Changing Hindu attitudes to cremation in the UK

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With the possible exception of the Parsees (Zoroastrians), Hindus in Britain have probably had more drastic changes to their traditional ways of dealing with death and bereavement than any other immigrant group. In India, cremation is not an isolated act but an integral part of complex extended death and mourning rituals. In Britain, Western patterns of care, the professionalisation of death, legal requirements and bureaucracy all put obstacles in the way of Hindus in observing their customary rituals.

Hindu models of death that are religiously and socially important are difficult, if not impossible, to put into practice in hospitals, and there is a low take-up of hospices by Asians. There may be problems in obtaining ritual specialists and the fragmentation of families causes further disruption. Bodies can rarely be disposed of immediately and methods of disposal have to be adapted to local facilities and regulations. This delays funerals and upsets traditional patterns of mourning which, on the subcontinent, begin after an immediate burial or cremation. While ideally there should be a return to India with the ashes, this is not always possible and Hindus have had to find inventive ways of disposal. In spite of these problems, adaptation is occurring, particularly where the hospital staff and local authorities co-operate imaginatively with Asian communities. This paper examines some of these issues, and the ways in which adaptation is taking place.

TRADITIONAL HINDU MOURNING PRACTICE

Death for Hindus is a process lasting at least 12 days. The diagram (p27) divides the process into nine stages:

I preparation for death
II moment of death
III preparation of the body
IV *pinda-dana* (offerings of rice balls) and procession to the cremation ground
V cremation (stages I-V all take place on day 1 or 2)
VI collection of bones and ashes (day 3).
VII *shraddha*, a series of rituals taking place over three days, starting on the 10th day, which may include taking the ashes to the sacred river, present-giving to Brahmins and a feast, and which concludes with *sapindi-karana* when the newly embodied soul becomes an ancestor.
VIII gifts to Brahmins, end of period the of impurity (*shoka*) and a feast (day 16)
IX annual *shraddhas* (anniversary rituals in the future).

The rituals illustrate Van Gennep's model of rites of passage[1]. There is a seamless flow of ritual activity from before the death up to the cremation (rites of separation), followed by a ten-day liminal period in which a new body is ritually created for the disembodied ghost (*preta*). On the 12th day rituals (a symbolic year later), the deceased becomes an ancestor located in heaven or reborn, followed by a ceremony legitimating the new heir, if a father has died. As the deceased is incorporated into the world of ancestors, the family is reincorporated in society. Until then the family is regarded as severely polluted and withdraws from the world. This structure provides a socially acceptable framework for grieving and religious and cognitive meaning in death.

Problems for British Hindus

This traditional pattern is ruptured in Britain. Control of the dying and dead is taken out of the hands of the family by professionals. The changes in the time, place and format of cremations alters the structure of the mourning period, which now begins *before* the rites of separation are complete, instead of afterwards. Some rituals have disappeared, such as carrying the body on a stretcher, or are reinvented and condensed. Without the familiar ritual framework there is less certainty, since some beliefs no longer make sense outside their original context. The 12-day period is difficult to maintain with work obligations, but the final rites of reincorporation (*shraddha*) are still considered essential, and often supplemented later in India.

Hindus in Britain come from many different regions, and belong to different language groups and religious traditions. The largest group are Gujaratis, followed by is. Many Punjabis belong to the reformist Arya Samaj movement, which focuses on the fire ritual, *havan*. Their rituals are simpler and there is less concern about pollution, whereas the Gujaratis tend to be more conservative and strict about their traditions. Many are 'twice migrants' via East Africa[2], so have had to adapt twice. Mourning may be complicated by earlier losses, of country, familiar religious and cultural milieu, and wider family networks. Eisenbruch[3,4] observes that uprooting affects whole communities. Some compensate by clinging to the past, while others adapt and 'modernise'. Extremes of both – resistance to change and the desire to adopt the customs and behaviour of the host

EDITOR'S NOTE

Although Shirley Firth's research was carried out mainly in the UK it has relevance in most countries in which Hindus are a minority of the population. She shows that by ignoring the norms of other cultures we can cause needless distress to families before and after bereavement. On the other hand, by showing sensitivity and respect for such customs, we not only assuage some of the pains of their grief, we also reduce the alienation and resentment that so often arises between races.

Several other papers concerning cross-cultural aspects of bereavement have been published in *Bereavement Care* and can be obtained as a separate collection, *Cultural and religious aspects*, in our Best of Bereavement Care series. *CMP*

community – can prevent adequate mourning at the time of death.

THE MOURNING RITUALS

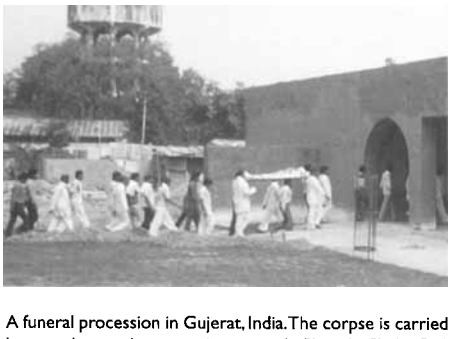
Stages I-II: Rituals at death

The good death is a conscious death at the right place (ideally in Varanasi in India[5, 6], but in practice, at home) and time, having dealt with unfinished business, said goodbye, performed an act of penance and offered meritorious gifts (Stage I). Attention is focused on God[7]. Death should take place on the floor, with Ganges water and a *tulsi* (a type of basil) leaf in the mouth to purify sins (Stage II)[8]. Facilitating this is a sacred duty, ensuring the soul moves on. With an untimely or violent death the unsatisfied soul hangs around, necessitating remedial rituals[8, 9, 5, 10].

In Britain most deaths occur in hospital and there is a low take-up of hospice places among South Asians[11]. Rituals are difficult to perform on a busy ward, and death on the floor is impossible in most hospitals. Sometimes the family is excluded, or are not told death is imminent; consequently, the most fundamental rites of transition may not be possible[10]. This creates guilt, distress and anxiety that the attached soul will create disturbances.

Stages III-IV: Preparation of the body and procession to the cremation ground

In India, the corpse is bathed and dressed immediately after death according to caste traditions by same-sex relatives. Purifying substances are placed on the body to prepare it as the last sacrifice to the God of fire, Agni (Stage III). It is then carried on a stretcher by male relatives to the cremation ground (Stage IV). During the ritual procession the stretcher is placed on the ground or turned around at strategic locations, while the chief mourner (the eldest son or nearest male relative) offers balls of wheat, barley or rice (*pindas*) to protect the soul and the corpse from dangerous spirits[8, 5]. Gujarati women do not go, but in the Punjab women often attend and watch the proceedings from a distance. A pot may be broken at the entrance to the cremation ground and at the pyre. At the cremation ground in rural areas, the pyre is built by male friends and relatives from wood and/or dried cow dung, depending on availability. In cities, there are attendants who build the pyres. The type of pyre depends on the mourners' socio-economic status, although in Varanasi the pyres are all similar. Increasingly, in cities, electric crematoria are being built, with a platform outside the cremator where the body can be placed for the final rituals.



A funeral procession in Gujerat, India. The corpse is carried by stretcher to the cremation ground *Photo by Shirley Firth*

In Britain the body is removed to the undertakers. The body should be bathed to purify it just before the cremation according to caste and family traditions. However, it is one thing to bathe the warm body of someone who has just died – it is a natural part of the caring for the person – and quite another to have to do it after a week. The body is then placed in a coffin, instead of being tied on to a bier as in India, and taken by hearse to the family home.

Stage V: Cremation/funeral

The timing, shape, structure and place of the funeral has had to change radically. There are often long delays at crematoria, for a week or more, which truncate the funeral and force a change of timing and structure. In India the chief mourner circumambulates the pyre with water and fire before lighting it. In many areas he has to break the skull at a certain point. This is said to release the soul (*atman*). This implies that there must be serious consequences for the soul if it is trapped for a week or more. Pandits (learned Brahmin priests) whom I interviewed in Varanasi believed that in consequence such souls will never be at peace. British pandits took the view that the soul would not be penalised for things that could not be helped, and pointed out that there were remedial rituals available especially in Varanasi or Gaya.

There are no specialist funeral priests in Britain. If there is no priest available or willing to go, a local Brahmin or senior caste member conducts a simple ritual instead. Experienced priests who are willing to conduct the rituals still have to negotiate with the family as to which elements are to be retained, and there are sometimes arguments between older family members and the pandit as to what is important. Because of the limited time in the crematorium, part of the service, which would normally take place at the pyre, takes place in shortened or adapted form in the home. The coffin is brought back from the undertakers and opened. While the pandit chants from the scriptures the chief mourner performs the rituals according to caste and family traditions. Herbs, sandalwood, *ghee* (purified butter, which purifies the body and helps it burn) and flowers are placed on the body. Ganges water and *tulsi* are put in the mouth, along with a coin, symbolising payment of the ferryman crossing the river of death. If *pindas* (rice balls) are offered at all, they are offered in the house, and placed in the coffin. Because it is not possible to circumambulate the body with fire at the crematorium, some pandits allow the chief mourner to circumambulate the coffin with incense sticks, but others forbid it since it is not an adequate substitute and the fire cannot be used to light the fire at the crematorium. Everyone else goes around the coffin to bid farewell. The coffin is closed and taken to the crematorium.

Friends, neighbours and community members follow, often in double-decker buses, including Punjabi and, increasingly, Gujarati women. The cremation service is similar to the Western one, often including a homily by the pandit or a senior community member. The emphasis is thus changing from concern about the fate of the soul to the comfort of mourners. The eldest son or sons then go down into the crematorium and press the button, or may actually push the coffin in. Laungani comments on the grotesqueness of seeing the body disappearing on a conveyer belt after the experience of the open pyre[13]. However, some of my informants in India felt that the experience at the pyre was so traumatic, especially if, in their tradition, the head had to be broken, or the body moved in the heat, that they were glad of the introduction of electric crematoria.

Mourners and friends then return to the deceased's home, sprinkle themselves with water from a bowl outside, and sit quietly with the family. The principal mourners may bathe at a friend's house before returning home. Arya Samajis return to the house for a *havan*, the sacred fire ceremony, followed, in the case of a father's death, by the giving of a turban to the eldest son to signify that he is now head of the household. This signals the end of pollution for this sect. However, as it is before the orthodox period of pollution is over, Brahmin pandits may refuse to attend since the Vedic texts are not to be recited during the period of *sutaka*, ritual pollution. This lasts from 10-30 days depending on caste.

It is customary in India to collect the ashes on the third day and take them to a holy river, preferably the Ganges or the confluence of three rivers near their ancestral home (Stage VI). Many British Hindus return with the ashes to Hardwar on the Ganges or a local river, but not all can afford this. Ashes are sometimes posted to India or placed in the sea or a local river

in Britain. However, this is forbidden by the National Rivers Authority in some areas[14, 15, 16]. A Swaminarayan family found an imaginative solution. They asked Lord Montagu of Beaulieu if they could use a beach on his river bank. He agreed, and the leader of their branch of Swaminarayan, Pramukh Swami[17, 18] blessed the spot where they then deposited their father's ashes. In a sense this is now a sacred part of India, and the river symbolically becomes the Ganges.

Children are not normally cremated under the age of three or four, as they have unformed personalities and are too pure to require the ritual purification of fire. They do not have a normal funeral, and may be buried with little ceremony in a special corner of the cemetery, or with a pandit saying some prayers. However, even here there have been adaptations.

A Punjabi lecturer said:

> Whoever heard of funeral directors in the Punjab? Here funerals are administered by third parties who take money for this purpose, whereas in the Punjab a funeral is very properly a community affair, where close relations and friends, when they had heard of a particular death, would inconspicuously go about the business of arranging for wood and other material with perfection. [Here] the body is put into a box with a name on it![12]

When his two-year-old son died in England he was shocked at the way control was taken out of his hands by the funeral directors. The body was put into a coffin and then in a hearse, and he felt bereft at not carrying the body himself as he would have done in the Punjab. He went on to comment that many Asians feel that the professionalisation of death is a denial of community responsibility, although my interviewees observed that often undertakers were more understanding than medical staff.

Stages VII-VIII Reincorporation

For orthodox Hindus, complex rites incorporate the deceased as an ancestor and reincorporate the mourners into society. All these rituals in India take place *after* the disposal of the body. A new ethereal body is ritually formed, or regenerated over 10 days. On the 12th day the ritual, *sapindi-karana,* creates a new ancestor[19, 6]. The chief mourner is then given a turban by his wife's or mother's family if the father has died, acknowledging his new role as heir and head of the family, and the widow embarks on her new marginalised role in society.

The ancestors are thought of as being in heaven with God or reborn, often within the family[8]. They are in a symbiotic relationship with their descendants, giving progeny, protection and safety in return for offerings. However, those who have had premature or bad deaths can create great mischief, which is why it is so important to have good deaths and proper rituals.

In Britain the traditional 12 days of rituals cannot take place from the day of death because of the delays in disposing of the body. Instead, there is a combined, condensed ritual on the 12th day. Its significance as an act of regeneration seems to be disappearing and it is often seen as 'giving a send-off'. However, it remains fundamentally important and may be done in India by proxy or when the family take the ashes back to India. Brahmins, as surrogates for the deceased, are given gifts of money, food and clothing, although some families prefer to give to charity.

THE TIMING OF DEATH RITUALS IN INDIA AND IN BRITAIN

TIMING	STAGE IN INDIA	STAGE IN BRITAIN
Day 1	I Preparation for death II Death III Preparation of body IV Procession to the cremation ground and *pindas* (rice ball offerings) V Cremation	I Preparation for death II Death; removal of body to the undertakers
Day 2		
Day 3	VI Ashes collected and may be taken to river. [Arya Samaj*: end of *shoka* (severe mourning) and *sutaka*]	
Day 4		VIII Some relatives may have to return to work
Day 5		
Day 6	Ten daily *pinda* offerings to create a new body	III Body prepared at undertakers IV Domestic stage of funeral V Cremation [Arya Samaj*: end of *shoka* and *sutaka*]
Day 7		
Day 8		
Day 9		VI Ashes received from crematorium
Day 10	VII *Shraddha* (3-day series of rituals): ashes to river, if not earlier	
Day 11		
Day 12	*Sapindi-karana* (creation of new ancestor); giving of turban to heir, gifts to Brahmins; feast	VII *Sapindi-karana* (may be done in India); ashes to river; feast
Day 13	VIII Gifts to Brahmins; feast	VIII Gifts to Brahmins; feast
Day 16	VIII End of *shoka* for most communitites; feast IX Annual *shraddhas*	VIII End of *shoka* for most communities; feast IX Annual *shraddhas*

Period of *sutaka* (impurity) - varies with caste

*A reformist sect which includes many Hindus from the Panjab

MOURNING IN BRITAIN

Mourning is set in a ritual framework of purposeful activity for the deceased. This period provides a setting for expressing grief and an opportunity to review the life of the person who died in a wider framework of meaning, relating to the ultimate purpose of life. Scripture readings, hymn singing, homilies and shared narratives of good deaths are ways of assuring the bereaved that there is meaning and significance in the death even if the death was sudden, forcing the mourners' attention away from themselves. The periods of talking and weeping for limited periods gradually bring the death home to the family.

For 12 days, chairs are removed from the living room and sheets spread on the floor. The bereaved relatives sit on the floor to receive the condolences of the relatives, friends and neighbours who pour into the house. Their ascetic lifestyle, sleeping on the floor, eating simple food, and having only religious music, reflects their liminal status, as they are dead to the ordinary world. They are in a ritually impure state (*sutaka*). They would not normally offer food or drink to anyone not in *sutaka,* although this is being relaxed because mourners come from considerable distances[8]. *Sutaka* seems to be associated with danger from the half-formed *preta* (ghost), which can cause injury to the family if it has not moved onto its new life[5, 8].

Grief is expressed in gender-specific ways; men are expected to be stoical while the women express their grief openly[5]. Public expression of grief in Britain occasionally causes problems at crematoria and in hospitals, although informants

sometimes said that it was good to 'get it out of your system'. However, with one exception, I noted restraint among educated Hindus. Young Hindus informants were often critical of expectations to show grief for distant relatives. They felt that grief got 'switched off and on' artificially, and some of the visitors were hypocritical. Grieving may be complicated by previous losses and issues of identity when familiar family members die in an alien milieu. Continuity is maintained by strong social support where it exists, although social and economic mobility leads to some family fragmentation. Eisenbruch notes that many immigrants to the USA have to be seen to grieve, and show extremes of emotion: 'Yet Anglo-American hospital staff may feel bewildered, threatened, hostile or derisive when faced by these behaviours, which are often treated by them as pathological'[4].

The loss of children is particularly distressing, especially a son on whom one's material, emotional and spiritual future depends (see below). There is little public mourning for infants, who are not considered to be social beings[8,5], and thus can leave the mother without a sense of completion. One mother has taken the unusual step of arranging for annual prayers at the temple for her daughter, who died as an infant.

Women's roles

In India gender roles are clearly demarcated in religious activities. Only male priests officiate at Sanskritic life-cycle rites and an eldest or youngest son, grandson or brother of the deceased normally acts as chief mourner, the wife or daughters assisting with the required materials. Some texts allow a woman to act for a husband or father if there are no male heirs[20,5,8]. This is linked to patrilineage and inheritance. Daughters are given away on marriage, joining their husbands' lineage, whereas sons traditionally inherit the property, guaranteeing their parents' security in old age and salvation by performing funeral and ancestral rites. At her death a woman's husband, son or grandson performs her rites.

In Britain some pandits allow daughters to perform their father's rites if there is no heir or if they insist on participating, seeing no scriptural reason to exclude them. Other pandits insist this is inappropriate. Women have to negotiate with the formidable combination of the pandit, relatives and elders. In one Gujarati family with no sons, the dying father insisted that the daughters acted as chief mourners, as they were to inherit the property and should have equal rights with men. The relatives were outraged, but they could do nothing about it because his preference was stated in his will. His widow was blamed for 'leading him on and twisting him around her little finger', and also blamed for not having had sons. Some relatives boycotted the funeral, and for years afterwards treated the wife coolly. She has now made the same provision in her will.

On the whole, Hindus are pragmatic about the alterations to the funerals. The entire family is more involved and delays allow overseas relatives to come. The purpose of the rituals is shifting towards the consolation of the mourners in this world, rather than the welfare of the dead in the next. One pandit explained that the funeral prayer should be directed towards two things: the elements making up the physical body, which now return to their origins, and those making up the spiritual body. As rituals such as the procession, pot breaking and skull-breaking disappear, the accompanying beliefs may also change. Individual pandits are adapting rituals appropriate to the circumstances, but whether there is eventually a standardised form or a variety, as at present, remains to be seen. BC

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editors

I was fascinated to read Dora Black's article on Pat Barker's novel, *The Eye in the Door* (Winter 2002 issue of *Bereavement Care*). The novel features real-life psychiatrist, Dr Rivers, who is treating, amongst others, the fictional WW1 officer, Billy Prior, for 'shell-shock'. Dora Black reveals that Prior is actually suffering from what is now known as dissociative identity disorder. She then reviews Prior's behaviour and Rivers' treatment (as described in the novel) within the context of that diagnosis. This insight and and explanation confirms yet again Pat Barker's ability to interweave fact and fiction into a convincing and brilliant recreation of people and events of that time.

I warmed to Rivers, a worthy role model for counsellors. He is the non-judgemental, caring male, described by Prior as a 'strip of empathetic wallpaper', who gets patients to confront their traumas and know themselves. On the other hand, Prior is the hard man, working class, enthusiastically bi-sexual, clever, angry, whose aggression so nearly unsettles Rivers. And yet these encounters lead to an ambiguous, mutual affection. This despite the fact that all of Rivers' skills and application are deployed in patching up these officers and returning them to the Front to die. A final irony?

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