



मुण्डकोपनिषद् Muṇḍakopaniṣad Mantra 1.2.7



प्लवा ह्येते अट्टवा यज्ञरूपाः
अष्टादशोक्तमवरं येषु कर्म ।
एतच्छ्रेयो येऽभिनन्दन्ति मूढाः
जरामृत्युं ते पुनरेवापि यन्ति ॥ १।२।७

plavā hyete adṛḥhā yajñarūpāḥ
aṣṭādaśoktamavaram yeṣu karma ।
etacchreyo ye'bhinandanti mūḍhāḥ
jarāmṛtyuṁ te punarevāpi yanti ॥ 1।2।7

plavāḥ – rafts; hi – indeed; ete – these; adṛḥhāḥ – not firm (quickly put together); yajñarūpāḥ – constituents of yajna; aṣṭādaśa – eighteen; uktam – mentioned in the Veda; yeṣu – upon which; avaram karma – the inferior karma (is dependent); etat – this; sreyaḥ - is the means of mokṣ; ye – those; abhinandanti – who rejoice; mūḍhāḥ – the deluded; jarāmṛtyuṁ – the old age and death; te – they; punareva – again and again; āpiyanti – gain

‘Those eighteen constituents of yajña, mentioned in the Veda, upon which the inferior karma is dependent, are not firm (quickly put together) rafts indeed. Those deluded ones who rejoice, ‘this karma is the means of mokṣa’, gain old age and death again and again.

The first six mantras detailed agnihotra and related rituals and praised karma. Śruti now, in the next four mantras, points out the inherent weaknesses and limitations of these karmas with equal vigour. This is the style of the Veda; it is a binary method of teaching. Those who are unfamiliar with this style of teaching conclude that the Veda makes back-to-back self-contradictory statements.

Ye te yajña rūpāḥ adṛḥhā plavāḥ : these rituals like agnihotra are insecure rafts. Adṛḥhā means those which are not firm, very fragile and not adequate. A raft is a makeshift floating structure in which a few wooden pieces are roughly put together. The yajñas are comparable to this raft. A raft is not an appropriate means for crossing the ocean. For crossing the ocean one requires a big ship,

which can withstand all the cyclones, sharks and so on. Even the ships can sink; what is there to say about the rafts? The rafts do not help one to cross even a river in spate; so there is no question of crossing the ocean with them.

The yajñās can help one to cross pain like naraka, hell, and adho-yonis, lower wombs, but not the ocean of saṃsāra. The jīva will not get into lower wombs because of its good karma. It will go higher up. The rituals can help one cross duḥkha, sorrow, temporarily. Therefore, they are called plavāḥ. They are vehicles to take one to the limited lokas only. Here again, the rituals are insecure because one will not get even svarga if they are not done properly. What are these rituals?

Yajñarūpāḥ aṣṭādaśa yeṣu avaram̐ karma uktam : these rituals consist of eighteenlimbs on which they depend, and hence, they are inferior. Aṣṭādaśa means eighteen. There are sixteen priests required in performing certain karmas where mantras from all three Vedas are used. There are priests belonging to each Veda. They are called ṛtviks. All these priests must be there to complete certain rituals, but not for rituals like agnihotra.

In the performance of a ritual the Yajurveda is important. The Yajurveda priests¹ are called Yajur-gaṇa, the Ṛgveda priests² are hotṛ gaṇa, the Sāmaveda priests³ are udgātr gaṇa and the Atharvaveda priests are brahma-gaṇa. The four gaṇās, groups, consist of sixteen priests. Then the yajamāna, the one who does the ritual and patnī, his wife, complete the eighteen⁴.

For performing Vedic rituals like agnihotra one requires one's wife. Without the wife one cannot perform rituals. When one performs the ritual, his wife gets fifty percent of the puṇya. She provides the infrastructure, like the home, prepares naivedya, offerings, and so on. She comes at the start of the ritual to give him permission to do the ritual. That is why she gets fifty percent of the puṇya. It is a clean partnership. If he commits any pāpa, fifty percent of it will come to hi, This is absolutely unacceptable! But that is how it is. It is completely one-sided and it is true. Women are given a big place in the scheme of Vedic life. If the women have some problem in India, that is due to the influence of other cultures.

¹ Their names are : advaryuḥ, pratiprasthātā, nestā and unnetā.

² Their names are: hotā, maitrāvaruṇaḥ, acchāvakaḥ, and grāva stutaḥ.

³ Their names are udgāta, prastotā, pratihartā, and subrahmaṇyaḥ. Subrahmaṇya is not the deity, it is the name of a Sāmaveda priest.

⁴ षोडश ऋत्विजः पत्नी यजमानोश्चेति अष्टादश । मुण्डक भाष्यम्

Karmas that are mentioned here with reference to the eighteen limbs are not simple karmas like agnihotra, but refer to great karmas because sixteen ṛtviks and lots of dakṣiṇā are involved. Even though they are great karmas, still, they are avara,⁵ 'inferior' or very small, because they are not backed up by upāsānās. So, they cannot take one to brahma-loka. They are called 'avara' because they depend on eighteen factors and they are subject to perish.⁶ Even if they take one to heaven, they are still 'avara' because the journey does not come to an end and one will come back from heaven. This is the nature of karma, and therefore, any end achieved by this karma is going to be impermanent only. Śāṅkara gives the example⁷ of loss of milk etc., when the container is destroyed. This person says, "I did not destroy the milk. I did not do anything with the milk. I only destroyed the pot". Similarly, the karma itself is subject to end and naturally what one accomplishes through karma is also anitya, impermanent.

Ye mūḍhāḥ etat śreyāḥ iti abhinandanti : these deluded people who are committed to karma take delight in presenting it as the means of mokṣa. They really do not see through all these things. They think that they will be liberated in heaven. So, they reinforce the belief that the rituals will take them to mokṣa. Such people are in millions in the world. Suppose someone says, "I am going to cross the Atlantic Ocean by this raft", what will you think? You can only pity him.

Jarāmṛtyuṃ te punarevāpi yanti : they gain old age and death repeatedly. It means they remain in saṃsāra. As a result of performing these karmas they go to svarga. They think that having reached heaven they will become immortals. In heaven it is said that there is no old age and death. Lord Death does not go to heaven because he need not go there. The people who go there deliver themselves into the hands of Lord Death by coming down at the end of their sojourn. The idea is that they do not gain mokṣa.

As long as these deluded people think and do so individually, it is all right. But they become leaders also, and take a few people along with them. That is the problem. That is what the śruti says next:

To be continued....

¹ अवरं केवलं ज्ञान वर्जितं कर्म - मुण्डक भाष्यम्

² अतस्तेषाम् अवर-कर्माश्रयाणाम् अष्टादशानाम् अदृढतया प्लवत्वात् प्लवते सह फलेन तत्साध्यं कर्म - मुण्डक भाष्यम्

³ कुण्ड-विनाशादिव क्षीर-दध्यादीनां तत्स्थानां नाशः। मुण्डक भाष्यम्