

MAHĀPRASTHĀNA, PRĀYOPA VEŚĀ, SALLEKHANA VIŚ-A-VIŚ SUICIDE

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Abstract

It is well known that Śri Rāma and his brothers entered the Sarayū and ended their lives. Yudhiṣṭhira, his wife and brothers started on *mahāprasthāna*; on their way each of them shed their mortal coils except Yudhiṣṭhira. This is also a well-known story. In Tamil country Kopparuncholan, a Chola king and his longtime friend and poet Picirāndaiyār left their mortal bodies by going into fasting (*prāyopaveśa*), seated facing the north, which is known as *vaḍakkirundu norral*. Great yogis would go into *samādhi* and leave their body. All these methods of leaving one's life on one's own volition fall under the term *mahāprasthāna*. Sacrificing one's life by undergoing *sallekhana* is a well-known practice of the Jains which has come to the court, recently, and is considered in the present day as committing suicide and hence a crime. The views of the *Dharmaśāstra* on these issues are discussed here.

In 2006, human activist Nikhil Soni and his lawyer Madhav Mishra filed a public interest litigation with the Rajasthan High court claiming *Sallekhana* to be suicide under the Indian legal statute. In August 2015 Rajasthan High court stated that the practice is not an essential tenet of Jainism and banned it making the practice punishable under section 306 and 309 (abetment of suicide) of the Indian Penal Code. On 24th August 2015, the members of the Jain community held a peaceful nationwide protest against the ban. Silent marches were carried out in various states. On 31st August 2015, Supreme Court of India stayed the decision of

Rajasthan High court and lifted the ban and considered *Sallekhana* as a component of non-violence (*Ahimsa*).

If it is *Sallekhana* in Jainism, it is *Mahāprasthāna* and *Prāyopaveśa* in Hinduism.

SUICIDE, A SIN

The general sentiment of *Dharmaśāstra* works is to condemn suicide or an attempt to commit suicide as a great sin. *Manusmṛti* condemns suicide by denying after-death rites to those who commit it. It says that no water is to be offered for the benefit of the souls of those who kill themselves¹:

वृथा संकरजातानां प्रवज्यासु च तिष्ठताम् ।
आत्मनस्त्यागिनां चैव निवर्ततोदकक्रिया ॥

*Parāśara*² states that if a man or a woman hangs himself or herself through extreme pride or rage or through affliction or fear he or she falls into hell for sixty thousand years .

अतिमानादतिक्रोधात्स्नेहाद्वा यदि वा भयात् ।
उद्धर्नीयास्त्री पुमान्वा गतिरेषा विधीयते ॥
पूयशोणितसंपूर्णे अन्धे तमसि मज्जति ।
षष्टि वर्षसहस्राणि नरकं प्रतिपद्यते ॥

Vaśiṣṭha Dharmasūtra ordains "whoever kills himself becomes *abhiśasta* (guilty of mortal sin) and his *sapindas* have to perform no death rites for him; a man becomes a killer of the self when he destroys himself by wood (i.e. by fire), water, clods and stones (i.e. by striking his head against a stone), weapon, poison, or ropes (i.e. by hanging)".

*Yama Smṛti*³ prescribes that when a person tries to do away with himself by such methods as hanging, if he dies, his body should be smeared with impure things and if he lives he should be fined two hundred *paṇas*; each of his friends and sons should be fined one *paṇa* and then they should undergo the penance laid down in the *Śāstra*:

आत्मानं घातयेद्यस्तु रज्ज्वादभिरुपक्रमैः ।
 मृतोऽमेध्येन लेप्तव्यो जीवतो द्विशतं दमः ॥
 दण्डयास्तत्पुत्रमित्राणि प्रत्येकं पणिकं दमम् ।
 प्रायश्चित्तं तपः कुर्युर्थथाशास्त्रप्रचोदितम् ॥

SUICIDE AS *PRĀYAŚCITTA*

Exceptions to this general attitude were also made in the Smṛtis, the Epics and Purāṇas. *Manusmṛti*⁴ allowed suicide in various ways as *prāyaścitta* for *mahāpatakas*:

सुरां पीत्वा द्विजो मोहादग्निवर्णां सुरां पिबेत् ।
 तथा स काये निर्दग्धे मुच्यते किल्बिषात्ततः ॥
 गोमूत्रमग्निवर्णं वा पिबेदुदकमेव वा ।
 पयो घृतं वामरणाद्गोशक्रद्रसमेव वा ॥

When a man was guilty of a murder, he was allowed to meet death at the hands of archers in a battle who knew that the sinner wanted to be killed in that way as a penance or the sinner may throw himself head downwards in fire. *Manu*⁵ states:

लक्ष्यं शस्त्रभृतां वा स्याद्विदुषामिच्छयात्मनः ।
 प्रास्येदात्मानमग्नौ वा समिद्धे त्रिरवाकिशराः ॥

Gautama Dharmasūtra prescribes that no mourning need to be observed for those who willingly meet death by fasting, or by cutting themselves off with a weapon, or by fire, or poison or water etc.

At extremely holy places like Prayāga, the Sarasvatī and Benares persons were allowed to kill themselves by drowning with the desire of securing release from *saṁsāra*.

MAHĀPRASTHĀNA– THE LAST JOURNEY:

The Smṛtis allowed a forest hermit to start on the great journey to meet death. Interestingly, they also allowed in certain circumstances death by entering into fire, or by drowning or by fasting or by throwing oneself from a precipice even for those who were not hermits. The *Atri Smṛti*⁶ states some exceptions *viz.*, 'if one

who is very old (beyond 70 years), one who cannot observe the rules of bodily purification (owing to extreme weakness &c.), one who is so ill that no medical help can be given, kills himself by throwing himself from a precipice or into fire or water or by fasting, mourning should be observed for him for three days and *śrāddha* may be performed for him:

वृद्धः शौचस्मृतेर्लुप्तः प्रत्याख्यातभिषक्क्रियः ।
 आत्मानं घातयेद्यस्तु भृग्वग्न्यनशानाम्बुभिः ॥
 तस्य त्रिरात्रमाशौचं द्वितीये त्वस्थिसञ्चयं ।
 तृतीये तूदकं कृत्वा चतुर्थे श्राद्धमाचरेत् ॥

Aparārka quotes texts of Brahmagarbhā, Vivasvat and Gārgya about a householder who suffering from serious illness cannot live for long, or who is very old, who has no desire left for the pleasure of any of the senses and who has carried out his tasks, may bring about his death at his pleasure by resorting to *mahāprasthāna*. By so doing he incurs no sin and his death is considered better than *tapas*:

तथा च ब्रह्मगर्भः - यो जीवितुं न शक्नोति महाव्याधयुपपीडितः ।
 सोऽग्न्युदकमहायात्रां कुर्वन्नामुत्र दुष्यति ॥
 विवस्वान् - सर्वेन्द्रियविरक्तस्य वृद्धस्य कृतकर्मणः ।
 व्याधितस्येच्छया तीर्थे मरणं तपसोधिकम् ॥
 तथा गार्ग्योऽपि - महाप्रस्थानगमनं ज्वलनाम्बुप्रवेशनम् ।
 भृगुप्रपतनं चैव वृथा नेच्छतु जीवितुम् ॥

There is no doubt that some of the Smṛtis, the *Mahābhārata* itself and some Purāṇas do recommend (or at least do not condemn) suicide in certain circumstances. The Śālyaparva states 'whoever abandons his body at Pṛthūdaka on the northern bank of the Sarasvati after repeating the Vedic prayers would not be troubled by death thereafter'.

The Anuśāsanaparva says that if a man knowing the Vedānta and understanding the ephemeral nature of life abandons life in the holy Himalayas by fasting, he would reach the world of *brahma*. The *Mahābhārata* has a *parva* called *Mahāprasthānika* in which it is narrated that Yudhiṣṭhira with his four brothers, queen Draupadi and a faithful dog started on the Great journey towards the

Himālayas and that they fell down dead one after another, Draupadi being the first and Bhīma being the last.

In the *Rāmāyaṇa*⁷, sage Śarabhaṅga is said to have entered into fire.

ततोऽग्निं सुसमाधाय हुत्वा चाऽज्ज्येन मन्त्रवित् ।
शरभङ्गो महातेजाः प्रविवेश हुताशनम् ॥

In the *Sundara Kāṇḍa*⁸ also, Hanuman decides to sacrifice himself by entering into the water if he fails to find Sita:

चितां कृत्वा प्रवेक्ष्यामि समिद्धमरणीसुतम् ।
उपविष्टस्य वा सम्यग्लिङ्गिनं साघयिष्यतः ॥
शरीरं भक्षयिष्यन्ति वायसाः श्वापदानि च ।
इदं महर्षिभिर्दृष्टं निर्याणमिति मे मतिः ॥
सम्यगापः प्रवेक्ष्यामि न चेत् पश्यामि जानकीम् ।
सुजातमाला सुभगा कीर्तिमाला यशस्विनी ॥

The *Mṛcchakaṭika*⁹ speaks of king Śūdraka as having entered fire thus 'having enjoyed a life of 100 years together with ten (more) days, Śūdraka entered the (sacred) fire'. The *Raghuvamśa*¹⁰ poetically describes how Aja in his old age when his health was shattered by disease resorted to fasting and drowned himself at the confluence of the holy rivers, the Ganges and the Sarayu, and immediately attained the position of a denizen of Heaven.

रोगोपसृष्टतनुदुर्वसति मुमुक्षुः प्रायोपवेशनमतिनृपतिर्बभूव ॥

The prescriptions in the *Matsya Purāṇa*¹¹ states 'the man who, suffering from no disease, having no deficiency as to his limbs and being in full possession of his five senses, encompasses (his death) in cow-dung fire remains honoured in heaven for as many years as there are pores on the whole of his body':

गङ्गायमुनयोर्मध्ये कर्षाग्निं यस्तु साधयेत् ।
अहीनाङ्गो ह्यरोगश्च तस्य गात्रेषु देहिनः ॥
तावद्वर्षसहस्राणि स्वर्गलोके महीयते ॥

The king Kumāragupta of Magadha is said to have entered the fire of dry cow-dung cakes.

The *Matsya-purāṇa*¹² eulogises the peak of Amaraṅṭaka by stating 'whoever dies at Amaraṅṭaka by fire, poison, water or by fasting enjoys the pleasures. He who throws himself down (from the peaks of Amaraṅṭaka) never returns (to *saṁsāra*).

एवं भोगो भवेत्तस्य यो मृतोऽमरकण्टके ।
अग्नौ विषजले वापि तथा चैव ह्यनाशके ॥
अनिवर्तिका गतिस्तस्य पवनस्याम्बरे यथा ।
पतनं कुरुते यस्तु अमरेशे नराधिप ॥

Two verses of the *Kūrmapurāṇa*¹³ state 'that goal (or state), which a wise man that is devoted to Yoga and that has become an ascetic (or has forsaken all actions) reaches, is secured by him who gives up life at the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna. Whoever dies in the Ganga whether willingly or unintentionally is born after death in heaven and does not see hell':

यागतिर्योगयुक्तस्य संन्यस्तस्य मनीषिणः ।
सा गतिस्त्यजतः प्राणान् गङ्गायामनुसङ्गमे ॥
अकामो वा सकामो वा गङ्गायां यो विपद्यते ।
स मृतो जायते स्वर्गे नरकं च न पश्यति ॥

The *Kūrma purāṇa* is quite clear 'Mokṣa may be secured or not after a thousand births elsewhere but in Benares, mokṣa can be secured in a single birth'. A verse of the *Skanda purāṇa* asserts 'he who abandons his life in this sacred place in some way or other, does not incur the sin of suicide but secures his desired objects':

यथा कथंचित्तीर्थेस्मिन् प्राणत्यागं करोति यः ।
तस्यात्मघातदोषो न प्राप्नुयादीप्सितानपि ॥

The *Padma purāṇa*¹⁴ too states 'a man who, knowingly or unknowingly, willingly or unintentionally, dies in the Ganges attains on death heaven and mokṣa':

ज्ञानतोऽज्ञानतो वापि कामतोऽकामतोऽपि वा ।
गङ्गायां च मृतो मर्त्यः स्वर्गे मोक्षं च विन्दति ॥

Gradually, the idea of securing heaven and *mokṣa* by committing suicide at Prayāga or Benares appears to have spread to other *tīrthas*. The *Brahma purāṇa* calls upon *dvījas* who are intent on securing *mokṣa* to commit suicide at Puruṣottama-Kṣetra. The *Liṅga purāṇa* says 'if a brāhmaṇa kills himself on Śrīśaila he destroys his sins and attains *mokṣa* as at Avimukta (Benares); there is no doubt about this':

श्रीशैले सन्त्यजेद् देहं ब्राह्मणो दग्धकिल्बिषः ।
मुच्यते नात्र सन्देहो ह्यविमुक्ते यथा शुभम् ॥

Not only did common men believe in the promise of the *purāṇas* that those who killed themselves at Prayāga secured *mokṣa* (freedom from the everlasting cycle of births and deaths) which was the highest of the four *puruṣārthas*, but even great poets like Kālidāsa held the view that, though *mokṣa* or *kaivalya* requires correct knowledge and realization of the Supreme Spirit according to the Vedānta, Sāṅkhya and Nyāya systems, death at the sacred sangama led to *mokṣa* even without *tattvajñāna*.

Centuries of philosophical thought had made a very deep impression on the minds of all people that the soul has to submit to a never-ending cycle of births and deaths. Ancient scriptures had offered a release in two ways viz. by *tattvajñāna* and by suicide at a *tīrtha*. The *Matsya purāṇa* says that those who enter fire according to the rules in Avimukta (Benares) enter the mouth of Śiva and so also those determined devotees of Śiva who die by fast in Benares do not return (to this world) even after millions of *kalpas*. Therefore all those who die in any way at Benares receive grace from Śiva after their deaths. That leads to *tattvajñāna* (correct spiritual knowledge) which leads to *mokṣa*.

PRĀYOPAVEŚA:

Prāyopaveśa is a practice in Hinduism that denotes leaving one's life by fasting, by a person who has no desire or ambition left and

no responsibilities remaining in life. It is also allowed in case of terminal disease or serious disability.

It was when king Parikṣit was observing *prāyopaveśa* that the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* was narrated to him by the sage Śuka, son of Vyāsa.

In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the 53rd sarga in the Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍa¹⁵ is titled as "Prāyopaveśanirdhāraṇam". Fearing that they will certainly be punished by their king Sugrīva for not having carried out their task of finding Sītā, within the prescribed time, all the monkeys decide to sacrifice their lives by fasting unto death:

तस्मिन्नतीते काले तु सुग्रीवेण कृते स्वयम् ।
 प्रायोपवेशनं युक्तं सर्वेषां च वनौकसम् ॥
 अप्रवृत्तौ च सीतायाः पापमेव करिष्यति ।
 तस्मात्क्षममिहाद्यैव हितं प्रायोपवेशनम् ॥

SALLEKHANA

Sallekhana is the last vow prescribed by the Jain ethical code of conduct. It is observed by the Jain ascetics and lay votaries at the end of their life by gradually reducing the intake of food and liquids. It is allowed when normal life according to religion is not possible due to old age, incurable disease or when a person is nearing his end. According to Jain texts, *Sallekhana* leads to *Ahimsā* (non-violence) as a person observing it subjugates the passions which are the root causes of *Himsā* (violence).

The *Ratnakaraṇḍaśrāvākācāra*¹⁶ of Samantabhadra (about 2nd century A.D.) dilates on *Sallekhanā*, which consists in abandoning the body for the accumulation of merit in calamities, famines, extreme old age and incurable diseases:

उपसर्गे दुर्भिक्षे जरसि रुजायां च निःप्रतीकारे ।
 धर्माय तनुविमोचनमाहुः सल्लेखनामार्याः ॥

In around 300 BC, Chandragupta Maurya (founder of Maurya Empire) undertook *Sallekhana* atop Chandragiri Hills,

Sravanabellagolla, Karnataka. Chandragupta Bessadi marks the place where Saint Chandragupta died.

Acharya Shantisagar, a highly revered digambara monk of modern India took Sallekhana on 18th August 1955 because of inability to walk without help and feeble eyesight, and breathed his last on that day.

In the times of the Purāṇas the method of starting on *mahāprasthāna* and suicide by entering into fire or falling from a precipice came to be forbidden and was included in *Kalivarjya*. In the *Bṛhannārādīya*, it is quoted thus:

महाप्रस्थानगमनं गोमेधश्च तथा मखः ।
एतान् धर्मान् कलियुगे वर्ज्यानाहुर्मनीषिणः ॥

CONCLUSION

The existential question arises in man at somepoint of life, "What is life, Who am I?". The answers are for him to explore and experience in *Tattvajñāna* (knowledge of the Supreme Self) that has been made available to him. Whatever the path that he chooses, whether from Hinduism or Jainism, the objective is to attain *Mokṣa* (the state of Supreme Bliss).

Can this Supreme Bliss be achieved here on earth as we are actively involved in everyday life? The answer would be "yes". We get the inkling that it is possible through *Tattvajñāna*. In that state of equilibrium, *Stitaprajña*, as Kṛṣṇa advised to Arjuna in the *Gīta*, the bliss can be experienced even in the heat of battle.

For those who could not experience it in day-to-day life, the sacred texts offer them more options in later life through *Mahāprasthāna*, *Prāyopaveśa*, or *Sallekhana*.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Manu., V.89
- 2 *Parāśarasmṛti*, IV.1-2
- 3 *Yama Smṛti*, 20-21
- 4 Manu., XI. 90-1
- 5 *Ibid.*, XI. 74
- 6 *AtriSmṛti*, 218-19
- 7 *Rāmāyaṇa*, Āraṇya Kāṇḍa, 5.36
- 8 *Ibid.* Sundara Kāṇḍa, 13. 42-4
- 9 *Mṛcchakaṭīka*, I. 4
- 10 *Raghuvaṃśa*, VIII.94cd

- 11 *Matsya Purāna*, 107.9-10
- 12 *Ibid.*, 186.34-5
- 13 *Kūrma Purāna*, I.37. 16,39
- 14 *Sṛṣṭi*., 60. 55
- 15 *Rāmāyaṇa*, Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍa, 53. 27, 29
- 16 *Ratnakaraṇḍasrāvākācāra*, Ch. V
