

Meeting 22: Svargá, Nárika, & more

The Vedic afterlife

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Meeting agenda

- (Re)introduction to discussion group
- Today's topic præsentation
- Free discussion

Why a Véda discussion group?

- What is Vedic literature?
 - Sámhitā-s
 - Bráhmaṇa-s
 - Others?
- Véda-s vs. Vedánta, Upaniṣád-s, Purāṇá-s
 - Later monism (ádvāita) vs. earlier dualism
- Modern (religious, scholarly) fixation upon later literature

What is there to discuss?

- History & linguistics
- Metaphysics of religion
- Exegesis (e.g. countering western narratives)
- Moral principles
- Nuances of Śrāutá ritual

Our plans

- Weekly meetings on Sundays at 1200 EDT
 - Followed by more in-depth literature meeting at 1330 EDT
- Different topic/aspect/angle discussed in depth every week
- Format:
 - Præsentation
 - Free-form discussion
- Eventually something more

WhatsApp group

<https://chat.whatsapp.com/IXCQEkhfrcwHI7CNY8Fgat>

Let's introduce ourselves!

- Name
- School (if student)
- How you found this group
- Briefly: background/interest in Hinduism & Vedic literature

Some questions to consider

- Did the afterlife conceptions significantly change within the Vedic period?
 - Is the Vedic literature internally consistent on the afterlife?
- What factors decided one's fate in the afterlife?
- What is *our* fate in the Vedic afterlife, as modern people?

Immortality?

- *Amṛta* usually used of the Gods
- But several times used for men too, e.g. *ápāma sómam • amṛtā abhūma* (RV 8.48.3)
- Must refer to an ever-lasting *afterlife*
- Implication: annihilation is possible

The funeral rites

- More detailed discussion in future meeting
- Cremation *and* burial (not incompatible), e.g. RV 10.18.11
- Just as in sacrifice, spirit carried to Heavens by Agnī
- Probably the charred remains were interred, alongside possessions.
- Animal sacrifice alongside?
- Saha-gamana?

Fates after death

- Four-fold:
 - Annihilation
 - Hell
 - Heaven
 - Reincarnation
- Decided by piousness & virtue on Earth, e.g. how much sacrificed
 - & by actions of your descendants

Annihilation

- i.e. no afterlife at all for some people
- Little discussion, but very likely
- Sometimes Nírrti interpreted so: “destruction”
 - cf. use even aside from afterlife, e.g. RV 10.10.11
 - But this is unlikely: specific fates are described, e.g. wolves (RV 10.95.14)

Hell

- Náraka (cf. later Naraka)
- Vivid descriptions even in Vedic literature: especially RV 7.104 (for dæmons)
 - Thus: dæmons & men alike can go there
 - Boiling in water
 - Given to serpent (áhi)
 - Darkness, depths/caverns
 - Chewing hair & swimming in blood (AV 5.19.3)
 - &c. &c.

- Maps fairly well onto Heaven
 - *Literally* in the Heavens: great souls shine as stars (TS 5.4.1.3, ŚB 6.5.4.8)
 - Also cf. etymology
- Vivid “hedonistic” description in AV 4.34
 - Sexual pleasure: *n' áiṣām ṣiṣnám • prá dahati jātávedāḥ*
 - Later reflexes of this in MB^h &c.
 - Lakes of butter, honey, wine; filled with lotus-blossoms
- Other names, e.g. *ásunīti* (RV 10.16.2), *pitr-loká*

Reincarnation

- Clearly present in the Vedic religion, but little discussion
- Rebirth for evil-doers: strange creature (ŚB 3.1.2.12)
- Reincarnation as descendants?
- Consistency with Svargá

Some references

- Bodewitz, H. "Life after death in the Ṛgveda Samhitā." *Gonda Indol. Stud.*, 2019.
- Chakraborty, C. "The racial history of India." 1944.
- Shusan, G. "Afterlife conceptions in the Vedas." *Religion Compass.*, 2011.

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