done during this time repeats five times. Five persons, relatives or close friends die within a short span of the death of a person during *panchak*. So the body is cremated in the *panchak* by keeping four dummies of flour and grass besides the dead body.

Achievement of Moksha

Hindus believe that the goals of human life encompass the following four broad categories:

- Karma - achieved by pure acts, knowledge and devotion to reincarnate to a higher level.
- Artha - the pursuit of achieving material gain or goals by lawful means.
- Dharma - the religious and moral duties or code for leading one’s life.
- Moksha - release of the soul (*atman*) from the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*).

As Lord Krishna mentions in *The Gita*, a body can achieve liberation from *samsara* by dying within city of Banaras (Varanasi)- on the Ganges. Even a droplet of Ganges water carried one’s way by the breeze will erase the sins of many lifetimes in an instant. Death, which elsewhere is feared, welcomed as a long-expected guest in Ganga River as it has a power to destroy sins. The funeral pyres, which are located on the river, burn nonstop. Hindus travel from around the country and the planet to spend their last days in Banaras as they believe

that they will achieve moksha- the rarest, most precious and most difficult goal of soul. For those who are unable to die in Banaras, cremation on the banks of the Ganges or the spreading of the ashes in her waters is preferred. Referred to as the “River of Heaven” or the Goddess, Ganga is considered to be sacred from her source, all the way to the sea.

‘*Garuda Puranam*’ explains the complete journey of the soul to the higher worlds. Sage Vasista in his ‘*Yoga Vaasistam*’ lucidly explains the reasons behind the phenomena of birth and death. Sankaracharya who is believed to be the incarnation of God Siva has contributed several volumes on spiritualism.

Conclusion

Hindus believe that the soul passes through a cycle of successive lives and its next incarnation is always dependent on the previous life and acts. Karma is the cause of our particular destiny.

Misfortunes in our present life are the result of acts that we have committed in the past. In the same way, our actions in our present lives will determine our fate in the lives that follow. Hindus therefore aim to live in a way that will cause each of their lives to be better than the life before.

The spiritual goal of a Hindu is to become one with Brahma. This freedom is referred to as moksha. Until moksha is achieved, a Hindu believes that he/she will be repeatedly reincarnated in order that he/she may work towards self-realization of the truth. To achieve this, they choose one or all four of the following paths:

- a. The path of Spiritual knowledge -leading to the knowledge of the relationship between the soul(atman) and God (Brahman)
- b. The path of Meditation - The idea is to concentrate so you can reach the real self within you and become one with Brahman
- c. The path of Devotion - Choosing a particular god or goddess and worshipping them throughout your life in actions, words and deeds.
- d. The path of Good Works -This involves doing all your duties correctly throughout your life.

Hindu scriptures aim to seek a good death through a conscious dying process. The last moment of life of human being is especially important to determine the properties of rebirth of the soul.

Given that secular society is geared toward gain, especially in the materialistic sense, it comes as no surprise that death has little or no place in its worldview. In the case of Hinduism this life after death comes in the form of a new mortal life whose state is a direct result of the type of life one led prior to death (karma). Although the promise of renewed or continued life is most often the focus of the practitioners of various religious traditions, the fact remains that all these promises depend on the quality of the life that you lead before death.

References:

1. Talageri, Shrikant. (2000), *The Rigveda: A Historical Analysis*
 2. Lewis, Richard D. (2003), *The Cultural Imperative: Global Trends in the 21st Century*.
 3. Harvey, Greg. (2007), *Grieving For Dummies*. John Wiley & Sons.
 4. S.Radhakrishna. (2009), *The Hindu view of life*. Harper Collins Publishers, India
 5. *Puranic Encyclopaedia: A Comprehensive Dictionary with Special Reference to the Epic and Puranic Literature*.
 6. *Indian Religion* - Peter Hess
 7. *Victory over death Mrtyorma Amrta Gamaya*, 2007; Radheshyam Das
 8. Eknath Easwaran (2003), *The Bhagvad Gita for daily living*. Jaico Publishing House
 9. *Shrimad Bhagwad Gita* - Kishorechandra Shastri
-