

The Garuda Purana

Translated by

Ernest Wood and S.V. Subrahmanyam



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This is a translation of an abridged version of the Garuda Purana. The Garuda Purana is one of the Vishnu Puranas. It is in the form of a dialog between Vishnu and Garuda, the King of Birds. The second section of this Purana (given here) deals with issues connected with death, particularly funeral rites and the metaphysics of reincarnation.

Of interest are the intermediate states between birth and rebirth.

The Garuda Purana starts with the details of the afterlife. Following this is an account of funeral procedures, including rituals, the astrological timing of the post-death observances, and ritual gifts. After that is an enumeration of correspondences between the macrocosmos and the human body. The final part of this text is an appeal to self-knowledge as the key to liberation, going beyond austerities and study of the texts. "The fool, not knowing that the truth is seated in himself, is bewildered by the Shastras, - a foolish goatherd, with the young goat under his arm, peers into the well."

THE
GARUDA PURĀṆA

(SĀRODDHĀRA)

WITH ENGLISH TRANSLATION

BY

ERNEST WOOD

AND

S.V. SUBRAHMANYAM

AND

AN INTRODUCTION FROM SRIS CHANDRA VASU

Allahabad: Pāṇiṇi Office

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INTRODUCTION

This Garuḍa Purāṇa Sārodhhāra (Extracted essence of the Garuḍa Purāṇa) was compiled or written by one Navanidhirāma, son of Śrī Hari Nārāyaṇa, who lived in the city of Jhunjhuṇū, which was ruled by a King Śrī Sūkhalājī. It was done for the helping of those who cannot understand the difficult earlier works; but itself is not easy to understand, and required much labour, the author informs us. It is entirely originally written, he says, and comprises the results of very deep study of the sacred books, and is the extracted essence of them on the subjects with which it deals.

It is used all over India at funeral ceremonies, but some are afraid to read it on other occasions, thinking it inauspicious.

Chapters I to VII deal with Hells.

Chapters VII to XIII deal with Ceremonies for the dead.

Chapter XIV deals with Heaven.

Chapters XV & XVI deal with Yoga and liberation.

The neo-theosophists, among the great good they have done to the world, have revived the idea that Hell is a living reality, and not a superstitious fiction, created by a designing priestcraft, to keep Humanity on its good behavior. Among the educated, with the vanishing of the belief in an after-life, has vanished also the belief in Hell. But owing to the labors of the Psychical Research Society and similar other bodies, there are few educated persons now, who deny the existence of the afterlife, as they used to do some thirty years back. But though the belief in after-life has revived, yet the cognate belief in Heaven and Hell is still very vague. Our Hindu Puranas, however, among the great mass of rubbish that they contain, have always been very clear on this question of Heaven and Hell. Serious writers of law books also like Yājñavalkya and Viṣṇu have described as-seriously the existences of various Hells, as they have done the various joys of Heaven. No doubt, the subject of Hell is not a very savoury one, and nervous persons have always fought shy of studying this unpleasant department of existence. But, pleasant or unpleasant, the science does not take into account the human feelings. No one is forced to study the subject, unless he feels strong enough to do so, as no one is bound to study Medicine, unless he is prepared to face the scenes of the dissecting room.

The question then is, do these hells really exist? If so, where? This is a question of fact, and must be decided like all questions of fact, on the evidence of reliable witnesses who have, from personal experience, described this region. To a Hindu there is needed no greater testimony than that of Yogi Yājñavalkya who, in the Pāyāschitta Adhyāya of his law book, mentions 21 hells. The author of Viṣṇu Smṛiti also has followed in his footsteps. Hell, then, according to Hindu seers, is a particular locality walled off from the surrounding regions of space by the messengers of Yama, the ruler of Hell. Within this particular space so specially guarded, no joy can enter. It is a region of pain - sharp, intense and severe. Sinners clothed in their painful bodies (jātana deha) - replica of their physical bodies, though made of subtler matter, suffer the punishments deserved by their sins. But there is one distinguishing mark between the Hindu idea of Hell and that of votaries of Semitic creeds. The punishment in Hell is not eternal. It is Reformatory and Educative. The hell punishment is not remembered by the soul when it is re-born, no more than it remembers the joys of heaven. But the permanent educative effect remains in that part of the sold - called the conscience. The natural fear, which certain souls feel at the sight of temptation to sin, is the result of the finer development of conscience, in the furnace of hell-fire. This is the permanent gain which the soul has

acquired, and which it will never lose through ages to come, by passing through the bitterness of the valley of Yama - the merciful ruler of Hell.

Where is then this Hell situated? According to Hindu belief, its locality is in the astral region of the physical South Pole, as the Heaven is situated in the astral region of the physical North Pole. As a prison house is a prison only to the criminal, but not to the visitor, who goes there on his mission of mercy and charity, so Hell is a place of punishment and pain only to the sinners and not to those who go there on similar missions. The readers of the Hindu Sacred literature will no doubt remember the beautiful episode of Nachiketas going to Hell, and learning from its Ruler the secret of cosmic evolution, miscalled the secret of death.

The twenty-two hells are described in the Viṣṇu Smṛiti. (See Sacred Books of the East, Viṣṇu Smṛiti, pp. 140-141, verse 22, Lohachāraka).

After being thus purified by Hell-fire, the soul is re-born with keener conscience and under circumstances where it can, if it so chooses, make better use of its faculties. Says Yājñavalkya in verse 218 of the Third Adhyāya that the lords of mercy place such souls in very favourable circumstances afterwards.¹

But if the soul so favourably placed, omits to do good action or commits evil deeds again, and leaves its senses unrestrained, there is again a fall for that soul, as is mentioned in the next verse.²

Is there any physical Hell also, or is it in the astral plane only? As Heaven is both physical and astral, and as the Svarga is on the physical plane also, where the great ṛiṣis like Vyāsa, Aśvathāman, Mārkaṇḍeya and others are said to be still living in their physical bodies, so there are physical hells also, though not known as Hells. What are these prison houses in every well-governed community but physical hells? What is this outcasting by the society, but making one feel the torture of hell, in fact Gautama in his law book definitely calls this stage hell, and some say that Gautama did not believe, in another form of hell.

Thus the fact of concrete existence of hell cannot be doubted. Leaving the testimony of Hindu seers aside, in modern times we have the evidence of a hard-headed man of science like Swedenborg, of a refined artist and poet like Dante, and the great sage Rāmkrīṣṇa Paramahansa.

Is there any means by which a man may save himself from the pains of hell? On this point, our ancient authors held different opinions. One class of thinkers held the view that sin could not be expiated by any act of man, however meritorious it be in its nature, but one must suffer the full consequences of his sins. The later view, which has gained ascendancy now, is that for the intentional mortal sins - kāma kṛitamahāpātaka, - there is no penance, except the death penance, which can save the man from future troubles. Several kinds of death penances are described in our law books, and in this age, a very salutary rule is laid down by the paṇḍits that no death penance should ever be described, if a sinner asks the paṇḍit for the appropriate penance of his sin. Thus in certain cases of incest, the only operative penance is to embrace a red-hot iron image and die in that way. Similarly, the penance for drinking spirituous liquors is death by drinking boiling liquors or butter. But no Paṇḍit is allowed, by the rule of the present Iron age, to describe these death penances to any sinner. The result therefore, is that according to the law, every mortal sinner must pass through the period of purificatory process of hell. For minor sins, the rule is different. The after-life consequences can be warded off by appropriate penances. And here is a rich field which the Brāhmiṇ priestcraft of India, preying on the gullibility of its votaries, has exploited to its extreme

extent. For every sin, there is a penance, and also a pilgrimage, with its concomitant result in the shape of so much fee (dakṣiṇā) to be paid to the Brāhmiṇ.

Penances have become a farce in Modern India. Like the dispensations of the Popes of Rome, penances can be compounded by the payment of amounts ranging from a cowrie shell to thousands of rupees to Brāhmiṇs. It is not that the gifts to a deserving man washes away sins, for modern Hinduism has done everything in its power to throw in 'the background that rational idea, but a gift to a Brāhmiṇ, however bad he may be, as the saying goes that no one feeds a docile donkey, but a kicking cow, for the sake of her milk. This presupposes that a kicking Brāhmiṇ has milk to give, which is far from the truth.

The practice of Prāyaścittas or penances is based upon a more rational basis. Repentance for sin is the highest prāyaścitta, the infliction of bodily pains is of secondary importance. One who has performed such penance has exhausted the evil effects of his sins and for him there is no penance.

Footnotes

No.1:"Afterwards freed from all sins, they are born in high families, where they enjoy pleasures, and become accomplished in arts and sciences, and possessed of wealth."

No. 2: Mandalik's Hindu Law, p. 265, verse 219.

GARUDA PURĀNA

HOMAGE TO THE BLESSED GANEṢA

I. An Account of the Miseries of the Sinful in this World and the Other

1. The tree Madhusūdana, - whose firm root is Law, whose trunk is the Vedas, whose abundant branches are the Purāṇas, whose flowers are sacrifices, and whose fruit is liberation, - excels.

2. In Naimiṣa, the field of the sleepless Ones¹, the sages, Saunaka and others, performed sacrifices for thousands of years to attain the Heaven-world.

3-5. Those sages once, in the morning, having offered oblations to the sacrificial fire respectfully asked this of the revered Sūta sitting there:

The sages said: The happiness-giving path of the Shining Ones has been described by you. We now wish to hear about the fear-inspiring Way of Yama²;

Also of the miseries of the World of Change³, and the means of destroying its pains. Please tell us correctly about the afflictions of this world and the other.

6. Suta said: Listen then. I am willing to describe the way of Yama, very difficult to tread, happiness-giving, to the virtuously inclined, misery-giving to the sinful.

7. As it was declared to Vainateya⁴ by the Blessed Viṣṇu, when asked; just so will I relate it, to remove your difficulties.

8-9. Once, when the Blessed Hari, the Teacher, was sitting at ease in Vaikuṅṭha, the son of Vinatā⁴, having bowed reverently, inquired:

Garuḍa said: The Path of Devotion, of many forms, has been described to me by you, and also, O Shining One, has been told the highest goal of the devotees.

10. Now I wish to hear about the fearsome Way of Yama, along which is the travelling, it is revealed, of those who turn away from devotion to Thee.

11. The name of the Lord is easily pronounced, and the tongue is under control. Fie, fie upon the wretched men who nevertheless go to hell!

12. Tell me, then, O Lord, to what condition the sinful come, and in what way they obtain the miseries of the Way of Yama.

13. The Blessed Lord said: Listen, O Lord of Birds, and I will describe the Way of Yama, terrible even to hear about, by which those who are sinful go in hell.

14-16. O Tārkaṣya, those who delight in sin, destitute of compassion and righteousness, attached to the wicked, averse from the true scriptures and the company of the good,

Self-satisfied, unbending, intoxicated with the pride of wealth, having the ungodly qualities, lacking the divine attributes,

Bewildered by many thoughts, enveloped in the net of delusion, revelling in the enjoyments of the desire-nature, - fall into a foul hell.

17. Those men who are intent upon wisdom go to the highest goal; the sinfully-inclined go miserably to the torments of Yama.

18. Listen how the misery of this world accrues to the sinful, then how they, having passed through death, meet with torments.

19. Having experienced the good or the bad actions, in accordance with his former earning, - then, as the result of his⁵ actions, some disease arises.

20. Powerful death, unexpectedly, like a serpent, approaches him stricken with bodily and mental pain, yet anxiously hoping to live.

21-24. Not yet tired of life, being cared for by his dependents, with his body deformed through old age, nearing death, in the house,

He remains, like a house-dog, eating what is ungraciously placed before him, diseased, with failing digestion, eating little, moving little,

With eyes turned up through loss of vitality, with tubes obstructed by phlegm, exhausted by coughing and difficult breathing, with the death rattle in his throat,

Lying encircled by his sorrowing relatives; though being spoken to he does not answer, being caught in the noose of death.

25. In this condition, with mind busy with the support of his family, with senses unconquered, swooning with intense pain he dies amidst his weeping relatives.

26. In this last moment, O Tārkaṣya, a divine vision arises,--all the worlds appear as one, - and he does not attempt to say anything.

27. Then, at the destruction of the decayed senses and the numbing of the intelligence, the messengers of Yama come near and life departs.

28. When the breath is leaving its place, the moment of dying seems an age, and pain like the stinging of hundred scorpions is experienced.

29. Now he emits foam; his mouth becomes filled with saliva. The vital breaths of the sinful depart by the lower gateway.

30-31. Then, two terrifying messengers of Yama are come, of fierce aspect, bearing nooses and rods, naked, with grinding teeth.

As black as crows, with hair erect, with ugly faces, with nails like weapons; seeing whom his heart palpitates and he releases excrements.

32. The man of the size of a thumb, crying out 'oh, oh,' is dragged from the body by the servants of Yama, looking the while at his own body.

33. Having put round him a body of torment, and bound the noose about his neck, they forcibly lead him a long way, like the king's officers a convict.

34-35. While thus leading him the messengers menace him, and recount over and over again the awful terrors of the hells,

'Hurry up, you wicked man. You shall go to the abode of Yama. We will lead you now, without delay, to Kumbhīpāka and the other hells.'

36. Then hearing these words, and the weeping of his relatives; crying loudly 'Oh, oh,' he is beaten by the servants of Yama.

37-38. With failing heart and shuddering at their threats, bitten by clogs upon the way, afflicted, remembering his misdeeds.

Hungry and thirsty, roasting in the sun, forest-fires and hot winds, struck upon the back with whips, painfully he walks, almost powerless, along a road of burning sand, shelterless and waterless.

30-40. Here and there falling exhausted and insensible, and rising again, - in this way, very miserably led through the darkness to the abode of Yama,

The man is brought there in a short time and the messengers show him the terrible torments of hell.

41. Having seen the fearful Yama, the man, after a time, by command of Yama, swiftly comes back through the air, with the messengers.

42. Having returned, bound by his past tendencies, desiring the body but held back with a noose by the followers of Yama, tortured by hunger and thirst, he weeps.

43. He obtains the rice-balls given by his offspring, and the gifts made during the time of his illness. Nevertheless, O Tārkaṣya, the sinful Denier does not obtain gratification.

44. The Śrāddha⁶, the gifts, and the handful of water, for the sinful, do not uplift. Although they eat the rice-ball offering, still they are tortured with hunger.

45. Those who are in the departed condition, deprived of the rice-ball offering, wander about in great misery, in an uninhabited forest, until the end of the age.

46. Karma not experienced does not die away even in thousands of millions of ages; the being who has not experienced the torment certainly does not obtain the human form.

47. Hence, O Twice-born⁷, for ten days the son should offer rice-balls. Every day these are divided into four portions, O Best of Birds.

48. Two portions give nourishment to the five elements of the body; the third goes to the messengers of Yama; he lives upon the fourth.

40. For nine days and nights the departed obtains rice-balls, and on the tenth day the being, with fully formed body, acquires strength.

50. The old body being cremated, a new one is formed by these offerings, O Bird; the man, the size of a hand (cubit), by this experiences good and evil on the way.

51-53. By the rice-ball of the first day the head is-formed; the neck and shoulders by the second; by the third the heart forms:

By the fourth the back forms; and by the fifth the navel; by the sixth the hips and secret parts; by the seventh the thigh forms;

Likewise next the knees and feet by two; on the tenth day hunger and thirst.

54. Dwelling in the body formed by the rice-balls, very hungry and pained with thirst, on both the eleventh and twelfth days the departed eats.

55. On the thirteenth day the departed, bound by the servants of Yama, walks alone along the road like a captured monkey.

56. The extent of the way of Yama measures eighty-six thousand Yojanas⁸, without Vaitaraṇī, O Bird.

57. Two hundred and forty-seven Yojanas each day the departed travels, going by day and night.

58-59. Having passed successively through these sixteen cities on the way, the sinful man goes to the place of the King of Righteousness⁹:

Saumya¹⁰, Sauripura¹¹, Nāgendrabhavana¹², Gāndharva¹³, Shailāgama¹⁴, Krauncha¹⁵,
Krūrapura¹⁶, Vichitrabhavana¹⁷, Bahwāpada¹⁸,
Duḥkhada¹⁹, Nānākrandapura²⁰, Sutaptabhawana²¹, Raudra²²,
Payovarshana²³, Shītādhyā²⁴, Bahubhīti²⁵:

- before the city of Yama, the abode of righteousness.

60. Held by the nooses of Yama, the sinful, crying out "Oh, oh," having left his own house, goes on the way to the city of Yama.

Footnotes

No.1: *I.e.*, The superphysical beings, who do not sleep.

No.2: Yama is the Lord of death.

No.3: Saṁsāra: The three worlds in which men circle through births and deaths.

No.4: A name of Garuḍa, Vinatā was the mother of Garuḍa.

No.5: The ambiguity of the pronouns in this work is unavoidable, They may be interpreted only with the aid of common-sense.

No.6: Ceremony for the dead.

No.7: Members of the three higher castes take a "second birth" when invested with the sacred thread; all birds are twice-born, in and from the egg.

No.8: A Yojana is between 8 and 9 miles.

No.9: Another form of Yama.

No.10: Calm place.

No.11: Town of Saturn.

No.12: Residence of the Lord of Serpents.

No.13: Place of Singers.

No.14: Inaccessible mountain.

No.15: Name of a mountain.

No.16: Town of cruelty.

No.17: A wonderful place.

No.18: Many calamities.

No.19: Misery-giving.

No.20: Town of varied cries.

No.21: Very hot place.

No.22: Savage.

No.23: Rains

No.24: Very cold.

No.25: Many horrors.

The fool, not knowing that the truth is seated in himself, is bewildered by the Śāstras, - a foolish goatherd, with the young goat under his arm, peers into the well.

Verbal knowledge cannot destroy the illusions of the world of change, - darkness never disappears by talking of a lamp.

Reading, to a man devoid of wisdom, is like a mirror to the blind; hence, for those who have understanding, Śāstras are only a potter to the knowledge of the truth.

83-84. "This is known; this must be known," - he wishes to hear everything. If one lives for a thousand celestial years he cannot reach the end of the Śāstras.

The Śāstras are numerous; life is brief; and there are tens of millions of obstacles; therefore the essence should be understood, - like the swan taking the milk in the water.

85-86. Having practised the Vedas and the Śāstras, and having known the Truth, the wise man should abandon all the scriptures; just as one rich in grains abandons the straw.

Just as there is no use for food to one who is satisfied with nectar, so is there not use for the scriptures, O Tārkaṣya, to the knower of the Truth.

87-88. There is no liberation by the study of the Vedas, nor by the reading of the Śāstras. Emancipation is by knowledge alone, not otherwise, O son of Vinatā.

The stages of life are not the cause of liberation, nor are the philosophies, nor are actions, - knowledge only is the cause.

89-90. The word from the Teacher gives liberation; all learning is masquerade. Among thousands of woods the Sañjivana¹⁷⁸ is best.

The non-dual, verily declared auspicious, is beyond efforts of action, and to be obtained by the word of the Teacher, not by the study of tens of millions of texts.

91. Knowledge is said to be of two kinds: study and discrimination. The study is of Śabda Brāhmaṇ; Para Brahmaṇ is reached by discrimination.

92. Some prefer the Non-dual¹⁷⁹; other prefer the Dual¹⁸⁰ but they do not understand the One Reality, beyond the Dual and Non-dual.

93-94. Two phrases make for bondage and liberation: "Mine" and "Not-mine." The being saying "Mine" is bound; saying "Not-mine" is released.

That is the karma that does not bind, that the knowledge that gives release; other karma is worrying, other knowledge is skilful chiselling.

95-97. So long as actions are performed; so long as the impressions of the world of change remain, so long as the senses are fickle; so long how can there be realisation of Truth?

So long as there is pride of body; so long as there is the sense of "mineness," so long as there is excited striving; so long as there is imagination of plans;

So long as there is not stability of mind; so long as there is no meditation upon the Śāstras, so long as there is no love for the Teacher; so long how can there be realisation of Truth?

98-99. So long as one does not reach Truth, so long should he do austerities, vows, pilgrimage to sacred waters, recitations, oblations, worship and reading of the prescribed texts of the Vedas and Śāstras.

Therefore, if one desires liberation for himself, O Tārkaṣya, he should every effort, always, and under all circumstances he attached to Truth.

100. One who is tormented by the three miseries and the rest, should resort to the shade of the tree of Liberation, whose flowers are righteousness and knowledge, and fruits are heaven and liberation.

101. Therefore from the mouth of the Blessed Teacher the Truth of the self should be known. By knowledge the being is easily released from the awful bondage of the worlds of change.

102. Listen! I will tell you now about the final actions of the knower of the Truth, by which he obtains liberation, which is called the Nirvāṇa of Brāhmaṇ.

103-107. His last days approaching, the man, rid of fear, should cut off, with the sword of unattachment, the desires connected with the body.

Courageously wandering from home, performing ablutions in the water of the holy bathing places, sitting alone on a pure seat prepared as prescribed,

He should practise mentally upon the supreme three-fold pure Word of Brahmā. He should, with breath controlled, restrain his mind, not forgetting the Brahma Bīja¹⁸¹.

With reason for charioteer he should withdraw the senses from the sense-objects by the mind, and should fix his mind, drawn away by karmas, with understanding, upon the pure.

"I am Brāhmaṇ, the Supreme Abode; I am Brāhmaṇ, the Highest Goal,"--having realised this and placed the self in the self he should meditate.

108. He who, when leaving the body, utters the one-syllabled Brāhmaṇ, "Om̐," remembering me, goes to the Highest Goal.

109-110. The hypocrites, devoid of knowledge and unattachment, do not go there. I will tell you about the wise, who go to that goal.

Free from pride and delusion, with the evils of attachment conquered, always dwelling in the Higher Self, with desires overcome, released from the contracts known as pleasure and pain, they go, undeluded, on that eternal path.

111-114. He who bathes in the water of the Mānasa¹⁸², which removes the impurities of attraction and repulsion, in the lake of knowledge, in the waters of Truth, - he verily attains liberation.

He who, firm in non-attachment, worships me, thinking of no other, full-visioned, with tranquil self, - he verily attains liberation.

He who, expecting to die, leaning his home, dwells at a sacred bathing-place, or dies in a place of liberation, he verily attains liberation.

Ayodhyā¹⁸³, Mathurā¹⁸⁴, Gayā¹⁸⁵, Kaśī¹⁸⁶, Kañchi¹⁸⁷, Avantikā¹⁸⁸, Dwārāvātī¹⁸⁹, - these seven cities should be known as the givers of liberation.

115. This eternal way of liberal in al has been described to you, O Tārkaṣya, - hearing it with knowledge and dispassion one attains liberation.

116. Knowers of Truth attain liberation; righteous men go to heaven; sinners go to an evil condition; birds and others transmigrate.

117. Thus in sixteen chapters I have related to you the extracted essence of all the scriptures. What else do you wish to hear?

118-120. Sūta said: Having thus heard, O King, these words from the mouth of the Lord, Garuḍa, repeatedly prostrating himself, said this, with hands folded together:

"O Lord, O God of Gods, having heard these words of nectar I have been helped over the ocean of existence, O Lord, O. Protector!

"I stand freed from doubts. My desires have been completely fulfilled." Having said this, Garuḍa became silent and lost in meditation.

121. May Hari, the remembrance of whom removes evil, who gives the condition of happiness for the sacrifice of worship, and who gives liberation for supreme devotion to Him, - protect us.

Footnotes

- No.174: That is, One who knows the Self.
No.175: Meaning that one may re-obtain these things after losing them - but not the body.
No.176: There is supposed to be a serpent living in the ground beneath the ant-hill.
No.177: Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, Vedānta.
No.178: The plant brought by Hanumat to restore Lakṣman when killed by Indrajit.
No.179: Advaita philosophy. Eternal inseparateness and non-duality.
No.180: Dvaita. Separateness of the individual and universal self.
No.181: Bīja is a seed; a mantra governing a work such as an Upaniṣad Om̐.
No.182: A holy lake in the Himālayas, also a mystical place.
No.183: Perhaps Oudh.
No.184: Muttra.
No.185: Gayā.
No.186: Benares.
No.187: Conjeeveram.
No.188: Ujjain.
No.189: Dwārakā.