

Immortality in Veda: An Analysis with Special Reference to the Rigveda

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Abstract:

The Vedas are regarded as one of the earliest instances of written literature and as the epitomes of Indian knowledge and philosophical tenets. The inherent philosophical framework of the Vedas is great facilitator of human insight about seminal issues like Life, Death, Mortality, and Immortality and so on. Vedas are always prescribing a balanced and measured way of life by bridging the gap between life and death. Life and Death are not two extremes; rather they are interrelated and co-existed. In the perspective of transitoriness of human body and the immortality of soul, the Vedas talk about the attainment of Immortality by understanding the truth about the cycle of life and death. Rigveda, in particular, does have significant instances and references about the idea of Immortality-its nature and the means of attaining the same. The present Paper looks into the idea of immortality represented in the Rigveda with a view of extracting the philosophical and pragmatic understanding of the same with the help of a descriptive and analytical approach.

Keywords: Immortality, Vedas, Rigveda, Philosophy, Life, Death

The Vedas are the epitomes of Indian knowledge and philosophy incorporating in itself almost all the fundamental aspects of life and the world. The phenomenon of Immortality, described as *amrta* is one of the seminal issues of human life taken over by the Vedas gearing up insightful and philosophical horizon of understanding. The Vedas has been talking of a balanced life; they talked about the relation between life and death in a very optimistic manner and the relation between life and death has been apprehended through the demarcation of three stages: *Mrtyu*, *Atimrtyu* and *Amrta* which can be understood as Mortality, Trans-Mortality and Immortality. Though these three stages seem to be independent entity, but understanding them in isolation is not possible as they are deeply interrelated to each other.

Veda is talking about a fruitful and balanced human life. Rigveda (10.13.1) refers man as *amrtasya putrah* i.e. the son of immortality:

युजे वां ब्रह्म पूर्वं नमोभिर्वि श्लोक एतु पथ्येव सूरेः । शृण्वन्तु विश्वे अमृतस्य पुत्रा आ ये धामानि दिव्यानि तस्थुः ॥

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Now the question arises how man can attain immortality as the mortal nature of being is universal. Here comes the idea of trans-mortality; trans-mortality refers to the sum total of the requisite eligibility through which mortal human being can attain immortality. It is the midway sojourn between the extreme poles of death and immortality. Immortality has been delineated as the highest goal of human life and it can be attained by acquiring the requisite eligibility. Veda holds an optimistic view about life and in living a fully accomplished life it prescribes the way of subverting the thread of death. The famous

Mrityunjaya Mantra in Rikveda (7.59.12) holds this essence of attaining immortality by breaking and crossing the bondage of the thread of death:

त्र्यम्बकं यजामहे सुगन्धिं पुष्टिवर्धनम् । उर्वारुकमिव बन्धनान्मृत्योर्मुक्षीय मामृतात् ॥

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The basic essence of this vedic thought is that man can attain a perfect blissful life in spite of the inevitable presence of death. Immortality is thus not a utopian idea in Veda, rather it has been treated in a pragmatic way and that makes it relevant all through the ages. This optimistic view about life and immortality has been exemplified in Rigveda also. Rigveda talks about hundred bounteous autumns to be lived out by a man: *shatam jiivantu sharadah puruuchiirantarmrityu dadhataa parvaten* (10.18.4) which means may man lives for hundred blissful autumn by keeping death far away.

It is to be noted that Veda is not denying death; rather death has been delineated as an eternal and inevitable condition of life. Rigveda itself has refers man as *mrityubandhavah* i.e. companion of death (8.18.22). Again it has been reminded that none can live indefinitely as it would against the divine design of creation:

na devaanaamati vrata.m shataatmaa chana jiivati .

tathaa yujaa vi va vrte (10.33.9)

But the point is that death should not be regarded as a factor forbidding mortals from living a blissful long life. In the perspective of the inevitability of death, Vedic thought deal death from two perspectives. Firstly death is delineated as a process of *dehanta* i.e. death as a material and physical phenomenon being the decay of the physical body. But this physical death can't stop the continuity of life in the earth; so Rigveda straightly urges people that someone's death should not stop us from living our life to the fullest (10.18.5). Accordingly it has been argued that at the physical level itself, continuity of life even after physical death signifies the transcendence of mortality:

Devebhyo hi prathamam yajniyebhyo 'mrtatvam suvasi

bhāgamuttamam Ādiddānāmaṃ savitarvyūrnuse 'nucīnā

jīvitā mānusebhyah. (4.54.2)

The continuity of life in spite of the inevitably potent existence of death marks the essence of the Vedic idea of transcendence of mortality and that of immortality. The body dies but the spirit is immortal and it reaches out to its eternal abode. The Vedic thought preaches to uplift the mortal beings to the level of immortality by making them undergoing this universal condition of being. The mortal being can attain the sense of immortality by subverting the death-thread and hence the Veda projects death and immortality as complementary to each other:

Yasyacchāyā amrtam yasya mrtyuh (10.121.2)

The immortal soul moves from one life to another through the means of the mortal bodies and hence immortality can't be realized or understood without the mortal experience. This close association of death and immortality has also been aptly described in the Atharbaveda:

Anacchaye turagātu jivamejadbhuvam madhya ā pastyānām

Jīvo mrtasya carati svadhābhiramartyo martyenā sayonih (9.10.8)

The body is mortal and the soul is immortal. Again mortality is given to living being while immortality is the highest goal of the being. In order to attain this ultimate goal and in order to bridging together the two extreme of death and immortality one must possess the knowledge of the Supreme. One can attain immortality by transcending death and this process is possible only by knowing and realizing the Supreme. Yajurveda has referred to a term of *Atimrtyu* i.e. trans-mortality which, as we have already

pointed out, designates the requisite criterion of attaining the ultimate goal of immortality (31.18). Hence trans-mortality is the bridging medium of the two extremes of death and immortality. No one can attain immortality unless he or she transcends death and death can only be transcended by realizing the essential truth that it is the body which dies while the indwelling spirit or soul is beyond death.

The pragmatic approach of death and life in vedic philosophy is a matter to be cherished. Rigveda has firmly prescribed that the inevitability of death should not forbid man from living a fruitful life. The body should not perish before living a fulfilled life and it should drop off like a ripe cucumber:

Tryambakam yajamahe sugandhim pustivardhanam

Urvarukamiva bandhanat mrtyormuksiya mamartat (RV. 7/59/12)

Death is not a forbidding factor in living life and after the perish of the body, the immortal soul transcends to the ultimate abode. Thus a life with fruitfulness and transcendence of the soul to the abode of immortality is within the reach of mortal beings. This can be guaranteed by mortal being through his/her action, behavior and through attaining the knowledge of the Supreme, which designated the understanding of the cycle of life, death and immortality.

To sum up, it has been observed how Veda has treated death and immortality not as two extremes of existence; rather they are observed as complementary to each other. The promise of a fulfilled mortal life along with the viability of the transcendence to the immortality is the core to the Vedic Philosophy that makes it pragmatic in approach.

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