

# HINDUISM Part 2: Additional Notes on Hindu Funeral Ceremonies



## Hindu funerals

Most Hindus are cremated as it is believed that this will help their soul to move on in its journey to its next incarnation, body or nearer to heaven. Although this is a sad occasion, Hindus believe the spirit soul lives on and has simply discarded its present body as one discards old garments for new.

Mourners are encouraged to chant prayers without excessive lamentation to help the departed soul to detach its feelings and emotions from the family members it leaves behind to move on in its onward journey. Hindu priests emphasise the route ahead for the departed soul and a funeral is as much a celebration as a remembrance service.

The funeral ceremony is called antyeshti samskara, which form the last of the **samskaras** and vary according to tradition and place. In the United Kingdom, the coffin will usually come to the home first for the ceremony and is then taken to the crematorium.

The funeral is usually conducted by a priest and by the eldest son of the person who has died. The following is

- Prayers are chanted and verses from the Bhagavad-Gita are recited.
- A lamp is placed by the head of the body.
- Prayers and hymns are sung.
- **Pindas** (rice balls) are placed in the coffin.
- Ganges Water is sprinkled on the body.
- Two garlands (one made of sandalwood and the other, fresh flowers) are placed around the head of the body.
- Chanting beads are placed in the coffin
- Family members and mourners offer their respects and final farewells by circumbulating the body once and placing flowers at the feet of the departed..
- In India the eldest son says the appropriate prayers and lights the funeral fire. Incense and ghee are poured into the flames.

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Vedic Prayers and the Bhagavad-Gita is often recited during the funeral ceremony.

Chapter 2 of the Bhagavad-Gita is read and below paraphrased.

*The wise do not lament for the dead body. The Soul is indestructible, never dies and is eternal.*

*There has never been a time when you or I have not existed and in the future there will never be a time when we cease to exist. The soul resides in a body that changes from childhood to youth and old age. Similarly the soul passes into another body a death. A sober person is not bewildered by such a change.. Life brings happiness and distress and takes them away too like winter and summer seasons. One must learn to tolerate them without getting distressed.*

After the cremation, the ashes of the dead person are immersed into a river. Many people take the ashes to India to put in the waters of the Ganges, In the UK, there are designated places that allow mourners to do this in London in the river Thames and in the Midlands.

During the funeral and mourning period some family members will wear white or pale clothing and refrain from attending celebrations and festivals.

Mourning tends to take place for 12 and 13 days. there will often be a picture of the deceased on display, garlanded with flowers and friends will come to the house to offer their condolences

On the twelfth or thirteenth day the samskara ends with **Kriya**. During this ceremony, rice balls and milk are offered to the dead person to show the gratitude of the family for the life of that person. After this, the mourners can continue with their normal lives and activities.

Every year after the death **Shraddha** takes place. Prayers are offered to all the departed souls and ancestors of the family.



## Glossary

**Antyeshti samskara:** The funeral as a last rite of passage.

**Bhagavad-Gita:** Holy book for Hindus. Translations in English and other languages now available.

**Ganges:** Sacred River in India

**Kriya:** Name of ceremony to end the twelfth and thirteenth day of mourning.

**Pindas :** Rice balls

**Samskaras:** Rites of Passage

**Shraddha:** Yearly ceremony to remember and pray for departed family members and ancestors.