

# Yama

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Yama stands as one of the gods of the Rigveda. Though not clearly mentioned as the god of Death, Yama, the son of Vivaswata and Sharanyu, is represented as the regulator of the way leading to Pitriyan i. e. Devayan. He is described in the Veda as a benevolent king ruling over that happy realm where the pious people, after their death, live happily and enjoy themselves. This is why men of the earth worship him as Pitri (the departed spirit) and pray him for the attainment of that realm. There is a clear reference about this fact in the Rigveda (verses: 9-113-8 & 10-14-1.2). It does not mean that He is not recognized as the god of Death in the Veda. He is imagined in the Rigveda as one compared to the setting Sun to show that a man's life terminates as the Sun sets. In the Rigveda it is clearly mentioned that Yama is the god who presides over the Pitris and rules over the spirit of the dead. The conception of Yama as the god of death is implied in the Mantras of the Rigveda, as such, He is prayed on the occasion of Shraddha (the performance of ritual rites) commemorating the departed spirit of the earthly mortal. In the extract from the Atharvaveda ".....यकाम अस्तु मृत्यवे" it is obvious that Yama is the god of Death. Besides, in the Kathopanishad 1.22 He is addressed as the god of Death.

“देवैरत्रापि विचिकित्सितं किल त्वं च मृत्यो यत्न  
सुविज्ञेयमात्थ ।  
वक्ता चास्य त्वादृगन्यो न लभ्यो नान्यो वरस्तुल्य एतस्य  
कश्चित् ॥२२१॥”

-Kathopanishad 1.22

In the Maitryayani Samhita Death itself is called Yama.

Many races (tribes) abroad other than the Indian and the Nepalese are accustomed to have one or the other as the god of Death. The god Yim of Avesta and Hades of Greek mythology both resemble our god Yama. As our culture is consistent with ideologies, physical and metaphysical, Yama is represented as the guardian of both the regions—the upper world (the symbol of the good) and the under world (the symbol of the evil). None can escape from Him. He is therefore regarded as the master of all beings, that are subject to the authority of Death. The power of the Sun's light becomes ineffective by night but that of Death prevails continuously throughout day and night. That power of Death is called Yama whose power as previously stated is greater than that of the Sun.

Yama is recognized as the regulator of both the regions—upper and under. So His name

as Dharmaraja, referred to the Post-Vedic mythology, is appropriately significant. He is endowed with such knowledge as to distinguish the good from the evil. On discovery of Yama Smriti, in a written form, He is found to be, like Manu, an exponent of religious laws. In the Kathopanishad He is described as one who knows about the life after death—a fact that lies outside the purview of gods. He deals out justice equally to all in consequence of what they perform. 'समेन धर्मेण चरन्ति ताः प्रजाः स्तनस्तवेहृद्वर धर्मराजव ।'—Mahabharata, Vanaparva, Yama is described as Dharma and Dharmaraja in the inscriptions of Champa like Myson stelae and Glailamov inscriptions (Shaka era 579 & 723). Never does He behave anyone with partiality but, in contrast, the other gods, for the defense of their devotees, do not hesitate to kick them out though sticking to their duty whole-heartedly. The Kalari image of Shiva can be illustrated here on this context. There is a legendary reference in the Mahabharata that He, though truthful and having great reverence for truth, had let Satyavan return to the earth alive after being defeated because of His promise, made to Savitri, wife of Satyavan. In that reference He is known as the god of Death who maintains law (truth) and follows religious behaviour. It reminds us of the Egyptian Civilization where Osiris, the regulator of the life after death, evaluates the work of the dead with the help of the judges under Him and punishes the evildoers with various kinds of devilish torture. That example, found in the Egyptian Civilization, indicates that the recognition of someone like Yama as Dharmaraja, has been the practice, reflected in the Cultures of India, Nepal and other countries.

The characteristic of Yama, as mentioned in the epic and the puranic age, is quite different as compared with that of the Vedic

age. In the Vedic literature He is described as the benovolent king of that happy region where the pious after death enjoy every sort of happiness. The pious ones bearing a shining body live about Yama in that region of brilliant light and sparkling water - a region where everyone enjoys unbound happiness. They are worshipped as Pitri (a departed soul) on the earth. But in the epic and the Puranas He is described as an administrator and moreover, as a governor of the Southern sphere, to inflict cruel and terrible punishment on the evildoers—an assumption which is proper on the ground that the Praharanas He held, include a rod and a noose, too. In such authoritative scriptures as Vrihat-Sambhita, Agni Purana, Vishnudharmottara Purana, Rupamandana, etc. there is a reference that the weapons of Yama include a rod as well. A club and a noose in substitution of a rod are carved there on the standing image of Yama at Chidamvaram. In the cave of Dashavatara at Ellora there is a Kalari image of Shiva on which the image of Yama, holding a noose, is clearly visible. This quotation from the Uttara Ramcharita "दत्तामये त्वयि यमादपि दंडधारे ।" affirms the above mentioned statement. He is described as the god of Death in the inscription of Ponnagar stelae at Champa and as Antaka, the god of Death in Kalidas's Raghuvamsha. The legends referred to in the Hindu mythology and in the other treatises are consistent with those of the Greeks. In the Greek legends it is stated that the great illustrious King of the Earth, Tantalus by name, the son of the Heavenly King 'Jupiter' had once been confined in Hades's underworld of darkness to suffer a hellish torture for his evil deeds. In an inscription of fifth century A. C., located at Kambuj it is stated that anyone, committing any of the five great sins, falls down into Yama's hell. "तत्सर्वैरूपयुज्यतां समयतो यैरन्यथा युज्यन्तां

## Yama

नरके यमस्य पतितास्ते पञ्चमि पातकैः ॥१११॥”  
Yama has been universally recognized from times immemorial as one to inflict bitter torture on the wicked ones, indifferent to a King or of a wretched. In addition to the Hindu literatures, the Buddhist literatures, too, recognizes Yama as the most dreadful god. Besides, he is assumed as assigned with a duty, firstly to evaluate the works done by the departed spirits and secondly to inflict the cruelest torture on them who had committed evil deeds. Matsyendra Karunamaya, the form of Brahma, is worshipped as Dharmaraja, the God of Justice, by all people, belonging to different cults, like Saivism Shaktism and Buddhism. The images carved on the tunals ( wooden projectors) of Matsyendra’s temple at Tabahal show how the departed spirits are inflicted with various kinds of tortures as consequences of their evil deeds committed when alive. Yama recognized as Dharmaraj, also inflicts the indescribable tortures on them who, when alive, had committed evil deeds—a fact which characterizes His nature. Minanath, the father of Matsyendra, is worshipped as Dharmaraj on the first day of Bhadra under lunar calendar. This has grown into a tradition, which is being practised even to the present day—a practice that can be taken as an example on this context. Since a son is begotten by one’s self, it is usual to recognize Matsyendra as Dharmaraj. Yudhis-thira, born of Kunti, the wife of Pandu, by Dharmaraj, is also called Dharmaraj. This reference, stated in the Mahabharata, further proves the truth of the aforesaid statement.

The antiquity as regards Yama is affirmed not only on the basis of literary materials but on the basis of archaeological materials, too. Nanaghat cave inscription of first century B. C. states that Yama is one of the four Lakpalas. On the same inscription the name of Dharma is separately mentioned while that of Yama alone is enlisted in the list of the Lokpalas—a fact which indicates that Yama had not been recog-

nized as Dharmaraj until the first century B. C.

“[सिधं] ...नो ब्रमस नमो ईदस नमो संकसन-वासुदेवान  
चंद सुरानं  
[महि]मा [व] तानं चतुनं च लोकपालानं यम-वरुन-  
कुवेर-वासवानं नमो (॥)”

-Nanaghat Cave Inscription, 1st Century B. C.

It seems that Yama and Dharma have become one and the same since the fourth century A. C. It is proved by the fact that the name—Dharmaraj is included in the fourteen names of Yama as mentioned in Amarakosh, a Sanskrit Lexicon. The four lokpalas are found to be mentioned in the great epic—Kumarasambhavam and in the Narasaravapet Inscription of 6th century A. C. On the Allahabad Pillar inscription Samudragupta, the Gupta emperor, is stated as similar to Kuvera, Varuna, Vasava (Indra) and Yama. This inscription seems to be laying more importance of Yama on the Divine theory of Kingship. Even in the Yang Tikuh Stelae inscription of Champa (Vietnam), dated Saka 721 King Indravarmman is described as having a spirit of heroism as Chandra, Indra, Agni, Yama and Kuvera—all had with them. It is already stated that Yama is described on the inscriptions, dated Saka 579, 706 & 733 and located at Champa as the God of Justice as well as the God of Death. Yama is described as the Codifier of the Smriti on the Garuda pillar inscription of Harigaon, dated Circa sixth century A. C. The discovery of Yama Smriti proves the above-mentioned fact.

It was known from the Nanaghat Cave inscription ( Circa first century B. C. ) that Yama had been renowned as a Lokpala in these days. But, since the Gupta period he has obviously been more popular. On an idol of sixth century A. C., located at Bhumara in India Yama is seen seated on a throne with a crown on the head and a rod in the left

hand. On either side of Yama there are two ladies standing with Chamara in their hands. There is, at Chidambaram, a standing image of Yama, who wears a Karandamakuta on the head, holds a noose in the right hand & a club on the left one, with a bull, that symbolizes his vahan, standing behind him. The bull, shown here as his vehicle, is the special characteristic of this image. According to iconology Yama must have a buffalo as his vehicle in consequence of which he is called Mahishavahan 'कृतांतः किं साक्षान्महिषवहनोऽस्यिति पुनः ।' Kavya Prakash 10. The Mahabharata, too, has clearly indicated towards the fact that a buffalo is the vehicle of Yama. This fact is further confirmed with the discovery of an image of Yama, riding a buffalo, called Emma San, installed in a temple in Japan. In the Dasavatara Cave at Ellora a Kalari image of Lord Siva is installed therein in which Yama, stretching his right hand upward, prays Siva and his left hand holds a noose. In the Kalari image of Lord Siva, located at Kailash temple of that very cave, too, Yama is carved in the same pose, mentioned above. In the Kalari images installed at Pattisvaram and Tiruchch-  
engattangudi Mahadeva is shown standing on the Yama's body.

In the Hindu and the Jain temples this god is shown as Lokpala of the Southern quarter. On this context the images existing in the Jain temples of Mahavir of Osia, of Jodhpur, of Dhamekh, of Sadadi and the Hindu temples of Khajuraho are worth-mentioning. An image of Yama is found installed at Pahadpur in Bengal. Here Yama has two arms and he is in Sthanaka posture. He is surrounded by attendants. An idol of Yama belonging to the 9th century A. C. is found installed in Rajasthan. To the left side of this two-handed Yama standing on an ordinary seat in Tribhanga posture, a buffalo, his vehicle, is carved there.

Yama, the dreadful, is adorned with such ornaments as flame-like sparkling hair, kundalas, a diamond lace, a long garland, bangles and dhoti etc. He holds in his right hand a death-rod with skull and in his left hand a cock. Nineteen images of the mediaeval age, belonging to the period from tenth to twelfth century A. C. are found at Khajuraho of which only one idol has two hands and each of the rest has four hands.

In Nepal no idol with the name of Yama has yet been found. But Siva is one of the Hindu trial. He is considered to be the destroyer of this universe. According to Siva Sahasranama Siva is also worshipped as Kala. These evidences clearly prove the fact that Yama is one of the forms of Siva. Again, the tradition that Mahakala is worshipped as Siva, is referred to in the Skanda Purana which further confirms the previous statement.

'आकाशे तारकं लिङ्गं पाताले हाटकेश्वरम् ।  
मर्त्यलोके महाकालं दृष्ट्वा काममवाप्नुयात् ॥'

-Skanda Purana

Kalidas had mentioned in his Meghadoot the Mahakala of Ujjain as Mahadeva. It is, therefore, logical to say that Mahakala, installed in the temple, located at Tundikhel in Kathmandu, is better to be recognized as Siva in the form or image of death. In addition to it there are examples that the images of Mahakala have been installed in the different Buddhist monasteries and temples. In 1661 A. C. an image of Mahakala was installed at Svayambhu. An inscription was engraved on its pedestal. A wooden image of Yama Kinker, an attendant of Yama, is found in Nepal which is considered to be of Circa sixteenth century A. C.

The treatises on Silpashastra, composed in Sanskrit language, have thrown light on the

features of the images of Yama. According to those treatises Yama is of black complexion with two hands, glowing eyes, sharp long tusks on either side of his mouth. Yama wears the Kirita mukuta on the head. He is adorned with ornaments and wears the garlands of red flowers about his neck. He is smeared on all over his body with the paste of sandalwood and wears red clothes. He may be seated either on a Simhasana or on a buffalo. He holds a Khadga and a Khetaka or a fruit and tender leaves or danda and pasa.

On either side of Yama there stand two terrific figures, called Mrityu and Samhita of dazzling blue and red colours respectively. Besides, there stand two women waving Chamaras on His either side. There should be two Brahmans standing before Yama. They are Dharma and Adharma. Chitragupta and Kali, clothed in red garments, stand at the door. Around Yama there are devas (gods), asuras (demons), dharmis (the pious) and papis (the sinners)-all worshipping him.

The references made in Brihatsamhita and Agni Purana describe him as one holding a rod and riding a buffalo. According to Vishnudharmottara Purana Yama is clothed in golden yellow garments and there should be his consort Dhumorna seated on his left lap. The complexion of Dhumorna is that of Nilotpala flower. She has only two arms. But Yama has four arms, holding the danda and the Khadga with his right hands and a flaming Trisula and the akshamala with the left hands. Dhumorna

places her right hand on the shoulder of Yama and she holds a pomegranate fruit with her left hand. To the right side of Yama there is Chitragupta with a pen and sheets of paper and to the left one is the dreadful Death with a noose. In a treatise entitled Roopamandan he is described as one having four arms. There is a customary rule as to describe him as one, having a dark complexion riding buffalo and holding in his hands a pen, a book, a cock and a rod.

There are references, in the Vedic and post-Vedic mythology, as regards Yamalok (the region of Yama) and the way leading to that region.

From the above facts it is known that Yama has continuously been worshipped since the Vedic age. But the importance of Yama, realized in the Vedic age, could not continue a for longer time. He was recognized as the god of Death and as a Lokpala of South quarter. Thus, he had been recognized as only a minor deity. It does not mean that he has not any entity in our traditional culture. Bhrati Puja (the worship of brothers by sisters) has been a festival, recognized and performed on the second day of Kartika under Lunar calendar, in commemoration of the Vedic age when Yami (the sister of Yama) had worshipped Yama. Besides, Yama is also worshipped here on the first day of Bhadra under Lunar calendar. From all the considerations, mentioned above, none can deny the existence of this famous god in our religious and traditional culture.