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**Dr. Neena T S**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of Philosophy,  
Maharaja's college, Ernakulam,  
Kerala

### Punarjanma in Upanishads – Philosophical Implications

**Dr. Neena T S**

The Sanskrit term Punarjanma means rebirth referring to succession of births. It is believed in the Indian philosophical systems that man is reborn for the fulfilment of his own karmas. It is through karmas that man is bound. So rebirth is understood as the corollary of human actions. Being a rational interpretation of the life and its mysteries, this theory has commended itself to the great thinkers from ancient times to the modern age.

The belief in rebirth has persisted from the time of the Upanishads. In the Upanishads there is advance recognition on the Vedic and Brahmanical conceptions of future life or rebirth, though there is not yet any consistent theory about it. A. B. Keith is of the opinion that the references to the transmigration which have been in the Rig Veda are of probable character<sup>1</sup>. It assumes at the same time equally true that in certain other places, an approach is being made to the idea of transmigration. The Brahmanas assume births and deaths in this world. But in the Upanishads the belief is transformed into the doctrine of rebirth in this world. However there are evidences that the belief in the rebirth was only being matured in the time of Upanishads since some passages of the Upanishads are not familiar with it.

Keith observes that the earliest notice of the doctrine of transmigration presented for us is to be traced in the Brahadaranyaka Upanishad in the section of ascribed to Yajnavalkya. To the question 'does the soul survive the bodily death?', Yajnavalkya<sup>2</sup> replies that after the death of men, his spirit goes into fire, breath into wind, eyes into the sun, his mind to the moon, his ears to the space, his body into the earth, his self into ether, the hair of his body into plants, the hair of his head into the trees, the blood and semen into the water. Then what becomes of the man? is the question put by the Artabhagya to Yajnavalkya. On this Yajnavalkya confers with him in secret and what they conversed about was work and what they recommended that was work.<sup>3</sup> In fact man becomes good by good works, bad by bad works.

The matter is further explained on such a way that on death the soul having shaken off the body and freed itself from ignorance makes a beginning on another body. Just as man acts, just as he behaves, so will he be born.<sup>4</sup> The soul when reached the end of the present life itself destroys the body and built up a newer and fairer frame by its own activity. At the time of death the self collects within itself all the senses and faculties and after death all its previous knowledge, work and experience accompanied him. In short the self that undergoes rebirth is a unity not only of moral and psychological tendencies but also of all the elements which compose the physical world<sup>5</sup>.

It is believed in the Upanishads that the departing soul does not pass on to another body as it is often assumed. At that time of the passing out of the body, the soul assumes a minute physical vesture that contains the potentialities of the next gross body. The kind of physical body the departing soul assumes depends on the nature of the thoughts and deeds that prevail within him at the time of death. It is said in the Katha Upanishad<sup>6</sup> that some souls enter into the

**Correspondence:**

**Dr. Neena T S**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of Philosophy,  
Maharaja's college, Ernakulam,  
Kerala

wombs for acquiring bodies; others enter into stationary life in accordance with their deeds and with their knowledge. But sooner or later every bound soul must come back to the human plain, where alone there is scope for the fulfillment of its highest destiny. There is no access to eternal life, but through the human birth.

When a bound soul is ready for rebirth on human plane the impressions of his karma lead him to the parents from whom he can secure the materials for his gross body. The fine physical vesture that the soul wears has the potency to acquire the necessary material elements. Being associated with food, he enters to the body of the male parent suitable for his purpose. There he gets into the requisite sperm which turns into a potent seed for his development as an individual. This potent seed being united with the requisite ovum in the female parent turns into the zygote and becomes ready for germination. As stated in the Brahadaranyaka Upanishad<sup>7</sup> that reaching the earth while coming down from the celestial sphere, the souls of those who perform sacrificial rites and righteous deeds in order to go the higher region for self-fulfillment becomes good. Then they are again offered in the fire of men, then in the fire of women, whence they are born, with a view to going to other worlds. Thus they rotate until they gain knowledge, which frees them from the cycle of repeated births and deaths.

The Upanishads refer two prime ways, the way of the fathers or Pitriyana and the way of Gods or Devayana<sup>8</sup> by which a departed soul proceeds to enjoy the fruits of its actions done in its lifetime on earth. Pitriyana or the way of fathers is a lot of those who performed charitable deeds or public works or those who has bent on sacrifice and works of piety. It is a way in which the soul after death, enter first into smoke then into night, dark half of the month, the dark half of the year, etc., and at last reaches the moon. The duration of the soul's residence there ends only when the merits of the soul is finished and it descends again through ether, wind, smoke, mist, cloud, rain, plants, food, seeds and through the assimilation of food by man, he enters the womb of the mother which result in rebirth.

Devayana or the way of Gods is meant for those who cultivate worship, faith, and asceticism. On the burning of the body, the soul enters the flame, then the day, the bright half of the month, bright half of the year, the sun, the moon, the lightning and finally into the world of Brahman. He who goes to Devayana does not come back to this world. The Devayana and Pitriyana correspond to the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness or ajnana, which involves us in Samsara. In addition to this, the lot of the wicked appears to have been the third place, which leads to the birth

again as animals of the lower insects, worms or flies. In the Chandogya Upanishad the position is more clear by the division of the classes of the souls which go to the moon into those of God and those of abominable conduct. Thus the reference of the degradation of man into lower levels can be seen in the Upanishads.

The distinction between Devayana and Pitriyana doctrines of Upanishads made to think that those who are faithful and perform sradha had a distinctly different type of goal from those who performed ordinary virtues and this distinction attains its fullest development in the doctrine of emancipation. In the Upanishads the emancipation or *mukti* means the state of infiniteness that a man attains when he knows his own self and thus becomes Brahman. The endless cycle of rebirth is only for those who are ignorant.

He who is liberated has no rebirth. The root cause of rebirth is the unfulfilled desires for worldly enjoyments. According to Upanishads the ignorance of the self about its own nature is the cause of bondage. Thus the only way to remove the ignorance is through the knowledge of Brahman.

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## Foot notes

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