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THE HELLS ENVISIONED IN
DIVINE COMEDY* AND *BHAGAVTHAM

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SOMETHING BEYOND OUR LIFE

Faith came into being with Man thinking deeply of matters relating to Birth and the inevitable end, Death. The immediate insight was that everyone born should die one day. Death has always been defying understanding and it shall remain an enigma forever. This led to the belief that there must be something, which is beyond surmise, which would perhaps be understood intuitively with some kind of deep and committed envisioning. When Good and Bad are posited, primarily the sense of right and wrong through a specific sense we call religious sense, the Divine Supreme is posited. With that Good and Bad came to be understood in depth leading to the insight that in after-life, that is life after death, the being which has had a span of life would be assessed by his/her deeds in the broad and never 'scientifically' defined' categories, Good and Bad. We the ordinary people think these are just relative terms but the seers knew intuitively they were not and left judgment to the Supreme Being.

ENVISIONING DARKNESS

Great sages and seers, '*drashtas*', as they are called in *Devabhasha*, language of gods, Sanskrit, wrote out long and inspired visionary experiences to reveal to us what they envisioned in an inspired effort to illumine what is dark in the likes of us. They invariably believed in a Supreme Being and showed time and again in their envisioned narratives what should be viewed as Good and what its dangerous opposite is.

BELIEF AND FAITH

Belief and Faith are aspects of Theism. Theism is a dynamics of thinking, which believes in these intriguing concepts, intriguing because of lack of basic understanding. This cannot be served on a platter and this is where the concept of intimate one-to-one relationship with God through a mental state and contributory way of living called *BHAKTI* emerged.

JUSTICE RENDERED

When bad is done, wrong is committed, it would be brought to book. It would be punished. This belief acts as a deterrent to bad deeds. While asking people to cultivate belief and have faith in God, the sages and seers went to explain the consequences of bad deeds, also called evil-doings. This is what we now call a two-pronged approach to instill Faith.

While detailing the fruits of right action and good deeds they also told us with deep concern how evil would be ‘punished’.

In our languages we have ‘punya’ and ‘paapa’. The western world has near equivalents like ‘merit’ and ‘sin.’

DANTE AND HIS *DIVINE COMEDY* -- INFERNO

Dante, (1265-1321), the Italian poet was born in Florence. Between 1308 ad 1321 he wrote what is now known as the *DIVINA COMMEDIA*, translated into English as *Divine Comedy*. This is considered the greatest epic in Italian produced at the junction of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Dante, very surprisingly wrote this in the people’s language, not the language of the learned in those days, Latin.

It is in this great work that he visits the underworld, Inferno (hell), and passes through Purgatorio (place where sins are washed away) to Paradiso, Heaven or the Empyrean regions. This great otherworldly work gives a graphic description of Hell with its various circles and ditches.

VIRGIL AS DANTE’S GUIDE

This is a first person narrative. Dante travels through the regions of the Worlds of the Dead. He has Virgil, an ancient poet, whose *AENEID* is the most famous of classical European texts, as his guide. The guide Virgil’s gesture of love to Dante was the result of the persuasion of Beatrice, a childhood friend of Dante, whom he adored according to the then prevalent practice of paying court. Beatrice died in 1290 but she remained Dante’s object of adoration and his guardian angel.

THE STRUCTURE OF *DIVINE COMEDY*

The epic is divided into three cantiches, each having 34, 33 and 33 cantos respectively. The mystic quality of three is too well known to need an explanation and to round the total to a hundred the first canto had 34. The description of hell is the most striking and bears comparison with the Hindu envisioning of the underworlds populated by sinners undergoing horrible punishments in retribution.

Dante’s epic is primarily a Christian epic, central to Christian Theology and a must-study in classical scholarship. It is an extended allegory as **Puranjanopaakhyaanam** in our *Bhagavathapuraanam*.

Dante sets out to visit the after-life worlds or the worlds of the dead with the ancient poet Virgil accompanying him. In the first circle, before entering hell, the visitors see the opportunists who do neither good nor evil. Along with them are those who intended to go up against God. But these are in a peculiar region, which is neither hell nor are they out of it. They are kept on the shores of the river Acheron. The only punishment for them is to go on pursuing a white flag while wasps go on stinging them urging them forward.

These insects go on drinking the blood and the tears of the inhabitants there. The white flag is symbolic of their neutrality and non-affiliation to either black or white.

To carry them across Acheron into the nine circles of hell, there is a boat and a boatman, Charon. He refuses to ferry the duo across since Dante is a living one whose weight would send the boat down to sink. Virgil wins his plea when Dante swoons and wakes up only at the Gate of Hell, on which was inscribed, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." There are nine circles in hell.

THE NINE CIRCLES OF HELL

The **first circle** is Limbo where the virtuous Pagans (non-believers) who did not accept Christ. Theirs is not exactly a punishment since the place would be pleasant with fields and a castle. Minos judges them as per the vices of incontinence (inability to control desires), violence and fraud. These are allegorically referred to as a she-wolf, a lion and a leopard respectively. The **second circle** is for those lustful. They are trapped in a torpedo, staying together forever. The **third circle** is for gluttons where Cereberus forces them to lie under mud under lashing wind and rain. In the **fourth circle** sinners are divided into two mobs, hoarders who keep things for themselves and rarely use them and wasters who squander all. Both the mobs are forced to roll boulders up which would be rolling down only to be rolled up again. The **fifth circle** is for the wrathful. There they fight with one another in swamp like water near the river Styx. The wrathful are also trapped underneath the water. These five circles are within the city walls of Dis, which is surrounded by the river Styx.

The **sixth circle** is for heretics. Here they are trapped in flaming tombs. The **seventh circle** is for the violent, which is further divided into six rings: the outer ring, where those violent against people and property are thrown into a river of boiling blood. The middle ring is for violence against the self, for those who committed suicide. These sinners are turned to black thorny trees. These would never be resurrected even after the Judgment Day. The inner ring is for those who are guilty of violence against God, being blasphemers, usurers and sodomites. These are in a flaming desert where it rains fire.

The **last two circles** are devised to punish sins of malice, sins of fraud, and treachery. These can be reached only by descending into a steep pit in hell. Satan is trapped in the frozen circle here, which is divided into ten ditches.

THE TEN DITCHES

The ditches are places where panderers and seducers suffer running forever in opposite directions in the first ditch. In the second flatterers are steeped in human excrement. In the third, buyers and sellers of positions among the clergy are placed in holes with heads inside and bodies backward. They cannot see forward. Ditch five is where corrupt politicians are trapped in a lake of burning pitch. The sixth is for hypocrites made to wear heavy lead cloaks. Ditch seven is for thieves who would be chased by venomous creatures. After being bitten by reptiles etc., they turn into snakes themselves to chase

others. The eighth ditch is where fraudulent advisors are trapped in flames. The ninth is the part of hell where those who sow discord are cloven and joined only to be attacked again. The last is where falsifiers like alchemists, counterfeits and cheats are punished with different kinds of afflictions and diseases.

In the ninth, heinous traitors are frozen in the ice-lake Cocytus. Each mob of traitors is put at a different height in four concentric zones, Caina, Antenora, Ptolemaia, Judecca. Caina is for traitors to their kindred, named for Caine, who killed his brother Abel. Antenora is for traitors to political entities at the city, party or country level. Ptolemaia is for traitors to their guests. Finally, Judecca is for the traitors to their lords, or benefactors. This is the most terrible and harsh section containing Satan, waist deep in ice his wings flapping and beating in vain. The two visitors escape into the next region Purgatorio by climbing the ragged fur of the once brightest angel Lucifer.

THE ORIENTAL VISUALIZATION OF HELL

While this is the conceptualization of hell towards the end of the middle ages and the beginning of Renaissance in the occident, the oriental visualization ages ago reflected in *Bhagavatham* appears to be more electrifying. It is inclined to more severe punishment for wrong doings. Shukamuni's **Tale Divine in Seven Days to Parikshit**, whose days were strictly numbered, would act as a more powerful deterrent to evil doing.

We have descriptions of twenty-one frightful hells *taamisra* (thick dark) *andha taamisra* (blinding dark), *raurava* (frightful and loathsome), and *mahaaraaurava* (extremely frightful, loathsome), *kumbhipaaka* (potter's kiln) and several others.

In *taamisra*, those sinners who make fun of or ridicule others' wives and children would be thrown into the pitch darkness. *andha taamisra* would be the lot of those sinners who take a woman who already has a man of her own. *Rauravas* are those places where those who cheat others or be traitors for the sake of maintaining families. *Mahaaraaurava* is the place where people who want to be on their own without paying heed to the suffering and travails of birds beasts and other beings. Those who kill rats and creatures by ensnaring them would be thrown into the hell where they would be baked in potters' kilns.

The one who is treacherous to his parents or the pious brahmins would be thrown into the most dreadful hell called *Kaalasootra*. Here there would be sun overhead and underneath flames. The one who leaves the path of righteousness and the Veda would be punished with sword blades on both sides making any movement impossible. This is called *asipattra* forests. *Kaalasootra naraka* is the place for those who punish the not punishable.

The servitors of Yama inflict these punishments. They break the sinners as simple sugar canes while they howl miserably.

For teasing and joyously inflicting pain on animals and birds, the sinner would be thrown into *andhakoopa* where he would be treated as he treated the unfortunate. He who enjoys

all his wealth eating and spending only for himself without sharing it with kith and kin would be thrown into this.

There is another severe punishment in the hell where a sinner is made to eat worms. This is called *krimi bhojan narak*. In *Sandasa* hell, those who commit theft of the property of the righteous are pierced with spears heated in heated orbs. For the madly lustful, the *narak* is designed in such a way that the couple would stand intertwined, burnt endlessly and made to embrace melting hot statues of iron. For those who have intercourse with animals, the punishment is the most severe. Those sinners are pounded with trees with thorns sharp as diamond points. This hell is called *vajra kantaka shalmali*.

Vyaraninaraka is for the lawless and who turn *pashandas* not following the Veda. Here crocodiles would chew the souls of sinners while they are made to list his sins. Here the sinner would have to be under blood, marrow, semen and the excreta eating and drinking them in that horrible and loathsome heat. The one and such as those who train dogs and the like and by killing makes a living in pride would be punished there.

There are other hells in this category called, *praanarodham* where life-breath is intermittently stopped as punishment. *Vishasanamu*, *laalaabhakshanamu*, *saarameyaadanamu*, *naveechirayambu* are other hells where unthinkable and unimaginable punishments are meted out.

Retah paanaamu is the most detestable hell where sinners are made to drink semen for making their wives do that in lasciviousness.

Besides these, there are seven more for corrupt practices like bribe-taking, bearing false witness, violating the modesty of one performs a fire ritual, harassing animals for fun, glaring at a guest with angry looks, miserliness and so on. There are seven such hells, and their names themselves are blood curdling: *kshaarakardama*, *rakshogana bhojana*, *shoolasootra*, *dandashooka*, *navata nirodhana*, *saparya vartana* and *shoochee mukha*. Those interested to know further can go to the second *aashwaasa* of the fifth *skandha* in *Sree Mahaa Bhaagavatham* in Telugu.

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