

## The Journey of the Soul According to Ancient Indian Scriptures: Ontology, Afterlife, and Ethical Implications

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the conception of the soul, afterlife, and moral cosmology as articulated in ancient Indian scriptures, including the *Puranas*, *Smritis*, *Mahabharata*, *Manu Smriti*, and *Bhagavad Gita*. Drawing upon textual evidence and doctrinal interpretations, it explores: (1) the nature of the soul's subtle body after death, (2) the mechanisms of transmigration and karmic fruition, and (3) the moral and ritual obligations that guide a soul's post-mortem destiny. The study further examines the role of yogic perception and divine insight in validating esoteric knowledge claims, situating these ancient perspectives in dialogue with select modern claims of near-death experiences and subtle body research. It addresses skepticism toward scriptural authority, arguing that disbelief often stems from socio-cultural dislocation rather than epistemic insufficiency. The paper concludes that ancient paradigms offer a coherent ethical and metaphysical framework for understanding human existential continuity.

Key Words- Ghost, Sharaddha, Purana, Yama, Death.

### Introduction

The question of what happens after death has occupied human thought across cultures and eras. In Indian intellectual and spiritual traditions, this inquiry assumes metaphysical, ethical, and soteriological dimensions. Ancient sages such as *Sanatkumāra*, the *r̥ṣis* featured in the *Puranas*, and the teachers represented in the *Mahābhārata* articulate a worldview in which the soul (*ātman*) survives bodily dissolution and traverses realms in accordance with its accumulated *karma*. Unlike reductive materialist positions, these traditions hold that the soul assumes a subtle body upon death, experiences resultant consequences—whether in heavens, hells, or intermediate states—and is reborn or liberated (*mokṣa*). Classical texts prescribe rigorous ritual and moral disciplines (*dharma*, *yoga*, *shraddhā*) that shape post-mortem outcomes. Despite this longstanding tradition, modernity has witnessed epistemic skepticism toward scriptural authority, often attributed to hybrid identities, atheism, or irreligiosity. Debates continue regarding the validity of ancient metaphysical claims, especially when juxtaposed with empirical science. By integrating textual exegesis with cross-cultural reflections on near-death phenomena and subtle body studies, this paper seeks to clarify foundational doctrines concerning the soul's afterlife journey and their ethical ramifications for human conduct. However, the answer to this question has been given by the ancient sages and we consider the words of our ancient sages as proof. Only hybrid or mixed-

race children will view the bad words of their ancestors with suspicion, not others. The feeling of disbelief in the scriptures can be seen in atheists and irreligious people and doubts have been expressed in the Puranas regarding the origin of religious people. In our view, such irreligious people are outcastes and outcastes and we cannot give them any advice in this regard. By giving sermons to such people, the preacher is blamed.

### Yogic and Scriptural Knowledge of the Soul's Nature and Perception

The *Bhagavad Gita* clearly emphasizes that the soul (*ātman*) persists beyond physical death and that ordinary perception is inadequate to grasp its reality:-

*Utkramantam sthitaam vapi bhunjanam va gunanvitam  
Vimudha nanupashyanti pashyanti gyanchakshusha.*

*(“Whether departing or remaining, the soul experiences qualities; the bewildered do not see it; only the wise see it with the eye of knowledge.”) (Gita 15.10).*

The *Mahabharata* (*Shanti Parva* 253/1–15) elaborates on this by noting that a yogi knows the soul's movements through yogic power, and ascetic sages perceive it through divine sight. These sources affirm that **transcendental insight**—not just ordinary sensory perception—is required to understand the soul's workings. Similarly, the *Manu Smriti* prescribes meditation and yoga to observe the inner self directly: “By the yoga of meditation one attains the path of the inner self” (*Manu* 6.73). These teachings underline a **contemplative epistemology**, where deep inner observation reveals the soul's processes that lie beyond ordinary sense perception. Among ancient sages, *Sanatkumara* is credited with knowledge of post-death transit and the effects of *shraddhā* (ritual offerings). Scriptural citations record that he spoke with divine vision about the attainment of deceased souls and the efficacy of ancestral rites:

*Sanatkumarah provaach pasyan divyen chakshusha /Gaatagataigya: Pretanaam Praptim  
Shraddhasya Chaiva Hi. (Brahmanda 2.28.62; Matsya 141.76–77).*

Thus, the scriptures assert that the true nature of the soul and its post-mortem journey is known through direct spiritual insight bestowed on enlightened seers.

### Post-Death Status of the Soul and Subtle Body Formation

After death, the soul assumes a subtle body. This fact has also been confirmed by research conducted by Western scholars. For example, when American scientists deflated a hollow transparent cylinder and filled it with a chemical solution that was dimly lit and permeated like a fog, when the rats and frogs kept in it were rendered lifeless by a shock of electricity, the similar figure floated in the fog. Such scientific experiments confirm the assumption of a subtle body of the soul after death. Furthermore, based on the experiences of human beings who have been

resurrected in the same body shortly after death and some answers to questions about the afterlife from ghosts summoned through planchets etc., it is known that after death the human soul wanders in many places. It is also stated in the *Smritis* and *Puranas* that a man who studies the Vedas daily, is devoted to chastity and penance and does not betray (violence, hatred) towards living beings attains knowledge of his previous birth. By constant practice of the *Vedas*, purity and austerity. By not milking he remembers the ancient race of beings.

*Vedabhyasen satatam shochen tapasaiva ch.*

*Adohen Cha Bhutanaan Jaati Smrati Paurvikim.*

### **Karma, Yamaloka, and Moral Order**

Based on the factual accounts given by some people around the world who have the memory of their past lives, about their family members and events that happened to them, many Western scholars now also accept that the soul is reborn. Thus, the findings of research by modern psychologists and scientists confirm the philosophy of ancient Indian sages that after death, the soul takes on a subtle body according to its karma and experiences heaven or hell, and thereafter is reborn or attains salvation. After death, the soul of sinful humans is taken by the messengers of *Yama* through the extremely painful *Yamraj* path and presented in the court of *Yamraj*. According to *Varaha Purana*, in the meeting of *Yamraj*, *Manu*, *Prajapati*, *Parashar*, *Atri*, *Auddalaki*, *Apastamba*, *Brihaspati*, *Indra*, *Gautam*, *Shankhalikhit*, *Angira*, *Bhrigu*, *Pulastya*, *Pulah* etc., along with sages like *Yama*, decide the punishment for the sinners. According to *Garudpuran* also, sages like *Atri*, *Vashishtha*, *Pulah*, *Daksh*, *Kratu*, *Angira*, *Jamdagni*, *Bhrigu*, *Pulastya*, *Agastya*, *Narad* etc. advise *Yamraj* in deciding the punishment (*torture*) for the sinners. (*Dr. Garuda Saroddhar 14/36-41*) In that meeting, many kings who had passed away from this world like *Ushinar*, *Sudhanva*, *Vrishparva*, *Jayadratha*, *Raji*, *Sahasrajit*, *Kukshi*, *Durdhadhanva*, *Ripunjay*, *Yuvnashwa*, *Dantavakra*, *Nabhag*, *Ripumangal*, *Karandham*, *Dharmasena*, *Paramarda*, *Parantaka* etc. also performed *Dharmadharmas*. Cooperates with *Yama* in thematic thinking. Apart from the religious, virtuous and just kings who follow their subjects filially, the members of that assembly also include *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas* and *Vaishyas* who follow their dharma properly. There, punishment is decided for the sinners according to their sins. After that, he is immediately sent to the earth with the same *Yamadutas*, where the *Dashagatra* (ten limbs) of his subtle body are formed by the *Pind Daan* done by the funeral rites performers till *Dasha*. In *Dharmakanda (Pretkhand)* 6.66-71 of *Garuda Purana (Vainkateswara Press Edition)*, it is said that the offering of *Pind* on the first day forms the head of the *Bhogadeha* of the *Pretatma*, the offering of *Pind* on the second day forms the neck and shoulders, the offering of *Pind* on the third day forms the heart, the offering of *Pind* on the fourth day forms the back, the offering of *Pind* on the fifth day forms the navel, the offering of *Pind* on the sixth day forms the waist, the offering of *Pind* on the seventh day forms the genitals, the offering of *Pind* on the eighth day forms the thighs (checks) and the

offering of *Pind* on the ninth day forms the palate and feet. Legs are formed and its appetite is generated by *Pind Daan* on the tenth day.

*Prathamehhani yah pindasten murdha prajayate.*

The neck and shoulders should be in the diviti and the trite lake.

*Chaturthe'hni bhavet pashtam panchme nabhirev cha.*

*Shatsaptme Katiguhyamuru Chapyashtme and.*

*Janu Padau Cha Navame Dashmehni Appetite Bhavet. (Garuda U. 5/66-68; Garuda, Dharamkand Pre-Kh0 6.66-71).*

The ghost accepts as food the bodies given on the days of *Ekadshah* and *Dwadshah*.  
*Ekadashahe twelfthshahe preto bhunkte dindvayam.*

On the thirteenth day, Yamdoot takes him for the great journey to Yamalok.

*Trayodshehni sa preto niyate ca mahapathe. (Garudapuran Dharamkand Pre-K0 6.76).*

When the Dashagatra is completed by offering Shraddha for the dead person for ten days, a sinful person goes to Yamalok and suffers torture, but a religious person attains happiness in heaven. It takes on another body, which it is controlled by its own actions. You will enjoy suffering and happiness. O sinful one, for the sake of righteousness, (Agni 203/3). It is worth remembering that after death, only humans have to remain in ghost form for some time and only their ghostly souls are taken to *Yamalok* by the messengers of *Yama*. Other living beings neither become ghosts after death nor are they taken to *Yamaloka*. Apart from humans, all the creatures of other species take birth again in some species after death. Only humans are heard of being ghosts, no such thing has been heard about other animals.

Human beings and Gachchanti do not reach Yamaloka. (72 *Marananantram Teshan Jantunam Yonipuranam*).

*And hi preta manujah shruyante naanyajantavh. (Skanda 1.2.5072-3)*

Animals, birds etc., the creatures of different types of births, after death, wander in the form of air and come back to the womb of a particular birth place to take birth in that birth place. Only humans have to die and is taken to Yamalok-

*Marananantaram proktam tirashcha garbhasambhavam.*

*Vayubhutascha te garbham prapadyante na samayasah.*

*Manyastu Mrito Ram Niyate Yamamandiram. (Vishnudharmottara 2.113.8-6).*

Only man has to suffer the good and bad consequences of his auspicious and inauspicious deeds in this world as well as in the next world. As a result of his auspicious or inauspicious deeds, only man has to suffer heaven or hell, not other living beings. Only human beings accumulate

auspicious or inauspicious deeds, that is, the good and bad deeds of only human beings keep getting accumulated. Therefore, only human beings go to *Yamalok* to enjoy the fruits of their deeds. The creatures of other births do not go there, because they take birth in different births and enjoy the fruits of their deeds done in human life.

*Manushya: Pratipadyante swarga narakameva va.*

*Naivanye praninah kechit sarvam te phalbhoginah.*

But it is not mandatory for all human beings to go to *Yamaloka* after death. Only sinful souls are taken there. Lord Vishnu's advisors themselves come and take the virtuous souls with them and they follow the path. While being in the meeting of *Dharmaraj*, after being honored by him, they go to heaven or *Vaikuntha* world. It has been discussed many times about who does not go to *Yamalok*. For example - Those people who follow the scriptures (orders) related to *Dharma* and *Adharma*, they do not go to *Yamalok*, those people who do not hurt others in any situation through mind, words and deeds, they also do not go to *Yamalok*. The person who is engaged in the favorite religions (*Yagya*, worship of gods, hospitality etc.) and the sacred religions (well, water, pond, etc.). They build *Dharamshala*, *Devalaya* etc. and do tree plantation etc., perform daily *Panchayagyas* and are kind in nature, they do not go to *Yamalok*.

*Ishtapuratarata ye cha panchayagyartaashcha ye.*

*Dayanvitashcha ye nityam nekshante te yamalayam. (Padma 3.31.42...)*

After death, virtuous people attain heaven according to their deeds. *Yagyavalkya* has said that a person who is self-aware, who follows the rules of purity, has self-control, is ascetic, has controlled senses, performs religious duties, is knowledgeable in the *Vedas*, and has a virtuous nature, attains the status of a deity. The above-mentioned virtuous souls attain the divine realms according to their good deeds. Those who are sinful, unrighteous, immoral, ruthless, cruel, and wicked not only suffer the consequences of their misdeeds on the path of death, but also suffer torment in hell and are subsequently born in various vile forms. A virtuous person who performs good deeds, due to the influence of his righteous conduct, not only remains happy and famous in this world, but also remains happy in the afterlife and in the next life. Sinful and unrighteous people who commit misdeeds remain condemned and suffer in this world, and after death, they also suffer on the great journey to *Yamaloka*. A person who consumes meat that has not been offered to the gods and steals the wealth of gods and Brahmins is also a ghost. (*Varaha 174.43-46*).

Thus, the above facts make it clear that in the view of the *Puranas*, almost all types of unrighteous, characterless, immoral, and unjust people can be ghosts. It is noteworthy that those who perform righteous deeds, are forgiving, kind, and have virtuous righteous people are not ghosts. Such views are expounded in detail in the *Varaha Purana* and others. Evidence of a deceased soul being a ghost - If a deceased soul appears to family members, relatives, or

acquaintances in a dream, it should be understood that it has neither attained liberation nor has it gone to heaven or hell, nor has it attained salvation, nor has it been reborn in any other form. Appearing in a dream means that the deceased soul is still in the form of a ghost (*Skanda 6.226.4-6*).

### **Ghostly States (*Preta*) and Familial Afflictions; the Haunting Pain**

A deceased soul that remains a ghost due to lack of salvation not only suffers pain (sufferings like hunger, thirst, etc.) on its own, but also causes various kinds of suffering to family members. Some of the sufferings caused by ghosts are mentioned here. In a family where the menstrual period of women passes fruitlessly and as a result of not being able to bear children, there is no growth of the family, where people die at a young age, the means of livelihood is suddenly lost (*vocation is taken away*), the family members have no reputation in the society, a fire breaks out suddenly, there is constant quarrel in the house, family members are falsely defamed or falsely blamed, diseases like tuberculosis etc. arise, the money earned with great effort is completely destroyed when invested in business or interest etc., agriculture is destroyed even after good rains, the profession (*livelihood*) is destroyed through commerce and the wife always behaves adversely in the house, then it should be believed that that family is suffering from ghost-affliction. (*Garudapuran U. (Kashi No.) 10/13-38*).

The standard of some families is so low and corrupt that attracted by the misbehavior of their members and the polluted environment of their homes, ghosts make their camp there and invisibly swallow all the wealth of those homes. For example, it has been said that in a house where there is no cleaning and dusting or sweeping in a house with concrete floors and where there are no auspicious activities and hospitality etc., *ghosts* eat food.

The level of some families is so low and corrupt that phantoms, attracted by the misconduct of their members and the polluted atmosphere of their houses, set up their tents there and invisibly swallow all the splendor of those houses. For example, it is said that in a house where there is no *marjan* (*cleaning*) and *uplepana* (*lipai-potai or sweeping in a house with a paved floor*) and where there are no auspicious rituals and no hospitality etc., ghosts eat. In which we are wiped and not smeared. There is no auspiciousness or hospitality for the dead enjoy there.

*Yasminno marjanam hamye kriyate nopalepanam.*

Neither wish nor welcome: *Preta bhunjanti tatra hi.*

In houses where phlegm and feces are lying and no attention is paid to cleanliness, the ghosts eat (*Garuda Purana A. (Kashi ed.) 10/13-3*): (Ghosts eat food in those houses where there is phlegm and excreta and urine is not taken care of).

*Mucus mutrapurishena yojitani samantah.*

*Grihāni tyaktaśouchāni preta bhunjanti tatra vai.*

*Varaha 172.28; Dr. Padma 1.32.33. (Varaha 172.28; Dr. Padma 1.32.33).*

In the houses where utensils etc. are scattered and sweets are scattered and in the houses where there is daily discord, *ghosts* eat food there. The houses have been abandoned and the dead are eating there. In houses where falsehoods are scattered, and where there is constant quarreling, *ghosts* eat (*Boar 172.28; D. Padma*). The remains were scattered, there is always quarreling where the dead eat.

That is,

*Prakirrabhandani Prakirnochheshanani Ch. Nityam Cha Kalho Yatra Preta Bhunjanti Tatra Vai. (Varaha 172.30; Dr. Padma 1.32.34).*

In houses where broken vessels are not abandoned (thrown away) and the sound of Vedic mantras is not heard, *ghosts* eat (*Boar 172.30; See Padma*).

*Bhinnbhaandparityago yatra na kriyate grhaye.*

*Na cha Vedadhvaniryatra preta bhunjanti tatra hi. (Skanda 6.18.23).*

*Ghosts* find their food in homes where people do not respect their teachers, are women-dominated and are under the influence of anger and greed, are feminine, the *ghosts* find their food (*Skanda*). Gurus are not worshiped and houses conquered by women are not worshipped.

*Guruvao Naiva Pujyante Strijitani Grihani Ch. Krodh Lobhagrihitani Preta Bhunjanti Tatra Vai. (Padma 1. 32. 36.)*

*Ghosts* eat food in those houses where people are shameless and do not perform *homa* and fasts etc., eat ghost food (*Padma 32. 36*) and those without shame of mind and without sacrifice. There the dead eat food devoid of vows (*Skanda 18.20.20*).

*Chittalajjavihinani homahinani i.e. Ch. Vrataishchaiva vihinani preta bhunjanti tatra va. (Skanda 6. 18. 20).*

At the time of the banquet in the house where the women fight even the dead eat almost all the mantras and herbs there. If *shraddha* or charity is performed at night at times other than the festival period, it is also for the *ghosts*. Food is made from- Whatever is done in the country is tired or tanned and devoid of festivals. All that, O tiger of the *Napas*, will be food for the dead. In the Garuda Purana it is clearly stated that no one can be happy in a family in which there is a *ghost-dosha*. In that family, the mind, love, passion, intelligence and *Lakshmi* (wealth) of men are destroyed and their lineage is destroyed from the third to the fifth generation. A person suffering from ghost-pain remains poor and destitute in every birth.

*Bhojyakaale grah yatra women would start wars.  
Api mantraushadhiprayam preta bhunjanti tatra hi. (Skanda 6.18.16).*

Food which consists of hair, urine, mucus (*phlegm*) etc. and which food (*of the Brahmins*) is touched by a man of the lower caste or by a person of inferior caste becomes the food of the ghosts (*Skanda 6.18.16*). That food which is soaked with hair, urine, mucus, etc. That which is touched by inferior races is born to us (*Skanda*), and the food (*of double castes*) which is touched, that food becomes the food of ghosts.

*Yadannam Kesh-Utradishleshmadibhirupputam.  
Heenajaatyaisch sansprishtam tadasmaakam prajayate. (Skanda 3.18.28).*

If *Shraddha* or charity is performed at night during times other than festivals, then that too is in danger of being haunted by ghosts.  
Only food is made.

*Ganau yatkriyate shrantam tanam va parvavarjitam.  
Tatsarvam napshardal pretanam bhojanam bhavet.*

It is clearly stated in *Garuda Purana* that no person can be happy in a family where there is *ghost-dosha*. In that family, the will, love, love, intelligence and *Lakshmi* (wealth) of the people get destroyed and by the time they reach the third to fifth generation, their entire lineage gets destroyed. A person suffering from ghostly pain remains destitute and poor in every birth.

*Pretadosh: Kul Yasya Sukham Tatra Na Vidyate.  
Matih preeti, ratirbuddhirlakshmi panchvinashanam,  
Tritiye panchme punsi vanshchhedo abhijayate.*

May the poor be destitute and their sinful deeds.

It becomes clear from the above description that ghosts are not beneficial in any situation and for anyone. It is discussed in many places in the Puranas how oppressed and thirsty the ghosts themselves are. Ghosts exploit the happiness, health, prosperity and progress of their family members. Therefore, after the death of every human being, all the rites, from the last rites prescribed by the scriptures to cremation, must be performed as per the rules and regulations to free him from ghosts. After leaving the body, *Siddha-Yogi*, *Vitarag Sannyasi* and religious devotees of God may attain salvation immediately, but common people attain the state of ghost only. Therefore, after death, it is very important to perform the last rites etc. to free the common people from ghosts. People who die due to various reasons like *Brahmadanda* and those people

for whom cremation etc. have not been performed are not eligible for *Shraddha* and good deeds, that is, even if *Shraddha* rituals are done for them, they cannot get them. There is no *agnisatkriya* for those who are equipped with *Brahmadanda* and others.

*Shraddhadisatkriyabhajo na bhavantih te kvachit. (Katyayana Smriti 24.26).*

Therefore, the person who dies somewhere far away in a foreign country or whose dead body is not available after his death, is cremated by making an effigy of him. Ancient sages believe that a day in the ghostly world is equal to a day in the human world. Therefore, for the sake of feeding the soul, food should be provided every day for a year -

*Manushen Dineev Pretaloke Dinam Smritam.*

*Tasmad din dein din pretayanam cha vatsaram. (Skanda 1/2/50/86)*

All the rituals till *Antyeshti Prabhruti Uttam-Shodashi* culminate in *Sapindikaran Shraddha*. Even if the deceased person was a pious and ascetic during his lifetime, he does not attain salvation until his body is donated.

### Skepticism toward Scriptural Authority and Cultural Perspectives

We consider the words of our ancestors as proof. Only hybrid or hybrid children will view the words of their ancestors with suspicion, no one else. A sense of disbelief in the scriptures can be seen among atheists and irreligious people and doubts are expressed in the *Puranas* about the origin of irreligious people. Such irreligious people are caste outcasts and casteless in our view and we cannot give them any advice in this regard. It is the *Upadhyaya* (preacher) who is to blame for preaching to such people. (*Universe 2.28.68-6; Vayu P. 56.60; Fish 141.58*)

Whether standing or standing up or eating, it is endowed with virtues. The deluded do not see but those with the eyes of knowledge see. The views on this subject described in *Mahabharata Shantiparva 253/1-15* can also be seen. From such words it is clear that the yogi knows the movements of the soul by his yogic power and the ascetic wise sages by their divine eyes of knowledge. *Manu* has also said that the movement of the soul within this body should be observed by meditation-yoga. By the practice of meditation one can see the movement of this inner self. (*Gita 15/1*). Among the ancient Indian sages, *Sanatkumara* also had knowledge about the transmigration of the dead souls to the afterlife and their satisfaction by *shraddha*. (*Manu 73*). *Sanatkumara* spoke, looking with divine eyes. He knew the past and the present and the attainment of the dead and the *shraddha*. Therefore, the *Puranas* have described the truth about the soul on the basis of the facts told by the sages and yogis endowed with transcendental knowledge like *Sanatkumara* of ancient times. (*Universe 2.28.62; air precedence 56.83; Fish 141.76-7*).

A day in the world of the dead is remembered by a human being; therefore one should give food to the deceased daily for one year (*Skanda 1/2/50/8*). All the rituals from funeral to *Uttama-*

*Shodashi* are completed in *Sapindakarana Shraddha*. Even if the deceased person has been a *Patan Dharmatya* and *Tapasti* during his lifetime, he does not attain liberation until his body is donated.

## Conclusion

Ancient Indian scriptures present a detailed metaphysical and ethical account of the soul's destiny beyond death, rooted in concepts of karmic justice, ritual efficacy, and spiritual realization. Through the testimonies of sages endowed with yogic and divine perception, these texts describe a continuum of existence in which the soul, after departing the physical body, assumes a subtle body, encounters the consequences of its actions, and is reborn or liberated. Ghostly states (*preta*) are depicted not merely as supernatural occurrences but as reflective of moral incompleteness and unresolved karmic debt. The paper argues that skepticism toward these doctrines often arises from epistemic paradigms that prioritize empirical materialism over contemplative insight. However, when understood on their own prescriptive and experiential terms, ancient paradigms offer a robust framework for interpreting human existential continuity. Ritual obligations like *shraddhā* and ethical conduct remain central to this worldview, underscoring the interdependence of morality, cosmology, and human destiny. Ultimately, the dialogues between ancient insights and modern perspectives on consciousness and post-mortem experiences enrich both philosophical inquiry and lived religious practice.

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