

Concept of Death in the Classical Hindu Thought: Philosophical and Anthropological Observations

***Monica Guidolin**

Introduction

This paper discusses the concept of death in classical Indian thought, its most significant and particular aspects and tries to focus the attention on a descriptive analysis of the fundamental elements of Hindu funeral rituality. It is a sufficiently comprehensive introduction to the idea of death through the religious practice where the ritual is a moment of meditation and communion in relation to the celestial sphere in a cyclical logic of eternal return.

Therefore it is important to highlight that article concerns a vision of ritual according to the textual heritage of Brahman tradition, a literate and ancient dimension of ritual that provides for few changes because it is fully canonized by Sanskrit texts. We know that the perception of religious funeral ritual in popular India is different because of the division component that, in this context, becomes the protagonist and creator of a characteristic performance of a region, according to the oral transmission of sacred knowledge, which is sometimes bequeathed in a different way from the traditional mainstream. In compliance with the idea that after death all the constituent elements of reality return to their places of origin, in India there are three methods to disappear- the body cremation, burial and exposure to the elements. On the whole most common method is the cremation even if classical literature says that the other two methods are required in specific cases.

The bibliography considered for this paper refers to the great material on the city of Benares and to its still diffused funeral practice Benares is the city where Hindu classical tradition has a very important role reflecting Brahman orthodoxy.

* Ph.D. Student at Ecole Houtes Ethdes on Sciences Sociales, Paris (France).

The Idea of Death and the Comparison with the West

According to the traditional philosophical perspective, death in India is a natural transforination of the being, the anticipation of which can be seen in the sleeping experience. In the course of life there are many transformations, as if they were a sort of little deaths, as if we died hule every day.

In this analysis especially if compared with the vision of death and life in the western modernity, it is evident that the conception of death in India is very different. In contemporary western society death seems an abstract concept, a subject to be studied according to a speculative, point of view, and not a real event. If death is undeniably a universal phenomenon, in general, in daily western experience, it has always been avoided. Faced with this phenomenon the feeling of death and horror permeating the Western world are caused by the inevitable resulimg collapse of the body and the fear of pain. Despite the historical and philosophical developments that the western world has known on the theme of death in the course of ceturies, today the situation is different because of a strong attachment to life understood as pleasure, satisfaction and achievement, whereas death is only linked to the sphere of suffering and pain.

In classical India, on the contrary, thanks to the Upanishads' speculation life is above all the cause of suffering, and for this reason, the approach is completely defferent. *Mrtyu*, the personification of death in the subcontinent, does not oppose the idea of life (*Jivan*), but the idea of birth (*Jati*) The change of state is ritually linked to the idea of transit in so far as each door of entry is also of exit.

If the passage death-birth is a phenomenon seen only in two different perspectives in a temporal sequence the same consideration is not valid for the two terms birth-death. These concepts cannot coincide because between them there is a time called "life". In This way the Hindu concept of transmigration is indented as consisting in a process of purification through successive births.

Most of Hindus reach the old age in the stage of *gihastin*., rather than of *sanyasin*² and when the elderly feel the end of bodily life they give Brahmans some specific objects, for example useful items for the forthcoming journey³. This gift will be useful to protect the subtle body of the deceased. Some shells of cotton are the first offer, a sort of *viaticum* and *Purana* says that, in anctent times, they were used as currency; the second offer consists in pots or pieces of iron, which is the most impure of metals, but very precious to *yam duta*, the angel of death⁴; the

third is salt element with a complex meaning, because it is the rest of the *surique* ocean, symbol of death and sterility⁵; it is possible to donate also some land to the Brahman since this action means the renunciation to the earth, which represents the most visible detachment; the fifth offer consists in seeds of cereals and legumes which express the potential of life that the world has together with seeds. Ghee can also be donated.

The sixth donation is *ladh* sweet, much loved by Ganesha and the last one is a cow called *vaitarani*, the one that has the task of crossing "the river of netherworld"⁶. However, the deceased is not yet in a state of agony until the *indriya* (the senses) of his/her body have not withdrawn⁷ to the *manas*⁸.

Yama A Reflection on the God Death⁹

In the Indian classical concept of death, the notion of time (*kala*) plays a vital role and in this sense, the mythology has established an identity between the god of death and time. We know that in India time is not linear, but circular and, hence, even human life, is seen under this perspective. In Indian mythology Yama is the god of death. Being immortal, he is the king of the dead and the deity that governs the protection of the relationship between living beings and subsequent generations. In this regard, the god has an enigmatic nature, because he is mortal and immortal at the same time. He decides to die in order to know the finiteness of life and the path that henceforth dead human beings have to take in order to reach the place of ancestors (*pur*)¹¹ master of death and of life rules, he is an immortal who decides to die and to reign on the population of the ancestors of the Fathers, even if it does not have any offspring.

The duality of the god is an essential element to understand him; as the god of death, he appears as a power from which we want to run away or to keep at a distance; as the king of the dead ancestors, he has power to which we implore relief.

Among the Vedic gods he is the one who keeps watch on the obligations and duties that govern individual and social life and for this reason his power is the model of royal power. His kingdom is located in the south because it is the place of death¹³. As it can be noted about the myths, Death is the one that steals the breath of life by asphyxiation, and in all Indian thought, death is considered like a choke since there is the last exhalation without inspiration. After the end of

respiration and cardiac arrest, the *rigor mortis* is the last proof of death. It is not by chance that a typical weapon of Yama is a slipknot.

Hindu Funeral Rituals

In the funeral rituals there is a perfect alchemy between the elements of fire and water; the action of water anticipates the action of fire to purify human beings that prepare for cremation rite¹⁴. Waters (*Apas*) are invoked in the Vedic texts as a female mass, maternal and plural. In a culture where the quality of a person is given by his/her actions, during funeral celebration it is important to know the social class (*varna*) to which the deceased belonged and the stage of life (*Asrama*) he/she has achieved. The balance of acts will be made by Yama so as that death from preta becomes pitr, and that the deceased can go to the kingdom of God.

a) Antyesti

The first group of rites to be considered is that described as antyesti, final sacrifice. "Parry" research, regarding the last sanskara, shows that the "last offering" (*antyeṣṭi*)-cremation ritual-is a sacrifice in its fullest sense: the offering of a living victim. Families follow the rauta tradition, which requires a solemn ritual in compliance with the revelation of the Veda, and begin to make offerings to domestic fire (*garhapatya*). While the corpse becomes a kind of sacred image, *annita*, the members of the family in mourning enter into a state of impurity (*asauca*), especially the oldest son¹⁵. In the preliminary phase, when the person is not dead yet, but is dying, it is recommendable that all the people present at the site begin to repeat a *mantra* in the ear of the dying person (in most cases it is the sacred syllable "Aum"). At the beginning this *mantra* is like a whisper then its intensity heightens progressively until it becomes a complaint to indicate the final death, this "sound" helps have a good rebirth.

According to Saunaka and the belief that *ante matih s gatih*, "the last thought determines the result of the revival"¹⁶ the *mantra* is preferably taken from *Rgvedasamhita* (9. 112). Sacrificer takes the right hand of the deceased and pours a spoon of ghrta into fire; some tulasi leaves, Indian basil, are placed on the mouth of the dead, with a few drops of water from *Ganges* and *Yamuna*. The corpse is placed on a straw mat¹⁷ on a stretcher consisting of wood steps *udumbara*. This mat replaces the black antelope skin, or perhaps the skin of the sacrificial cow (*anustaran*), which in ancient times, represented the placenta

surrounding fetus before birth. If a white, or sometimes yellow silk dress is chosen for men, women are dressed in red. In the first case the colour symbolizes the sperm, whereas in the second the female seed. During the first part of the funeral ceremony, the officiating priest prepares five balls of rice or flour and water (*pinda* or *p raka*)¹⁸ to celebrate the rite of the traveler (*rathika*)¹⁹. By repeating the name of *Rama-Rama Rama Bolo Bhai* or *Rama Nama Satya Hai*-the procession arrives at the mortuary field (*masana*), which is always outside the gates of the city, often southward, where texts indicate the kingdom of Yama.

The corpse is placed on the funeral pyre with the head on the north side and henceforth the anticlockwise circumambulation (*prasavya*) begins around the corpse and the *dvijas* (the "twice born") present at the cremation rite take the sacred cord and shift it from the left to the right. This custom alludes to the opposite rules governing the world of dead people. We know that in pre Vedic period food, weapons and animals were burnt to help the dead on the journey toward the land of the dead and there are also some testimonies taken from the oldest passages of *Rgveda* saying that on earlier times, the widow was burnt with the dead husband.²⁰

b) *Suddhi-and riddha*

Ten days after death are useful to give a new body to the deceased, an essential rite in order to transform the *preta* into *pitṛ*: it is the duty of the first-born to continue *Pinda* rituals that, in this case, are ten like the lunar months. After *antyeṣṭi* there are the *Suddhi* rites. These rites are to purify the body also called *pretadeha*, "body of the dead" - which the deceased takes after death by abandoning both the heaviest elements (*water and earth*), and which is made of fire, wind and ether. The *Suddhi* rites also prepare the deceased to have a body that benefits from offerings (*bhogadeha*), taking form with *Pinda* ritual.

In the absence of food offerings, the deceased is sentenced to become a *pi ca*²¹, and his/her body turns into *y tan ya* destined to the torments of hell. Conversely, if the offerings are provided one year after death, the deceased- once exceeded the transitional condition of *preta*- becomes an ancestor, a *pitṛ*. Consequently the condition of ancestor is not natural: this new body must be built with patience with the support of offerings. Rites of purification close the period

of impurity (*asauca*), which usually lasts ten days after death. A shorter period relegates the *preta* to the rank of *kalivarjya*.²²

This important process of transformation is completed by *sapind karana* ritual, a ceremony able to settle the new state of *pitr* permanently. The ritual permits the welcome of the deceased in the community of ancestors, owners of the food ball offering. Each ball is a piece of body making, from head, the first day up to genitals the last day.

Through this ritual we can restore the link between the living and the dead and therefore, it allows family members to leave the impurity of mourning. It is certain that these rituals are *riddha* rites, namely the post-funeral offering to build the body of ancestor.

The site of *pitr* is said to be located in the region included between the earth's world (*bhuloka*) and the space between heaven and earth (*antariksa*),²³ *Pitr* are different from gods, even if they share some characteristics: they drink the *soma* like gods, they adorn the sky by *naksatra*, they attribute the dark to the night and the light to the day. They have a cosmogonic role and, for this reason, it is necessary to obtain their protection and avoid their wrath.

The most suitable places to celebrate the rite of *riddha* are above all sacred fords (*tirtha*) and other places considered having good omen; inappropriate places are in the first instance foreign countries, because they are inhabited by barbarians (*mleccha*)²⁴. This specific and rigorous rituality is aimed at developing a subtle body in order to adapt the *lingasarira* of the dead to the new condition of existence.

If the ritual of *riddha* is/was absent or interrupted, the soul of the deceased (*jiva*) would remain entrapped forever in a dream state, unable to enjoy its new subtle existence.

We can reply to the question put by *Matsyapurana*²⁵ regarding the food consumed by a Brahman or oblation in the fire to reach the deceased ancestors saying that *pitr*, *pita maha* and *prapta maha* are reached by the names of *gotra* and *mantra* pronounced during rituals. If *pitr* lives in the sky, the offering becomes *amrta* (divine nectar), if, on the contrary, it turns into a demon (*asura*)²⁶. It becomes an enjoyment of any kind if it is reborn as a quadruped, it becomes

icrageigrass, if as a snake, it becomes wind (according to the belief that snakes live in the wind), etc.

Rituals : An interpretation

Cremation is not the only funerary rite included in Hindu tradition. It is possible to find a correlation between the components of the universe, *tattva*, the stages of life, *rama*, and funeral rituals.

Burial, associated with the element of earth, would be reserved for "renouncer", the *sanyasin*, as well as for children under two years; burial in water is for *vanaprastha*, who lives in the forest, as well as victims of plagues: cremation is for *grhastha*, the householder, whereas brahman students, brahmacharin, are exposed to atmospheric agents provided that they die a violent death. In general, the Indian sacrifice has been interpreted as an attempt to control in any way death.

In this connection, the funeral rite is characterized by two opposing "coalitions" opposing the group of death represented by the sacrificer (*yajamana*), and the group of life represented by the officiant, who is the intermediary between the gods and *vajamana*.

At the beginning of the sacrifice commenting has the property that is offering, in the sacrifice it transfers it to the officers, who take on themselves the burden of causing the murder of the victim chosen before, taking with knowingly the burden of its death.

We can say that the first group is *yajamana*, linked to asura, the second to *deva*²⁸. Therefore, there is a conceptual distinction between funeral rites, designed to take care of the remains of the deceased and to transform him/her to dead, so by the cremation until the new existence as *preta*; and post-funeral rites, as far as we know to transform *petra* in *pitr*.

However both are reconciled by the cuisine of sacrifice, thanks to the Brahmin who has the duty to "cook the world,"²⁹ The kitchen, in this specific context, as handling raw food substances through the fire that turns them into real food, is part of the post-funeral ritual, through the offering of cooked rice. The same thing is valid for funeral rites, because the functions of the cremation sacrifice are two: to feed Agni, by the consumption of the offering consisting in dead body, and to

preserve the integrity of the dead, which should not be eaten, but it must be prepared since the fire to the crematorium accompanies it towards the next world.

The funeral, therefore, is the *samskara* "par excellence", in its etymological meaning, a "bringing to conclusion" to the "perfecting" of the deceased body. Through the element of cooking, the funeral *samskara* turns the dead body into the oblation.

The body of the sacrificer is the authentic donation and the offering of animals or vegetables are only a substitute of the effective offering, which is the sacrifice of oneself, of one's body and one's own being. Any strategy of sacrifice is to give the unique offering that counts, the "Self", and in an attempt to resume after having furnished a substitute³⁰.

The common human being during the funeral rite is, above all, sacrificed, and then offered to the flame that cooks and carries it to the gods. The "renouncer", by contrast, is already subject to cooking before physical death. He has internalized his own lights, and the space dedicated to the divine. He is also *atmayjin*. "one who sacrifices himself". Therefore, the act of renunciation implies to increase the renouncer's *tapas* at a temperature so that between divinity, sacrifice and the victim there is a fusion: this is the acme of sacrifice, and at the same time, its death.³¹

In view of these considerations, it would be a mistake to think of a contrast between the cooked world of sacrifice and the natural pre-sacrificial, raw world. Actually, it is the cooking of what is already cooked. Agni cooks what has been cooked by the sun (*atapathabrahmana* 10, 4, 2.19)³²

The birth is an absolute separation, since a new body comes into being. On the other side death is a relative separation, because living and dead people maintain a relationship of sharing food (*sapinda*). Death is impure like birth, but, unlike birth, death is a bad omen. However, in funeral rites also there is also a birth, or rather a rebirth: in fact, living son gives life to a new body for the deceased father, nourishes it and cares it to lead it from the *preta* state into *pitr* just as child is led into the adult world, on the same way *preta* is led to *pitr* stage.

Conclusion

This analysis shows the great complexity and richness of contemplation about death in India, in particular in Hindu world. The study of sacred texts and direct observation in Benares, place of reference for this argument, suggest the importance of rituals, in particular their role into Hindu classical thought. Actually the funeral ritual dimension is not only for the traditional and orthodox sphere, but also for regional and popular context, where local elements mix with the great literacy tradition. Certainly death notion in the classical Hindu thought has a great importance and still today, the practice recurs every day in the *ghats* of Benares. In this place Hindu tradition is emphasized by the large presence of pilgrims, who choose to spend their retirement in the most sacred place for Hindu people³⁴, Benares is said to be a great cremation ground (*masana*) with about three hundred cremations a day, and its uniqueness is in the fact that, traditionally, in India the cremation ground is outside of town. Once I asked an informer: "What is the idea of death in Hindu thought?", and the informer said: "In Hindu religion there is no death, but only rebirth".

This affirmation, despite its object to evident criticisms, emphasizes to analyze the subject from a different perspective.

Notes

1. Stages of life (*a rama*) are four *brahmac rin* (student), *ghasthya* (householder), *v naprasthva* (who is lives in the jungle), *sa nv sin* (renouncer).
2. The gift (*d na*) has a very great efficacy in order to obtain merits during the *k liyuga*. During the earlier times, there were different ways, given the characteristics of humanity during *kpayuga*, the lapas or ascetic discipline, during *tr el yuga* the knowledge, and the sacrifice furing *dv para*.
3. Yama himself has an iron rod (*danda*)
4. Salt is the element that represents the mineralization of the dying body that will remain in a state of preservation until the time of a new birth.
5. The animal is decorated for teh rite. Its function is to lead the soul to the kingdom of the dead, as a kind of Caronte the mythical "smuggler tray" of teh souls of the dead on the river Acheron in Greek mytholgy.
6. The agony comes after a period of neglect of neglect of the mind when the

- individual faculties are beginning to withdraw. This syndrome is known as *arista*, the name of the buffalo of Kṛṣṇa's mythology.
7. *Manas* is the intelligence, the ability of understanding, the will. In philosophy *manas* is the spirit, the internal organ of perception and cognition.
 8. Kusum P. Merh. 2006.
vaivasvatan: samgamanam jan n m
yamam r j nam havis dnvasya Rgveda 10.14.1
 9. Malamoud, C, 2002.
 10. In the ancient India this term shows the status of ancestor lineage through funeral rites, in particular through the rite of *sapindikarana*. The earliest references about concept of *pitr* are in *Rgveda* (X 15,1) and *Atharvaveda* (XVIII 248) and we can infer that the same *pitr* are divided into three categories, each assigned to one of three spheres (*loka*) on its own inherits, sky, atmosphere and land.
 11. Malamoud, C., 2002. p. 10.
 12. The Hindu myth is that, while the *Gang* descends from the moon, the *Yamun* is associated with *Yama*, what a solar river, since, as the twin *Yama*, she is the daughter of *Vivasvant*, the sun shining. Unlike the *Gang*, white and rescue's river, *Yamun* is the river of the dead to be reborn, of black color.
 13. In general, after the dispersal of the remains of the deceased, there is no existence or construction of a tomb or a cenotaph: However, there is an exception in the case of construction of the tumulus called *maṇḍapa*, Cf. Malamoud, C., 2002p.74.
 14. Parry, Jonathan P., 1994.
 15. *Aunaka gvidh na3*, 18 where we can see M. S. Bhat, *Vedic Tantrism, A Study of gvidh no of aunaka with Text and Translation*, Critically Edited in the Original Sanskrit with an Introductory Study and Translated with Critical exegetical Notes, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1987, p. 237 (text), 351 (translation) Cf. Franklin Edgerton, *The Hour of Death, Its Importance for Man's Future Fate in Hindu and Western Religions*, in "Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute . 8/3(1927) pp 219-249.
 16. In the civilization of the Indus Valley also it was possible to exhume corpses wrapped in a mat of straw very similar to those used today. Nowadays the mat of straw is used in place of the antelope skin of Hindu funeral rituals in Bali (Covarrubias, M 1946). It is believed that the mat of straw has the power to protect the body from the attacks of *pitras*, demonic beings (*Garuda Purana*, II 35.42).
 17. Mass round, ball of flesh, pulp, soil etc.; embryo: body, balls of cooked rice, an essential ingredient of funeral rites and ancestral worship. Five *pinda* offering

- contemplates one for the domestic genius, one for the guardian spirit of the house's threshold, one for the goddess of the wquared, one for the local spirit of *ma na*, one for the funeral pyre. (Cf. Filippi, G.G *Mnya*, p. 133).
18. A verse of *Rgveda* recites: That i twill lead for your far travel the guardian divinity P. san; that it consigns you *pur...* (X 17.3).
 19. Cf. Sat, the voluntray sacrifice of widows.
 20. A goblin or malevolent spirit.
 21. Pelissero. A. 2005, (p. 56). Cf. P. V. Kane, *History of Dharma stra*, p. 270.
 22. Taittir yabr hima's 1.3, 10.5 Cf. P. V. Dane, *History of Dharma stra*. p. 343.
 23. Cf. P. V. Kane. *History of Dharma stra*, p. 379 sub.
 24. *Matsyapur na*, 19.2.
 25. Demons in perpetual hostility with gods (Deve).
 26. *Ibidem*. 19.3-9.

*