

RE-PRESENTING DEATH AND DYING IN THE HINDU HOLY CITY OF KASHI

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Albeit we know that death is inescapable, we try to avoid it as long as we can so that we can enjoy the immediate and worldly pleasures. Conspicuously, the negative facet of death has always been emphasized. This study represents the positive aspect of death and, simultaneously, the importance of death for human existence. Interestingly, many scholars have discussed that a human being can never imagine his death, though he knows that he has to die. When we talk about death in relation to Kashi, we find most of the positive aspects of death and dying in Kashi. Though most of the Hindu religious texts have delineated the greatness of Kashi as one of the sacred places of pilgrimage, this study endeavors to show that not all people who die in Kashi will achieve moksha. It is interesting to note that for many Indian people, death is a matter of joy in Kashi. This study explores, though not restricted to, the question of death and dying in India in general and in Kashi in particular.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is the most arduous task to define death. Being the subject of an interdisciplinary study ranging from medical, anthropology, sociology to religion, law, philosophy, culture, and, most importantly, literature. To define death only from a particular perspective is not only to limit its wide range of meanings but also to do injustice with such a relevant topic in the present scenario. Berkson describes Louis Pojman's four approaches to death. Firstly, from the religious point of view, death can be defined as "the departure of the soul from the body" (*Death* 15). Secondly, death can be also defined as what is known as "clinical death", i.e., "the cessation of the heartbeat, blood circulation, and breathing . . ." The third approach is known as "whole brain death", i.e., "when the brain is dead, the argument goes, the person is dead, even if the heart and lungs can be kept functioning" (*Death* 16). Lastly, this approach is called "neocortical death", i.e., "in the brain, the neocortex is the seat of many of the elements we identify with our sense of self and what it means to be a conscious subject in the world. These include consciousness or awareness, sense perception, language, memory, and thought. If this part of the brain dies, one will no longer be an experiencing subject" (*Death* 17). Strikingly, when someone dies, it is considered to be his physical death which is a "biological fact". Someone's physical death may not "necessarily mark the end of that person's social or cultural life" (Berkson 44). Indeed, a person's physical death may or may not be his social death because every culture and religion define death in a specific way. Ergo, a person may die physically but not socially.

Needless to say, it is not a novel fact that the notion of death has always been associated with negative meanings. Human beings are not quite comfortable at the mere mention of death. Since at the time of death human beings are forced to leave this material world and its pleasures, their views on death are not sanguine but pessimistic. Romanian philosopher and essayist E. M. Cioran has also emphasized this fact. In the words of Cioran, "If death had only negative aspects, dying would be an unmanageable action" (*Trouble* 7). The emphasis on the negative facet of death can also be discerned in the statement of Kübler-Ross when she says "death in itself is associated with a bad act, a frightening happening, something that in itself calls for retribution and punishment" (*On Death* 18). Even now, in this modern age, the concept of death is in most cases related to terror. Drawing attention to this fact Kübler-Ross affirms that albeit one might ruminate that one has "mastered" the fear of death "on many levels", death is a "fearful, frightening happening". The fear which is associated with death is, de facto, "a universal fear" (*On Death* 21). Not only this but death is also perceived as "more gruesome in many ways, namely, more lonely, mechanical, and dehumanized" (Kübler-Ross 23).

Perhaps, this putting more stress on the negative facet of death is the reason that a person can never contemplate his death but only that of another person. Some scholars have also discussed this fact that it is, in fact, not at all possible for a human being to contemplate his death. Even Kübler-Ross affirms that the study of old culture, as well as person, manifests that "death has always been distasteful to man and will probably always be". A person who is well versed in psychology perfectly comprehends that in one's unconscious mind, death is not at all "possible" as far as oneself is concerned (Kübler-Ross 17).

To emphasize only the negative facet of death is to undermine its positive facet as well as its significance for life. It is only when we view death without any prejudices as such that we can see the positive aspect of death. To give only one example, in the Hindu religion, a person gets liberation only after death. If people won't die the systematic functioning and organization of any society will be adversely affected. "We should also remember that we would not have this precious life were it not for death. Death is necessary for new life to be possible. Our lives are constituted and sustained by death" (Berkson 11). "Death itself is not the problem, but dying is feared because of the accompanying sense of hopelessness, helplessness, and isolation" (Kübler-Ross 304). Berkson has beautifully delineated simultaneously the negative and positive aspects of death. In the words of Berkson,

Death is paradoxical in many ways. Death is bad, yet not bad, for the person who dies. It is both important to hold on, and essential to let go. There are times that ending a life is justified, yet one of the worst things anyone can do is end of life. We are justified in fearing death, and yet we should recognize that death is what gives our life meaning (*Death* 199).

Existentialist philosopher Heidegger has discussed the concept of death, specifically, in relation to what he calls 'Dasein'. Precisely, Dasein refers to "Being-there". In typical German Philosophy, Dasein betokens "almost any kind of being or 'existence' which we can say that something has (the 'existence' of God, for example), in everyday usage it tends to be used more narrowly to stand for the kind of Being that belongs to persons" (*Being* Footnotes 27). Heidegger discusses that Dasein (existence or entity) "reaches its wholeness in death" (*Being* 281).

In Kashi, Indian/Hindu denizens look at the process of dying in a starkly different manner. People did not afraid of death here. Per contra, in Kashi, death is a matter of delight. It is a very striking fact that not only the denizens of Kashi look differently at death here but the outlook of denizens of other states of India on death is utterly different whenever death is mentioned in association with Kashi. Kāśī- Khaṇḍa of the Skanda- Purāna depicts that Brahmā himself says about Kashi that sacred rituals, no matter even if they are diminutive, observed by people will render benefit in the form of liberation. It has been delineated in Kāśī- Khaṇḍa of the Skanda- Purāna that abandoning one's body in Kāśī is deemed as Dāna (religious gift), Tapas (penance), and Yoga- these facts consonance the euphoria of Nirvāṇa (salvation) in Kāśī (IV.i.30.313). ". . . Hindus from all over the world come to Varanasi to die, be cremated, and have their ashes poured into the river" (Berkson 92). Contrary to the aforementioned views of scholars that a person can't imagine his death, that it is impossible for a person to imagine his death, people throughout the world do not only imagine their death in Kashi, but awaiting to die in Kashi.

It is believed that this city is "as old as time itself". Since this is the place of "cosmic creation", it is said that here time itself commenced. The current moment of this place is even the primal moment of genesis because here cosmogony is ad-infinitum recurrent phenomena. It is considered that this city is the "origin-point" as well as the "microcosm" of the cosmos. Albeit, it is said to stand outside time and space, it consists of all the space (Parry 11). Unlike other places, where people are horrified of death, in Kashi people receive death as "a long-expected guest". In other parts of India, death is considered as polluting but in Kashi, it is believed as hallowed and propitious. In Kashi, death is a "sure gate to moksha, the rarest, most precious, most difficult to achieve of spiritual goals" whereas at

spots it is common, ineluctable, and definite of human existence (Eck, *Banaras* 325). Casting off one's body in Kashi is, howbeit, proof of "an absence of worldly desire and a calm indifference to mundane existence" (Parry 163).

In Svargakhaṇḍa of the Padma-Purāna, the lord (Mahādeva) voices that Kashi is his most mysterious pious city. It aids every creature to traverse the river of mundane existence. His residence i.e., Kashi is not associated with the earth but is in the "Intermediate Space" (III.33.1467). It is most popularly believed that three forces, viz., Yamraj, i.e., lord of death, Yamdut, i.e., emissaries of Yamraj and Kali Age, i.e., the debauch eon in which "rest of the creation has sunk" will never have any access within this city (Parry 18). It is regarded that here, in the inception and cessation of every cosmic cycle, the world has been created and destroyed (Parry 30). Kashi is thought out to be hallowed owing to the fact that people enter into this city with the intention of dying and be cremated here as it is both death as well as cremation which put it in the omphalos of the cosmos yet beyond time and space (Parry 32).

Here, this paper brings forth some very essential question. We can ask if liberation is bestowed on all creatures irrespective of their deeds, where does the concept of righteousness exist? Why should a person follow the path of good deeds if he and the person who commit sins will ultimately meet the same fate, i.e. obtain liberation? What is the relevance of differentiating a person who renounced this material world from a person who enjoyed sexual and material pleasures? Can we see it as one of the reasons for the extinction of the ashrama system? Diana L. Eck also questions what about those people who are wicked but they die within Kashi and those who are saintly but, unfortunately, they die outside Kashi (*Banaras* 336-7)? Many people loathed to accept that the wicked person "gets off scot-free" and they even proclaimed that a wicked person will definitely be encountered by the consequences of his former deeds (Parry 28). Few people even believed that only by "reaching the internal tirtha" it can be possible to obtain liberation and only those people who have shaken off "the bondage of desire" are eligible for doing it.

At this moment, people even uphold that punishment will be meted out to sinners in the present birth. Punishment will be inflicted on the sinner either in the manner of a "lingering and gruesome" demise or in the manner of a "miserable existence" before his demise. Certain people even strongly proclaim that merely those persons who had performed virtuous deeds are entitled to meet their demise in Kashi. Umpteen precedents are there which represent that sinners enter into Kashi solely with the intention of dying albeit anyhow they died outside Kashi. The moral of these anecdotes is that "karma cannot be cheated" in this city. It is said that a sinner would receive his punishment "by postulating a period of expiatory suffering" after his demise or before his soul will attain moksha (Parry 29). It is believed that vicious people won't be able to die here. In the ultimate moment, something transpires and they will die anywhere else. A person won't die here by "a matter of chance". A "great sinner" won't meet his death in Kashi. Myriad people arrive here with the purpose of dying. However, by chance or by god's intrigue, some of them have to vamoose from this city before their demise. It is also remarkable that we are not qualified to state that this particular person is a saint or a sinner merely on the basis of his present life because his deeds of not only this life but of all his past lives determine his fate. Hence, we are not supposed to say that "the beggar or the swindler is undeserving of death" here (Eck, *Banaras* 337).

Kāśī- Khaṇḍa of the Skanda- Purāna conspicuously avers that those who engage in sins should and must eschew Kashi in case they desire moksha. This city must not be resorted to by a person habituated to defame others, by one who aspires for fornication with another man's wife, by one who desires riches by way of accepting monetary presents or of other's riches through treacherous ways, by a person whose demeanor causes scourge to others, by one who desires carnal pleasure, by a person who engages in reproaching Lord Śiva, by one who scoffs at Vedas, by a person who persecutes others, who is envious of others or by one who tantalizes others (IV.i.22.211-2). Thus, we found that in reality, not all people who die here will attain moksha. In some cases, they have to take rebirth owing to their accumulated deeds which do not qualify them to attain liberation in this life while in other cases the vicious people are not at all allowed to die in Kashi. It is believed that only people of exceptional quality will die in Kashi.

In the concluding part of this paper, it is requisite to contend we need to develop a positive and wholesome attitude towards death and dying. It is essential to break as many myths and stereotypes pertaining to death and dying. At whichever part of the world a person resides s/he will ultimately die a good death with no burden of any kind.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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