

Anthropology of Death: A Study of the Garuḍa Purāṇa

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Abstract: *The study of death in anthropology opens a window to life, one which does not show death as an end but rather the beginning of a new journey. In cultures throughout the world, the path of this journey is paved with rites and rituals. Similarly, in Hinduism, the event of death is followed by an array of rituals that has its source in the Garuḍa Purāṇa. This Sanskrit text is the most superior doctrine that resolves the mysteries of death. It disseminates knowledge about the proper rituals that are to be conducted after death, the importance of charity as well as living a sin free life, all to ensure a peaceful death and a luxurious afterlife. At one glance these may seem obligatory religious processes, but when given a closer look with the help of anthropological theories, they reveal the inner workings of both the human mind and the society.*

Keywords: *Anthropology, Culture, Death, Funerary rituals, Garuḍa Purāṇa.*

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Introduction

Death is considered as an end to the journey of life. The mystery of death and the emotions it triggers are universal. However, it is particular to the human species to believe that the journey does not end there. Regardless of the permanence of death, human beings remain hopeful that there exists an afterlife. Accompanied with this belief, people of most cultures perform elaborate rituals after the death of a loved one in order to send them off to the realm of afterlife. From an anthropological perspective, the belief in the existence of an afterlife may be perceived as a necessary psychological reaction of the human mind to distract itself from the impending doom of death. It is not only a relief to the constant fear of the end of life but is also an answer to the unanswered mysteries of death. Apart

from the ideas regarding the existence of an afterlife, it is also second to human nature to believe that judgement awaits them even after death. It is almost universally believed that once the soul of a dead person reaches the afterlife, they are judged on the basis of their good or bad deeds which they committed while they were alive. In anthropology, the study of death is not just unearthing prehistoric graves and recording the data regarding the disposal of the dead in contemporary cultures. For them, death is a window that provides a view of life. The information that is obtained, is considered as knowledge about the social values and norms that shape a culture. Beliefs regarding the existence of an afterlife may have originated in the prehistoric period. The earliest burial practices can be found among the Neanderthals and the early *Homo sapiens* (Pettitt, 2011). Prehistoric grave sites discovered during an excavation often reveal that the prehistoric people buried their dead with several grave goods. Such prehistoric burials and the artifacts recovered from them are often indicative of funerary rituals that existed during the prehistoric period. Grave goods also serve as evidence of the material culture and point towards an organized social life of the people.

Apart from material evidence, the knowledge about a culture's understanding of afterlife and their funerary rituals can also be gathered from their myths documented in their sacred texts. The Egyptians may be considered as the earliest of all the cultures that were able to coherently express their beliefs and vivid ideas of the afterlife. Such ideas were first found in the form of texts painted on the walls of the pyramids, tombs, coffins and sarcophagi by the ancient Egyptian scribes. Later on a collection of these pyramid texts was termed as the Book of the Dead by Egyptologists in the first quarter of the 19th century (Budge and Wilson, 2016, p. 3). The present research focuses on the Garuḍa Purāṇa which is one of the eighteen Mahāpurāṇa s (Mani, 1975, p. 285). This text elaborately discusses the beliefs and practices of the Hindu population regarding death and afterlife. An analysis of the Garuḍa Purāṇa through the lenses of anthropology provides detailed information about how death is perceived in the Hindu religion. The present research deals with certain social and cultural aspects of death presented by the Garuḍa Purāṇa, like its transitory nature, position of women, beliefs regarding afterlife and the functions of funerary rituals.

Death as a Medium of Transition

The primary aspect of death that has been highlighted again and again in the Garuḍa Purāṇa, is transition. The first anthropological theory that explained the nature of this transition achieved in death, was given by Robert Hertz (1960). He stated that in death, a person's status changes from a living member of the society to being an ancestor or a member of the ancestral society and this transition is obtained through the funeral rites that take place after death. The funeral rites can be segregated into two major phases. The first or the wet phase involves the disposal of the body, through which the identity of the dead as a living member of the society is relinquished. The second or the dry phase involves giving the dead individual a new identity as an ancestor (Davies, 2005, p. 232). The Garuḍa Purāṇa states cremation as the process through which disposal of the corpse should take place and may be considered as the wet phase of the funeral. Hertz (1960) further theorized that despite the destruction of the material remains, cremation is not the final stage and nor is it sufficient. He states:

This transformation is not, in the eyes of the 'primitives', a mere physical disintegration; it changes the character of the corpse, turns it into a new body, and is, consequently, a necessary condition for the

salvation of the soul. This is precisely the meaning of cremation: far from destroying the body of the deceased, it recreates it and makes it capable of entering a new life; it thus achieves the same result as the temporary exposure, but in a much faster way. (Hertz, 1960, p. 43)

He further emphasized that compared to other methods of disposal of the dead, cremation takes mercy on the mourners and the survivors as it spares them from the sorrows of separation by a rapid disposal and also the horrors and dangers of a gradually decomposing corpse (Hertz, 1960, p. 43). After the wet phase or the cremation is completed, the Garuḍa Purāṇa instructs the living relatives to move on to the phase of mourning, which according to Hertz (1960) coincides with the soul's temporary stay on earth. The Garuḍa Purāṇa mentions the ritual of *sapiṇḍikarna*, which is the dry phase of the funeral. This funeral service admits the soul into the land of the dead and gives it the new identity of an ancestor. (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 5:55).

Another theory of transition in death has been given by Arnold van Gennep (1960) who visualized death as one of the many transitions that an individual achieves as a member of the society. He termed the rituals related to such transitory events as Rites of Passage. When further analyzed, they can be found to comprise three subdivisions- rites of separation, transition rites and rites of incorporation (van Gennep, 1960, p. 11). The Garuḍa Purāṇa is the most expert doctrine that compiles all the facts related to death. Upon a close study it can be observed that the sequence of rituals mentioned in the Garuḍa Purāṇa that takes place upon death can be classified into the three subdivisions of van Gennep's theory.

The Hindu ritual of cremation that immediately succeeds death may be considered as a rite of separation. According to the Garuḍa Purāṇa, the funerary rituals are initiated with the cremation which should take place immediately after death. It states:

When it is ascertained, that life has gone out of the body, the son should bathe and wash the corpse with pure water without delay.

Having clothed it afresh they should smear the body with the sandal-paste. The son or the successor should perform the *ekoddiṣṭa* rite afterwards. (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 4:41-42)

Thus the body is prepared for cremation. Upon reaching the cremation site, the corpse is laid on the earth with its head to the south (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 4:56). The relatives of the deceased go round it while reciting the *gāthā* or *sūkta* of Yama and holding gingelly seeds and clarified butter (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 4:52). A cloth is torn into two pieces, half of which is laid on the earth and the other half is used to cover the corpse. A *piṇḍa* should be kept in the hand of the corpse (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 4:58-59). On the day of the death, six *piṇḍas* should be offered, five before cremation and one after the cremation, during the collection of bones (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 15:30-31). *Piṇḍa* are balls of rice that are donated in the dying person's name. The initial offering of five *piṇḍas* ensures the sanctity and fitness of the body before its sacrifice in the fire (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 4:61). The deity *Kravyāda* is worshipped with flowers and grains of rice, after which the cremation is begun (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 4:65). The hymn for the deity *Kravyāda* states:

You are the creator of creatures, the birth-place of the world, the protector of the people. Please therefore, consume the corpse and carry the soul to heaven"-having thus worshipped the deity

Kravyāda -the meat devouring fire god, he should set fire to the corpse. (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 4:65)

After the cremation is completed, the relatives of the deceased circumambulate the pyre and leave to bathe. After bathing they shave their heads and wear washed clothes and sit quietly for a while, contemplating on the temporary nature of time and unsubstantial nature of the universe. After a while, the mourners return to their home. But before entering, they must chew margosa leaves and rinse their mouths (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 5:2). ‘Then having entered the house, the sons and the relatives of the deceased should observe āśuca for ten nights’. (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kāṇḍa. 5:3)

The **transition rites** take place after the rites of separation. According to van Gennep (1960), after observing the rites of separation, the survivors enter a transitional period, where they mourn the death of their beloved before re-entering the society. The transitional period for the living relatives also parallels the transitional period for the dead, through which the deceased is prepared to enter the afterlife (van Gennep, 1960, p. 147). The Garuḍa Purāṇa mentions several transition rites that should be performed to ensure the transition of the soul of the deceased into the afterlife. The āśuca is such a transitional rite that immediately succeeds the cremation and is observed by the relatives of the deceased on the father’s side. During this period of ten days, the relatives of the deceased are considered impure. They are expected to avoid all pleasures of life until they attain purity (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 5:4-7). In the course of these ten days, ten piṇḍas are offered to the dead, given one on each day. These piṇḍas are said to form the body of the deceased. The Garuḍa Purāṇa states:

During nine days and nights, the body is formed. By offering the first piṇḍa, the head of the preta is formed.

By the second, ears, eyes and nose. By the third, neck, shoulder, arms and chest.

By the fourth piṇḍa, navel and private parts. By the fifth thighs, calves.

By the sixth all vital organs, by the seventh nerves, by the eighth teeth and hair, by the ninth semen.

By the tenth fulness is achieved, hunger is satisfied. (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kāṇḍa. 5:33-37)

Thus the deceased assumes a body made of the piṇḍas and begins the journey towards Yama’s realm accompanied by his servants. Meanwhile, on the 11th day Vṛṣotsarga rite is performed, which involves releasing a bull to free the deceased from ghost hood (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 5:40). After the mourning period is over, the survivors re-enter the society through rites of reintegration, where the mourning is officially lifted from them (van Gennep, 1960, p. 147). In the Garuḍa Purāṇa, the reintegration of the survivor into the society takes place on the 10th day after death. After offering the 10th piṇḍa, the mourners become pure (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 5:19). They should take a bath outside the village and leave their disposed hair, nails, beard and old clothes (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 5:28-29). On the other hand, the Garuḍa Purāṇa also mentions the rites for incorporation of the dead into the afterlife. This ritual is known as sapiṇḍikarna, which is performed on the 12th day. Through this ritual, the deceased person becomes one with the ancestors and henceforth can be worshipped alongside them (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 5:55-59).

Practice of Sati and Position of Women

The practice of Sati generally refers to the widows who sacrifice themselves in the funeral pyre of their husband. The practice derives its name from the Hindu mythical character of Sati, who performed self-immolation, being unable to witness the insult of her husband Siva at her maternal home. The Garuḍa Purāṇa has presented the practice of Sati in a manner similar to the other funerary rites mentioned in the text, that is, in a purely instructional form. According to this Purāṇa, a woman who has been chaste and loyal to her husband must ascend the funeral pyre of her deceased husband, on the event of his cremation (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kanda. 4:88-90). Though unlike the other funeral rites and rituals, the Garuḍa Purāṇa has not gone into much detail in the case of the practice of Sati. However, this category of self-destruction may be analyzed through Emile Durkheim's theory of suicide. According to Durkheim (1952), a woman does not become Sati because it is the right thing to do, but because she believes it to be her duty. If she fails to perform this sacred duty, she is either dishonored or punished (Durkheim, 1952, p. 177). 'One who gets away from the pyre due to fainting should observe the vow named prājāpatya.' (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kanda. 4:88-90)

Durkheim's theory also aids in understanding the position of women who are subjected to the practice of Sati. He speculates that the interdependence between the husband and the wife is so strict that separation even in death is unacceptable. The woman is bound to her husband by the sacred bond of marriage and must follow him even in the afterlife. The compulsion of the society is so great that the individual personality or the rights of a woman is given little value. She is completely absorbed in a highly integrated society and shows no intent or purpose of her own. Therefore, the society faces no hesitation to sentence such an individual to end their life at the death of her husband (Durkheim, 1952, p. 178). This category of suicide is termed as obligatory altruistic suicide. He states:

“...where the ego is not its own property, where it is blended with something not itself, where the goal of conduct is exterior to itself, that is, in one of the groups in which it participates.” (Durkheim, 1952, p. 180).

Furthermore, the woman is burdened with the purpose that extends beyond her life and therefore, living on is merely considered as an obstacle. '...for it depends on the belief in beautiful perspectives beyond this life' (Durkheim, 1952, p. 184). The Garuḍa Purāṇa states that a woman ascending the pyre of her dead husband resides in heaven for three and a half crore years. There she enjoys the company of her husband as long as fourteen Indras rule in heaven. Even the most heinous crimes of a man, like killing a brāhmaṇa or a friend or an individual of noble states is forgiven and his soul purified, when his wife bones Sati. Even the extended families of the woman on her mother's, father's and husband's side are benefited from her act of sacrifice (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 4:91-97).

Life after Death

One of the greatest mysteries of death is its aftermath. The great unknown future after death has occupied a permanent position of curiosity in the human mind. This curiosity has led to the origin of the belief in an afterlife. In Hindu mythology, the Garuḍa Purāṇa has explicitly described the journey after death. The approach of Garuḍa Purāṇa towards death is an animistic one. According to the first

dogma of animism, the soul of an individual creature is capable of continuing its existence even after death (Tylor, 2016, p. 1). Tylor (2016), states:

“Departing from the body at the time of death, the soul or spirit is considered set free to linger near the tomb, to wander on earth or flit in the air, or to travel to the proper region of spirits-the world beyond the grave.” (Tylor, 2016, p. 457)

The Garuḍa Purāṇa states that when a person dies, the soul of the person detaches from the body and lingers nearby. A donation of salt should be made to the dead so that the soul is able to leave the mortal body for the doors of heaven (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kanda. 2:33-34). ‘This thought of the soul’s continued existence is, however, but the gateway into a complex region of belief’ (Tylor, 2016, p. 24). The realm of death is governed by the deity Yama. Tylor (2016) mentions that, belief in a controlling deity and subordinate spirits controlling the souls in a future state is an active part of animism. The Garuḍa Purāṇa informs that a truthful person who is devoted towards God obtains a peaceful death. However, individuals who are liars and deceivers are abused at the hands of the servants of Yama (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kanda. 2:50-52). A sinful person must go to hell by undertaking a perilous journey. The Garuḍa Purāṇa produces a detailed description of the seven hells of Raurava, Mahāraurava, Atisita, Niṣkṛntana, Apratiṣṭha, Asitapatravana and Taptakumbha along with the punishments that the sinners receive there. (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 3:47-48). It also states that the sinners are born again and again until they have exhausted their sins and have acquired virtue. (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 3:84). The system of reward or punishment after death may be explained with Tylor’s Retribution theory of animism. It states that the fate of the soul or spirit that outlives the body depends on its conduct during life (Tylor, 2016, p. 84). Tylor (2016) terms such a belief as a ‘powerful engine shaping the life of nations’. The fear of punishment after death aids in checking wickedness and promoting goodness in society. However, the retribution of sins does not completely end in hell. It follows one even in the next birth. The Garuḍa Purāṇa states:

When the sinners have exhausted the fruits of their actions in dreadful hells, they are born on the earth.

The killer of a brāhmaṇa attains the form of a deer, horse, pig or camel.

The stealer of gold becomes a worm or a germ or a fly. He who lies on the bed of a teacher becomes grass, plant or vine. (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Dharma Kaṇḍa. 2:60-62)

Through such statements, Garuḍa Purāṇa accepts the presence of souls in all animals and plants, which is the essence of animism. The idea of human souls being reborn in new bodies is termed as Transmigration of souls by Tylor. He explains that the different animals are thought to be the incarnation of the different qualities that a man exhibited during his previous life. The animals are assigned as the incarnation of an individual in his next life because there is a natural similarity between them. Since the individual showed the qualities of a particular animal in his previous life, the actual animal form is manifested in his next life as a form of retribution (Tylor, 2016, p. 15).

Funerary Rites and Their Function in Society

Death, as a natural and biological phenomenon is universal but so are the cultural practices related to it, like disposal of the body, funerary rituals, belief in afterlife and ancestor worship. The biological

process of death has its explanation in science, but it is the discipline of anthropology that satisfies the curiosities about the man-made reactions to it. Bronislaw Malinowski (1948) is one such anthropologist to provide a rational theory explaining the cultural reactions to death. He states that mortuary practices all over the world share similarities with each other. Certain elements like gathering of near and dear relatives before death, watching the corpse by relatives, washing, anointing and adorning the corpse, disposal of the body and the mourning are all essential cultural reactions to death (Malinowski, 1948, p. 30). The Garuḍa Purāṇa also vividly mentions some of these elements in its doctrine of death. The dominant feeling or the first instinct that is felt by the survivors at the time of death is that of horror and repulsion. However, these are stifled with a flurry of rituals and controlled through the process of mourning. Malinowski states that immediately after death occurs, the body becomes the center of attention instead of being shunned or dreaded as common logic dictates. The rituals that proceed after death beginning with the disposal of the body are usually governed by desires of a dual nature (Malinowski, 1948, p. 32). 'In all such rites, there is a desire to maintain the tie and the parallel tendency to break the bond' (Malinowski, 1948, p. 32). Thus, on one hand, those touched by death and partaking in the funeral rites are considered as unclean and impure, while on the other hand, those same rituals allow the survivors to overcome the negativity of death and hope for the survival of the spirit in the afterlife. Malinowski (1948) further explains that the fear of death and the dead is a primal instinct of man, who neither can nor wants to face the idea of complete annihilation. Rather than accepting death as the end, it is easier to believe in the continuity of life through a spiritual existence. But this hopeful belief is also continuously challenged with the realities of death which includes the sorrow of losing a loved one or the gruesome appearance of a corpse. However, in this balance of fear and hope, when religion steps in, it chooses the comforting notion of the afterlife and thus incorporates cultural elements like rituals and ceremonies giving shape and form to the already existing beliefs (Malinowski, 1948, p. 33). Hence, the rites and rituals mentioned in the Garuḍa Purāṇa may be interpreted through Malinowski's theory of functionalism as a religious means to save man from utter desolation in the face of death. In regards to death, Malinowski's theory of functionalism states that when death occurs in a family, the relatives and friends of the deceased person are suddenly pitched into an unknown depth of sorrow. The foundation of their family is shaken and the normal course of life is disrupted. In such a situation, human instinct may direct them to surrender to fear, abandonment of the dead body and even destruction of the belongings of the deceased one. However, religion plays an active part in this scenario by standardizing a set of rituals and ceremonies which conquers the destructive impulses of man, borne from fear and establishes emotional integrity (Malinowski, 1948, p. 35). Therefore, the death rituals that are stated in the Garuḍa Purāṇa are not mere religious obligations. They exist to remedy the bonds that were broken by death, to guide the survivors through their mourning and to re-integrate them back into society. Through the rituals the living relatives are made aware that the deceased person has been transformed into an ancestor, thus relieving them from the sorrow of separation.

Conclusion

The Garuḍa Purāṇa is one of the eighteen Mahāpurāṇas and is an important religious text dedicated to the understanding of death. This text is the primary source of the funerary rites and rituals existing

in Hinduism. Though these rituals form a vital cultural element and are still in practice at present, the original meaning behind their performance is only known by a handful of people. But the funerary rites flowing death are more than religious obligations. They signify the transition of the identity of an individual through death, as well as the transformation of that individual into an ancestor. The study of the Garuḍa Purāṇa revealed that death is not merely the end of life, but is a transition towards the afterlife and eventually rebirth. However, it is the actions of the living individual which decides whether punishment or rewards await him after death. Thus enforcing a compulsion on an individual to lead a sin free life practicing charity and performing noble deeds. On the other hand, the rituals of Garuḍa Purāṇa may also be interpreted as controlling mechanisms that alleviate the horrors and sorrows that follow the death of a loved one. Furthermore, anthropological analysis of the practice of Sati mentioned in the Garuḍa Purāṇa provides an understanding of the position of the women and the psychology behind the practice of ritual suicide. Hence, with the aid of the discipline of anthropology, the present research has interpreted death, as mentioned in the Garuḍa Purāṇa, as a multi-faceted cultural aspect, and the rituals associated with it functioning to mend the bonds in the fabric of society that were broken in death.

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