

THE SURVIVAL OF HINDU CREMATION MYTHS AND RITUALS

IN 21ST CENTURY PRACTICE:

THREE CONTEMPORARY CASE STUDIES

by

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Dedicated to my parents, Charu and Girish Samarth, my husband, Raj Shimpi, my sons, Rishi Shimpi and Rishabh Shimpi, and my beloved dogs, Chowder, Haiku, Happy, and Maya for their loving support.

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by

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The University of Texas at Dallas, 2018

Supervising Professors: Dr. Thomas Riccio, Chair
Dr. Richard Brettell, Co-Chair

The 4,000-year-old Hindu *Agni Sanskar* (cremation) myth and ritual prescribed in the ancient scriptures continues to be an indomitable attribute of contemporary Hinduism. This qualitative dissertation focuses on cremations in three different Hindu communities of Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas, and notes recurring themes and patterns to exemplify the continuity and changes in Hindu cremation traditions. Personal factors such as age, gender, socio-economic status, educational qualifications, and family situation determine how a deceased person's cremation rites are performed. Cremation is also impacted by the socio-economic and political power of the Hindu community within the larger nation or city, as well as the historical context for settlement of the Hindu community in the "New" homelands. Despite global Hindu diaspora and in spite of modern innovations in cremation, the *Agni Sanskar* ritual remains the backbone of contemporary Hindu tradition.

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INTRODUCTION

The Survival of Hindu Cremation Myths and Rituals in 21st Century Practice: Three Contemporary Case Studies (1) explains and analyzes death rituals in the three locations of Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas (2) compares the contemporary practices to traditional cremation practices based on Vedic scriptures and (3) identifies the continuities and changes - and possible reasons for them - in contemporary cremation practices.

Defining the Problem

The Hindu communities in Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas share the fundamental myths of Eternal Laws and rituals of cremation, which culminate in the dissipation of the body (ashes) into the five elements. However, the diaspora does not exist in a vacuum in their new homeland; so, changes are evident in the enactment of the myths and rituals. The changes are based on pre-Hindu traditions of those places, including the co-existence of other traditions, local geography, laws, institutions, among others. Some adaptations are internally driven by the Hindu communities in these locations as a result of modern lifestyle. Personal factors such as age, gender, social status, economic well-being, and family situation have also impacted the changes in traditions.

Despite the antiquity of Vedic cremation myths and rituals, and despite the extreme historical, socio-economic, cultural, geographical, and linguistic variations among the three Hindu communities, the foundational cosmological philosophy remains tied and uncompromisingly faithful to the ancient Vedas from 1500 BCE, and by extension, to India as its birthplace. Following the Vedic scriptures gives the rituals unquestioned authority and

legitimacy, whereas adapting the rituals to the new homelands empowers the community with ritual continuity, connection, and contemporary relevance. What adaptations have enabled the cremation rituals to survive in the three Hindu communities outside of their original homeland?

The Issue of Hindu and Homeland

The Gujarati Hindu *bestu-varas* (new year) is celebrated after the Diwali festival in October-November, whereas the Marathi Hindu community celebrates *gudi padwa* (new year) in March-April. Some brahmin communities do not consume meat, whereas fish is the staple food of Bengali Hindus, Brahmins included. Punjabi Hindu festivals are celebrated with impromptu dance by men and women accompanying beating of barrel drums, whereas Tamil festivals include temple dances by trained *Bharatanatyam* dancers, almost always women. There is no singular Hinduism or one cohesive Hindu identity.

Hindu cosmology comprises of over 4,000 years of the cultural synthesis of various traditions. "Unlike other religions in the World, the Hindu religion does not claim any one Prophet, it does not worship any one God, it does not believe in any one philosophic concept, it does not follow any one act of religious rites or performances; in fact, it does not satisfy the traditional features of a religion or creed. It is a way of life and nothing more" (Supreme Court of India). Some Hindu philosophies postulate a theistic ontology of creation, of sustenance, and of the destruction of the universe, yet some Hindus are atheists, they view Hinduism more as philosophy than a religion. Within these two extreme Hindu worldviews, an interesting fact remains: Hindu is a term given to the "Indus" river people, those living on the other side of the Indus River, by the early Persians and then adopted by the British, probably for the convenience

of administration. The native word for the Hindu philosophy is *Santana Dharma* (Eternal Laws). Although there are shared precepts among the Hindus - such as the Vedas, *Purusharthas* (the four objectives of human life: *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha*), *sanskar* (rites of passage), *karma* (cause and effect of one's actions) among others, - these take on varieties of form. For example, *dharma* (doing one's duty), is the first aim in the Hindu person's life. However, duty depends on one's caste. The *brahmin* has a duty to recite Vedic chants, whereas the chants are polluted if a *Sudra* recites them (Anantha Murthy 6, 150, Eiseman 11-14). Caste, wealth, moral character, gender, age, marital and family status, language, ancestry and village of origin are some of the factors that shape Hindu ways of life; ritual traditions reflect the way of life.

The multiplicity of Hindu identity and the varieties of geographical locations in India as a homeland are carried over into the Hindu communities in Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas. In every Hindu person's mind, there is a singular Hindu identity and homeland, one that they were exposed to. Outside of their personal context, the Hindu identity is broad and unfamiliar, a mosaic built over 4,000 years of its survival.

Contributions of this Study

This study not only explains and analyzes death rituals in the three representational Hindu communities of Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas, but also compares the practices to one another. Similarities and differences are evident among the rituals of the three communities, which is reflective of the amorphous nature of Hinduism.

Attempts to unify Hinduism for the Hindu communities as well as for others' perception of Hinduism as singular (and thus not divisive and susceptible to weakened numbers and

strength) are driven by many factors, one of which is the attempt to recreate sacred geography vital for shared rituals and ritual legitimacy. Some other factors for uniting the varying Hindu communities under the umbrella term “Hindus” relate to increasing the communities’ numeric strength for gaining socio-economic status and positional power. The fear of proselytization of a nominal Hindu cannot be ruled out as an important reason to retain members of the community through a singular Hindu identity.

Although the focus of this study is cremation myths and rituals in contemporary Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas, the study situates Hindu beliefs and practices in a global system by providing a bird’s eye view into shared transnational as well as unique manifestations of Hinduism, all of which are aligned with pluralism that is inherent in Hinduism.

Why Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas?

The three Hindu communities of Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas are very different from one another. They are specifically chosen for the study because each of the three locations has a unique character based on when, why, and how the early Hindus first arrived in the three locations, and how they have made the “new homeland” their home.

In his book, *New Homelands: Hindu Communities in Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, South Africa, Fiji, and East Africa*, Paul Younger draws attention to the distinction among the different Hindu diasporic populations. The diaspora of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whose migration depended on colonial authority, such as in Mauritius and the Hindu diaspora who migrated to the West, and particularly to the United States after the 1960s, on their own desire, and often with families represent two very different Hindu communities.

Bali, Indonesia, however, is an exception to the Hindu ethnic diaspora because the Balinese are non-Indian origin Hindus. The Hindus of Bali are not diasporic Indian-Hindus because Hindu ideas came to Bali from Java, not from migration of ethnic Hindu persons from India. The oldest physical evidence of Hindu ideas on Bali in the form of a collection of small sun-dried clay stupas and seals dates to the eighth or ninth centuries. Indian texts, such as Puranas and *dharmashastras* (law manuals) written in the Sanskrit language, and as early as the fourth century, were deemed the legitimate foundation for the conception of royalty; hence, these religious ideas were meant for the elite, and not the whole population (Coedes 14-23). Large-scale Hindu influence came in 1343, with the Hindu-Buddhist Javanese kingdom of Majapahit invasion of Bali. It was during the latter part of the Majapahit kingdom in the mid-sixteenth century that Balinese Hinduism, including the caste-system, was established for the entire population. Prior to their flight to Bali, the Javanese kings were introduced to Hinduism through traders. Bali represents a thousand-years old migration of Hindu ideas. When Hinduism was introduced to Bali, it created a syncretic blend with the existing Polynesian Animist indigenous belief system to create a unique manifestation of native Hinduism that is Balinese Hinduism today (Younger 9-11, Lansing 3, Eiseman 11-32, Pringle 44-65).

Mauritian Hindus arrived in large numbers in the 19th century as indentured workers from India under the French and British Colonial rule. They represent involuntary migration and makeup about 68% of the country's population today. While Mauritian Indians share ethnicity with people from India, they have established Mauritius as their homeland for over 150 years now, with little or no familial contact in India. From marginalized Hindu workers with no rights to citizens who are empowered by Hinduism as the national religion in Mauritius today, the

Mauritian Hindu community has become a model of Indian-Hindu diaspora. The Mauritian Hindus' claim to be "more Hindu than the Hindus of India" (Younger 53), must be understood in this context of positional power.

Dallas migration of Hindu Indians is part of the larger migration of Indian-Asians to America, which can be traced to the 1960s after President Johnson signed the Immigration Act of 1965. The act abolished the race-based National Origins quota system that had favored European nations, replacing it with one that privileged immigrants with professional work skills as well as those reuniting with families. These early Hindu Indian immigrants had economically privileged backgrounds and arrived as students. Name-recognized, known universities in large cities were the hub of these early Hindu-Indian graduate students. After their degree completion, they opted to work and live in larger, ethnically diverse cities on the East and West coasts. Here, they gradually integrated their ritual practices within the larger landscape of America. A more definite migration pattern has emerged among the Hindu community in certain American cities - Dallas, Texas, being one of them - from around the year 2000, when large numbers of engineers and computer professionals from India began getting H1B employment visas to work in IT and support companies, allowing them to voluntarily relocate to the Dallas area. Their decision stems from the existing Indian Hindu population and the many conveniences in the Dallas area. This newer but much larger Indian-Hindu immigrant community is economically strong, and maintains close ties to India with frequent visits, allowing them to maintain their traditions. Not in the least, today's technology and app-use make it easy, more so for the tech-savvy, to connect cheaply and immediately to their native land, obscuring much of the giant differences that exist

between the two places. Dallas represents a voluntary and economically advantaged diaspora-immigrant community.

Given the markedly different nature of the three Hindu communities, comparative variations in the cremation rituals are to be expected. Clearly, the conditions under which each community developed its ritual tradition is different from the other, accounting for myriad local factors, such as geography, history, natural resources, socio-economic status, access to ritual objects and persons, local laws and permissions or permits, among others. By sifting through the variations, a pattern emerged, bringing to the fore the shared fundamental beliefs and practices. The myths of Eternal Laws and the cremation rituals of returning to the five elements are the two steadfast continuities amid changes caused by “location displacement” and “corrupting by the passage of time.”

Methodology

Qualitative research method is fitting for the study because the research question cannot be answered by a simple yes or no hypotheses. Plus, qualitative research is especially useful for answering how or why questions. The dissertation focuses on the reasons for the Hindu diaspora cremation rituals’ continuity and changes, and not simply the details of what, where, and when. For gathering this data, the following unstructured data collection methods are used: (1) action research (address a specific issue through observation), (2) interviews, (3) participant questions and conversations, (4) ethnography (field research with site visits), (5) visual and oral documentation of rituals, (6) phenomenology (study the subjective experiences of others), (7)

grounded theory (looking at specific information to derive reasons for the phenomenon), and (8) case study research (an in-depth study of a specific phenomenon in its existing context).

The next step was to select the ideal sampling communities: how many to study? Why? Possible outcomes were considered based on the literature review, and because qualitative methodologies are generally quite broad, there is always the possibility that some useful data would come out of the research. The Hindu communities in Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas were selected because of their extreme difference from one another in terms of geography, history, natural resources, socio-economic status, access to ritual objects and persons, local laws and permissions or permits, among others. By studying the comparative rituals, the shared elements would reveal the core and strength, the non-negotiable aspects, of the Hindu cremation rituals, the *raison d'être* for the dissertation.

The next step was content analysis, which involves organizing, sorting, labeling, coding, categorizing, and summarizing all the data to identify themes and to recognize the similarities and differences. Content analysis is done on two levels. Level One, basic or manifest level, which gives a descriptive account of the data, i.e., what is said, without any comments or theories as to why or how. It is basic reporting. Level Two, higher level or latent level analysis is a more interpretive analysis that is concerned with the response as well as what may have been inferred or implied. Content analysis is a procedure for the categorization of verbal or behavioral data, for purposes of classification, summarization, and tabulation. The aim of context analysis is to make sense of the data collected and to highlight the important messages, features, or findings.

Chapters

Chapter 1, “Rituals,” will explain the 3-fold structure of rituals and ceremonies in traditional societies based on Arnold Van Gennep’s seminal theory on the rites of passage, and will explain Hindu death rituals. Contemporary rituals from field study in the three locations are explained in Chapter 2, “Death,” Chapter 3, “Cremation,” and Chapter 4, “Post-Cremation.” The organization for the chapters is based on the 3-fold structure of the rites of separation, rites of transition, and rites of incorporation. Chapter 5, “Conclusion: Hindu Cremations – Continuity, Change and Community” analyzes cremation practices in the three locations to identify the adaptations made by the Hindu communities to remain faithful to the original belief in Eternal Laws and the cremation ritual, which is believed to sustain the universe.

Human Subjects

Research for this study was conducted on cremation grounds and in private residences. Cremation grounds are remote, hard to access, private and secluded places; entry to the places is considered suspicious and impossible without local informants. Access to cremation grounds and private residences was provided by local priests, facility staff and community persons performing and overseeing the death ceremonies. Note-taking, photos and videos for the study were taken by the author with full disclosure and consent of the local informants. Two photographs in the study were provided by and are used with permission from a personal contact with the initials of RMS (Figures 44 and 65).

Consent was in the form of driving the researcher to the sites or informing of a meeting place, explaining the rituals, interviewing the ritual participants, permitting photography, and

answering follow-up questions. No coercive, unethical or irresponsible methods were used to gain access to the places or the people photographed for this study. All information given and gathered for the study was voluntary and for the purpose of knowledge sharing. Table 1 discloses the information on local informants who provided access and enabled the research study. Table 2 lists the cremations attended. To maintain the sensitivity of the research topic and considering the vulnerable time at which the study was taking place, photographs show the backs of persons or are taken without any person present. To protect the identity of the individual human subjects, group photographs were taken. Minimum identification has been made for family members undergoing the cremation ritual.

Table 1: Informant Information

Bali	Mauritius	Dallas
Wayan Gajah Mada Work: Villa Puri Ayu, Sanur 45 YO native Balinese man Married w/two grown Children Lives in a traditional Balinese household with three generations of family Wayan means “first born”	Choonuksingh Oumashanker Male, Temple Priest 4 th gen. Mauritian- Hindu Speaks Bhojpuri	Pandit Janakbhai Shukla Male, Temple Priest DFW Hindu Ekta Mandir Gujrati origin 30+ years Dallas resident Performs all rites of passage rituals
Agung Work: Hospitality business 38 YO native Balinese woman Agung means “great,” a common Ksatriya caste girl name.	Pandita Barran Female, Priestess Sudra, widow Arya Samaj (reform movement) Speaks Bhojpuri	Pandit Harshvardhan Shukla Male, Temple Priest DFW Hindu Ekta Mandir Madhya Pradesh origin Speaks Hindi Worked in Western Mauritius (Flic-en-Flac) from 2003-2006. Prior to that, a priest in India. Performs only “auspicious” rites.

Made Work: Hotel Santrian 24 YO native Balinese man Unmarried From Singaraja (north Bali)	Pandit Dhawdall Male, Priest Puranic cremation rituals Upper-caste	Paresh Patel 45-YO Male, married with 2 children; temple administrator and community member. BAPS (Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha) Temple 20+ years in Dallas Work: Software Engineer. Member of worldwide BAPS.
Gungde Work: Food stall owner 45 YO native Balinese man Arya (Ksatriya) caste	Pandit Ashwini Male, Priest	Ashokbhai Patel 55 YO Male; 40+ years in Dallas BAPS Temple (Funeral Coordinator).
	Dr. Uma Bhowon Dean of the Department of Social Studies and Humanities and Faculty in Social Studies at the University of Mauritius. Born in India; lived in Mauritius for 25+ years	Ms. Stephanie Hughes Hughes Family Tribute Center in Dallas
	Professor Rajen Suntoo Education instructor at the University of Mauritius Marathi speaking, 4 th generation Mauritian-Hindu	
	Mr. Chenganna Coordinator for Certificate in Peace Program. 4 th generation ethnic Tamilian and French-speaking	
	Reverend Eddy Cheong Chair, Council of Religions	

Table 2: Cremations Attended

	Bali	Mauritius	Dallas
Cremation 1	Upper caste “lembu” bull sarcophagus 67 YO man White and gold color symbolism	Vedic – Arya Samaj 80 YO Vaish caste Married, 2 grown sons Natural death Riviere du Rempart Priestess Barran	Hughes Funeral Home 79 YO Vaish woman Married, grandmother 20 years in Dallas Died from prolonged illness Pooja
Cremation 2	Lower caste “open” cremation 65 YO man	Puranic cremation 47 YO Vaish caste Married, 2 young children Cardiac arrest Roches Noires Pandit Dhawdall	Hughes Funeral Home 56 YO woman Widow, grown daughter 3 years in Dallas Pooja + assembly
Cremation 3	Six-persons group cremation Buried first (between 6 months and 2 years) <i>Banjar-Keluarga</i> Besar Meranggi- sponsored and shared resources and offerings		Hughes Funeral Home 23 YO man died in a car accident “bad” death His parents in their 50s 30 years in Corpus Christi Pooja in Dallas Assembly in Corpus Christi
Cremation 4			Hughes Funeral Home 70+ YO man Natural death Lived with son’s family in Dallas; a son in CA and a daughter in England 40 years in CA and TX Partially embalmed (4 days)
Cremation 5			30+ YO man H1B visa holder Married w/2 children Died in his sleep Lived in Dallas for 4 years

CHAPTER 1

RITUALS

Hindu rituals are based on the unquestionable belief that Eternal Laws - the universe's unceasing and impartial cycles, rhythms, and balance – govern the universe, including humankind. The role of humankind is to live in synchronicity with these Eternal Laws. Within this cosmological framework, rituals serve the purpose of acknowledging the inherent cosmic order and sustaining the rhythm of the cosmic concert (Anantha Murthy 6, 150, Eiseman 11-14).

Rites of Passage

Just as the universe is governed by rhythms of seasons, transitions, and inactivity, so also is human life. *The Rites of Passage* by Arnold Van Gennep theorizes that every individual undergoes “life crises,” which he called the rites of passage. The biological and social “life crises” change in status may be dangerous and upset the life of the individual or the group. It is here that the structure contained in the rites of passage rituals provides concession and cushion to absorb the disturbance and chaos caused by the change. Rituals contain 3 parts: (1) rites of separation, which identify and segregate the individual(s) undergoing the biological and social transformation, (2) rites of transition, in which the individual(s) undergoing the transition change from the previous status to the next status, and (3) rites of incorporation, which bring the individual(s) back into the fold. The ritual structure minimizes individual and community hardship, enabling order to be restored to the individual and community life (Van Gennep 1-21).

In the Hindu tradition, the gradual process of separation of a person from daily living and social engagements begins in the *vanaprastha* (retired/hermit) stage of life, and accelerates in the

final stage of *sanyas* (renunciation/wandering ascetic). In the *vanaprastha* stage, a person has fulfilled their social duties and responsibilities toward others, and gradually retires from family responsibilities. The focus is on spiritual matters and pilgrimages. The final stage of *sanyas* requires one to leave home and family, to be socially dead. *Sanyasi* don saffron robes and wander in search of self-realization and God. At death, all earthly ties are suspended. Death, cremation, and post-cremation rites are performed for thirteen-days after death; this mourning period allows the grieving family to come to terms with the loss and chaos of death. Simultaneously, the rites performed by the grieving family serve to transition the dead person from this world to the next (Bhalla 304, Tiwari 11).

Vedas – Hindu Source of Knowledge

“The root of the Laws is the entire Veda...for it contains all knowledge” (Olivelle 23). The supreme authority of the Vedas lies in their revelations heard by ancient rishis - seers, sages, and wise men - after intense meditation. The Vedas were recited for millenniums prior to their written recorded from circa 1500-1200 BCE; the rishis heard the universe’s sounds of knowledge and resonated what they heard with what they said, and later wrote.

The four types of Vedas are considered the property of the high caste Brahmin priests, who are the hereditary keepers of tradition. Rig Veda is the knowledge of the verses; Sama Veda is the knowledge of chants, the Yajur Veda is the knowledge of the ritual direction, and the Atharva Veda is the knowledge of the procedures for every day. These four divisions reflect a division of labor among the priestly elite, and this knowledge was organized around the performance of *yajna* or sacrifice. For the early practitioners of this knowledge, the *yajna* is the

central ritual action that was meant to motivate and sustain the entire universe. The Vedas are the words and chants accompanying the ritual actions and served to augment and vitalize the actions into having cosmic power. Without the sacrifice, the sun would not rise in the morning, the cattle would not grow and multiply, nor would the crops flourish throughout the year (Patton 18-20).

Sacrifice as Sustenance

Death is not seen as the end in the Hindu tradition; rather, it is the gateway to another beginning. Death follows life, and rebirth follows death; the individual is only a temporary figure in this cosmic cycle of sustenance. “At the funeral rituals, the sacrificer’s body is also a kind of actual oblation, in which the body is not to be devoured, but “prepared” for the world beyond, where the crematory fire will take him” (Rig Veda 10.16.5). The following Vedic hymn connects cremation to returning of the body to the five elements.

Burn him not up, nor quite consume him, Agni: let not his body or his skin be scattered,
O all possessing Fire, when thou hast matured him, then send him on his way unto the Fathers.
When thou hast made him ready, all possessing Fire, then do thou give him over to the Fathers,
When he attains unto the life that waits him, he shall become subject to the will of gods.
The Sun receive thine eye, the Wind thy Prana (life-principle, breathe); go, as thy merit is, to earth or heaven.
Go, if it be thy lot, unto the waters; go, make thine home in plants with all thy members (Rigveda 10.16)

Death

Death is a critical moment in the life of a Hindu, not only because it marks the end of life, but also because it marks the transition to the afterlife and next life. Funeral rites, therefore, are

among the most elaborate rituals in the Hindu tradition. If the funeral rites are not performed per the set laws, then the deceased may be in “limbo,” between this life and the next, and remain in the world as a *preta*, a ghost. The Garuda Purana states that if deprived of final rites, “the ghost remains as *preta* always” (78). *Preta* is a chaotic state of being because it is neither dead, nor alive, and has the impossible status of existence. *Preta* is both, unharnessed power and undifferentiated pollution, hence a danger for the surviving relatives. Ritual performance eradicates the possibility of harm to the family and ensures the smooth transition of the dying to deceased to a corpse, soul, and into the afterlife.

Hindu Final Rites

Antyesti is a series of rituals performed to mark the death of a person. The rituals consist of washing and preparing the dead for cremation. The intent of the *Antyesti* ritual is to convert the body into substances that formed the body at birth – water, air, fire, earth, and ether – so that they can return back into the universe at death, completing the cycle of life at an individual level, and keeping the cosmic cycle in motion at a macrocosmic level.

The final rites have evolved in many ways, but cremation as the method for the disposal of the dead remains a constant. In times past, funeral gifts consisted of (1) empty cotton balls, which were exchanged as money, (2) iron pots, since the metal is considered full of subtle impure influences, easily accepted by the envoys of Yama (yamaduta), (3) salt, which in its complex significance is not only the residue of primeval oceans but also a symbol of sterility and death. Salt conserves food and adds flavor. Salt is a substitute for the dying man who is becoming mineralized, and who will remain in a state of preservation until the moment in which

he will return to a new existence. (4) Land may be gifted, too, or a poor man hands the brahmin priest a handful of earth, along with a few coins, signifying that the old man is registered to leaving the earth. (5) A handful of cereal and legume seeds are also a part of the gift; these seeds represent the old man's last vital powers which he disperses to take his last trip. (6) Laddu, a spherical, golden color sweet, which the god Ganesha loves. The elephant-headed god is the destroyer of obstacles and the lord of passages, so through this gift, the man guarantees his exit from earthly life without hindrances or difficulties. (7) If possible, a fragment of gold is applied on the laddu as payment for the passage to the world beyond. "The gift of gold produces happiness in heaven" (Garuda Purana, II.30.16). (8) The final gift is that of a cow, call Vaitarani, meaning one who helps in crossing over. Bedecked with painted gold horns, silver hooves, and copper back, neck adorned with bells and her tail braided with pearls, the cow is brought into the room of the old man and his right-hand holds her tail. He then consigns the cow to the brahmin. The animal functions as a psychopomp, leading the deceased along the road that leads to the kingdom of the dead. A poor man who cannot afford the gift of a cow can donate a few coins, symbolizing the price of a cow. It is interesting to note that in archaic Hinduism, still alive in Bali, the remains of brahmins are enclosed in wooden coffins sculptures in the form of a cow. In this coffin, they are delivered to the flames of cremation. After the medieval period, a custom arose in which the cow was made to flee from the sacrifice site, in conformity with the progressive reduction of bloody rites (Filippi 110-12, Parry 200, Wood 52). These funerary rites no longer make up Hindu death rites, or they exist in symbolic ritual substance, such as ghee (clarified butter), a substance produced from the cow.

Brahmins were not the only intermediaries for funeral gifts; those of the *śrauta* cults, for example, made the offerings directly into the sacrificial fire which transformed them into smoke and vapor, going upwards. There were instances of actual sacrificing of a cow, or a billy goat, placing its organs on the corresponding organs of the deceased, lying on the pile of wood. *Pitrs* (ancestors) are said to be especially fond of the meat of billy goats. Kidneys were placed in the hands of the dead, as an offering to Yama's (god of death) two dogs. It's probable that the skin of the sacrificed animal was used to wrap around the corpse to be cremated. In contemporary Mauritius, the straw mat enfolding the dead body is called the placenta for a new birth. The pinda (rice) balls are offered as substitutes for kidneys in contemporary Mauritian Puranic funerary rites. Today, ritual purity of priests may be judged on a purely vegetarian diet, hence the ritual adaptation of the pinda balls may have arisen.

Garuda Purana, II.47.22-23 advises the funeral gifts to be offered during an eclipse, an equinox, at dusk, or at the sun's passage from one zodiacal sign to the next (Wood 52). Many elderly who are not on the brink of death would try to coincide their gift giving with some important astrological event. If gifts have already been made, then they need not be repeated at the time of death. After these gifts have been made, the dying man was said to feel comforted and ready to die. The relatives would lift his body and place it on the purified naked earth, with his head facing north and his feet south, so that he can depart toward the southern reign of Yama. The man should not expire in this state, between heaven and earth, lacking objective reality and prey to unbridled imagination, a state of existence populated by demons (*pisacas*), vampires (*vetalas*), and nightmares (*uragrahas*), all ready to invade anyone new to this aerial condition. If the person dies in this state, he was said to be suspended in a dream state, where he cannot

distinguish between real and unreal. He would also be placed close to the domestic fire. Sacred water from the Ganges or holy water was sprinkled around the dying man, kusa or durva grass were scattered, symbolizing promises of a new existence. Sometimes, cow excrements were sprinkled, representing the land in its rawness. Relatives would gather around him. In the case the dying man was a brahmin, the priest officiating would recite some passages and hymns from the Vedas of his family tradition. For other castes, the priest would choose sacred and efficacious verses from the Bhagvad Geeta and the Ramayana. The atmosphere created around the dying man was of extreme holiness: sacred chants filling the space; fragrant flowers and burning incense perfuming the air; flickering flame of the hearth fire symbolized sanctity of the event. The practice of creating a holy atmosphere continues even to this day in the Hindu communities of Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas. The man, lying in a space sprinkled with holy water, would be lulled by the five bhutas, senses, and in this consecrated space, that man concludes his earthly existence. When his heart stops beating, his family called him by name. When he does not respond, all witnesses promise to help the deceased reach the highest goal in his posthumous condition. A little ghee (clarified butter) would be placed on his forehead, and replaced a few times, as it melts. When the ghee no longer melts, it is the proof of the cooling of the body. This moment onward, the house, as well as family members of the deceased, are struck by impurity, whereas the corpse is declared sacred.

The *asaucha* period of mourning and ritual impurity, stays with the brahmins for nine days, ksatriyas for 12 days, vaisyas for fifteen days, and sudras for a month. Sitting at the top of the caste hierarchy, the brahmin is the paradigmatic Brahman, the source of atman, soul, hence a paragon of purity. Here again, we see the caste disparity as brahmins maintain their superior

status of purity through fewer days of impact due to the psychic unbalancing caused by the death of a family member (Parry 109). This is a period of weakness in the family's defenses, in which subtle attacks of evil spirits such as vetalas, pisacas, bhutas, or living wizards (yatudhana) may insinuate themselves. Their aim of infesting the home, or of utilizing the mortal remains or psychic residue of the deceased, would cause grave repercussions to his post-mortem condition, plus fear and damage to the family. As per Garuda Purana II.2.12 and 14, a mandala, a magic circle of protection, is drawn all around the corpse. It is believed that if the deceased is not protected this way, he will be reborn in the air, and thus will become a pisaca (Filippi 127-28). So great was the emphasis on the final stage of life in earlier Hindu societies. The belief in spirits continues to this day in all the three Hindu communities. Water is sprinkled in a circle around the funeral pyre in Mauritian Hindu cremations to demarcate the sacred cremation space from the undifferentiated landscape of everyday life.

Fire – The Medium of Sacrifice

In the Katha Upanishad, the symbolic sacredness and sanctity of fire is explained by Lord Yama, none other than the God of Death himself. Yama is conversing with a young Brahmin boy, Nachiketas.

Little Nachiketas had watched his father perform a *yajna*, fire sacrifice. He offered all the old cows for the sacrifice, which wise Nachiketas had a difficult time understanding because the intent of the father seemed selfish: to attain good *karma* and to offer cows that the father cannot benefit from. So, this little boy asked his father, "Who will you give me to?" The father ignored the boy's question a few times, but the child was relentless. So, in anger, the father replies, "To god Yama. I am going to give you to Yama!" The boy took his father's words very seriously and made a journey to see Yama, who was not at home when the boy arrived, and was in fact out, imparting the justice of death as per karmic transactions. Nachiketas waited at the door of Yama for three days and nights,

hungry and thirsty. When Yama arrived, he felt terrible that he had made his guest wait. This was terrible hospitality to a guest (because it was not Nachiketas' time to die, yet, so he was a visitor to Yama.) To compensate for Nachiketas' waiting, Yama offered him three boons. The little boy quickly asked for the first boon, which was to make sure his father forgives him upon his return home and Death grants that wish to him. For the next wish, Nachiketas asks about what happens after a person dies. At first, Yama is averse to answering his question, and instead offers the young boy wealth, beautiful maidens, horse chariots and land. But wise Nachiketas refuses it all, and remains adamant about the final mystery, with a conclusive retort to Lord Yama, "Who can enjoy any of that, knowing You, Death, are looming large?" At this response, Death imparts knowledge of the fire ritual to the Brahmin boy, and sacrificial fire thus comes to be named as the fire of Nachiketas. Yama explains, "Sacred fire which leads to heaven, that fire which is the means of attaining the infinite worlds and is also their foundation, is hidden in the sacred place of the heart. And Death told him of the fire of creation, the beginning of the worlds, and of the altar of the fire-sacrifice, of how many bricks it should be built and how they should be placed" (The Upanishads, 56).

Agni Sanskar (cremation) leads the dead from this world to the next. "With few exceptions, the Hindu rites at the time of death and the procedures for cremation (*antyeshti*) are fairly uniform throughout the regions of India. This conformity in ritual across vedic, epic, puranic, and agamic periods, and on into modern practice, is remarkable" (Davis 2).

Yama, the God of Death

Yama, the god of death, is said to take the person who is about to die. The myths of Yama, common in Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas, are generally passed down as oral tradition, and for the older generation, reading about him in Indian mythology books. The Balinese figure of *Rangda*, although a female, embodies the notions of fright and is fused with Yama.

In the Vedic tradition, Yama is the first mortal to meet his fate with Death. This honor makes him uniquely qualified to lead the way for others after death. The tenth book of the Rig Veda has three hymns, 10, 14, and 35, addressed to Yama as Yamraj (King Yama), an

acknowledgment of Yama as the king of the Underworld. The hymns promise that all who have been good will receive admission to Yama's paradise and the everlasting enjoyment of all the heavenly pleasures. These pleasures include the restoration of a sick body, the maintaining of family relations, and the highly desired deification. In popular folklore, the slow-moving buffalo is a symbolic metaphor for a lack of hurriedness. It is a popular myth in rural India that dogs barking at night time is an evil omen and foretells the arrival of Yama on his buffalo. "Even today the typical mournful baying of a dog is considered ominous. It is believed to be a portent of the impending death of someone living nearby. Thus the arrival of death is connected with the wail of a dog and hence a wailing dog is driven away to avert the arrival of death" (Merh 53).

Rituals at Death

The dying person, if able, recites the name of their family deity during the last moments of life. Family members chant Vedic mantras softly at the moment of death. This calms the soul. Death is a mystery, so it is important to remain focused on positive thoughts at this crucial time. The Bhagvad Geeta states that whatever a soul is thinking at the time of death will be attained in the next lifetime (8:6), hence it is necessary for the dying person to remember God through prayers and invoking through the name.

At the moment of death, rites of separation are performed by the family. The eyelids of the dead are closed to emulate sleep. If the eyes are open then the person appears unnatural and scary, hence the family will close the deceased's eyes. The body is laid in the home's entryway with the feet facing the southern direction, the direction of Yama (the god of death) as per instructions in the Yajur Veda. The body is placed on a low bed or on a mat on the ground,

reflecting a return to earth. A lamp is lit and placed near the head, keeping ritual impurity at a safe distance until the body is prepared for cremation. The lamp will keep burning until the time of cremation. Incense is burned to purify the polluted space through the smoke. Holy ash (burned out fire) or fragrant sandalwood paste is applied to the center of the corpse's forehead, a mark of anointment and holiness, visually identifying and separating the dead from the living, as well as identifying it as a sacred object. A few drops of milk (pure substance), Ganga or other holy water are trickled into the mouth of the deceased to nourish the soul since the consumption is no longer for the body. The thumbs are tied together, as are the big toes. The reason for this ritual practice is to keep the body intact and laying straight. This position enables the body to be placed on a bier or in a casket, which is compact. It is difficult to align the body if the muscles become stiff, so tying the thumbs and toes keeps them close to the body.

In modern times, many deaths occur in a hospital. If the death occurs in a hospital, the family must wait for the hospital staff to declare the body dead and sign a release form before all these rituals can be performed. Traditionally, all these rituals must be performed at home, but nowadays, many people do not bring the body home, so abbreviated versions of the rituals are performed at the *samsana* (cremation ground). Vedic mantras and prayers are continuously recited by the family. In some staunch Hindu traditions, images of deities in the home are turned to the wall, as a mark of the family home experiencing ritual impurity. The temporary covering of the deities indicates a state of mourning for the family. By turning the deities' gaze "away", the focus is on death. Nowadays, most families do not turn the deities or cover them, but simply refrain from performing any religious rites of worship during the mourning period. In a few traditions, the mirrors are covered. The idea is that death is contagious, hence covering the

mirrors ensures that the spirit of the dead will not recognize any items or their reflection in the mirror.

After these initial preparations, a call is made to a priest. The priest may be a family priest, which most Hindus have since priests' services are used for rites of passage and festival rituals. The priest is the guide in all matters henceforth, until the deceased is believed to arrive in Yamlok, the abode of Yama, or united with the *pitr*, ancestors, which will be on the thirteenth day after the death.

While awaiting the priest, calls are made to friends and family; as relatives arrive, they are beckoned to bid farewell and chant sacred words at the side of the body. Relatives and neighbors are a great source of comfort during this difficult time. They bring simple food to the family during the next several days (even after the cremation is over) and may help with arrangements for the cremation and other funerary rites. It is important to note that despite treating the body as sacred and performing rituals to it, it is not yet time to seek its blessings through touching of the feet. That ritual only takes place after the corpse has been prepared for cremation.

The rituals performed on the corpse - chanting of mantras, washing the body, dressing the body in appropriate clothing, offering of prayers and flowers, standing in gesture of prayer, touching the feet, and passing the lamp *arti* around the corpse - are identical to those performed for Hindu deities, thus elevating the status of the corpse to a future deified-ancestor. "According to ancient custom, until the body is properly removed there can be no worship, no bathing, no prayers, no food, nothing. No one but a brahmin can touch the body" (Anantha Murthy 12).

The *Homa* Fire Ritual

When the funeral priest arrives, he provides guidance to the family to start a *homa* fire in the home. A *homa* fire is the fire of oblation, the *yajna*, which from the Vedic times has been the fire of sacrifice and offering. This is the fire (flame) in which the oblation of the corpse will be made in the *samsana* (cremation ground). In the *homa* fire, a lamp is lit while the priest chants sacred mantras and prayers. The fire takes on a sacred dimension as the smoke and sounds blend in the atmosphere. Nine brass kumbhas (water pots) and one clay pot are filled with water and placed near the lamp. By proximity to this lamp, the water in the pots is blessed. The clay pot will be used later to carry the *homa* fire to the *samsana*, cremation ground.

The nine pots are a symbolic representation of the nine planets, as well as the number nine being revered as a complete and perfect number because it represents the end of a cycle in the decimal system, which originated in the Indian subcontinent around 3,000 BCE. The Vedas treat the Sun as God, and the Sun has 12 signs of the zodiac. In Yajurveda, Sun is related to the Creator Lord Brahma, whose number is nine. $12 \times 9 = 108$, which is a sacred number for repeating prayers, such as the Gayatri Mantra. Adding $1+0+8 = 9$. Hence, nine pots represent the perfect cosmos.

The pot is circular, denoting a mandala, a symbolic diagram of the Cosmos in which the deities descend and raise themselves. The lighting of the *homa* fire purifies the water in the pots, which will be used later for cleansing the dead body. Thus, the dead body is set amid the symbolic creation of the perfect universe, of which it is a part.

All household fires are turned off when the *homa* fire is burning and must remain extinguished until the mourning period has ended. The reason for this is that the *homa* fire will

be carried from home and will be used to light the funeral pyre at the cremation. It is the flames of the crematory fire, along with the sacred mantras, that transform and then transport the offering of the corpse into the world of Yamlok and the *pitr*-ancestors. The chief mourner leads the rites. He is the eldest son in the case of the father's death and the youngest son in the case of the mother's. In some traditions, the eldest son serves for both parents, and also for his wife. In the absence of a son, a son-in-law or nearest male relative will lead the rites. While there have been some reforms recently to allow daughters to perform the final rites in the “mother” culture of India, these are isolated and politicized cases.

Son - The Ritual Agent of Regeneration

All the informants in India, Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas, and all Vedic and sacred Hindu texts, reiterated that a son, or another close male family-member, should perform the funeral rites because it is “tradition” and the way of “our” ancestors. “Death is the same now as it was 4,000 years ago, so what is there to reform?” said Pandit Oumashankerji in Mauritius, when asked why contemporary societal changes are not reflected in including women in funerary rituals. Women and men did not go to university 4,000 years back, but that is no longer true. News stories from the Indian media, which told of daughters performing the final rites for their parents, reported that women in reformed and progressive families may go to the *samsana*, and attend all the ceremonies for the dead. Panditji agreed that was true in India, and added that generally women are passive or nominally engaged agents of funerary ceremonies. The literary texts and tradition require men to perform the rituals, but there is no mandate to remove women. It’s a family’s wish on who performs the rites in “mother” Indian culture, but the focus needs to be on the

deceased, and not on some political agenda or gender advancement. “Yeh waqt nahi hai” (This is not the time) Pandit Oumashankerji explained.

Death rituals in Bali are community events and women participate in them. One reason could be that women have the major role of making the offerings, central to Balinese rituals, and many offerings consist of food preparations and aesthetic presentation of offerings, duties of Balinese women. Women in Dallas participate in all the death rituals. Perhaps an educated workforce that prizes gender equality has brought about this reform, but a more likely reason is that most Hindus are first generation immigrants and do not have extended family present. To bar women from participating not only shrinks the family further, but the women may have closer relation to the deceased than the men. The tradition of only men attending cremations is deeply rooted in Mauritius, where the priests and community members choose to emphasize the tradition of a son performing the final rites. Sons represent regeneration; they set the creative cycle in motion. Women are perceived as passive agents of regeneration. Without rain as a catalyst, the earth cannot produce. Funerary rites are not the platform for women’s equal rights, and they are certainly not negotiable in Mauritius, as they have been in Bali and in Dallas.

A likely reason for barring women from cremation sites in Mauritius may be that men may express emotions and cry, which might be perceived as signs of weakness. In the formative period of Hindu-Mauritian identity, it may have been imperative for men to maintain an outward show of strength at all times, hence the ritual practice of keeping women away may have taken shape.

Another possible explanation for the strict ritual adherence for a son performing all the funerary rites in Mauritius may be because the culture’s orientation is past-centered. When a

culture believes that its glory lay in the past, there is little incentive for progress and contemporary inclusiveness. The past was perfect, and perfection cannot be improved. Hence, the Mauritius Hindu community attempts to retain the ancient practice without the interception of any signs of modernity.

Mourning

During the mourning period, the living mourners and the deceased constitute a special group of liminal persons, “betwixt and between” in the words of Victor Turner (*The Ritual Process* 95), as they are situated between the world of the living and a world of the dead. In the cultures of Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas, basic mourning consists of wearing white or muted color clothing, refraining from eating rich food and maintaining *shoka* (sadness). Close family may avoid eating salt during mourning as a rite of separation because salt symbolizes absorption in the food. The mourning period and severity is based on the degree of kinship and closeness of the relationship with the dead person, but the Hindu norm is to maintain thirteen days of mourning.

Crying is done in private but may spillover in social setting when extended family visits; mourners are comforted and advised against crying as crying is believed to disturb and delay the journey of the soul into the afterlife. Mourners are also reminded that the soul is free at death, whereas the living are entrapped in the body.

Although the cremation usually takes place within a day of death, it is a common Hindu belief that it takes thirteen days of ritual propitiation for the soul to attain its rightful place. On the thirteenth day the family cooks a simple meal at home. The family remembers the deceased

person by invoking their name at the start of the meal. In remembering the deceased, the deceased is pleased that they are remembered fondly. The family believes that the deceased has also remembered them back. The family eats together, which pleases the deceased person's soul because they see that life is continuing for their surviving family; the devastation of death did not disrupt the cycle of life. At the completion of this meal, the surviving family believes that the deceased has safely joined the ancestors and is pleased with the family. According to Van Genneep, all traditional societies employ the family meal as a rite of incorporation. This meal marks an end to the mourning period for the family (146-148, Anantha Murthy 142).

Preparing the Body

In the Vedic tradition, the body is prepared as a "bundle" of offering on the funeral pyre. In Bali, the corpse is wrapped in a sacred cloth and then buried in the ground if the cremation will not take place immediately. In Mauritius and in Dallas, a white cloth lightly covers the body so that the pollution of the corpse does not make contact with the living.

In all the three traditions, the family first lights a small lamp called *arti*. *Arti* is a mandatory fire ritual performed on all auspicious occasions of Hindus. Performing *arti* means passing an oil, but preferably a ghee, lamp over the corpse. The ritual is an extension of the ancient Vedic concept of *homa* fire ritual. Wicks of cotton or thin cloth strip is soaked in clarified butter (ghee) or oil and placed in a palm-sized earthen pot. The *arti* is offered to all holy objects, including the corpse during the final rites. The *arti* constitutes worship through *bhava*, or emotion, considered the highest form of worship as it is personal devotion.

After the *arti* has been passed over the body, flowers are offered to it. The male (or female, depending on the gender of the deceased) relatives carry the body to private area in the home. If there is no private space available, the body can be sponge bathed and prepared where it is. Each person applies sesame oil to the head, and the body is sponged or bathed in water from the nine kumbha (round clay) pots. The corpse is dressed in formal clothing, placed on a wooden platform, and carried back to the front of the home, to where the *homa* fire is. Young family members encircle the body, carrying incense and singing devotional songs and hymns, chanting mantras and offering prayers. They offer flower petals to the body, touch its feet as a mark of utmost and final respect.

Touching feet is a sign of respect among the Hindus. The person whose feet are being touched is always superior in age and position. Touching elders' feet is the first lesson in manners and etiquette that all Hindu children are taught; children touch their parents' feet (every morning, in earlier Hindu societies), newly married couples touch the feet of their in-laws after the wedding, students touch the feet of their gurus (teachers) upon completion of studies. The intent is to seek blessings of the person whose feet are being touched. Hence, when the family and community members touch the corpse's feet, they are seeking its blessings as they would from a sacred object or from a deity. The corpse is elevated to the status of a deity.

The practice of touching elders' feet is losing importance in modern times, however, it still remains important to perform the gesture to a corpse, just as it does to a deity. This holds true among the Hindus in India, Mauritius, and Dallas, irrespective of their regional, linguistic, and caste affiliations. The Balinese join the palms of the hands together in a gesture of prayer and bow when paying respect. Kneeling with the hands folded is a mark of deep reverence. Bali

and Mauritius cremations are open air, on a traditional funeral pyre, so the corpse is prepared at home when the body is on a cot. The Dallas area cremations are in a cremation vault, and prior to the cremation, there's usually a "viewing" assembly. At the Hughes Family Tribute Center in Dallas, for example, the corpse is placed in a full couch casket during the viewing ceremony so that the feet of the deceased are exposed to be touched by the mourners seeking blessings from the future ancestor-deity. The open casket adaptation is unique to Dallas.

After blessings are sought by the children, the women walk around the body and offer puffed rice into the mouth to nourish the deceased for the journey ahead. If the deceased is a married man, then the widow will place her tali (wedding pendant) around her husband's neck, signifying her enduring tie to him. The men also circumambulate the body and seek blessings. The body is then lightly covered with a white uncut shroud. The uncut shroud is always without seams and unwashed. The white color symbolizes purity. The shroud provides a protective covering to avoid any contact with the corpse, because the corpse still remains an impure object, and thus contagious. This ritual symbolizes "tying all loose ends", marking an end to earthly involvement.

In modern day, many families in India, and especially in the Dallas area are unable or unwilling to bring the body home. This mindset is due to the fear of death, and death's association with contamination and its contagiousness. This is not true in Bali and in Mauritius as the dead are "prepared" at home for their cremation. In Dallas, where the corpse is rarely "prepared" at home, the families make arrangements to clean and dress the body at the funeral home. It is preferred that family perform these final rites, but given the inexperience and emotional fragility of the family at this time, the family often have to give these duties to funeral

home staff. An important reason for this adaptation in Dallas is that many persons performing funeral rites for their loved ones do not have local support of immediate and extended family and neighbors. In Bali and Mauritius, there are literally a hundred people around the mourning family, ready to help in any way they can. Living in a mature community affords exposure to several generations of community members, who share and participate in the rituals. The older community members share their own experiences and guide the young on how the rituals are performed and explain the reasons for each of the ritual actions. The experience and knowledge shared by older community members lends comfort and support in carrying out the rituals. Discomfort and hesitation of the young are absorbed by the experience and guidance of the old. The collective ritual knowledge of the community is passed down from one generation to the next, but generational families have yet to develop in Dallas. Most Dallas Hindus are first-generation immigrants, so they have yet to reach the mature stage of a Hindu community as demonstrated in Bali and Mauritius. The Dallas Hindu community is nascent, still in early (social) development stage, and quite scattered due to the loose nature of Hindu beliefs. Hence, the Funeral Homes meet the important need of preparing the body for cremation.

The last step is to light a *homa* fire. If the *homa* fire is not lighted at home, then it can be kindled at the crematorium. Nowadays the *homa* fire is created at the place of cremation due to safety reasons in all the three locations. Death rituals follow these general patterns within the tradition, but each death experience is unique.

CHAPTER 2

DEATH

Death is inevitable. “Sage or ignorant, brahman or whatever, all men must die” (Garuda Purana II.24.30). In Garuda Purana, II.24.29, we are told that human life is an ascending process leading to one’s maturity, after which the “descent” begins, leading to death. Whatever comes into being is bound to perish. “Everything is destroyed by time” (Basham 55). Thus, the Hindu attitude toward death is in concert with the universe. Rites of separation begin at death. Rites of separation successively terminate social bonds and biological status that were reinforced throughout a person’s life.

Bali

Balinese death rituals are elaborate and vary significantly in one way from the Vedic practice. *Ngaben*, or cremation, is the most important funerary ritual, so it is not performed right away and not within a day after death, like their Vedic counterpart. This is because cremation requires immense preparation. As a result, most corpses are buried until cremation. Upper caste members are not supposed to bury their members as their association with earth is considered defilement. Priests are not buried either, due to the ritual prohibition on their interment. The body must be continuously attended to until cremation because the Balinese believe that the soul lingers around the body and wanders around until the time of cremation. A wandering soul is a cause for harm to the family. The family holds a ceremony with close family members to let the soul of the deceased know when they will be incinerated. This ceremony is held in the Pura Dalem (Temple of Death) or within the cemetery.

Pura Dalem Agung (Great Temple of Death)

The *Pura Dalem Agung* (Great Temple of Death) in the Padang Tegal neighborhood in Ubud, Bali is visited only in association with cremation rituals since there is a cemetery close to it and spirits of the dead are said to wander around the area. The temple (Figure 1) is dedicated to the witch-widow *Rangda*, who is believed to be the demon- queen of *leyaks* (witches) in Balinese mythology. *Leyaks* are given the fierce visual form of a flying head with attached entrails of heart, lungs, liver, etc. Considering the temple's potency in attracting spirits of the dead from the nearby cemetery, this temple is a propitious place for learning witchcraft. As a result, access to it is monitored and controlled.

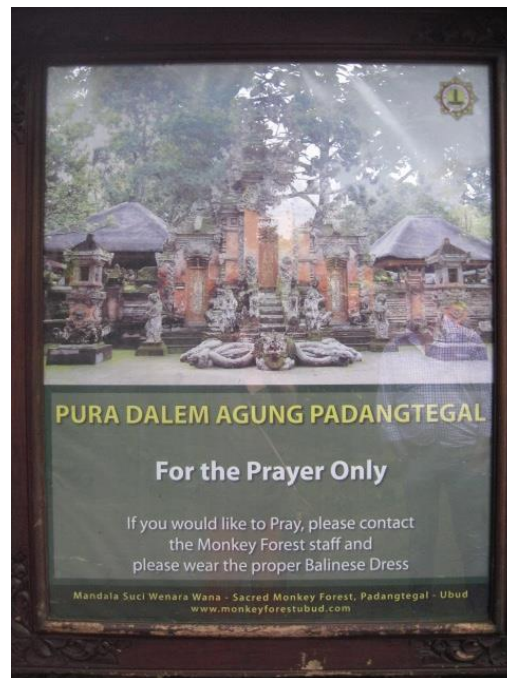


Figure 1: This notice informs the Balinese Hindus to contact the temple staff if they wish to pray or propitiate ancestors with offerings in the *Pura Dalem Agung* Temple of Death. Unless opened by a staff person for death-related rituals, the temple is always locked. The main reason for remaining locked is to keep leyaks (witches) away from learning their witchcraft in this highly propitious setting. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Further, the Balinese believe that the monkey *luntung bangkur* (Figure 2) is a favorite of *leyak* (Figures 3 and 4) women, one they wish to transform into when practicing their craft. *Pura Dalem Agung* temple is home to this monkey population. The temple is deserted except for the families of monkeys who call the temple home. Filled with potent ritual power, the *Pura Dalem Agung* temple of death is a polluted sacred space, one of great benefit if controlled, or of great danger when unattended. Families make offerings to the deceased in the temple so that the spirit of the dead will not wreak havoc on the family that is delaying the cremation.



Figure 2: Monkeys *luntung bangkur* at home in the *Pura Dalem Agung* Temple of Death. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.



Figure 3: A monkey sits on a *leyak* (witch) sculpture in the generally deserted *Pura Dalem Agung* temple. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

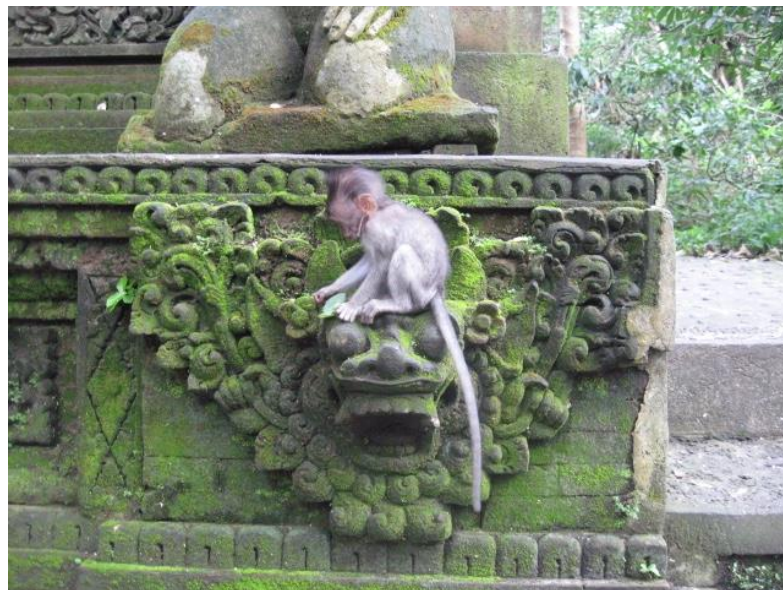


Figure 4: A baby monkey sits fearlessly on an haute-relief stone sculpture of *Barong*. *Barong* is *Rangda*'s opposite, and as an embodiment of good, is the enemy of the *leyak* (witches), who practice witchcraft in Balinese folklore and culture. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Balinese View on Death

According to the Balinese Hindus, a person's journey on earth is a short stop in the larger spiritual evolutionary process of the soul. At death, the soul is said to leave the body, but hovers around it, posing a great threat to the family. The soul cannot be freed as long as there is a body. "Only after the body's *panca maha butha* (the five elements) have been returned to the macrocosm by burning can the soul completely detach itself from the body" (Eiseman 116). Further, there is a pervasive Balinese belief that a frugal cremation constitutes disrespect for the dead, and "since this soul will shortly become a deified ancestor, with great power to help or hurt, a cheap funeral is considered a very bad way to start this relationship" (Eiseman 116).

Role of the *Banjar* (Neighborhood)

Bali is socially organized into *banjars*, or residential neighborhoods. The *banjar* works like an extended family and every family within the *banjar* is expected to contribute to rituals and ceremonies. When someone dies in Bali, traditionally, a drum is beaten as a call to every family in the *banjar* to send a representative to the family in need. The drum is generally hung from a tower in a shared neighborhood assembly hall. Upon hearing the drum, every family responds to the call and sends at least one member to help. All the members help the family of the deceased by assisting in washing the corpse and preparing it for burial, or cremation. Balinese do not prepare the corpse for cremation at death, but rather, prepare it first for burial in the family compound. My informant Wayan Gajah Mada (hereafter referred to as Wayan) in Bali said, "The cremation can only happen after the family has enough money." So the corpse can lay buried for weeks, months, or years, depending on when the family can gather sufficient funds for

a fitting farewell to the deceased. Wayan told me that sometimes all that is cremated are a few bones of the deceased because the burial lasted for years. Even after the funds have been gathered, the family must consult the *pedanda* (priest) for an auspicious day for cremation. Agung, who works in the hospitality industry, was an attendee at the upper-caste funeral where the lembu-bull sarcophagus was burned. She informed me that in general, festival days are inappropriate for funerary rites due to the obvious conflict of emotions; waning moon period (associated with descend) is generally assigned for cremations.

In contemporary Bali, a coconut-oil lamp is hung from a long bamboo pole high over the roof of the deceased's family home. Since the soul is thought to be hovering around its dead body, agitated and longing for release from the "limbo" state of existence, the lamp enables the wandering spirit to find its way home in the dark.

A *pedanda*, or priest, is consulted to determine an auspicious time for cremation. If the family is wealthy and can afford to prepare for the cremation as soon as an auspicious day is identified, then the body is to remain in the house with some preparation. If the death is of a child, the atmosphere is solemn, but for older persons, the household is filled with informal talking and preparation for the burial, rather than mourning. The body of the dead person is washed from head to foot and purified with *tirta*, holy water. The holy water washes away the pollution of death.

The *banjar* is like an extended family and a deep sense of community permeates through solidarity to help the family through the difficult and potentially dangerous time. After the bath of holy water, any wounds on the body are covered with tamarind paste, which is said to heal the wounds in the person's next life. Mirrors are placed over the eyes of the corpse, which are

thought to confer clear sight and personal beauty in the next life. The hands are bound and folded over on the breast in the gesture of prayer. A white shroud with inscriptions and images of the cosmos and *dasabayu*, ten wind directions, is prepared and wrapped around the corpse. These inscriptions indicate the destination of different aspects of the person, the inner world, during cremation, which will dissolve the elements of the self, back into the cosmos, the outer world. If possible, the body is also dressed in new clothes. New clothes are a sign of respect to the dead, and they indicate to the deceased and the ancestors that there was no ritual deficiency through cost-cutting. Ritual propriety is extremely important if the surviving family is to receive blessings from the ancestors. After these initial preparations, the corpse is buried in the family cemetery. This is a temporary disposal of the dead.

The *pedanda* (priest) will be consulted again when the family is ready for the cremation ceremony. For the cremation, though, the family, and not the *banjar*, bears the expenses for the cremation. It is here that the cracks of the caste association make their mark. The implied merits of each caste may be generally ignored in daily life, but they are highlighted during the death and cremation process. The cremation ceremony requires the family of the deceased to make a very public statement about how they define their position in the social hierarchy. The building of the *bade* (Figures 5 and 6), the cremation tower, which will carry the corpse to the cremation ground, is the prime indicator of the family's perception of its own socio-economic standing. This is a major reason for families to temporarily bury their dead and postpone the cremation for months or years. Cremations costs vary from expensive to exorbitant, beginning with the making of the *bade*. There are different cremation towers appropriate to different castes and some ambitious caste families are tempted to carry out cremations with high-ranking caste symbolism

than their neighbors regard as inappropriate. Many contemporary Balinese believe that the cremation will not achieve the desired effect of launching the deceased on a successful journey to the next life if one's social status is aggrandized, but the practice persists.



Figure 5: A colorful *bade* made to carry the disinterred body from the burial ground to the cremation site. The body is placed inside the *bade*, and it will be burned together at the cremation. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Alternatively, lack of financial resources may cause a family to postpone the cremation ritual indefinitely, leading to feelings of guilt and failure, as well as the fear of revenge from impatient ghosts awaiting cremation. Every family would like to cremate its dead as soon as possible, but only the wealthy can do so immediately. Those who lack the financial means to cremate their dead right away will wait to gather enough funds to cremate at a later time, or they will wait to cremate their dead with a high-ranking person's cremation so that they will be spared

the burden of cremation costs, which are between eight – twelve million Rupiah (US\$600-900). Recognizing the ridiculously expensive nature of cremations, many *banjar* neighborhood communities have come up with the solution to hold a group cremation in which the offerings and expenses are shared, but the individuals are cremated separately (Wayan).



Figure 6: The young men from the *banjar* rest against the *bade* that they carried to the *setra*, cremation ground. This *bade* is elaborate, and the gold and white colors signify the higher caste of the person placed inside this *bade*. The umbrellas are a ceremonial symbol of the upper caste. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

In poorer families, it is common to hold a simple ceremony of preparation and cleansing, and then bury the corpse in the village cemetery with no cremation at all. Later, with sufficient funds, a proper cremation may be held, but it is a common practice for the poor families to request cremation with a high-ranking person's cremation ceremonies, thus sparing itself much

of the expense (Wayan). “It is not unknown for dozens, or even hundreds, of bodies to join in the shared glory of a particularly important or rich person’s cremation” (Eiseman 117).

The corpse is carried to the neighborhood graveyard accompanied by chanting *banjar* members and relatives, all of them bearing offerings of fruits and flowers. The body is then buried, often simply wrapped in cloth and placed directly in the earth. Open mourning is forbidden; a weeping child is sent out of the cemetery. This practice is shared with the Mauritian and Dallas Hindus. Crying and open mourning may attract the spirits and defile the sanctity of the rituals by their mere presence. Further, the Balinese believe that the body is only a casing for the soul, which is eternal. There is no point in crying when the soul will be reborn. And most interesting of all, the Balinese believe the deceased will be born as the fourth generation. This is a great deviation from the Indian, Vedic Hindu belief of reincarnation because there is no guarantee to when one will be reborn and in what form. When the body is buried, it will remain there until it is burned. There is no limit to the time the body can be buried, and sometimes the family will agree to cremate their deceased family member along with a high-caste person’s cremation. Nowadays, group cremations are common as *banjar* members can pool their resources for one large cremation (Wayan).

A small bamboo altar is erected next to the grave and offerings are brought to it daily for 12 days, which is similar to the Indian, Mauritian, and Dallas Hindu post-death rituals. But 12-days of grave offerings in Bali have a far greater significance in beliefs regarding the rebirth of the soul, than in the other locations. A Balinese baby is given a name on the 12th day after its birth. On this day, grandparents visit *balian tenung*, a clairvoyant priest, who has the ability to

communicate with the ancestors to identify which ancestor is reincarnated in the baby. They believe the first twelve days after death are mirrored in the first twelve days after birth (Agung).

Similarly, the 42-days rituals after death and birth mirror the two opposite rites of passage. One Balinese month is made of 35 days plus 7 days, or 42 days. Since 42 days marks the end of a month's cycle, more offerings are placed at the deceased's altar on the 42nd day. The Balinese believe the soul has fled the body on this day. The 42-day period coincides with a ceremony for a newborn baby. The baby and mother are considered impure for the first 42 days after the baby's birth. During this period, the baby is said to be most vulnerable to witches and sorcerers. On the 42nd day, a small purification ceremony is held, after which the mother and baby cease to be vulnerable to evil forces (Agung).

When a priest, or a descendant of a former ruler or of a royal family, has died, then burial is considered inappropriate for them as it would result in pollution. They must be cremated. Their body is preserved and kept lying in state in a pavilion in the family house compound, which is an extremely expensive procedure. Fresh offerings are made to it daily. The services of *pedanda*, a high priest, have to be engaged. The body must be under guard 24 hours to keep evil spirits away. Music and other entertainment must be commissioned. Symbolic daily meals must be provided for the body, plus tea or coffee and snacks. A mirror, comb, and toothbrush are laid nearby. All these ritual offerings confirm to the soul that it is being attended to, and not forgotten. Incense of tropical blooms of frangipani, cempaka, lemongrass and sandalwood are burned and the offerings are carried skyward for the gods and ancestors through the billowing sari smoke. Thus, the offerings are symbolically consumed. Death pollution is kept at bay and the spirits are diverted when the correct rituals are followed. In case of the higher caste deceased

persons, even if cremation is planned right away, the preparations can take so long that this lying-in-state may go on for weeks or even months (Eiseman 117).

The reason for delaying the cremation for the high caste persons would be to coincide with auspicious days for cremation based on the Balinese calendar. For most people, the expense of a cremation ceremony can be devastating for a family. With hundreds of callers to feed, entertain, and keep supplied with cigarettes for as long as a week, a special *gamelan* musical ensemble required, and priest's and assistant's fees, an elaborate cremation can easily cost eight to 12 million Rupiah (US\$600-900). It takes 2 million Rupiah (US\$150) alone to take down power lines so that cremation towers can pass underneath. But for this spectacular send-off – the life goal of every Balinese – a family is prepared to make sacrifices. When poor families cremate with the wealthier upper-caste cremation, they do not bear any costs related to cremations, the *gamelan* orchestra, or the plethora of offerings. They must bear the cost for what they choose to offer in honor of the deceased at the time of the burial (Wayan).

Music as an Offering

Music is a form of offering in Balinese death rituals. The music's presence is aesthetically and functionally important to the people involved, but music is also presented as a form of offering to supernatural powers. While the idea of music as a ritual and ceremonial offering is present in the Vedic tradition, it is personal and takes the form of incantations. Devotional songs may be sung at a gathering in honor of the deceased, but the focus is on lyrics, not instruments. "In two of the *pitra yadnya*, the mortuary rituals *ngaben* (cremation) and *memukur* (purification of the soul), *beleganjur* music serves at several levels to assist deceased

human souls in their afterlife journeys” (Bakan 69). The presence of an organized and professional ensemble (Figure 7) is a unique Balinese funeral tradition.



Figure 7: *Gamelan* ensemble in a family home prior to the funeral procession. They will become a part of the funeral procession, playing their instruments on the way to the cremation ground, while walking with the mourners. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Mauritius

There are two schools of Hindu thought among the Hindus in Mauritius: The Vedic or Arya Samaj, and the Puranic or Sanatan Dharma. Death rituals are performed in accordance with one of these two Hindu schools of thoughts. Mauritius Vedic or Arya Samaj rituals are based on the Path of ritual action and its central feature was *yajna* (sacrifice, *yadnya* in Bali) hence mantras and fire continue to be central to rituals in this tradition.

Arya Samaj (Noble Society in Sanskrit) is an Indian, Hindu religious reform movement founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in 1875. Arya Samaj is a revival of the Vedic tradition, hence its central rituals focus on mantras and fire reinforces its connection with the Vedas,

especially the Rig Veda. The Arya Samaj teaches that the Vedas are infallible and hold all true knowledge but the society rejects idol worship, seeks equality of all human beings and promotes the empowerment of women. The Samaj advocates personal worship of God, and its main religious practice include a *havan* (fire-altar) where the sound Aum (also Om) is chanted and the Gayatri Mantra is recited. The Arya Samaj seeks to unite Hindus primarily through the performance of *havan*. According to the Yajur Veda, Aum is the sound of the Only One Supreme Reality, the highest and most proper name of God (Merh 126). The Gayatri Mantra is a highly revered mantra, chant, from the Rig Veda. Like all Vedic mantras, the Gayatri mantra is considered not to have an author, and like all other Vedic mantras, is believed to have been revealed to a brahmarishi, highest seer, in this case, Vishwamitra. Gayatri is the name of the Vedic meter in which the verse is composed. As the verse can be interpreted to invoke Savitr, it is also called the Savitri Mantra. Its recitation is traditionally preceded by Aum and the formula *bhur bhuvah svah*, is known as *mahavyahrti* (great mystical utterance). Several classical Hindu texts, such as Manusmṛti (The Code of Manu), Harivamsa, and the Bhagvad Geeta praise the Gayatri Mantra. The ritual knowledge of these texts has historically been the domain of brahmin men. Many Hindu reform movements, such as the Arya Samaj, have made social efforts to spread the practice of the mantra to include women and all castes, because of which its use is now very widespread (Pandita Barran, Pandit Oumashankerji).

When a Hindu person dies in Mauritius, be they from Arya Samaj or Sanatan Dharma, similar rituals are performed at death. This ritual standardization must be understood in the much broader context of positional and numerical power of the Hindu Mauritians. Regional and linguistic differences from one's point of origin in India (from generations ago) may undermine

the solidarity of the majority community and impact its strength, hence emphasis is placed on a unified “Hindu” identity in which outward differences are minimized.

At the time of death in Mauritius, a lamp is lit and placed near the body to avert the pollution of the corpse. Sacred chants are recited. The body is placed in the foremost room of the home and all windows and doors are kept open. One major difference between these two groups is the priest who will perform the final rites. The Arya Samaj aspires for equality among all the Hindus, so a priest or priestess from any caste who has been trained by the Arya Samaj priests can perform the final rites. The Puranic Sanatan Dharma rites must be performed by an upper-caste priest. Brahmin priests would want another brahmin priest to perform their final rites. This has to do with the view of brahmins as agents of transformation. Those who uphold the merit of the caste system believe in the transformative powers of the brahmins because devout brahmins are not in name alone, but they live their lives following ritual practices befitting their caste (Pandit Dhawdall).

The Vedic – Arya Samaj death ritual was for an 80-year-old man from the Vaish caste was at his home, and the cremation was at Riviere du Rempart. The rites of separation for the deceased were led by the priestess, Pandita Barran, who is a Sudra caste woman and a widow. The funeral preparations had begun as soon as death had occurred. The cremation should take place as soon as possible, traditionally, by the next dusk or dawn, whichever occurs first. In this situation, the final rites began at the home of the deceased. The man had died in his sleep. The family called the local Arya Samaj priest to perform the final rites. While waiting for the priest, the family lit an oil lamp. Then the body was cleaned with water by the man’s wife and two grown sons. Then it was dressed in simple, everyday clothes, since he was elderly, having

already passed the vanaprastha and sanyas life stages. The body was placed on a bed in the outer most room of the home. This room allowed for sufficient space for the last viewing of the deceased, who was placed on a plastic mat on the bed. In earlier times, the body would be placed on the sacred kusha grass, which is also known as durva grass. The grass is believed to have a purifying effect on the participants. Use of durva grass began in Vedic times. The grass is variously known as kusha and durva. The unique feature of kusha grass is that it has sharp edges and that of durva grass is that it is a hardy plant and, therefore, is a great survivor; its roots go deep in search of water. The grass is not native to Mauritius, and the availability of the plastic mat make it a convenient replacement for the kusha grass in Mauritian Hindu cremations (Pandit Oumashankerji).

Family members had placed a small piece of gold on each of the seven gates, “openings” of the human body so as to help the soul identify its way out. Pandita Barran shared, “Mauritian Hindus believe that the soul exits the body upon death through one of the seven gates, which are the two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, and one mouth. The crematory fires will devour the corpse and all impurities held within it, just as fire purifies gold.” This is interesting, but confusing because the actual escape of the soul is believed to be from the skull, in the *kapala kriya* ritual during the cremation. It is the lead mourner’s responsibility to assist the soul in leaving the body by breaking open the skull during this ritual. That is said to be the release of the soul. Pandita Barran said, “Kapalakriya antim riti hai jisme atma sharir chhod deta hai” (kapalakriya is the last ritual in which the soul leaves the body). Pandit Oumashankerji explained, “We do not know exactly when the soul leaves the body, so the *kapala kriya* is the final ritual marked for the soul to leave the body.” This is a local adaptation because none of the other Hindu sources had heard

about placing gold pieces on the corpse, but neither did they disown the practice (Pandit Barran, Pandit Oumashankerji).

Grand Bassin in Mauritius is popularly known to the Hindus as Ganga Talao (Lake Ganga). The Hindu community believes it to hold a subterranean connection to the Ganges river in India, hence it is a common practice to use the water from the high lake for ritual purposes. The myth of subterranean connection between the two water sources abrogates any inferior status that may be perceived of the Ganga Talao. Myth elevates the local lake water to an equally holy status of water from the Ganges, thus keeping the ritual uncompromised. The Hindus in Mauritius know well that Ganga *jal* (water from the Ganges) is used to wash the body. In situations when this is not available, a lamp is lit close to a pot of water and sacred mantras are chanted. This ritual transforms water into the sacred water as it has now imbibed the sacred smoke and chants. The Balinese priests conduct the same ritual to make *tirta*, holy water. Some families wash the body with rose water. Sometimes sandalwood oil is applied to the body for its fragrance. Ghee is applied thereafter as a catalyst for the fire. Pandit Oumashankerji said, “Every substance has a vibration level. The vibration level is dependent on the purity of the substance.” He explained that pure ghee – made from cow milk and purified with heat (fire) until it reaches the state of ghee – has a high vibration. The wick burns brightest in ghee than in oil or butter. As a result of this brightness, ghee has the longest lasting vibration impact. The high vibration deposits benevolence back to the universe, which benefits everyone. Pandit Oumashankerji explained that since the corpse is a selfless offering to the fire, intended to benefit others, ghee is the delivering agent of maximum benefit to the universe. At this point, the body of the man was

ready for cremation and placed in a casket and adorned with flowers and a garland (Wayan, Pandit Ashwini, Pandit Oumashankerji).

The Puranic death ritual was at the home of a 47-year-old Vaish man, who had died due to cardiac arrest. His cremations was later held at the *samsana* in Roches Noires. His wife, a young daughter, and a very young son survived him. The priest performing the ceremony was a Brahmin, Pandit Dhawdall, who was also related to the family as his wife is the sister of the deceased man.

Upon learning of the death, family and close relatives had begun to gather at the home of the deceased. The dead body was washed and dressed in the robe of a groom. Since he was 47 years old, in the life stage of the *Grihastha*, householder, his status is that of a husband and father, hence the attire identifying him as a married and family man.

The priest who led the Puranic rituals did not address the gathering in any manner. He spoke to the lead ritual performer only to instruct. He spoke only once to the daughter of the deceased, who was crying inconsolably. While mourning is never suppressed or denied, the scriptures admonish against excessive lamentation and encourage joyous release. The departed soul is acutely conscious of emotional forces directed at him, so grief can hold him in earthly consciousness, inhibiting full transition to the heavenly worlds (Pandit Dhawdall).

The most notable difference in the Puranic cremation ritual from the Vedic is the offering of the pinda (rice balls). Pandit Oumashankerji and Pandit Dhawdall explained that pinda balls symbolize ovaries and are made up of rice and barley flour mixed with milk, honey, sesame seeds, tulsi (basil) leaves, and ghee (clarified butter). Together, these items represent the five elements: earth, water, air, fire, and ether. While carrying a corpse from the place of death to the

samsana cremation ground, *shraddha* (symbolic offerings of the pinda balls) are to be performed at six places. These six places are thresholds of sorts for the corpse. The performance of these six ceremonies satisfies six gods. One pinda ball is offered at the place of death to satisfy the Goddess earth. The second pinda ball is offered at the main door, seeking permission of Vishnu (Vishwadeva) to grant liberation to the deceased. Three, on the ready-made aluminum frame (Figure 8) that will carry the deceased to the cremation ground. Four, at a cross road, where the body is turned from the head facing the south direction to the feet facing the southern direction. This pinda ball is an offering to Lord Yama. However, Mauritian law does not permit this ritual to be performed at a crossroad, due to a traffic hazard, hence this pinda ball is offered at the cremation ground. Five, at the entrance to the *samsana* entrance, as an offering to Rudra, an aspect of Shiva who represents transformation, and six, on the funeral pyre, as a request to the fire god Agni, to accept the offering (Pandit Oumashankerji).



Figure 8: Men carrying the body down the stairs. It will be placed inside the open floral casket. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

As the body was moved from the home to the *samsana* ground, the priest instructed the young mourning son to offer the pindas to the deceased at each juncture. At the last point of contact for the women where the body was placed in the aluminum casket, the women offered small bundles of wooden sticks (Figure 9) to the corpse; they placed these on the body as an offering for the cremation since the women do not go to the cremation ground.



Figure 9: Woman offering a symbolic bundle of wood for the crematory fire as women do not accompany the corpse to the crematorium in Mauritius. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

This tradition goes back to Vedic times when women did not go to the *samsana*, cremation grounds (Figure 10). The priest explained that the reason for this is to curb the high display of emotions associated with women, especially at the sensitive time of cremation when the soul is keenly aware of the energies directed at it. Crying and mourning create obstacles in the smooth transition of the soul into the other world, hence men are to refrain from crying at the cremation and women are to remain away from the cremation. The women offer their offering of the wood at this point of departure, whereas the men will offer the wood for the corpse's

oblation when they build the funeral pyre at the *samsana*. The entire congregation offered flowers to the deceased before it was carried by the men to the *samsana*, cremation ground.



Figure 10: Women stay back as the men carry the corpse to the *samsana*, crematorium. The pouring of the water symbolizes providing water for the deceased in his afterlife journey. The woman in the red saree is the deceased's wife. It is important to note that the women are not wearing white, dark, or mute color clothing, as is normally the custom in the Indian Hindu "original" culture. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Dallas

The Hindu funerary rituals in Dallas are shaped by city laws and contemporary ritual traditions in India due to close ties with the culture. Not only are the visits to India frequent when compared to their counterparts in Bali and in Mauritius because they have immediate family members in India, but also because most of them came from India as adults hence were ingrained in the Indian ritual culture. Most Indian Hindus in Dallas are first generation immigrants, educated and economically well-off. Further, technology allows for quick communication and access to knowledge that the local community resources may not provide.

At death, preparation begins at two fronts. One, the family of the deceased must work with a Funeral Home to abide by all the laws to secure permits, and two, the family must contact the local Hindu temple, from where they can get a priest to perform the final rites. If a family has not already contacted a priest, the funeral home will direct them to the temple or provide a list with priest names, whom the family must contact. At the DFW Hindu Ekta Mandir in Irving, there are priests from different parts of India who speak language(s) from their home states. Language, and the last name of the priest, make it easy for the family to select the priest that most matches with their language, culture, and ritual requirements. According to several priests at the temple, the rituals themselves are fairly standard – or have been simplified and made uniform - for all Hindu communities, but during this time of deep sorrow, speaking in one’s “mother-tongue” and following one’s regional, linguistic, and caste group rituals is assured, and is a great source of comfort. As soon as the family has contacted the Funeral Home or has asked the hospital to contact one, the task of legally claiming the dead body begins. The body is discharged only to the Funeral Home, never to a family member (Patel, A.).

Stephanie Hughes, Funeral Director at Hughes Funeral Home in Dallas, discussed the formal paperwork process that must be completed by family members and funeral homes before the body can be discharged from the hospital, morgue, hospice, etc. She said, “The family fills out the vital statistics form, which is filed by the Funeral Home in the Texas Electronic Registry; this is required to issue a death certificate.” Ms. Hughes explained that as many as five or more original death certificates are issued as insurance companies, banks, etc. all require an original certificate to process or close the accounts. She said, “After that, the body is examined by a medical examiner who then issues the cremation permit.” This step may take a few days as

Tarrant, Collin, and Denton counties do not issue permits on the weekend as they are closed. But their turnaround time on weekdays is very quick. Dallas County issues permits every day of the week, but still takes longer, due to its larger population. When asking for a cremation permit, funeral Homes, specifically Hughes, requests that the cremation must be done as soon as possible for religious purposes. Ms. Hughes said, “Listing religious purpose really hastens getting the permit” (Hughes).

Typically, Hindu cremations must be done as soon as possible or within twenty-four hours after death, but practical considerations do not always allow for this ritual adherence in Dallas. Rituals vary in form, but require planning and coordination with the priest. Many family members may have to arrive from distant places. Plus, the pooja (worship), assembly fellowship, and cremation take several hours, which is difficult for a large congregation to manage in a work-centric culture like America’s, hence it is common for some cremations to be postponed to the weekend. “We are busy on the weekends with the cremations” (Hughes).

Among the BAPS Temple members, cremations are never held on Wednesdays as they believe it to be an inauspicious day of “doubles”, which means if a cremation is held on a Wednesday, then another death will follow. This is a unique feature of the BAPS community’s cremation practice. The Balinese consult one of their two calendars to determine auspicious times for burial and cremations. They do not hold cremations in the mornings prior to 12 noon, because the sun is approaching its zenith. Cremations take place at 1 p.m., when the sun’s descent has begun. Cremations in Mauritius take place within hours of death, unless the death occurred after 4 p.m., in which case, the cremation will be held on the following morning. We can see that each location has shaped the ritual beliefs of the community (Patel, A., Wayan).

Hughes Family Tribute Center on Webb Chapel Road in Dallas is the busiest crematorium for Hindus. Stephanie L. Hughes, the Center's funeral services director said, "Out of 15-18 cremations per month, 8-10 are for the Hindu community originating from India, Nepal, and Bhutan" (Hughes).

FUNERAL HOME | FUNERARIA | CREMATORY

CREMATION TRIBUTES PACKAGES ASIAN INDIAN COMMUNITY

The following packages include only the items listed. You may select additional merchandise and services; however, you may not delete or substitute any items from the packages. Prices are effective July 1, 2013 and are subject to change without notice.

INCLUDED IN ALL PACKAGES

- Basic services of Funeral Director & Staff
- Initial Call & Transfer of Remains to Our Facility (within a 50 mile radius of Dallas)
- Refrigeration (up to 5 days)
- Washing & Disinfecting of Unembalmed Remains
- Dressing & Casketing & Basic Cosmetology of Remains
- Transportation of Remains to Crematory
- Medical Examiner's Cremation Permit
- Up to 5 Certified Copies of the Death Certificate (additional copies may be purchased)
- Basic Plastic Urn & Cardboard Shipping Box
- Cremation Fee (Mon – Fri : Arriving at the crematory before 3pm)
- Guest Register Book

TRADITIONAL PACKAGE (Non Community Regular Price \$ 3,962.00 plus casket)

- Use of Family Room for Prayers & Ceremonies (Puja), and
- Use of Chapel/Main Hall for Public Ceremony

BASIC PACKAGE (Non community Regular Price \$ 3,662 plus casket)

- Use of Family Room OR Chapel/Main Hall for Ceremonies

SIMPLE PACKAGE (Non community Regular Price \$ 3,137 plus casket)

- Limited Use (30 min) of Family Room for Ceremonies

COMMUNITY DISCOUNTED PRICES (including casket – see back)

Ceremonial Rental		Taylor		Newport		Rockwood	
Traditional	\$2,231	Traditional	\$3,481	Traditional	\$4,181	Traditional	\$4,681
Basic	\$2,171	Basic	\$3,421	Basic	\$4,121	Basic	\$4,621
Simple	\$1,981	Simple	\$3,231	Simple	\$3,931	Simple	\$4,431
Cremation Tray or Trayview		Caden		Pacific Pine		Serenity	
Traditional	\$2,101	Traditional	\$2,631	Traditional	\$3,481	Traditional	\$4,181
Basic	\$2,041	Basic	\$2,571	Basic	\$3,421	Basic	\$4,121
Simple	\$1,851	Simple	\$2,381	Simple	\$3,231	Simple	\$3,931

ADDITIONAL ITEMS & MERCHANDISE (NOT INCLUDED IN PACKAGES)

- Cremation Overtime Fee (After 3pm on Mon – Fri; or 9am to 5pm on weekends)\$ 200.00
- Embalming\$ 600.00
- Additional Days of Refrigeration (per day)\$ 50.00
- Additional Care for autopsied Remains\$ 250.00
- Transportation Remains to Residence\$ 300.00
- Additional Family Viewing (per hour)\$ 50.00
- Video Recording and/or Live Streaming of Service\$ 250.00
- Mailing Death Certificates via USPS.....\$ 15.00
- Excess Mileage (per mile).....\$ 2.50

9700 Webb Chapel Road | Dallas, Texas 75220 | (214) 350-9951 | HughesCrownHill.com

Figure 11: Hughes Family Tribute Center's price list for cremation packages for the Asian Indian community. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Cost is a considerable factor in cremations. The Hughes Family Tribute Center has published a Cremation Tributes Packages for Asian Indian Community (Figure 11), rather than specifically for Hindu or any of the other communities. The entire process from death to cremains “cremation remains” is simplified through the package that the family of the deceased selects. Most families opt for a sturdy cardboard box for cremation and a simple open casket for the viewing. Hindu families always ask for discounts, which prompted the Funeral Home to print the set costs. Families are not interested in expensive wooden caskets for their deceased member because it will be burned within a few hours. Besides, a fancy or expensive casket does not enhance the karmic merit of the dead (Patel, P., Hughes).

After a priest has been called and the family has selected a “package,” the priest informs the family on the items to bring to the final rites. Minimum rites must consist of doing the pooja, worshiping and honoring the deceased, and the cremation. The “package” consists of the use of facility for pooja, a memorial service (if the family wants it, and it includes a guest sign-in book), cremation with the body in a cardboard box, and certified boxing of cremations. The Funeral Home provides these services based on the patterns developed by past cremation services. The Funeral Homes in dialog with priests determined how Hindu ritual needs and Funeral Home laws could reconcile without compromising the Hindu cremation or the laws. The services offered can easily be adapted, extended or minimized without compromising the cremation as Hindu. Many Hindus in Dallas rely on Hindu colleagues, neighbors and friends to assist during cremations. That is a likely reason for simplifying the final rites. Many balance work while enduring the personal loss, so simplified rituals may be a relief as elaborate and demanding rituals may conflict with work hours. As an educated community, it is also possible that many Hindus

perceive elaborate death rituals as obsolete and a contrast to modern life. The Hindus may also expect simpler final rites in Dallas because the rituals are not native to Dallas, and everything is a substitute in the new homeland. The community accepts the nuances of being outside of one's original culture, and as a result has found a way to maintain any tradition it can until the community reaches greater maturity and representation (Pandit Shukla, J).

Pooja (puja) is the worship of the gods in the form of images. The pooja items consist of ghee for the arti, incense, flowers, coconut, and aluminum foil tray. The Funeral Home staff bathe and ready the body, and it is then placed in an open wooden crate for the pooja. The pooja usually lasts for 30-45 minutes. The priest leads the pooja, in which the lead mourner, and then the family members light the arti lamp and circulate it over the body. Flowers are offered to it. Everyone touches the feet of the corpse.

Hindu rituals at the funeral home are very flexible. The flexibility, however, is in terms of which priest assists in performing the final rites, the duration of the public service assembly, use of video cameras, whether to carry the corpse to the crematorium in a coach or in a procession after the assembly, whether to perform the pooja ritual or the assembly first, etc. "The rituals themselves appear to be uniform. There are three parts to the rituals at the Funeral Home: pooja worship, the fellowship assembly, and the cremation. Some families prefer to do the pooja through prayer, anointing, and offerings, first, and only with close family. This is an intimate farewell from the immediate family to the deceased. Some families may hold the pooja and the assembly together, where family and friends gather to perform the final rites of prayers, anointing, and offerings, as well as saying a few words of farewell to the deceased. Cremation is the final part; some families hold the cremation after the pooja if they forego the assembly.

Others will do the cremation after the assembly” (Pandit Shukla, J.).

“Irrespective of the priest leading the rites, any family is forbidden to carry anything home, except the guest sign-in book. Creains are readied for the family to pick up a few days after the cremation, but some families may not take them home, and may pick up on way to the airport when “home-bound” to India to immerse the creains in the Ganges or another holy river,” said Stephanie Hughes. “Many people feel uncomfortable holding onto the creains even in their garage (the creains should never be brought into the home because of its association with death). The content is polluted, and by being in proximity to the content, people feel a sense of pollution and uneasiness” Paresh Patel said. Most Hindu persons are keenly aware that the creains must flow, and holding them in a box is restricting the natural flow of life. Now a days there are services that will carry the creains to India and immerse them in the Ganges or other rivers closer to the family’s hometown. However, all these are innovations in the Hindu cremations in Dallas, as well as borrowings from other established religions’ rituals in the Dallas area. “The guest sign-in book is an innovation, because this is not a Hindu tradition” Pandit Janakbhai Shukla. “When the memory of these final rites begins to fade, the guest sign-in book is some tangible memorabilia of the event and a sign of comfort” Stephanie Hughes. Even the creains must be disposed of as soon as possible, but the Funeral Home provides services for keeping them for up to six months, and longer, if necessary (Hughes, Pandit Shukla J., Patel, P.).

Changing Views on Death and Ritual Impact

Although Hindus traditionally prepared for death as early as the third and fourth ashrama stages of life, these practices are waning across the three Hindu communities. The elaborate

Vedic tradition in which man prepared for his own death is long gone. The emphasis in today's society is on life, not death. Old family members from the educated or wealthy class often write wills; others verbally express their wish to close family members. People no longer give funeral gifts to a brahmin, gathering their family around, and resigning to death, but rather retain their wealth within the family. This has contributed to limitations on the brahmin caste's position and power.

Over the years, the power claimed by the brahmins and bestowed upon them through ritual practice made the brahmins prone to greed and abuse their privilege. Although Manusmriti (4:190) warns, "a brahmin who neither performs austerities nor studies the Veda, yet delights in accepting gifts, sinks with the donor into hell," brahmins began to assert themselves over other castes. They began to think of themselves as more important than the other castes, which violated the interdependence and social balance inherent in the original intention of caste as social organization. Rather than provide a service to society, brahmins exhibited elitism and discrimination toward lower castes and poor families, whom they perceived as not beneficial to their well-being. This ongoing practice culminated in the other castes empowering themselves and reducing the power of the brahmins. Today, brahmins are requested as ritual necessities but treated with caution and limited respect. Elaborate preparations for the final stage of life quintessential in earlier times are irrelevant today; a standard fee is paid to the brahmin for performing the services.

Many priests are unaware of all the rites and their evolution, perhaps because they are not performed and do not hold any contemporary relevance. The Sanskrit language of the Vedas and the rituals is an obsolete language. The Gayatri mantra, for example, should be recited 108 times

as an offering to the universe. Many priests and even devout Hindus have reduced the number to 9 times, and yet others recite it one time. Some persons may not know the meaning contained in the hymn. Myriad factors have led to this skeletal minimization of rituals. Modern demands for efficiency and time constraint are definite contributors. Priestly lack of comprehensive ritual knowledge is a two-way exchange, one, there is little time and need for elaborate rituals, and two, because there is little time and need, the priests provide only what fulfils the basic ritual need.

In Dallas, temples and religious organizations have stepped up to provide community services and support to grieving families, a role that was fulfilled by extended family and neighbors in the original homeland. “It is inconsequential to attend a wedding (happy occasion) even when we have been invited to it, but we must attend a funeral (sad occasion) especially when we weren’t asked to share in the sorrow” (Paresh Patel). This is profound because happiness multiplies and sorrows divide when shared. Sharing grief lightens its burden. During difficult time, we need comfort and support, which is why it is necessary to attend a funeral. Such attitudes of shared community responsibilities and service were common among the Hindu communities in Bali, through the *banjar* system, in Mauritius, through the Arya Samaj Society, and in Dallas, through one of the many temples in the city. It is indeed during the difficult times that we need community support and encouragement to move past the times of grief, which no one will escape.

The rich and extensive traditions of Hindu texts and rituals is a matter of great pride for the Hindu community; however, the demands of modern life have made their way into ritual life, making it difficult to carry out every one of the prescribed rituals in time-consuming and

demanding manner. Factors such as the breakdown of the joint-family system into nuclear families, work mobility and migration, women working outside the home, inter-mixing of castes in urban areas, children going to school and college, among others, have taken their toll on the enactment of the traditionally performed rituals. The change in family structure has meant adaptation to each person's individual situation, such as in a family that has no son, for example, the father may continue to work for a much longer period than in a family where the son is the provider for the family. Attitudes toward death have also changed; while death may be certain, modern innovations and technologies are allowing people access to medicine, services, travel, and to enjoy life while it is still possible. Hence, death rituals are reduced to minimal ways in contemporary Hindu societies, be they in India, Bali, Mauritius, or Dallas. In performing the final rites, there are many major differences, and several similarities, among the three Hindu communities, and within each community, there are only minor variations per sect, region, language, caste and family tradition. Nowadays, there are more laws and institutions that shape cremation practices, but family members still fulfill most of the rites. Certain rites are traditionally performed by a priest but may also be performed by the family if no priest is available. When priests are unavailable, it's easy to find information on the internet. Several community temples and funeral homes even have a webpage dedicated solely to this final rite of passage, including preparation for the next step, cremation.

CHAPTER 3

CREMATION

In Van Gennep's schema of the rites of passage, cremation would fall under the rites of transition. Victor Turner refers to this transition stage as "betwixt and between," when the liminal person in the transition phase, at a threshold, ready to begin a new process. Liminality is marked by ambiguity as it has few or none of the attributes of the past or the future state. Quite literally, it is a state of limbo, the individual existing neither here nor there, since the individual has lost the previous status and is not yet conjoined in the future status. Hence, this status is attributed to contradictory traits of chaos and structure, loss and acquisition, powerless and powerful, and potent and volatile. Turner endows liminal "threshold" phase and persons with powerful possibilities of transformation because they are outside of a structure, a place and position of immense power. During liminal periods of all kinds, social hierarchies may be reversed or temporarily dissolved, continuity of tradition may become uncertain, and future outcomes once taken for granted may be thrown into doubt. *Preta*, the departed one, is in this ambiguous state of existence; it is contingent upon ritual performance to transport the *preta* to the other world (Michaels 201, Turner, Ritual, 1-139).

Funeral Procession

From the Vedic time, the most common funeral procession consists of men generally dressed in white clothing, led by the chief mourner. In contemporary times, it is common to hear the procession chanting "Ram naam satya hai" (the name of god is the truth) as they walk to the *samsana* cremation ground. In Bali, the funeral processions are on foot, but on a large scale as

the entire *banjar* neighborhood community accompanies the procession. In Mauritius, the *samsana* cremation grounds are in distant locations, so the mourners carry the corpse in large pick-up trucks and others arrive in cars. The cars are parked at a short distance from the *samsana* and the men carry the corpse in a procession. In Dallas, the mourners arrive in their respective cars at a predetermined time to the funeral home. In these ways, the funeral processions differ in the three locations.

Cremation Fire

Cremation fire is the recreation of the original fire altar to Agni, built with 360 bricks of the enclosure corresponding to the 360 nights of the year, and 360 yajusmati bricks to the 360 days. When building the fire altar, not only is the world remade, but the year is also built. Time is regenerated by being created anew. What is sought by the erection of the fire altar is to sanctify the world, hence to place it in a sacred time, where the original sanctity of the world is renewed (Eliade, *Sacred*, 74-78). Irrespective of time-space changes, the reference is always made to the original sacrificial ritual, although it may only be symbolically, such as using obsolete Chinese coins in Balinese cremations to appease Yama, creating an altar in the form of a funeral pyre with wood in Mauritius, or placing token wooden blocks and a flame inside the gas chamber in a Dallas crematorium. These ritual adaptations symbolize renewing of the world.

Funeral Pyre

Traditionally, the funeral pyre is lit from the crematory fire from the Doms, an untouchable sub-caste. It is believed that the Dom community has kept the crematory fire alive

from earlier times. This practice is not applicable in Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas, where families light the funeral pyre with a blow torch, wooden stick lit with a matchstick, and an electric switch, respectively. Practically speaking, it is impossible that a burning fire was carried to these new homelands. Crematory fire from a Dom exists as an idea only among the three communities.

The chief mourner circumambulates the pyre counterclockwise– for everything is backward at the time of death. Ritually speaking, clockwise direction, the movement to the right are done for an idol, holy shrines, and brahmins, and are auspicious. Counter-clockwise movements are inauspicious. As the chief mourner walks around the pyre, his sacred thread, which usually hangs from the left shoulder, has been reversed to hang from the right. The shroud from the corpse is removed. The men offer puffed rice as the women did earlier, cover the corpse with wood and offer incense and ghee, clarified butter. The chief mourner carries a clay pot filled with water on his left shoulder, circles the pyre while holding a firebrand behind his back. This ritual acknowledges the corpse as the focal point. At each turn around the pyre, a relative knocks a hole in the pot with a knife, letting water out, signifying life is leaving its vessel. At the end of three turns, the chief mourner drops the pot. Then, without turning to face the body, he lights the pyre.

After the corpse is almost completely burned, the chief mourner performs the rite called kapalakriya, the “rite of the skull,” cracking the skull with a long bamboo stick, thus releasing the soul from entrapment in the body. Then he leaves the cremation grounds, along with the others. The corpse is now an offering to Agni, fire. Agni is an intermediary between gods and men. As far back as the 2,700 BCE Indus Valley cultures of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, every

Aryan family had its domestic Agni in the family hearth fire, and thus Agni was very closely in touch with humans (Basham 14, Chatterji 66, Ramanujan 155).

At a gas-fueled crematorium, sacred and symbolic wood and ghee are placed inside the wooden or cardboard plank with the body. The cremation switch then is turned on by the chief mourner (Pandit Janakbhai Shukla).

Cremation rituals in Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas express the Vedic notion of release, transformation, and return, through cremation fire. Several Vedic ritual behaviors are no longer necessary, but they continue. For example, the oldest son carrying fire from the home in an earthen pot and walking at the head of the funeral procession must have been prevalent in the days when lighting a fire was not easy as it is today, hence the fire had to be carried from home. In lieu of carrying the fire (which would be seen as a safety hazard in modern society), it is sufficient for the oldest son to perform the ritual of lighting the pyre in a traditional pyre-cremation, or to turn on the cremation vault switch in an electric and gas crematorium. Similarly, there's a tradition of waiting for a few minutes outside the crematorium in Mauritius. "This custom is very old, a remnant of a time when the chandala (Keeper of the crematorium) was offered a tax" (Pandit Oumashankerji). So the mourners would wait outside the *samsana* until some of the family who had left to pay the tax would return. This practice is merited to the myth of righteous Raja Harishchandra (Dave 146-147).

Bali

"If the corpse is not cremated, then the dead body is buried by the seaside in the *Kelod*, south direction. This direction is reserved for the dead" (Wayan). It could take as little as a week

(for wealthy people) or as much as 3-5 years (for poor people) to cremate the dead. Auspicious days for cremation are identified based on the lontar calendar and with the help of the *pedanda* priest. Cremations are always held after 12 noon when the sun has crossed its highest point, zenith. Time after 12 noon symbolizes the setting of the sun, so cremations generally take place at 1 p.m. (Wayan).

The mourners generally maintain silence at cremations in Mauritius and in Dallas, but Balinese cremations are rambunctious. That is not to imply that the families are not sad at the loss of the deceased, but this convivial atmosphere is rooted in three factors. One, a significant amount of time may have lapsed from the time of death and burial to the time of cremation, allowing the family ample time to come to terms with the loss of the loved one. Two, death is seen as a release of the soul, hence a time for happiness. And three, the Balinese Hindu hold a unique belief regarding reincarnation, that the deceased will be born as the fourth generation in the family; knowing that the loved one will return soon to earth provides comfort in dealing with the death.

“A few days before the auspicious cremation day, relatives “reawaken” the deceased by opening the grave.” The remains are then cleaned and wrapped in a white sacral cloth and taken directly to the *setra*, cremation grounds, to await the arrival of the coffin containing the effigy. Buried bones may never enter in the family compound because they are polluted and unclean (Wayan).

The ceremony of cremation comprises three feast days. The first day is used to purify the corpse from head to toes with holy water. The second to elaborate the offerings, some of them being high structures solidly built of wood. The third is the incineration. The body is then placed

in the *bade* funeral tower which can take up to 12 meters (about 39 feet) in height, depending on the wealth of the family and the caste. In the Hindu worldview, it represents Merupakan, Mount Meru, the center of the universe. Its base represents the lower world and stands on a bamboo structure carried on the shoulders by several men. Above is the mythical bird Garuda, symbolizing the human world; the corpse of the dead, or the effigy, is placed here. The third level is composed of a series of roofs in odd numbers, depending on the caste and the level of nobility (Wayan). The king of Klungkung was the only person allowed to enjoy the maximum number of eleven roofs. The incineration of a *Pedanda* (Hindu priest belonging to the Brahmin caste) is identical, but the tower does not have a roof. During life, such a priest is considered to have already reached the level of union with Siwa. Therefore, he does not need all the funeral rites as ordinary people do (Lansing 73, Davison & Granquist 16-17).

On the morning of the cremation, relatives and friends visit the house to pay their respects. The guests partake in a lavish banquet, after which the village *Kulkul* bell is sounded to begin the final march to the cremation grounds. Incited by the climactic rhythms of the *beleganjur* (boisterous Balinese marching percussion ensemble featuring drums, cymbals, and turned pot gongs), members of the dead man's *banjar* (Figure 12) carry the effigy-bone corpse from its stretcher at home and hoist it onto the decorated wood and bamboo *bade* tower supported on a bamboo base frame. The *bade* is beautifully decorated with tinsel, paper ornaments, flowers, glittering mirrors, and expensive fabrics. Since height is considered holy, the higher the tower, the higher the rank of the deceased. Towers for wealthy Ksatriya may attain heights of 20 meters (about 65 feet) or more, though the pervasive power lines of the island mean the really tall towers of the past are seldom seen today (Wayan).



Figure 12: The six-person group cremation began here, in this *banjar* neighborhood. The *bade* tower is placed at the front. The entire *banjar* participated in the funeral procession, which left from here to go to the cremation ground. An interesting aspect of the multi-*banjar* cremations is that the women of the *banjar* wore color-specific tops to identify with the *banjar* that they were representing. While the clothing appeared traditional, a sleeved top and a legs-covering sarong, the fabrics reflected current trends. Most of the women had indulged in the fashion of wearing tops that were made of lace. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Musicians at the funeral are a novelty in Hindu death traditions, making the *gamelan* a unique feature of Balinese cremations. One of the *gamelan* performers shared with Wayan, who translated for me, “The Balinese believe the *gamelan* (Figure 13), traditional Indonesian percussion orchestra instruments, are not just musical instruments and physical objects but also spiritual entities, and in order to succeed in playing the instruments, the spirits are to be welcomed properly, with chants, incense, flower petals, and the sprinkling of holy water to solicit the spirits’ cooperation.” *Gamelan* music is the social essence of Balinese music; even though it aspires to the highest levels of artistic complexity and demands incredible effort from its players, it is at its heart a manifestation of a cooperative community, whatever people with whatever skills that community may include. The belief that community is sacred, that

community effort is consecrated, and that consecrated, cooperative acts rendered in a harmonious community are offerings to God. In general, there is a musical tradition of worship in Hinduism, but it is relegated to after the cremation is completed, and during the thirteen days following cremation, which is believed to help the soul attain its destination in *pitr-lok*, land of ancestors.



Figure 13: This is the Angklung *Gamelan*, a traditional percussion 4-note bronze orchestra used during cremation ceremonies, that performed throughout the six-persons multi-*banjar* cremations. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

The entire Balinese cremation event is a spectacle. When it was time to carry the remains to the *setra* cremation ground, 20 men were required to carry the *bade*. One of the young men explained that for the more elaborate funeral, such as one for a prince, as many as three shifts of 100 men may be required to carry the heavily decorated funeral tower in a procession for two or three kilometers (roughly 1.2 to 1.8 miles) to the burning site. A venerable high priest may ride in a sedan chair at the top of the tower, accompanying the mummy; in some cases, space is provided in front for a small Angklung mourning orchestra (Wayan).

After the men placed the remains in the *bade* (Figure 14), it was time to leave for the cremation ground. The mourners lined up to form the funeral procession. Although the procession does not always follow the same organization, this funeral procession had the *gamelan* at the front, then the women and men mourners with offerings, the *bade* in the middle of the processions, and then men toward the back. Each *banjar* member carried offerings for the cremation; offerings are in the form of tirta (holy water), ritual accessories, and pyramids of food piled high on their heads. The mourners were in single file, as well as in pairs and talking to each other. The visual image of a smoothly flowing line of colorfully dressed women and men leading the mourners' parade looked more like a parade than a funeral procession. Some of the mourners were holding or touching a long white cloth attached to the *bade* coffin; this cloth symbolizes their assistance in transporting the coffin. Some of the men carried offerings. Wayan did not know what these specific offerings were but guessed they were roasted quail and rabbits on sticks. These would be consumed by the mourners in a "feast" after they were symbolically offered in presence of the cremation fire. The procession moved along boisterously.



Figure 14: This is the multi-*banjar* sponsored *bade* tower made to carry six-persons remains. The tower is hand-made by the *banjar* members and it stays on the road until ready for use. The *bade* takes up the space of one parked car side-ways and two parked cars in length. Pictures of the deceased persons are pasted on the *bade* tower. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.



Figure 15: These young men carried the *bade* for the multi-*banjar* sponsored cremation; they walked three miles from their *banjar* to the cremation site, although shorter routes exist. The intent of taking the longer route is to confuse the spirits so that the spirits do not find the way to the home of the living. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

In some grand cremations, walking on the dirt roads creates clouds of dust, and the fireworks are noisy. Additionally, an uproar of music, yelling, and hooting elevates the party-like atmosphere. Often, a handful of old Chinese coins are scattered at the participants' feet (Michaels 201). One of the women carrying offerings said that the coins may be offered only at the cremation; they are not always scattered during the procession. It's important the parade be bustling, crowded, and noisy - this shows the funeral has achieved large-scale public recognition. The chaos reigns most notably around the tower, as relatives struggle to carry the body, each striving to prove loyalty to the deceased (Figure 15). Another important ritual juncture is when the *bade* tower reaches crossroads. The spirit world (*Niskala*) intersects with the seen (*Sekala*) world everywhere in Bali, and crossroads represent the intersection of the two worlds, which makes them easily susceptible to spirit forces in Bali. The mourners spin the tower to confuse the soul and prevent it from finding its way back to its house, where it might make mischief for the living. The Hindu idea of the spirit not progressing in its onward journey is evident in this

playful ritual. Young men lost balance or tripped while turning the tower, which was the source of comedy for the mourners. The men made fun of each other, saying they needed to work out or were getting old. But the focus was clear, to confuse the spirits, which are easily distracted by noise and even minor complexity. Angklung *gamelan* music serves the purpose of frightening the spirits (Figure 16) and offerings appease the spirits (Figure 17). Since evil spirits may be following, seeking to pilfer the soul, some processions might go out of their way to cross a stream, because spirits hate to get their feet wet. Evil spirits (bhutas and leyaks) can only travel in straight lines, so spinning of the tower deters and walking zigzag eliminates their potentially damaging meddling. Several funeral attendees shared that these practices are outdated because there are no streams to cross in urban Bali. Development has taken up all the available space; impatience of drivers waiting for the seemingly endless funeral procession to pass is evident in their incessant honking that appears to fit in with the idea of scaring away the spirits. Everyone is busy, so the cremation ceremonies last only a few hours now. In rural areas, especially in north Bali, one of the informants told me, some of the older funerary traditions are still evident.



Figure 16: Angklung *gamelan*, which played at the *banjar* on the morning of the cremation day, accompanies the procession from the *banjar* to the *setra*, cremation ground. It is important to wear muted colors for men as it serves as a barrier to themselves. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Belief regarding crossroads and spinning the tower at crossroads are continued Balinese traditions to this day. Is there a specific number of times that the tower must be spun? “At every such intersection, the tower must be rapidly spun around three times” (Bakan 72). Is this true today? The response was yes. Again, we see a connection to Indian Hinduism in the use of the auspicious number three. In Hinduism, three represents the supreme deities, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer, respectively. Together, they represent *rta*, the underlying universal laws that govern the universe. In Mauritian and Dallas cremations, the corpse is encircled anticlockwise three times, too. Anticlockwise direction symbolizes an unwinding, a chaos. Similarly, the spinning of the cremation tower in Bali is chaotic, opposite of *rta*, order.



Figure 17: Women from two different *banjars* (neighborhoods) carrying offerings to the cremation site. Every *banjar* member contributes to the cremation. Offerings include coconut leaves, roses, jasmines, frangipanis, sometimes biscuits, coins, a variety of rice dishes, candies, and a few stalks of incenses. Since this cremation was a multi-*banjar* event, the women from each *banjar* wore a color that was specific to their *banjar*. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

In olden days, the *setra* (cremation ground) was usually located near the Pura Dalem, Temple of the Dead, in the cemetery just outside the village. In the space allocated for cremation would stand an animal-shaped sarcophagus (*bade*), which is determined by the caste of the

deceased: a bull for a Brahmin male, a cow for a Brahmin woman, a winged lion for the Ksatriya caste, a mythological half-elephant, half-fish (Gadjamina) for a lower-caste Sudra. The bull was considered a sacred animal, representing the fertilizing sky (common to early agriculturalists), as far back as the 2,700 BCE Mohenjo-Daro (the Mound of the Dead) civilization. Lion, on the other hand, was unknown in these civilizations, yet, the Vedic hymns mention them (Basham 1-7). In the past, these sarcophagi were made from tree trunks.



Figure 18: Sign at the entrance to the *setra*, cremation ground. This sign is from Denpasar, the capital of Bali. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Today, the *setra* (Figure 18) is in the heart of the capital of Bali, Denpasar. It is easily accessible by everyone on foot or by car. Today's sarcophagus (*bade* towers) are constructed in bamboo and plaster due to the depleting of the natural resource of wood. The sarcophagus does not have to reflect one's caste in today's cremations, although it can. The remains carried to the *setra* will be placed in the sarcophagus. The access into the coffin is gained through a lid in the

back. The entire coffin is draped with velvet or other expensive cloth and decorated with gold leaf, silk scarves, and cotton wool.

When the procession reached the *setra*, *kajang* (a lengthy white shroud) was attached to the corpse. Held over everyone's heads, the corpse was led by the '*kajang*' down from the *bade* tower and placed inside the coffin. The fragile, pagoda-like tower (which carried the remains) was no longer of any use, so was tipped over and stripped of all valuables. Wayan told me that it would later be burned down. Family members huddled together to take one last look at their loved ones, which Wayan assured me were just bones, since all the six persons were buried, and then the *banjars* had to pool together their resources to perform this cremation at a much later day. After each of the six persons were carefully placed in their simple sarcophagus, the lids were kept open. One high priest climbed up on the platform to recite prayers over the bodies. Pots of holy water were sprinkled over the bodies. The pots were then broken. Some old Chinese coins were showered over the bodies as ransom to Yama, the Lord of the Underworld. After all the precious materials were piled on top, the high priest ignited the fuel under the pyre with gas torches. Many young men assisted in the burning of the sarcophagus, ensuring the fire was consuming the offerings. When a side was not burning, the young men pointed the gas torch and lit that area. The use of blowtorches has become commonplace as an aid to cremation, because it reconciles religious cremation practice with the demand for speed of modern society. The requisite equipment and fuel tank are transported by a pickup truck, whereas the workers are attired in the customary sarong covering (Pringle 208-09, Grimshaw 85).



Figure 19: The offerings are displayed at the cremation site. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Within seconds, the splendid tower was consumed by the flames. The smoke signaled the last spectacle of the cremation ritual, affirming the Balinese belief that the column of smoke raises the soul to heaven. The offerings that were laid out (Figure 19) were distributed among the mourners. The young men who assisted in the cremation watched the cremation fire as caretakers. They laughed and joked around. One of the young men said that although the soul is regarded as all-important, the body is a foul, contaminated object, to be disposed at the first opportunity. Casual treatment of the body was evident as the men clobbered burning bodies with bamboo sticks so they burn better (Figures 20, 21, and 22). One man even told the corpse to burn faster. Wayan said that it is a common practice for corpses to be unceremoniously poked and prodded by relatives who make raucous jokes and mock the body for not burning fast enough so they can all go home. As the fire subsided, the priest climbed the elevated platform again and uttered a few mantras and rang a bell, which indicated to hasten the soul's journey to heaven.

Generally, the eldest son rakes the ashes to make sure all the flesh is burned. This is consistent with Hindu cremations in Mauritius and Dallas; the only anomaly was the Balinese casual attitude while the body burned. After the cremation, everything associated with the deceased person was burned as an extension of separation and into transition, the next phase.



Figure 20: Lembu, a large bull-shaped effigy, was used for cremating a high-caste deceased person, whose remains were placed inside the effigy. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.



Figure 21: Lembu sarcophagi being burned with the corpse placed inside it. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.



Figure 22: The lembu is burned after mantras are offered to it, as well as holy water has cleansed it and coins were placed on it as an offering to Yama. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

A definite deviation from the Vedic and other Hindu traditions is the presence of dancers at the Balinese Hindu cremations (Figure 23). The dancers made movements that captured the deceased's soul journey into the afterlife. They were dressed in the ubiquitous *saput poleng*, black and white checkered sacred cloth. This cloth is a common sight throughout Bali as temples and deities are adorned in it. Pre-Hindu Polynesian and animism ideas are incorporated in this visual dichotomy of opposite colors, which represent the two sides of all entities; the grey check in the cloth symbolizes balance of the two opposites.



Figure 23: The sacred ritual dance, Baris Gede. As the cremation smoke rises, a group of funeral dancers perform a dance. The dance, with its symbolic movements, rhythms, and gestures, is intended to assist the departing soul in its journey to the Afterlife. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Balinese Hindu cremations are spectacular events, so much so that there is an entire tourism industry built around it. Far from a solemn, somber occasion, cremations are big events marked with ceremonies and preparations, horseplay, music, dance, food, all of which has hardly anything do to with the dead body (Figures 24, 25, and 26). Considering the spectacular nature of Balinese cremations, it is not surprising that the spectacular ceremonies performed today are influenced by overseas film units than by the money paid to the high priests performing the

rituals. The main job of a priest is to consecrate the deceased and his effigy with tirta (holy water), cleanse the body before cremation, and write letters of introduction (Ratnyadana) to open the doors of heaven for the soul. It is tradition for high Brahman priests to officiate at cremations of the highborn; the services of the lesser ranking *pemangku* are utilized by the poor. These are not issues that concern the tourists, whose numbers at cremations are on the rise. Wayan told me that cremations today are marketed by hotels to tourists. The general cost posted at low-end hotels for attending a Balinese cremation is US\$50. It is a 4-hour “event” and includes transportation to the from the location. It is common to see tourists walking with their phone-cameras and iPads trying to capture the cacophony, unaware of the ritual richness they are witnessing.



Figure 24: Women socializing and playing a game during a cremation ritual. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.



Figure 25: Men smoking and engaging in conversation during a cremation ritual. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.



Figure 26: Fashionable women pose at a cremation. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

How do the Balinese perceive tourists invading their private and intimate ceremonies of death? Gungde, a 45-year old man (Figure 27, man on the left) who was at the cremation of the high-caste person, said that these ceremonies were meant to be public. “By having more people at the cremation, we are honoring the dead, recognizing them” he said, and added, “That makes the soul happy.” How about the ritual of burial, could a tourist attend it? The same gentleman, and then Wayan said that the burial was a much more intimate ritual of death. “Burial is private, but here (pointing to the burnt *bade* tower) is the release of the soul, a happy ritual” the gentleman said.



Figure 27: Family members of the high-caste deceased person who was cremated in the lembu, bull-shaped effigy. The gentleman on the right said that cremations were happy rituals. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

After the body was completely burned, water was poured over the embers, and children were allowed to poke through the hot muddy ashes for the Chinese coins that were offered to the corpse prior to burning. Some of the coins were gathered by the family, as well. The bone ash was collected in a pile. Some bones remained, which were placed in a coconut shell. The coconut and the bone ash were then tied in a “bundle” of plain looking cloth. This “bundle” was placed on a richly decorated sedan chair and carried to the sea in another rambunctious, disorderly, and laughing procession. One of the women that I walked in the procession with told me that the sea was close to this cremation ground, hence we were headed there; in inner-island areas, people would carry the “bundle” to a nearby river, where the ashes would be immersed, and then flow into the sea. Sometimes, a small prahu (boat sail), is used to carry ashes out past the reefs so they won’t wash ashore. There was no prahu attached to the “bundle” that was immersed. One of the women said the prahu is needed on windy or high-tide days only, not on calm weather days. After the “bundle-offering” was immersed in the sea, it is thought to convert into micro-form and the resultant benefits are experienced by the collective Universe.

Wayan, and several other cremation attendees expressed repeatedly that the body was merely a casing for the soul. Perhaps they reiterated this fundamental Balinese idea because they perceived how an “outsider” might view the cremation as being far from a solemn and somber event. Many cultures focus their death rituals upon the body itself, but in Bali, the body has little significance other than as a temporary shell, and as a container of the soul and its anchor to earth. All thoughts at the time of death are concentrated upon the spirit and its passage to heaven. The body is only there to be disposed of as quickly as possible. In the Balinese Hindu cosmology, the body is the microcosm of the universe, made up of the panca maha butha, five elements of the

universe: air, earth, fire, water, and space. Only after the body's five elements have been returned to the macrocosm by burning can the soul completely detach itself from the body. Hence, the cremation is a celebration, which leads the soul to unite with god. Poor family cremations (Figures 28 and 29) have the same intent of returning the body to the universe.



Figure 28: Cremation from a poor family. They used a bamboo platform to lay the deceased person and then performed the cremation. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.



Figure 29: The ngaben (cremation) offerings from the poor family were modest. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Returning the elements is the final rite of purification and disposal of the material body, the ultimate purification of the three cycles of the earth, fire, and water. Were there mores

ceremonies? Wayan explained that families hold ceremonies to honor the soul. The ceremony would take place at a later date; the intent of the ceremony is for the soul to be enshrined as a family ancestral deities, who will be installed in a special shrine in the family temple. Between 12 and 42 days after the cremation, depending on an auspicious day determined by the Balinese calendar, more offerings and *mantras* (chants) are made on behalf of the soul. Many wealthy families construct another elaborate tower at this time.

Rame: Balinese Aesthetic

The Balinese Hindu cremation ritual clearly exemplifies many elements of its Vedic predecessor, but it differs in ceremony and celebration of the deceased. Hindu cremations in Mauritius and Dallas pale in comparison to the ostentatious nature of Balinese cremations. Cremations celebrate the foundational Balinese aesthetic ideal of *rame*. *Rame* is a spirit of fullness or boisterousness that is thought to drive away evil forces. The freshly made baskets, bowls, trays, palm fans, sacks of rice, floral arrangements, emblems, effigies, and other items carried as offerings are handmade. Women carefully arrange dabs of rice or pieces of fruits, candy, crackers, and cigarette, inside baskets carefully woven from palm fronds, pandanus petals or strips of banana leaves. Fragrant frangipanis, tender hibiscus, lush lotus blossoms, clusters of oleander, and delicate rosettes made from rice dough, all arranged in careful and circling symmetrical patterns. These offerings are given as expressions of gratitude. The transactions between the physical and metaphysical worlds take place all day, every day; the cremation offerings are only an exaggeration of this daily gratitude. The delicious, fragrant, and beautiful offerings are far more aesthetic than ascetic. *Rame* is the aesthetic of fullness over emptiness,

boisterousness over boredom, togetherness over isolation. *Rame* strives for sanctification through ornamentation and sensory exaggeration. It requires the hypertrophic through embellishment of sacred events and spaces to such an extent as to leave no room – physical, visual, sonic, or even olfactory – for evil forces to operate. Rame is the reason all Balinese have to be sent to the other world with such elaborate ceremony (Bakan 74, Grimshaw 22, 79). Wayan explained this concept in relation to cremations, “*Rame* scares away the bad spirits.” He explained that harmful spirits hover around everywhere, looking for easy prey. When the spirits hear the loud noises, they associate it with vigilance, which scares the spirits away. Similarly, the sensory overload indicates fullness, a lack of space for the spirits to occupy, so they turn away. He concluded eloquently, “*Rame* maintains the sacredness of the rituals.”

Mauritius

The Vedic or Arya Samaj cremation is a syncretic blend of ancient Vedic *havan* (fire) and mantra ritual offerings with the accessibility brought on by the social reformation of the Arya Samaj. According to Mr. Chenganna, Coordinator for Certificate in Peace Program at the University of Mauritius, the Vedic cremation is less expensive and less time consuming than the Puranic cremation, which is elaborate and requires more time and resources. In both the methods, priests play a lead role in instructing the deceased person’s family members to perform the final rites. Mr. Chenganna clarified that electric cremations, although economical and affordable for poorer families, are somewhat unpopular among the Mauritian Hindus. Pandit Oumashanker said, “It is a common belief among the Mauritian Hindus that not performing the final rites according to tradition will result in dosh (ill luck) to the family.”

In the Vedic cremation that I documented, after the family completed the preparations of the dead body, it was carried outside the home with the head going out first. The body was placed in the open courtyard by the two sons of the deceased and several other relatives and neighbors. The entire congregation faced the decorated corpse and all the subsequent rituals were directed at it. The assembly members recited the Gayatri Mantra eight times. The mantra is, “Om bhūr bhuvaḥ svaḥ, tát savitúr váreṇ(i)yaṃ, bhárgo devásya dhīmahi, dhíyo yó naḥ pracodáyāt.” It means, “We meditate on the glory of that Being who has produced this universe; may He enlighten our minds” (Pandita Barran and Pandit Oumashankerji).

Then the Pandita welcomed the congregation and proceeded to console them through the Hindu concept of rta (tradition). She explained that rta is the unchangeable law of God, just as night and day follow one another, as prakash and andhera (light and darkness) are cyclic, so are birth and death. She explained the concept of jagat (world), comprising of the chakra (cycle of life); if you have come, then you have to go. She referred to those verses of the Veda that directly address the relationship between the body and the soul, and the five elements that make up the human body. The address was in the Hindi language.

Another priest attended the cremation and the Pandita publically called upon him to say a few words of comfort to the assembly. Pandit Choonuksingh Oumashanker thanked her and said mrityu (death) is a change of body. He reflected by saying, “mrityu nishchit hai” (death is certain) and “Antim samay par mukti prapt hoti hai” (In the final moments, liberation is attained). The Pandita then elaborated on the entrapment of the human soul in the body by explaining that the atma (soul) is in shok (sorrow) at birth and the family is ashok (happy),

whereas the family in shok cries at death, while the soul is ashok, rejoicing, because it is finally free to return to its original elements.

She said to the congregation that the deceased man had lived up to the age of 80 years, which is considered “purna ayu”, a full life. In the Hindu view of the human life stages, she explained, the deceased had indeed been blessed to have lived until the age of 80, essentially experiencing all the four ashrama (age-based stages) of a human life. The first stage of life, Brahmachari, is from birth until the age of 25; this stage is marked by learning, with focus on education and included the practice of celibacy. In Hindu traditions, it connotes chastity during student stage of life for the purposes of learning from a guru (teacher), and during later stages of life for the purposes of attaining moksha (spiritual liberation). Brahmachari literally means "going after Brahman" (Supreme Reality, Self, God). The Grihastha (householder) stage is from age 25 to 50 years of age, marked by marriage, progeny, and fulfillment of social responsibilities. The third stage from age 50 to 75 is Vanprast (forest-dweller). In this stage a person gradually retreats from social bindings. In Medieval India, a physical manifestation of retreat from society – a social death - meant living in the forest, away from society and its demands. The final stage, Sanyas (renunciation) is from 75 years onwards, withdrawal from this physical world, preparing for death and beyond. The dead person before us, said the Pandita, had enjoyed all these stages, indeed a full life, so excessive grief and sorrow were unwarranted for such a successful long life (Pandita Barran).

The congregation then chanted a prayer to Shanti Vishwadeva (Peace to the God of the Universe, i.e., Vishnu, the Maintainer and Balancer of the Universe). The congregation then

threw flower petals on the corpse (Figure 30), a sign of peace for the soul as a mark of last collective respect paid to the deceased.



Figure 30: The decorated corpse being carried to the aluminum carrier, which will then carry the corpse to the *samsana* (cremation ground). Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

The body was then placed in an aluminum carrier that was adorned with flowers. Pandit Oumashankerji explained that in the past, bodies were placed on a bamboo bier and carried to the *samsana* (cremation ground). The bamboo bier would also carry the pot containing the fire. The bier was built by cutting two pieces of bamboo approximately 6 feet in length. These would be placed on the ground, about 2 feet apart from one another. Then, a 2-feet wide bamboo stick would be placed between the two longer bamboo sticks, and tied at each intersection, making an H-shape. Several more 2-feet wide bamboo sticks would be placed about one and a half feet apart from the horizontal 2-feet bamboo that was tied. The result looks like a bamboo ladder. While tying the strips, the extra portion of the coir rope is left uncut for later use in tying the dead body when it is placed on the bier. For the *homa* fire, a bamboo is cut into vertical pieces

and tied into a triangular shape so that the pot fits into it. The prepared bier is placed in the east-west direction in the front yard. After ritual preparation, the dead body is laid on the bier with its head facing the east and legs facing the west. In present-day Mauritian Hindu cremations, ready-made, and reusable aluminum open caskets (Figure 31) serve the function of the bamboo bier.



Figure 31: Aluminum casket to carry the corpse. This will be decorated with flowers by the family before placing the corpse in it. After the corpse is placed in it, it will be carried to the cremation site. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Several men from the community picked up the metal carrier to be taken to the *samsana*, cremation ground. The body left the courtyard with its head facing the front. The women stayed back. A close female family member poured a vessel full of water outside the boundary of the home, symbolizing the corpse will have sufficient water and it will not be thirsty along the journey into the afterlife. The women stayed back at the home, and the men carried the corpse (Figure 32). In *Death in Benaras*, Jonathan P. Parry states that women do attend cremation, such as the Gotakhor (cremation ground) Doms caste and certain Punjabi communities in Benaras; the women do not join the funeral procession but make their own way to the ghat burning ground (155).



Figure 32: Funeral procession carrying the corpse in a decorated aluminum casket. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

After leaving the home area, the corpse was turned around, and then it was turned again at a junction (cross-road) so that the soul would forget the way to return back to its familiar dwelling. It is thought that the soul might look for a company in the familiar surroundings, hence these practices to confuse the soul and deter further loss to the family. The deceased left the home with his head out first and entered the cremation ground with its feet first.

Traditionally, cremation sites were on the outskirts of townships, and the men would carry the bier on their shoulders to the cremation ground. Nowadays it is not possible to walk such great distance, hence a large vehicle is used to carry the casket. In this cremation service, a

white pick-up truck was used to transfer the body. However, in line with tradition, the corpse was carried on the men's shoulders for a short distance up to the cremation site (Figure 33).



Figure 33: Men carry the corpse on their shoulders into the cremation site. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

At the *samsana*, the men accompanying the body assisted the *samsana* attendants to pile up wood to build a funeral pyre. The two sons sprinkled holy water (from Ganga Talao) around the stacked wood; this marked a symbolic boundary around the sacred offering of the corpse to Agni fire. This boundary also serves as a demarcation between the dead and the living, a washing away of earthly ties. Then the men began construction the funeral pyre with wood. The body was placed in the middle of the pyre and more wood was used to cover it completely. The men worked silently, focusing on placing the wood strategically so that the flames would consume the wood and the body completely. The entire mood was somber and the only conversation was

regarding creating the optimal pyre (Figure 34). Although both, Balinese and Mauritian, prefer the natural, open-air cremations, unlike their Balinese counterpart at the *setra* ground, there were no women at the Mauritius cremation. But the priest performing the rituals was a woman. As well, there were no chants, orchestra, music, dance, food, or drink. The aesthetics, spectacle, cacophony, and rame – sensory overload - of the Balinese cremation was nowhere close to being present here.



Figure 34: Men build the funeral pyre by stacking wood around the corpse. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

After the pyre was complete, Pandita Barron addressed the gathering of men that they were partaking in the sixteenth rite of passage, the final rite of Antim Sanskar, or Antyeshti. She asked the gathered men to pray for the deceased's atman (soul). She said that this is a time of great humility as no one can perform their own final rites; we must depend on others to perform

them for us. She recited the Gayatri Mantra, Aum bhur bhuva svaha chant as she directed the two sons of the deceased to pour ghee on the pyre. She told them to light the fire at four cardinal direction openings under the pyre. She chanted several Vedic mantras referencing the offerings to be accepted by the fire. Each mantra began with Aum; she explained, “Saying Aum is like calling the Universe by its name to get its attention.” She asked the congregation to recite Svaha, (acceptance of the offerings made to the Vedic fire god Agni). Svaha is the personification of oblation; whenever fire sacrifices are made, svaha is chanted. Per Vedic tradition, it is believed by the Hindu community that when offerings are made to gods through *yajna*, they are only accepted after the utterance of the word svaha. As she recited the chants from her Arya Samaj religious text, the congregation repeated svaha.

The two sons offered ghee with a long stick to the fire through one of the openings. Sesame seeds were also offered to the fire, which was already bursting into voracious flames. Sesame seeds are said to be the favorite of departed ancestors. The seeds are small but storehouses of energy, which are thought to remove the black covering around the symbolic subtle body of the ancestors, “because the sesamum is produced from My sweat it is holy” (Wood 55). When combined with bhav (spiritual emotion) of the person performing the rites, sesame seeds are believed to increase the spiritual purity in the subtle body of the departed, and thus they gain energy to move on to the next spiritual plane, *pitr lok*, land of ancestors. The rite performer, in turn, receives protection from distress.

More than the words of the Vedic mantras, which are themselves comforting, the tone of the communal chanting is intended to quicken the soul's release. The Pandita addressed the men, in Hindi, “*Koi has ke jeeta hai, koi mar ke, maut tab hasti hai jab hum kuch karke marte hai*”

(some live by laughter, some live by dying, death laughs when we do something worthwhile and die), and “*Jaise hum karenge waise hi phalwa payenge*” (as we do, its fruits we bear). It was interesting to note her use of the word *phalwa*, a Bhojpuri rendition; in Hindi, the word would be *phal* for fruit(s). Knowing that the majority of the gathered assembly members spoke Bhojpuri, she immediately related to them through familiarity of their own language. She spoke to the two grieving sons that it is their good *karma* that they got to lend shoulders to their father’s final rites; human *dharma* is to serve and to love, as love is the quality of God. With folded hands, she chanted *Aum shanti shanti shanti* (Peace to the universe). She began to leave the *samsana* and the congregation followed her. This marked the end of the Vedic – Arya Samaj cremation ritual.

Outside the cremation ground, Pandita Barran shared that she was reciting the chants from the book that was a collection of the great reformer Dayanand Saraswati’s teachings, because of which she has the opportunity to perform this ritual (Figure 35).

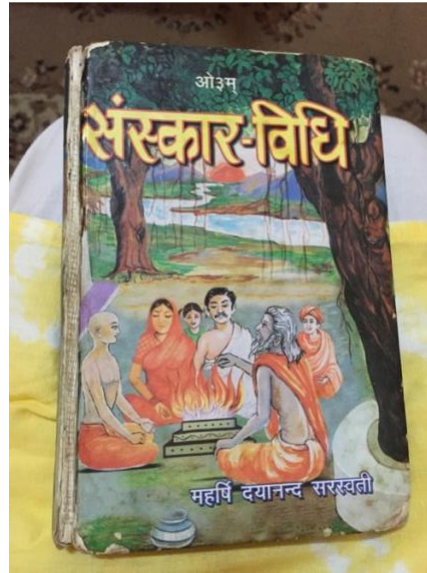


Figure 35: Pandita Barron’s personal copy of the Arya Samaj’s Vedic ritual text Aum: Rituals for Rites of Passage by Maharishi Dayanand Saraswati. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

The cremation ground is traditionally located near a river, if not on the river bank itself. Is this true for the Hindu *samsana* location in Mauritius? Pandit Oumashankerji said, “Location is not as important for the cremation as direction is. The corpse’s head should face the north and the feet should face the south during cremation. Symbolically, south is the realm of Yama, the god of death. Hence, the feet facing in that direction implies a southward journey, to the abode of Yama.” This is a shared precept of all the three Hindu cremation practices in this study. He explained, “*Dhruv*, the North Star, is believed to absorb the water quickly from the deceased body in this ideal position. Priests always perform auspicious ceremonies while facing the north. Inauspicious ceremonies, such as cremation rituals, are performed while facing the southern direction.”

The Puranic cremation ritual was at Roches Noires, for a 47-year-old Vaish man. There are a few rituals that separate the Puranic cremation ritual from the Vedic. One is the offering of the pinda (rice balls), which symbolize ovaries or the embryo (Michaels 206-207), and are made up of rice and barley flour mixed with milk, honey, sesame seeds, tulsi (basil) leaves, and ghee (clarified butter). According to the Garuda Purana, “The man who dies with a leaf of it (holy basil shoot) in his mouth, upon a seat of sesamum and darbha-grass, goes to the city of Visnu, unfailingly, though he have no son” (Wood 55). The items represent the five elements: earth, water, air, fire, and ether. Then, during the cremation, the face of the corpse is left uncovered. Rather than offering ghee only to the fire, ghee was also offered to the corpse. The *kapala kriya*, breaking of the skull ritual, was symbolically performed, with breaking of a pot, and leaving the site immediately without turning back.

At the *samsana*, a few large pieces of wood were laid on the platform where the cremation is done. The body was placed on these and additional wood was placed around and on top of the body. The face is left uncovered in the Puranic cremation. Then the surviving male member of the deceased's family (the young boy, in this case), was given the responsibility by the priest to light the oblation fire on the four corners. Several family members assisted him since he was a young boy. As the fire began, a bamboo stick wrapped in cotton was dipped in ghee and touched to the lips of the deceased, to symbolically offer fire to the corpse. The family made five anticlockwise circles – symbolizing the five elements - around the funeral pyre, each time stopping to offer the oblation fire via the bamboo stick to the corpse. Additional wood was placed on the face of the corpse so that it was completely covered. The priest chanted several mantras seeking peace for the dead. The mantras blended with the billowing smoke from the funeral pyre, carrying the prayers and offerings upwards and into the Afterlife (Figure 36).



Figure 36: The oblation of the corpse being carried to the Vedic fire god, Agni, through the intermingling of the mediums of smoke and Vedic chants. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

The men looked on for a few minutes until the next ritual, *kapala kriya*, breaking of the skull, was performed. A clay pot filled with milk, honey, ghee, sesame seeds and basil leaves, representing the five elements of the world, was given to an older family member. The person performing this ritual turned away from the cremation fire, and while holding the pot over his shoulder, circumambulated the funeral pyre in counterclockwise direction three times. “Ritually speaking, clockwise (moving to the right) circumambulations (of an idol, a brahmin, a holy place, etc.) are auspicious, counter-clockwise movements are not” (Anantha Murthy 155). Then the pot was thrown over the shoulder to the ground, where it broke and the content spilled, i.e., the pot symbolizes the man, and the spill is the returning of the five elements. This ritual marks the symbolic breaking of the skull in the Hindu tradition as it is believed that the soul breaks free from the body through the skull. It is considered inauspicious to look behind and everyone should leave the *samsana* at this time. Men must show restraint in expressing grief. They must focus on the task at hand of begetting an ancestor. In Benaras, “mother” India’s holiest city, the ultimate textual authority on death is the Garuda Purana (Parts 10 and 11). The text says that the only point in time that a chief mourner may express his personal anguish is at *kapala kriya*, when mid-way through the cremation he cracks open the corpse’s skull with a bamboo pole. Outside of this moment, the tears will have to be drunk by the *preta*-ghost. In the Indian- Hindu tradition, it is common for a family member to actually use a bamboo pole to break the skull during the cremation, symbolizing assistance in the release of the soul of the dead (Parry 155). Pandit Oumashankerji explained, “In the Mauritian Hindu tradition, the practice of using a bamboo pole to break the skull is perceived as harsh, hence the innovation of this ritual. The clay pot is the

symbolic breaking of the skull.” This ritual marks the end of the cremation; this is as far as any living person can go with the dead.

Does caste play a role in Mauritius cremations? Are cremation rituals truly egalitarian and equal in caste, especially since Arya Samaj had infiltrated the social fiber of the community so deeply? Almost all the men at both the cremation rituals said this ritual did not articulate any caste differences. Pandit Dhawdall told me that Brahmin cremations are always done in the Puranic tradition and must be done by Brahmin priests. Vaish cremations may be done in the Puranic tradition, but among the contemporary Vaishs of Mauritius, the preference is for Vedic cremations as they require less time and money. Sudra priests never perform Puranic cremations.

A more recent development in the Mauritian Hindu tradition is gas cremation (Figures 37 and 38). In response to the depletion of forests caused by wood-burning cremations, and due to a shortage of wood, gas crematoriums are being introduced. Some traditional Hindus, however, have argued that ending open-air, wood-burning cremations could violate their religious rights since the whole point is to return to the elements. Gas cremations are not a popular method of cremation as yet, but that may change soon, given the unavailability and rising cost of wood. The current cost of cremation varies from Mauritian Rupees 6510 - 97,651 (US\$200 - \$2,000 for Arya followers; US\$400 - \$3,000 for Puranic followers).

Gas cremations are in a completely enclosed structure. Hence the fire oblation is performed to the body in the urn before placing the body in the chamber. The head faces the north and oblation is performed at the head with a *homa* fire. The body is placed with the head first in the chamber, and the feet face the south. Then the lead ritualist turns the chamber switch on. This is the equivalent to lighting the pyre in a traditional cremation. The assembly members

return home after the chamber has been lit because, at this juncture, there is nothing to look at or do. There is no need to turn the wood on the pyre or pour ghee to incite the flames, nor any rituals to perform for the corpse because it is not in view.



Figure 37: Platform for preparing the corpse for gas cremation. The urn on the right holds the *homa* fire and all offerings (ghee, sesame seeds, milk, basil leaves, and honey) are poured into the urn. The offerings will be placed at the foot of the corpse in the cremation chamber. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.



Figure 38: A gas chamber for the cremation. The image on the left shows the inside of the chamber, and the image on the right shows how the inside of the chamber looks when it is in use. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Irrespective of whether a person has attended the Vedic – Arya Samaj, Puranic – Sanatan Dharma, or the gas chamber cremation, they are required to take a bath to remove the ritually impure state of having been in contact with a corpse. Several community members shared that some Hindu traditions have additional methods of purification, such as chewing dried chilly or basil leaf, as well as lighting a flame outside the home. The clothing worn to the cremation must also be washed immediately to remove all pollution associated with it.

Dallas

Hindu cremations in Dallas are largely Americanized and demonstrate American values of efficiency, convenience, and structure, which includes laws. Further, the rituals emulate the established Christian traditions at funeral homes. In conducting my research, it was evident at the Hughes Family Tribute Center, Restland Funeral Home, BAPS Hindu Temple Society, DFW Ekta Mandir, Kalachandji Temple, Sai Baba Temple, and the Hanuman Temple that the priests and the community utilizing the resources of the funeral homes must work within the parameters established by the agencies in accordance with city regulations. "The protocol that surrounds the Hindu funeral in America has changed, the style and texture of the event are far more Americanized than any other rite of passage," per Dr. Vasudha Narayanan, Professor of Religion at the University of Florida and head of the American Academy of Religion.

The body is never brought home after death. If the person had died within the home, the first step is to call 911, so that an investigation can be performed to identify the cause of death. Only upon clearance from representatives of a law enforcement agency will the funeral home remove the body from the home. If the family belongs to a temple community, such as BAPS

Temple Society, then the administrator at the Temple will be called and that person will line up all the tasks to be performed. The grieving family generally will receive family and friends and mourn during this time. If a person does not belong to any organized Hindu community, then they may call the DFW Hindu Ekta Mandir and they will be connected with a priest. In most cases, the family will already know a priest and contact him directly. When no priest is known, the family would contact the local temple, where they will be assisted in identifying a priest who familiar with the family's language, caste, and its final rites traditions. But first, the body must be sent to the funeral home, because the priest will arrive directly at the funeral home at an available time for all three entities, the funeral home, the bereaved family, and the priest.

The body will be collected and refrigerated at the funeral home until it is time for the final rituals. About an hour prior to final rituals, the staff will attend to cleaning the body and readying it. Hindus do not embalm the body. The body would be washed and dressed per the Hindu custom. Several funeral homes have a staff person who knows how to dress a female corpse in a traditional saree. When the family arrives at their appointment time at the funeral home, they will find the deceased family member laying in the casket they would have selected as per the services sheet they were given. Many families do not wish to add on the cost of the casket, considering that it will be burned within minutes, hence, they opt for a sturdy cardboard box. In that case, the funeral home makes available an open casket (Figure 39) which is used only for the pooja and the assembly, and then the body is transported to the crematorium in the cardboard box.



Figure 39: One of the caskets available for Hindu cremation. The casket is specifically made for a Hindu person as it has the Aum symbol (in red) inscribed on it. The Hughes funeral home orders these caskets and they always have one in store at their facility. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

The family is met by the priest at the funeral home. The priest would have shared with the family the items they would need to bring for the final rites. These items, per several community members, are ghee, incense, flowers (red or other color rose petals are preferred), aluminum foil, and a coconut.

The family is led to the Pooja room. All Hindu ceremonies perform a pooja to the corpse. Pooja means worship of deities in idol form. In the case of the young woman whose mother had passed away, her older brother performed all the rituals, while she made the fresh flowers bouquet. The priest began the ceremony by uttering the sacred syllable *Aum*, meant to invoke the Universal energies. The family and friends repeated the words after him. He recited mantras, as he prepared for the older brother to light the *homa* fire. Aluminum foil was placed in the urn that he brought with him. Aluminum foil prevents the urn from getting too hot, as it will need to be carried to the cremation vault. The brother was directed to light the fire; this is the symbolic

homa fire rooted in the Vedic religion, the center of cremation rites. The family offered flowers to the corpse as well as sought blessings by touching its feet.

Stephanie Hughes, the funeral director at Hughes Funeral Home, said that it is confusing sometimes when the attendees can wear shoes and when they cannot. She said that it had to do with the very large space which causes the confusion, because spaces close to the ritual space are sacred, where the shoes must be removed. Pandit Janakbhai Shukla said, “The pooja must always be performed barefoot; it’s a taboo to wear shoes before deities and in sacred spaces; this keeps profane pollution at bay and maintains the sacrality of the pooja worship.”

The corpse will be an oblation to the *homa* fire that the brother had lit. As one of the five representative elements of the Universe, fire is an agent of transformation because it will reduce the body to ash. *Homa* is called a sacrifice ritual precisely for this reason because it destroys the offering. There is nothing left of the individual except what will benefit all of the Universe; in other words, everything that made the person at birth is given away at death. This is the whole point of *yajna*, *yadnya* in Balinese. The corpse is a sacrifice; when the sacrifice is done with devotion by family in front of Agni (the Vedic fire god), then the sacrifice turns into service toward others. In performing a sacrifice, humans are reminded that nothing belongs to us. In the humble act of individual submission to the gods, all humans get blessings. The pooja ceremony lasts between 30-45 minutes.



Figure 40: View of the space for community assembly. The green background is always up on the back wall. The ceremony taking place at the time of the picture was Hindu, hence the Aum symbol on the wall, as well as a fresh flower decoration with the Aum symbol embedded in it, made by the daughter as a gesture of love for her mother. When used for a Christian service, families usually place a cross on the back wall, and the space below it is used for viewing. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Many families choose to hold an assembly (Figure 40) after the private pooja ceremony. Extended family, community members, neighbors, co-workers and friends attend the ceremony. The body is in the coffin, and open for viewing. The *homa* fire (from the earlier pooja) is placed close to the corpse. The attendees perform pooja of the corpse by performing the arti (circulating the fire lamp over the body), offering flowers to the body, and touching the feet of the body to seek blessings. The entire ceremony is solemn and lasts between 45-60 minutes. Most people are quiet, or murmuring prayers or reflecting. Some families will plan an assembly to have loved ones speak about the deceased, sharing fond memories of them and wishing them peace in the soul. This exhibition and demonstration of the corpse is an innovation in the cremation ritual and clearly follows practice of some other tradition. In traditional Hinduism in India, Bali, and Mauritius, the concept of viewing the body and bidding it a verbal farewell is absent. Rituals

alone are powerful and sufficient to convey the meaning of the magnificent event unfolding before the eyes. Performances (devotional music and dance) accompany the rituals in Bali, and almost all Hindu sects hold a devotional worship in memory of the deceased after the cremation, never before. In traditional Hindu funerals, every person has a role to play. The rituals are performed to the corpse by the family members and by friends, who are community members. In Dallas, the concept of family and community are much broader than in India, Bali, or Mauritius, because the community is much younger and many immigrants and their nuclear families do not have the multi-generation or extended family with them. Pandit Harshvardhan Shukla from the DFW Ekta Mandir explained, “Many times friends attend and even help with the rituals. They can be the deceased’s neighbors, co-workers, and others of similar religious background, but almost always are from the same linguistic and regional origin as the deceased.” Friends become family because many immigrants do not have their families with them in Dallas. Celebrations and times of difficulty are made easier by friends, so they become like family members.

The idea of onlookers, like in the Dallas Hindu cremations, is absent in other Hindu funerals. Rituals are to be participated in and performed, not viewed as a spectator. The viewership angle creates distance between the dead and the mourners. The corpse is objectified and treated as the “other” in the Dallas Hindu tradition. The sweeping autonomy of ritual behavior is an adequate farewell in the Hindu tradition. Words are unnecessary because the person is dead to society. Members may or may not wear shoes at the assembly.

Immediately after the assembly, the corpse is ready to be taken to the crematorium, a nondescript but practical and functional building. At the Hughes Funeral Home and at Restland Funeral Home, a coach is available to carry the body to the crematorium. In one funeral, the

family wanted to carry the corpse in a traditional manner, on shoulders of men. The person who had passed away was a young man, in his 30s. He was a software engineer who had come to Dallas a few years back on an H1B work visa. His friends and small family decided to carry him on their shoulders from the back door of the funeral home to the crematorium. They wanted it to look like a funeral procession “like back home” (his friends said). The funeral home was flexible on this matter. The crematorium is on the premise, and within a short walking distance. No laws are violated and there is no disruption of any sort. Plus, there are barely any pedestrians around the funeral home. Either the coach carries the coffin to the crematorium, or several men carry the corpse. It is a practice to recite mantras during the funeral procession, but nowadays it is carried out in silence. In this procession, the friends softly chanted “Ram naam satya hai” (the name of God is Truth) as they carried their departed friend to the crematorium.

Pandit Janakbhai Shukla explained that the cremations are fairly standard in Dallas. The family has very few decisions to make in the final rite of passage. For example, when a person passes away, the funeral home and a priest must be contacted. If the family does not know any priest, then the funeral home will give them some names. Or, the family can directly contact one of several Hindu temples in the Dallas area and ask for a priest’s services. How do they know which priest to choose? Stephanie Hughes, director of Hughes Funeral Home said, “The family will generally choose a priest based on the last name of the priest.” Pandit Janakbhai Shukla at the DFW Ekta Mandir in Irving explained, “Many people feel comforted knowing they have a priest who knows about their caste. Caste is easily identified by the priest’s last name.” So families call the priest they feel they would be most comfortable with at this crucial time.

At the BAPS Temple, Mr. Ashokbhai Patel personally attends to all the details in case of death in any of their 390 temple-affiliated families. “Thankfully, text messages, group messages, and message forwards in this technology-laden times make this task much simpler today, than in 1978 when the BAPS temple was consecrated on Webb Chapel Road in Dallas” Mr. Ashokbhai Patel said, and added, “Within 2-3 hours, 20-25 community members will arrive at the deceased’s home to help with all funeral preparations.” He said that later in the evening, pretty much the entire community would arrive at the deceased’s home. “Everyone has to be present. This is the time for spirituality,” he said. Mr. Paresh Patel, Director at the BAPS temple explained that we need people in time of distress. “We have so much attachment to the deceased. So when death comes, we have to realize, accept, and move forward. The community helps us to move forward” he said.



Figure 41: Firewood for the crematorium. This is a symbolic offering of wood to the corpse. Although not a practical necessity, it is placed in the crematorium to keep in line with the Hindu tradition. (Keys next to the package are only meant as a reference to show and compare size of the wood). Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Continuing on with the final rites, the body is placed on a platform next to the burner and logistical issues are addressed. The feet must face the south direction. Families can purchase wood (Figure 41) to place it on the corpse, as a symbolic act of creating the traditional funeral pyre. The men carry the corpse (in the coffin or in the cardboard box container) and place it on the roller in the gas chamber (Figure 42). The corpse is thus secured inside the chamber. One reason the Hindu priests and community members prefer the Hughes Funeral Home for cremations is that the *homa* fire (which was in the aluminum foil at the pooja and at the assembly) can be placed inside the gas chamber as a final offering to the corpse. It signifies lighting the fire. Stephanie Hughes at Hughes Funeral Home reiterated, “We work with the community’s need. Offering the final fire lamp is an important ritual, so we allow for that addition in the cremation vault.”



Figure 42: Inside of the gas chamber. The cardboard roller facilitates easy sliding of the coffin inside the chamber and securing it in place. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

In the cremation of an elderly man whose grown children were across America and in England, after the corpse was in place, the wood chips were offered by placing them on his body. It is not always a practice to offer wood in the cremation vault. This is not a practice in Mauritius when electric cremations are performed. In Dallas and in Mauritius, the priest recites a final prayer after the corpse is secured in the vault. At Hughes Funeral Home, the *homa* fire was placed in the gas chamber, which was then closed by the crematorium attendant. The lead ritualist – older brother, a male friend, and the oldest son, respectively - were instructed to turn on the switch for the gas chamber (Figure 43).



Figure 43: The gas chamber is closed after the body is placed inside it. The lead ritualist will turn the switch ON for the cremation to start. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

The fact that everyone leaves the crematorium after it has been turned on is indicative of the insulated process, one in which there is no viewing. Pandit Janakbhai Shukla said that everyone goes home from this point on, and they will shower to get rid of the ritual impurity associated with death. At Hughes Funeral Home, there are several basins and sprinklers for symbolic washing up as several of their customers had indicated that they wanted to wash up at

the facility itself and not carry the contamination into their car or home. So the Funeral Home provided accommodation for this ritual need.

Compared to the Balinese spectacle of roaring *rame* aesthetics, and the ascetic aesthetic of the Mauritian Hindu sacrificial funeral fire, all under the expanse of the great sky above, the Dallas Hindu cremation is unceremonial and disappointing. Pandit Janakbhai Shukla said, “There is nothing to see in this cremation. We cannot see the fire, the flames, or the transformation of the body into ash; the entire reduction of the body into a few ounces of cremains takes place in the enclosed vault.” In Mauritius, Pandit Oumashankerji had shared the same banal sentiment regarding the electric cremation, “We do not know what is happening in the vault.”

“Time is everything in modern society,” Pandit Janakbhai Shukla said. “We cremate on the weekends when everyone has time to attend the cremation. Cremations are hurried; time is important” he said. Generally, the cremations in Dallas last about two to three hours. Sometimes there is more than one cremation, so multiple cremations have to be accommodated. The cremations in Dallas are efficient, mechanical, and rudimentary, but in terms of ritual performance, they are bare and reduced to being purely symbolic. I shared with Pandit Janakbhai Shukla, Pandit Harshvardhan Shukla, Mr. Ashokbhai Patel, Mr. Paresh Patel, and Ms. Stephanie Hughes the variations among Hindu cremations that I had documented in Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas. Both the priests agreed that the Dallas cremation is the least creative of all the three cremations as almost every aspect of the final rites is standardized and predetermined. “It is not a traditional Hindu custom” was the response of both the priests when I shared with them my disappointment in the cremation vaults. Pandit Harshvardhan Shukla, who was a priest in

Mauritius before coming to Dallas, said that open-air cremations are indeed spectacular because “we can witness the fire burning the body.” I explain to him that open-air cremations have the reputation of being archaic and heathen, but their value as spectacles and representations of ancient traditions, especially the ancient Vedic-Hindu tradition, is priceless. He said, “But we have to work with the system here. Otherwise, we have to take the body to India, which is very expensive, and time-consuming. Maybe there will be other problems regarding where to keep the corpse in the airplane, and handling the dead body at the airport.” From my vantage point of studying cross-comparative Hindu cremation rituals, I shared with him that the elaborate nature of the rituals in Bali and in Mauritius points to the emphasis placed on human life and human relations in these places, whereas in Dallas, time and efficiency dictate ritual performance. Death, like life, is hurried and conveniently placed in the fast-paced work-centered culture of the Hindu community in Dallas. The spectacles of cremation bring death to life in Bali and Mauritius, whereas in the Dallas iteration, the ritual is devoid of energy and community synergy. The lines of life and death are blurred in the cremation fires. The mourners witness the end of life before their eyes and for at least a brief moment, recognize the inevitable fate that will eventually be theirs. Yet, that brief moment is rushed. Does he think so, too?

Pandit Harshvardhan Shukla completely agreed with my views. When he was in Mauritius, and now in Dallas, he does not perform death rituals, because he performs “life” such as weddings. He explained that traditionally priests who perform mangal or shubh (auspicious) rites, like weddings, do not perform death rituals. “These rites are on opposite spectrums” he said. But he has knowledge of death rituals and has witnessed death rites in Mauritius and in Dallas. The elaborate and seemingly time-unconscious performance of funeral rites in Mauritius

are opposite of Dallas Hindu community's funeral rites, where time is crucial and even funeral rites are a matter of convenience. "Many priests perform auspicious and inauspicious (death) rites. It's a community need. We have to do what we need to do, with what is available" he said, and continued, "The family maintains a moment of uneasy silence in the crematorium and makes its way out during the most important ritual of fire offering."

The entire cremation process takes five hours, which includes cooling down of the chamber. In a traditional cremation in Mauritius and even in India, the family would return the following day to collect the *asti*, ashes, or cremains (cremation remains). In Bali, the family collects it right away. In Dallas, the funeral homes will inform the family when the cremains are boxed and ready for pick-up, generally after five days.

Mr. Ashokbhai Patel rationalized the practice of Hindu funerals across America, where the body is not kept at home as in India but must be taken immediately to a funeral home, and the funeral services reflect other traditions' practices, with mourners watching the rituals take place, while in India these are done in private, and all by family members.

When asked about how Hindu families deal with grief at such a mournful time, Mr. Ashokbhai Patel said, "Community is everything in difficult time." He said their temple ensures that the grieving family has nothing to worry about and everything will be taken care of, from getting the body to the funeral home to meals for the families for at least four days after the cremation, and an assembly in memory of the deceased. "The family is already weak at this time" Mr. Paresh Patel said, and added, "We need to give them strength, help them move forward." The memorial assembly in honor of the deceased emphasizes through song and music the immortality of the soul, the fountainhead of Hindu philosophy. The music and verses that are

read from sacred books help the grieving person accept that the body is discarded, but the soul never dies. But what about the living persons? How can they move on in their own lives? Mr. Paresh Patel said, “We don’t let them be alone in their hard times. The community is the heart of rituals and traditions. We are together in this. It is alright if we don’t attend a wedding or a happy occasion, but during sadness, we should go even if we are not invited. Be of service to others. As a community, we absorb the pain and help our members move forward.”

CHAPTER 4

POST-CREMATATION

Post-cremation rituals serve a two-fold purpose: one, they facilitate the deceased's soul to enjoin with the ancestors in the spiritual realm of *pitr-lok* (the land of ancestors), and two, they allow the surviving family to formally mourn the loss of a loved one. Both these purposes are attained simultaneously in the thirteen-day period following death.

The cremation disposes the body, but the bigger concern for the Hindus is the transition of the soul, which they believe is eternal, and separates from the body during cremation. The soul must be sent to its rightful destination, *pitr-lok* (the land of the ancestors), or else it will create havoc for the surviving family members. The thirteen-day post-cremation rituals culminate in the soul becoming an ancestor. The mourning period ends after the thirteenth day, ending the period of formal ritual mourning and pollution for the survivors. Through the rituals performed by the survivors during the thirteen days, it is believed that the soul has reached its intended destination. Thereafter, the yearly *shraddha* rituals are marked to remember the ancestors collectively, through a shared family meal. In Arnold van Gennep's ritual structure, post-cremation rituals may be understood as rites of integration, as well as rites of renewal; through these rituals, chaos is structured and order is restored.

Thirteen Days of Mourning

"Hindus believe that thirteen days of mourning after cremation results in the soul uniting with the ancestor," Pandit Janakbhai Shukla said in Dallas. "When surviving families follow the

mourning rituals for thirteen days, the soul is believed to make progress in its journey toward the ancestor land,” Pandit Oumashankerji said in Mauritius.

The rituals for the thirteen days of mourning are outlined in Garuda Purana. The Garuda Purana focuses on Vishnu’s central role in Hinduism as the sustainer of the universe; the text exists in various forms and has evolved significantly from its first written form in Sanskrit from the 1st millennium CE. The text presents information shared by Vishnu through Garuda (the man-eagle bird vehicle of Vishnu), who narrated it to rishi Kashyapa and through him to rishi Vyasa. So potent is the Garuda Purana believed to be, that it is read by old people to know about death customs and symbolism; priests specializing in funeral rites by caste association study the ritual text to gain knowledge on the final rite of passage. The text is also read during the mourning period by the surviving family as it gives them comfort to know at what stage of transition the soul has reached each day. The second section of the Purana addresses issues connected with funerary rituals.

“By the rice-ball of the first day the head is formed; the neck and shoulders by the second; by the third the heart forms: by the fourth the back forms; and by the fifth the naval; by the sixth the hips and secret parts; by the seventh the thigh forms; likewise next to knees and feet by two; on the tenth day hunger and thirst. Dwelling in the body formed by the rice balls, very hungry and pained with thirst, on both the 11th and 12th days the departed eats. On the 13th day the departed, bound by the servants of Yama, walks on alone along the road like a captured monkey” (Garuda Purana 9).

In case of bad death, different rituals are performed, such as *narayani bali* on the eleventh day, a sacrifice whose purpose is to eradicate the *preta*-hood of the *preta*-ghost. The *narayani bali* ritual prayers liberate the *preta*-ghosts and release their trapped and unprepared (for death) souls into becoming ancestors. In return, the surviving family believes the ancestors

will bless the living family by conferring material prosperity (getting a job or a promotion, if seeking), but more importantly, the increase of their descent line. “Thankfully, the majority of deaths are “good” deaths, occurring in one’s old age and without much physical suffering. The thirteen-day rituals are sufficient to ensure that the soul unites with the ancestors” Pandit Oumashankerji said.

Gathering the Bones

The first ritual after cremation is to return to the *samsana* cremation ground on the day after cremation to collect the *asti*, the ashes, and bones, also called cremains, cremation remains. Pandit Oumashankerji explained that the cremains are euphemistically referred to as *phool* (flowers) in Hindi (*phoolwa* in Mauritian Bhojpuri), because of their small white color and texture. This terminology also makes a reference to children as *phal* (fruits) in Hindi and *phalwa* in Bhojpuri. Children are lovingly referred to as fruits, hence the forebears are the flowers (Bhalla, Parry 188).

The Garuda Purana instructs that the bones should be sprinkled with water and milk, and the son should drop it into the middle of the Ganges (64). In the chapter on “The Collecting of the Bones from the Fire,” verses 4-6, male mourners are advised to abandon sorrow at the end of the mourning period with a shave, a symbol of removing all sins, also a rite of purification. This practice is followed in the Indian Hindu communities and in Mauritius. The Balinese Hindus do not follow this custom. Wayan was not aware of this Hindu custom. The Hindu community in Dallas is aware of the custom, but averse to adhering to it for the fear of looking different from others. This is particularly true for the younger generation of men. Ashokbhai Patel explained,

“The interpretation of the shave in the Dallas BAPS community is a facial shave, and not of the head.” This ritual adaptation has a purely social context. The association of a shaved head in the majority American culture means something very different than an Indian-American head shave. “Young men did not wish to draw any attention to themselves through the outward manifestation of appearing more different than they already are” said Ashokbhai Patel at the BAPS temple. A 36-year old man at the DFW Ekta Hindu Temple shared, “When my mother passed away, I got my hair cut very short, instead of a full head shave. It was easier to dismiss it as a bad haircut than explain the nuances of mourning rituals. I did not want anyone in my workplace to ask me about something so personal.” A college student who is a BAPS temple member shared similar sentiments, “I did not shave my head because I didn’t want to explain to anyone why I had shaved my head.” Ritual adaptations are caused by social, educational, and work situations in the Dallas iterations regarding shaving of the head.

In the Vedic tradition, men would return to the cremation ground to collect ashes on the following morning. The practice has continued in Mauritius. The rite of *astisanchay* (the accumulation of bones) constitutes an offering of milk, rice, and a pinda rice ball. Pindas are balls made of cooked rice and barley flour mixed with ghee and black sesame seeds. The substance is believed to represent the subtle body, which is built gradually during the thirteen-day post-cremation mourning ritual period. The pinda ball offering is believed to appease the remains, which exists only as a soul after cremation, and the offering begins the process of reconstituting the body with food. The offerings are placed on the remains on the pyre in order to cool it. Water is sprinkled on the ash. Then the remains are collected on a large tray. In the ancient Vedic tradition, these would be placed in a round earthen pot, symbolizing earth.

According to Pandit Oumashankerji, “Nowadays people do not believe in pinda offerings. Some people feed the poor, or they may feed a Brahmin priest, feed a cow, or make a donation of money or food. All these are forms of appeasement for the soul.”

If the cremation was at a crematorium, like in all the Dallas cremations, then the family would return to gather the boxed cremains. In crematoriums, these can be ground further into dust by the crematorium attendant, and arrangements must be made to pick them up or to preserve them. Pandit Janakbhai Shukla said, “In the Vedic tradition, the ashes are carried to or sent for deposition in the Ganges river or placed in an auspicious river or the ocean closer to home, along with garlands of flowers, symbols of offerings to the ancestors-deity. After the immersion of the ashes, the soul is truly free of all earthly bonding to continue its onward journey.”

Ideally, the immersion must occur as soon as possible to minimize any potential harm to the surviving family. Despite regional variations in the immersion ritual practices in the Indian Hindu communities, it is a standard belief that the remains must be immersed as soon as possible. This practice continues in Bali and in Mauritius. A possible reason for this ritual continuity is the regions’ close proximity and immediate access to large bodies of water. Local bodies of water in Bali and in Mauritius have attained a sacred status. This practice is not as popular in the Dallas area because immersion cannot take place in an unspecified body of water or at any location. Plus, families need a priest to immerse the ashes. The ashes are considered polluted, and any contact with them must be countered with a sanctifying act. The priests recite sacred mantras upon guiding the family on immersing the ashes in the body of water. Rituals performed outside context appear to be haphazard and lack rooting in tradition, hence they will

be perceived as violating the sanctity of the final rites, a hoax or hastened, which would not make the *preta* happy. Planning and preparation are required in the Dallas area immersion rites; hence it does not take place as soon as possible. Stephanie Hughes at the Hughes Funeral Home explained that the Hindu customers are not keen to carry the ashes home. She said, “We had the cremations of one family member for over six months because the family did not want to store it on their property. He could not go to India for immersing the ashes, so we stored them at the Funeral Home and he picked them upon his way to the airport.” By contrast, Pandit Janakbhai Shukla said, “Many Hindus to the Dallas area will want to immerse the ashes as soon as the Funeral Home has the ashes ready for pick-up, which can be anywhere from five days to two weeks.” Pareshbhai Patel at the BAPS Temple said, “When people bring the ashes home, they are kept as far away from the home’s entrance in the garage as possible. This is because the ashes are considered polluted. We don’t want any contact with the ashes. They are to be disposed of because the soul has already moved on.” A new development in the ashes immersion is the possibility of sending the ashes with a company that will immerse the ashes in the Ganges river in India for a fee.

If the *asti* (cremains) are not immersed immediately after the cremation, then they must remain outside the home, and should never enter the home due to its polluting attributes; although subtle in substance, the remains are of the dead. As well, the *asti* is considered sacred and never placed on the ground. Hence it is hung outside the doorway of the deceased’ home. The power and pollution of *asti* is believed to be severe; in Dallas, most Hindu persons never bring it home but instead arrange with the Funeral Home to preserve it until its immersion. If it is taken home, it is placed on a shelf in the garage, as far away as possible from any entry into the

home. It was common for the Hindus in Dallas to carry the remains to India for immersion in the Ganges or a regional holy river. Some families continue the practice, but it is more practical and immediate to immerse the remains in the local Trinity River off I-35 as the river flows into the Gulf of Mexico. One family drove to Galveston to immerse their mother's ashes in the Gulf of Mexico waters. This family could not leave the country because they are undocumented persons and believed the only option available to them was to perform the immersion rites as close to home as possible, and by themselves. In an unusual adaptation of the immersion ritual, their dog accompanied the family of six. "My mother and this dog loved each other," the son said. The family looked up toward the clear, blue, open Texas sky, offered prayers, and let the ashes flow into the water. After nearly twenty years of not being able to leave the country, the family felt a deep sense of satisfaction at having arrived at what the son described as, "a true release for my mother."

While an adaptation, this ritual practice does not deviate from the fundamental Hindu belief that the cremains must be scattered in a flowing body of water so that life continues through the elements of water, earth, fire, air, and ether. Rivers and seas are a source of water, the fundamental necessity of life. The Gulf of Mexico does not have a Hindu context of sacred place, but flowing water does fit into the larger Hindu idea of continuity. The fundamental Hindu belief in flowing water as a metaphor for the continuity of universal laws of life is uncompromised, hence the infusion of traditional ideas into the new homeland.

In South Indian traditions of the same ritual, the *Niravapanjali* ritual, close relatives ceremonially immerse the ashes in the Ganges river or in holy water, so that the soul may rise to heaven. Pandit Oumashankerji in Mauritius said, "This ritual is based on the myth of King

Bhagiratha's performance of a tapasya (penance) to bring the river Ganges upon earth, so that he could immerse the ashes of sixty thousand of his slain ancestors in her sacred waters. The Garuda Purana chapter "The Collecting of the Bones from the Fire," verses 79-84 (65), merit this myth. In another myth, the Great Parasurama offered a tarpana (libation) ritual for his father Jamadagni with the blood of his father's killer, hence in the tarpana ritual the closest relatives make a sacred offering to the Gods so that the departed soul may enter Swarga, which literally translates into heaven, which also implies the place of the *pitr* ancestors (Wood 60-65).

Ritual Pollution

The family will continue to be ritually polluted and vulnerable to spirit forces for the next twelve days after the cremation. Ritual pollution ends on the thirteenth day when the soul is no longer wandering and keeping the family vulnerable to attacks; the soul is believed to have reached its community of ancestors on the thirteenth day, thus ending ritual pollution for the family. Satak is a general term for states of temporary pollution and impurity because the deceased is outside of the ordered social categories, which also puts him outside of cosmic order. Death pollution is triggered at the point at which the vital breath evacuates the body, which in theory is when the chief mourner cracks open the cranium as the corpse lies burning on the pyre. The symbolism of the *kapalakriya* ritual to release the soul from the entrapment of the body, which is an Upanishadic addition to the Vedic ritual. The twelve-days' regime of mourning diminishes death pollution with each passing day (Bhalla 306-307, Filippi 101, Parry 216 - 218). Pandit Oumashankerji said, "When the family performs the death rituals for the twelve days, then simultaneously they are purifying themselves as the soul progresses toward the ancestors."

After gathering the bones and securing them outside the home, all the family members bathe and share in cleaning the house. The emphasis on ritual purity, maintained by ablution with water is dated as far back as 2,700 BCE to the religion of the Harappa culture in present-day Pakistan (Basham 1-3). A lit lamp and a pot of water are set where the corpse lay. Fresh water is provided everyday as a form of nourishment for the *preta*. The household shrine is closed, and pictures are covered with white cloth. During these days of ritual impurity, social visits are suspended, although neighbors and relatives bring daily meals to sustain the impacted family during mourning. Families do not attend festivals, go to temples, visit swamis (religious teachers), and they should stay away from taking part in marriage arrangements as marriage is an auspicious rite, the opposite of mourning rite. Depending on the degree of closeness with the deceased, the state of ritual impurity can last beyond the thirteen days to anywhere from a month to one year. The rituals performed by the survivors for the thirteen days are aimed at the soul's transition and incorporation in the other world, but the survivors' emotions are said to affect the journeying soul; crying by survivors leads to the soul's hesitation and delay into the other world. The soul should be assisted in being released by the surviving family so it is considered best to not display anger or resistance to the death (Dave 148).

In many Hindu communities, a woman loses social status when her husband passes away, and depending on her family, socio-economic, and educational standing, she may also live the remainder of her life as a widow, marked by wearing white clothing, devoid of jewelry and ornamentation, and isolated from social and celebratory ceremonies. Pandit Janakbhai Shukla said, "These attributes were meant to reinforce her social status as a widow, but the status of widows has improved greatly in recent decades."

For the death of friends, teachers, or students, mourning observances are optional. The determining factor for mourning these losses depends on the proximity of the deceased person to the survivor. Mourning is not denied in these relations, but acceptance of death is emphasized. The soul is not impacted by the ritual indifference of these relationships; the sole responsibility of ritual adherence is shouldered by the surviving family members. In the six-persons group cremation in Bali, for instance, the *banjar* members did not share a close relationship with the deceased persons from the neighboring *banjars*. They were not impacted by the deaths of persons who they were not related to, hence their mourning was perfunctory. The family members for each of the six deceased, however, ensured that all the rituals were performed as per the *pedanda*'s instructions. The other two cremations, one for the rich man and the other for a poor man, were performed by the closest family members. The community members assist in the cremation and related rituals, but the sole responsibility of attending to the soul befalls on the closest relatives. If the rituals are not performed, then the closest relatives – and not the larger community - experience the wrath and ill-luck meted out by the *preta*-ghost.

Similarly, in Mauritius, close family members are most impacted by the death, and they perform the funerary rituals. The 80-year old man's death impacted his wife and grown sons, who performed all the rituals of cremation, immersion, mourning, and reintegration with deep visible emotion. The mourning rituals performed for the 47-years old middle-age father in Mauritius were primarily experienced by his wife and their two young children. Family members, neighbors, co-workers, and friends gathered at the death rituals expressed the sadness of the situation not in terms of their relational proximity to the deceased man, but as a deep loss for the family and especially for the two young children.

The concept of the family appears to be broader among the Dallas Hindu community members. This is because of the nature of the population, lack of extended local family, and friends taking place of family. However, the death rituals must be performed only by close relatives. All the five Dallas cremations were attended by varying number of mourners, but all the rituals were performed by the closest family members, even if they were young children. The priest explained to the young ones what was to be done and why it was being done.

In Dallas cremation #1, an old woman aged 79 had passed away. She spoke little English and was in Dallas staying with her grown children and grandchildren. Her husband and she had lived in Dallas for twenty years. When she died, she was cremated in bridal clothes, denoting her married social status. Her husband and grown son performed her final rites. The family did not hold a public assembly prior to cremation for her as they wished to keep a low-key due to their undocumented status.

In Dallas cremation #2, the 56-year old woman-widow, who also spoke little English, had an elaborate assembly prior to cremation. Many family and friends said words of solace at the assembly. The woman's grown daughter works in Dallas and has lived here for three years; the mother was living with her daughter. As a gesture of her love, the deceased's daughter had created red roses heart-shaped flower bouquet. The action of creating something in memory of her mother would have comforted her in time of a deep personal loss. However, this is an atypical Hindu ritual.

In Dallas cremation #3, a 23-year old young man had died in a car accident. This was certainly a "bad" death due to his young age and the circumstances of death. His family drove to Dallas from Corpus Christi to hold his cremation as the body was released to Hughes Funeral

Home. Although the cremation was immediate, his parents, in their late 50s, performed a series of rituals in his memory in Corpus Christi, where the young man was born and his parents had lived for thirty years.

In Dallas cremation #4, a man in his late 70s had passed away. He lived with one son and his family in Dallas, and the other son lived in California. His daughter lived in England. He had lived in California and Texas for almost forty years of his life. He had told his children that when he dies, he wants all his three children present at the cremation. The son in Texas recalled, “He told us it was alright to wait a few days to cremate him after his death, but he wanted my brother from California and my sister from England to be present at the cremation.” Due to the travel time required for this cremation, his body was partially embalmed for four days until the family arrived. Embalming is not permitted in Hinduism, and the body must be disposed as soon as possible, or within 24 hours. A clear ritual adaptation was made to accommodate varying aspects of the same ritual; in order for the family to be together at cremation, they had to compromise on the timing of the cremation. The family used the legal resources available to them to meet the ritual protocol and to fulfill their father’s final wish. A factor affecting this mode of ritual adaptation may be the upper social class of the family, who could afford the embalming procedure. Even within the same space of the funeral home, the cremation ritual variation is great. Similar gender or age or socioeconomic status of two or more people does not indicate that the cremation ritual will be the same for them. One may assume that older persons may be more prone to tradition, whereas younger persons gravitate toward innovation, but there are too many individual and family factors at play, which determine the performance of the final rites of passage.

In Dallas cremation #5, a man in his late 30s had passed away peacefully in his sleep. He was married, had 2 young children, and had come to Dallas four years back after living elsewhere in America for a few years. He had come to America on an H1B work visa and was working for a local Telecom company. Since his wife was busy at the Funeral Home with their two young children, the deceased man's friends from work carried out all the preparations. When the priest was performing the puja, the wife of the deceased man was holding her young son's hand to ensure he was doing what the priest asked him to do. Pandit Janakbhai Shukla explained, "All the rituals he (the little boy) performs are going to benefit his father." At the crematorium, the mother helped the boy turn the switch on.

There is no replacement for close family, and hence it is only they who must perform the final rituals so that the deceased earns most merit in the afterworld. Friends may grieve like family members, but they do not appease the soul whose goal is to enjoin ancestors, their family, and bloodline. Hence only close family members must perform the final rites. Even the priest, who is the presiding authority over rituals, cannot perform the family's responsibilities. This is very simply because the rituals are only meritorious when performed by close family. This ritual requirement helps us understand the need for the son to perform the final rituals. The son is a direct descendant and inheritor in the family bloodline, whereas in traditional view, which continues even in today's day, "a daughter is considered "paraya-dhan" (others' wealth) because a daughter will be given away in marriage and she will grow the family that she is married into" Pandit Oumashankerji explained. The emphasis on sons performing the final rites is a continuation of the cremation tradition. "A man wins worlds by means of his son, immortality by means of a grandson, and the sun by means of the grandson of his son" (Manu Smriti 9.137).

Three generations of deceased form a ladder with increasing status, but constantly decreasing closeness to the survivors. This is why sons are important for one's own salvation, as only they can carry out the rituals.

Mourning Rituals for Twelve Days

The most striking change from Vedic post-cremation rituals is evident in all the three contemporary Hindu communities. "It is a common Hindu belief that mourning helps eliminate death pollution" said Pandit Ashwini in Mauritius. Pandit Oumashankerji elaborated on traditional mourning practices, saying the senses must be kept under strict control during the twelve days' mourning period. Ways in which senses are controlled is through consuming simple food with no salt in it. Salt blends into the food, hence mourners should avoid salt to symbolically separate themselves from the deceased. In very ancient times, Pandit Oumashankerji said, that the bereaved household would take only one meal a day, which has grains in it, and it must be eaten before sunset to benefit the *preta* the most. *Phalahar* (fruits) are the food of fasting and the food of the ascetic, which may be eaten after dark. Only one kind of grain is consumed; this echoes the rule for the Sapindikarana ritual performed on the twelfth day of mourning, that the ten pinda (rice balls), which create the *preta*'s subtle body should all be made from a single variety of grain. Pandit Oumashankerji explained, "Salt, fried food and turmeric (associated with auspicious occasions like marriage) must be avoided. The *preta* is believed to be watching the surviving family, and strict adherence to a mourning diet indicates to the *preta* that there is no enjoyment for those he has left behind. This accelerates the *preta*'s journey to ancestor land."

Other senses are curbed, too, such as sensual pleasures. This kind of mourning is indicated by the mourning family not wearing jewelry and new clothes for adornment; this is a sign of sadness and loss for the *preta*. This indicates to the *preta* that it need not be attracted to anything in the world of the living as the survivors are not enjoying in any material or sensual way. The chief mourner must adhere to more stringent ritual behavior by not sleeping on a bed, use separate bedding, carry a knife or iron-containing object on his person as a protection against evil spirits. He should not cut his nails or hair, not groom his hair or shave, all of which suggests a suspension of the normal concern with the boundaries of the body. These mourning rituals also serve to protect the mourners who are vulnerable at this time, and thus susceptible to *preta*-ghost.

What if mourners make a mistake following the rituals, like adding salt to their food, or not shaving their head? Considering the brevity of contemporary post-cremation rituals, does circumventing these rituals accrue bad *karma* for the mourners, or does the *preta* suffer due to the mourners' negligence? I mentioned to Pandit Oumashankerji the following Publisher's Preface from the Garuda Purana, "Of interest are the intermediate states between birth and rebirth, which roughly correspond to the western concepts of Hell and Heaven. Since this was written during the medieval era, it is possible that the writer of this text had contact with Christianity. Earlier Hindu texts do not elaborate on 'hell' and 'heaven,' at least not to this extent, and the subject is completely absent in the oldest texts" (vii). Pandit Oumashankerji explained, "Mourners' rituals are believed to simultaneously aid the *preta*-ghost to incorporate into *pitr*-ancestors. These are beliefs from the past. Many people do not believe them in today's society. Many people also believe them, but look at it as rituals from the olden days. People can do what they think will help them during this mourning period." Pandit Harshvardhan in Dallas

echoed similar change in beliefs and attitudes of the community toward post-cremation rituals. Pandit Janakbhai Shukla said, “The most common post-cremation ritual for people is to immerse the ashes in the river. The body and the soul are then released.” The body of water for immersion has retained its significance. In Mauritius, Pandit Oumashankerji said that many families will journey to a tirtha, such as a river joining the ocean or a stream of Ganga Talao; they “sink” a portion of the deceased’s cremated remains, further ensuring a safe passage to the next life. It was financially hard, but if families can, they carry the ashes to the Ganges in India. This is especially true for the grandparents’ generation. It is believed that a person should return where they were born. Especially in the case of older Mauritian Hindus, the connection to India is very deep and close, albeit mostly constructed from memory. “Immersing ashes in India is like returning home,” Pandit Oumashankerji explained.

The five Dallas post-cremation rituals were widely different from one another. One daughter mourned privately but held a large community prayer-assembly for her mother at the time of cremation. The family of the young man from Corpus Christi had the most elaborate post-death ceremonies that accommodated his parents’ Indian community, as well as the young man’s American school and college friends and neighbors. The older man with three grown children had a close family-only prayer organized by the BAPS temple community. The man who had died in his sleep had a silence and prayer assembly at the temple. It is also a harsh human truth that sometimes it is a relief to see a family member pass away if they are suffering. Other private human circumstances cannot be ruled out.

A funerary ritual that is barely practiced is the pinda pradana, a ritual that is performed at several precise points after death and that involves the offering of pinda, which are thought to

feed and give a symbolic body to the deceased prior to rebirth. According to tradition, pindas are to be offered daily to the deceased during the first ten days of mourning, representing the ten lunar months of gestation. The daily offerings of pinda provide a symbolic, transitional body for the dead when the dead person makes the journey to the heavens, or the world of the ancestors, or the “far shore.” On the twelfth day, in the Sapindikarana ceremony, the departed soul is said to reach its destination and be joined with its ancestors. “We know the soul has reached its destination on the twelfth day when the chief mourner symbolically joins a small pinda to a much larger one” Pandit Oumashankerji said, and clarified, “the small pinda represents the recently departed soul’s subtle body, and the large pinda represents the last three ancestors. When we mix the pindas, it means the deceased’s soul has reached its destination.” After completion of these rituals, the family can re-incorporate into society. It was believed that without these rites, the soul may never find its way to *Pitr lok* (land of ancestors), *Swarga* (heaven), or Yama's realm. One out of fifteen cremations that I documented (Puranic cremation in Mauritius) illustrated partial elements of this ritual continuation.

It is stated in the Grhya-Sutras that during the ancestor propitiation rituals the pindas offered by the grandfather of the householder should be eaten by the householder’s wife if she is desirous of a son. Consuming the pindas symbolically alludes that the reincarnated body which will be manifested will be made up of food. It is also common to offer pinda to crows, who are thought to be temporary embodiments of the *preta*-ghost. The crows eating the pinda offerings is interpreted as a sign of acceptance (Parry 195, Filippi 41-42).

Untouchability is finished on the tenth day, when the chief mourner’s knife, utensils, bedding, and clothes are given to the barber who in traditional cremation would have shaved the

male family members' heads after immersion rites. Shaving heads is a rite of renewal and purification; the deceased' objects are neutralized in symbolic power when handed to the barber. The mourners can become fit for "the work of gods" only on the thirteenth day after they have completed the twelfth-day Sapindikarana rites. But to invoke various deities and to recite Sanskrit mantras during the eleventh-day rituals to prepare for the twelfth day Sapindikarana rites, their ineligibility must be removed on the tenth day. In the normal course of events, the pinda offerings are completed on the tenth day. When the deceased is a young child, or in the absence of an actual body, an effigy is cremated sometime after death, the pinda ritual will be completed in three nights. There is an important reason for this. "The family wants the child to move on to the afterworld as soon as possible, and the family wants to help" Pandit Ashwini explained.

Pinda offering is also hastened if Amavasya or Purnima (new or full moon) occur during the mourning period. The construction of the *preta*'s body should not span two different fortnights. New and full moon start and end a cycle. Human life follows nature's rhythmic patterns of waxing and waning, ebb, and flow, full and void. The cycles of the moon are a metaphor for the deceased's next phase. Hence, it is important to complete the pinda offerings of mourning prior to the start of the next cycle so that the *preta* can progress to its next destination with as much help from surviving family, as from humanity's original source, the universe. It is better to end a cycle based on the cosmic calendar. Closure and termination are symbolically stressed. In case of a "bad" death, the early ending of mourning provides relief to the family. The *preta* is propitiated by the accelerated rituals offered in cosmic time by the surviving family (Pandit Oumashankerji).



Figure 44: Offerings of pinda balls at a post-cremation ceremony. This image illustrates the acceleration of *preta*'s body through pinda (rice ball) offerings. The priest guides family members to perform actions and repeat mantras after him. The number of pinda balls offered depend on the number of ceremonies being performed at one time. Source: RMS 9/18/2017.

Sapindikarana Ritual: From *Preta*-Ghost to *Pitr*-Ancestor

It takes twelve days after death for a *preta*-ghost to transform into a *pitr*-ancestor. The Sapindikarana ritual is performed on the twelfth day to mark this transformation (Figure 44). Until then the *preta* remains a ghost and a danger to those who survive him. Unable to reconcile itself to the separation of death, it beckons others to follow. The living must, therefore, put a safe distance between themselves and the departed. Relationship with the ghost should not be acknowledged, for instance, through the use of kinship term or caste title. Today, very few Hindu families offer the daily pinda balls. However, all the families in the Mauritius and Dallas study marked the end of thirteenth-day in a manner appropriate for their social standing. The two families with oldest deaths marked the end of mourning period by some family members visiting the local temple. The young woman whose mother had passed away visited the temple by herself. The 23-year old man's thirteenth-day ritual was nominal because the family continued to mourn formally for an entire year, doing things in memory of their son on every monthly death anniversary. The woman whose husband had passed away leaving two young children behind visited the temple. None of the families had offered the pinda balls.

One reason the Sapindikarana ritual is kept at a bare minimum is that the focus is on the thirteenth day. The days will pass, no matter what is done during those days. Time passes, that is the nature of time. The thirteenth day is a marker that a certain amount of time has passed since the death and cremation. Time is moving, and we have moved with it.

Another important reason is that the Sapindikarana ritual is the first of the post-cremation rituals which may be conducted inside the precincts of the house, and hence, can be done privately. Compared to the tense and shell-shocked atmosphere characteristically pervading the

proceedings of the previous days, this ritual is marked by a feeling of relaxation and joyful relief. In a separate death case, a man who had lost his 80-year old mother had mourned her loss by refraining from consuming meat and alcohol for the twelve-day period following her death. On the thirteenth day, he carried a basket of fruits in his mother's memory to a local temple, where he offered them to a priest. He did not specify what the offering was for; the priest chanted a prayer, showed the fruits to the deity's image, sprinkled some holy water on it and distributed the fruits among the devotees at the temple. This ritual can be interpreted as a transformation of the individual reincorporating into the community. When the deity "sees" the offerings, they are symbolically accepted, which neutralizes the individual's energy contained in the offering. The act of offering makes the offerings sacred, and when the offerings are redistributed to community members, the positive energy of the deity present in the offerings is dispersed among them. Rituals change as per individuals, time, need, and circumstances; rituals survive through change. If rituals remained static and uncompromised, they would result in the demise of the ritual tradition because they would be irrelevant, not meet the needs of the community, and lack contemporary context. The Sapindikarana ritual was prominent in earlier times to admit the departed to the society of the ancestors. Ritual offerings in contemporary times incorporate impacted persons back into the larger community. We can see a shift in meaning through the Sapindikarana ritual, but the offerings of prayers and fruits keep the content of the ritual intact.

It is believed that by smelling the pinda of the father's father, the chief mourner will be blessed with a son; it is also believed that if he feeds it to his wife, she will conceive a boy. This pinda thus has the quality of increasing their descent line. This theory is inconsistent with the *karma* theory: the idea is that the great-grandfather will come back as his own great-grandson.

Indian Hindu beliefs do not have a time limit for rebirth, nor do they guarantee rebirth as a human being. This is true among the Hindus in Mauritius and in the Dallas area. However, the Balinese Hindu believe that the great-grandfather will come back as his own great-grandson.



Figure 45: A shrine outside a store in Sanur, Denpasar, Bali. The checkered black and white cloth is called saput poleng in Balinese. It symbolizes the syncretic blend of Balinese Hinduism and animism as the black and white colors represent the outermost layer of opposing forces in the world (good and bad, happy and sad, right and wrong). Saput Poleng is draped over statues and buildings and even on people, but only for events that take place in the outer area.

Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Two different explanations are possible for this Balinese belief. One, progeny was important to increase the family size, and quick rebirth validates this cultural value. Two, *karma* theory may have had a literal adaptation among the Balinese Hindus. Hindu ideas came to Bali not through India, but through the Javanese royal family and courtiers. Prior to Hinduism, various forms of ancestor worship, totemism, and Polynesian beliefs existed on the island (Figures 45, 46, 47, 48). The Balinese interpretation of fourth generation rebirth is a unique and syncretic blend of the reconciliation of Hindu and native beliefs. The quick rebirth also explains

why the Balinese cremations are extravagant and elaborate because family members can witness the regeneration of one's family (Figure 49).



Figure 46: Saput Poleng cloth signifies the dwelling of a spirit. Balinese people pay respect to these and similar shrines when they walk past them, as not doing so could anger the spirit and bring bad luck to the disrespectful person. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.



Figure 47: The entire island of Bali is dotted with shrines and offerings. The white and gold shrines are sacred shrines, dedicated to various deities and directional forces. Paying respect to these shrines begets blessing, as opposed to the saput poleng clothed shrines, which keep the evil spirits at bay. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.



Figure 48: Some shrines in Bali are incorporated into trees, a nature spirit, making the shrine more powerful. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.



Figure 49: These two altar-shrines are in a family compound in Bali. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Brahmins and Symbols

Rituals today do not carry their earlier symbolism and meaning. As an example, Pandit Oumashankerji said that in the past, post-cremation rituals required a priest, who were always brahmins. “This is because the brahmin is more of an agent of transformation than a passive mode of transmission” he explained. The symbols of fire and kusha grass were associated with the brahmin as he was the transformer. The role of the brahmin in society allowed him to transform offerings into oblations, sacrifices made for god or the greater universe. In ritual context, a blade of kusha grass is commonly made to stand in for a brahmin; while in accepting the food of the yearly *shraddha* ritual, the brahmin replaces the fire that transmits oblations to the gods. His alchemy works through “digesting,” consuming like fire, the offerings made to gods and ancestors, and dispersing of the ashes like the elements (Figure 50). Other castes may also be relevant in the transformation, but it is the brahmins who have articulated the theory of the system, and it is they who straddle the crucial boundary between the mundane world of men and the transcendent world of the gods, effecting transformations between the two.



Figure 50: Sanur beach, Bali. Sanur is in the southern, *kelod* direction, ritually suitable for funerals. Families immerse the cremation ashes in the water off the Sanur beach area. Sanur is identified as Bali’s hub for black magic because of its association with death. Leyaks (witches) are believed to haunt graveyards looking for remains to perform witchcraft and sorcery. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

By the same token, the crematory fires are no longer lit by members of the Dom caste. In Bali, the young men from the *banjar* lit the electric torch to burn the *bade*. In Mauritius, the sons lit the funeral pyre. A Vaishya man attended the electric crematorium in Mauritius. There were two non-Indian male crematorium attendants at the Hughes Funeral Home in Dallas. Stephanie Hughes said, “One of the men who had a family member cremated here told me that back in India, this work is done by lowest caste men and they are not regarded with respect. But I have not felt any disrespect from the Hindus here.” The obvious reason for this shift in attitude is location. The Hindu community has adapted to the local attitude toward respect for work and working persons. Further, the issue of gender and caste are redundant outside of the Hindu context because non-Hindus are the “other.”

End of Ritual Impurity

The end of the Sapindikarana ritual marks the end to ritual impurity. After this ritual, the family is free from pollution, although they may continue to mourn privately, depending on their relationship with the deceased. The surviving family may return to regular living such as cooking and returning to work, but there should not be any celebratory event in the household, nor should they attend any happy occasions such as weddings and birth rites. The reason is that funeral rites are exactly opposite of creation rites. Funeral rites are monastic, solitary, denying and shunning the world. Creative rites are exactly the opposite, world-affirming, social, and sensuous. Hence, distance is maintained between the opposite rites.

These are the general features of the Sapindikarana rituals. Individual family circumstances may warrant adjustments to these rituals; Hindu rituals are rife with alterations,

and none of the ritual versions are wrong. Value judgments are human creations, not some divine revelation. Nature does not understand flighty human emotions. Nature is a perfect concert of “life-giving and life-taking processes” (Pattanaik 40), in which ritual variations perform the role of an orchestra. Rituals have different tempos, rhythms, and a variety of instruments may be employed, or one ensemble may play a specific piece; notes could be accelerated, and a few notes could be high or low. Similarly, rituals can vary widely within the established tradition. As an example, there was a “bad” death in a family because the 23-year old son in the family had committed suicide. The family was in a state of shock, and in deep mourning, but the young man’s mother could not fully mourn for him because her daughter was pregnant and gave birth to a son very shortly after the death in the family. After consultation with the funeral priest, the family was able to complete the funeral rites before the thirteen days, and the mother was out of ritual pollution, allowing her to perform the celebratory role of a grandmother. Each person exists in society in several different roles, and rituals allow for flexibility in honoring each social responsibility, as in the case of this mother who also was a grandmother. Flexibility in ritual performances is based on nature’s cycles, and human events cannot be out of sync with nature, but they can be flexible. When spring equinox arrives on March 21, it’s not mandated that temperatures get pleasant on that day, that flower buds bloom and saplings grow, that tender green grass peeks out of the ground and birds sing in the early morning hours. But these manifestations of spring time reveal themselves making it known as springtime by association, and people welcome these signs. Similarly, nature absorbs ritual variation, like in the case of the man who took fruit offerings to the temple on one of the monthly anniversaries of his mother’s passing away. The priest accepted the fruits, blessed them by “showing” them to the deity,

sprinkling it with holy water, and chanting holy mantras. Then he distributed the fruits among the devotees, thus transforming the *phal* (fruits offering) to *prasad* (blessed food). When the Prasad is distributed, it means the intent of the offering has been successful. The priest served as the intermediary to maintain the delicate balance between human and natural worlds.

In another mourning example, a young woman asked her mother in India to distribute candies and cookies to 100 street children for 10-years on the death anniversary of her father. The mother would carry the items to the same neighborhood close to her home. She got down from her car and began handing out the food items and within minutes, scores of children and friends from surrounding neighborhoods had crowded around her for the items. There was no priest in attendance, and this method of remembering departed family is popular among many educated, middle and upper-class Hindus. The element of sharing is like glue, holding the community together in good and hard times.

Rituals can vary widely, but not so far that they lose their identity or intent. In some communities, on the 3rd, 5th, 7th or 9th day, relatives gather for a meal of the deceased's favorite foods. A portion is offered before his photo and later ceremonially left at an abandoned place, along with some lit camphor; the flames symbolically carry the essence of the food offering to the *preta*-ghost. Customs vary for pinda offering, too. "Some communities do not have the tradition of offering pinda at all, never had the custom" according to Pandit Oumashankerji. Others combine all these offerings on one day of ceremonies. In the Arya Samaj cremation in Mauritius, pinda balls are not offered at any time during the mourning rituals. I asked Pandita Barron how the *preta* would get a transient body for the journey into *pitr lok* if the pinda are not offered by the surviving family. She said, "One should only perform rituals that are within their

means and ability, otherwise the rituals lose meaning.” This idea is very similar to the exorbitant cost of the funeral rites in Bali. Wayan had said, “People take loans, sometimes they sell their motorcycle, to pay for the cremation and offerings. This makes the soul sad. We should not suffer to show others big funerals and rites.” Pareshbhai Patel shared similar economic and practical consideration for the variety of coffins offered for cremation in Dallas. He said, “Most of the BAPS members will opt for the cardboard coffin-box. Whether the coffin is cardboard or mahogany wood, it’s all going to burn. It’s not going with the dead.” Stephanie Hughes at the Funeral Home said, “The Hindu community will request a nicer coffin for the assembly and pooja, where family and friends pray to the corpse, but the cremations are always done in the cardboard coffins.”

For most families today, the ritual pollution associated with death ends on the thirteenth day. However, depending on the closeness of relation, some families will hold a memorial service on the 31st day. The memorial consists of a shared meal, a donation at the temple (Figures 51 and 52) or to the poor and needy, or in more traditional cases, the offering of a pinda ball, which represents the deceased, and three small pinda, representing the father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. One family in Mauritius had performed this rite on the 11th day after cremation, but due to the closeness of the relation with the deceased, the pinda offering was repeated on the 31st day. “Symbols provide the content of ritual” (Grimes 341), as the large ball is cut in three pieces and joined with the three small pindas to ritually unite the soul with the ancestors in the next world. The pindas are then fed to the crows, to a cow or thrown in a river for the fish. The idea of sacrifice leading toward the betterment of the world is a recurring pattern in all the varieties of the post-cremation rituals.



Figure 51: The Besakih Temple in Bali is referred to as “mother” temple, the most sacred of all Balinese Hindu temples. Families visit this temple after all the funerary rites have been completed. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth



Figure 52: Besakih Temple in Bali. Towers canopy all temple shrines. The multi-tier towers represent the various layers of the world associated with each deity. Families perform prayers and make offerings at this and similar temples in honor of their departed members. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

After the Sapindikarana ritual has been completed as per the family's choice, the chief mourner and the family are eligible to perform "the works of gods" by worshipping Lord Ganesha, the guardian of temporal and spatial thresholds, and who should always receive the worshipper's first homage. "The first ritual act after completing mourning is to perform a puja at home." Pandit Oumashankerji said in Mauritius. "Performing the puja takes us closer to God; we survived the calamity and now can move forward with life" Pandit Janakbhai Shukla said in Dallas (Figures 53, 54 and 55).



Figure 53: A statue of Ganesha graces a beach bar in Bali. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.



Figure 54: An open-air temple and shrine to Lord Ganesha in the northeastern town of Pointe des Lascars, Mauritius. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.



Figure 55: Worshippers making offerings to a Ganesha idol at Grand Bassin (Ganga Talao) in Mauritius. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

The Yearly *Shraddha* Ritual

Today, and “for some twenty-five hundred years or more” (Basham 18) the yearly *Shraddha* ritual is held in remembrance of all the dead ancestors; however, the Rigveda gives no definite reference to the *shraddha* ceremony, which is performed anywhere from ten days after the funeral to one-year death anniversary, and then optionally at intervals later. It is believed that the souls of three preceding generations of one's ancestor reside in *Pitr-lok* (ancestor realm), between heaven and earth. This realm is governed by Yama, the god of death, who takes the soul of a dying person from earth to *Pitr-lok*. When a person of the next generation dies, the first generation shifts to heaven and unites with God. Thus, only the three generations in *Pitr-lok* are given *Shraddha* rites, in which Yama plays a significant role. According to the sacred Itihasa

(Hindu epics), the *Pitr Paksha* (fifteen-days of the yearly *Shraddha* period), is the sacred time of the ancestors. At the beginning of *Pitr Paksha*, the sun enters the zodiac sign of *Tula* (Libra). Coinciding with this moment, it is believed that the souls leave *Pitr-lok* (ancestors' land) and reside in their descendants' homes for a month until the sun enters the next zodiac, *Vrichchhika* (Scorpio) —and there is a full moon. Hindus are expected to propitiate the ancestors in the first half, during the dark fortnight, known as *Pitr Paksha*. *Shraddha* meal is offered to each individual ancestor during *Pitr Paksha*. It is also performed collectively for the ancestors on the day of *Amavasya* (the day before a new moon) which brings the fortnight to a close. For its duration, those who are offering *shraddha* should observe a regime of mourning similar to the mourning period that was followed after the death in the family: consuming one meal a day, not shaving or getting a haircut, not using soap or oil, and not using services of a washerman. It is not necessary to dress in any special manner during this period, but one must be mindful of the occasion. No life cycle rituals can be held during *Pitr Paksha*. *Pitr Paksha* is not observed in a year during which a member of the family has died, a child has been born, or a marriage is celebrated. Nowadays, *Pitr Paksha* period is upheld only through the *Shraddha* family meal, at which time a dessert containing milk must be served. The symbolism of the milk is akin to ghee (clarified butter), which is a pure substance and from a cow. Desserts or sweets indicate happy occasions, so when a family consumes the sweet, the ancestors are satisfied through their living descendants. They can see the family together, enough to eat, and doing well. With a content heart, they will be ready to return to *pitr-lok* after the *Pitr Paksha* fortnight is over. “It is not possible to follow all the *shraddha* rituals now days due to lack of time and everybody working, so most families who follow these traditions will meet for one meal” Pandit Janakbhai Shukla

said. To follow these rituals, though, one has to be familiar with the Hindu calendar and the younger generation is not familiar with this calendar as it is not corresponding to the western Gregorian calendar.

Pandit Oumashankerji explained, “The *Shraddha* ritual, in which food and prayers for the departed soul are offered, goes back to Vedic times. These feasts symbolically provide sustenance for the ancestors.” I asked him if the *Shraddha* ritual could have variations. He said, “The ceremony should be done yearly as long as the sons of the deceased are alive (or for a specified period).” In Bali, Wayan, said, “We pray to ancestors before every celebration. We ask for their blessings.” It appears that in Bali, the ancestors are a much closer reality in everyday life than among the Mauritian and Dallas Hindus. Offerings are made on a regular basis, if not daily, to the Balinese ancestors. In Dallas, Pandit Janakbhai Shukla said, “It is now common in the Indian Hindu culture to observe *shraddha* for ancestors just prior to the yearly Navaratri festival, rather than at the death anniversary. This time is easy to remember in cases where the day of death is unknown.” Having a set period for the *shraddha* ceremony may actually revive its practice because the individual families do not have to remember each of the death anniversaries to conduct the ritual, but may perform them collectively at a time that the entire community is performing the shared ritual. In recent years, people feed the poor or give donations to orphanages as a substitute to performing the *Shraddha*. Charity toward the poor in memory of the dead is considered particularly meritorious. In some communities, *Shraddha* is performed on the twelfth day of mourning after death, when family consumes a meal together, after which the mourning period is officially considered complete. No auspicious rituals may be held before performing the annual *shraddha*; to avoid this prohibition, many families perform the

annual *Shraddha* immediately after death. Dallas area Hindus are not staunch maintainers of the *shraddha*. It's not because they do not believe in the ritual, but when families are scattered in different parts of the world – a contemporary phenomenon - generally, the oldest or the closest family will celebrate *shraddha*. Since the ritual function has been performed, other family members do not see the necessity for this ritual. In Mauritius, the *shraddha* ritual is maintained as per the Vedic tradition. This is because Hindu rituals are a connection to the original homeland for the Mauritians. The ritual has adapted in Bali, as well. Agung explained, “In Bali, the post-cremation rituals consist of deifying the deceased in nyekah, a ceremony that takes place after 12 days after the cremation. Some Balinese Hindus perform the ceremony after 42 days, which coincides with the first 42 days of a newborn's life when he is considered god.” Wayan elaborated further that it is not possible to follow the exact number of days in today's busy work-centered life. He said, “Today, no specific number of days are observed, and the family selects an auspicious day for the nyekah as per their convenience. It's important to perform the ritual, but the family can decide on when to perform.”

When the brave warrior *Karna* died in the epic Mahabharata war, his soul transcended to heaven, where he was offered gold and jewels as food for sustenance. But *Karna* needed real food to eat. He asked Indra, the lord of heaven, the reason for this. Indra explained to *Karna* that he had donated gold, but never food, to his ancestors during the yearly *Shraddha*. *Karna* said that since he was unaware of his ancestors, he never donated anything in their memory. To rectify the dutiful warrior's *karma*, *Karna* was granted time to return to earth for a 15-day period - one cycle of the moon - so that he could perform *Shraddha* for his ancestors and donate food and water in their memory. This time period is known as *Pitr Paksha* (Pandit Oumashankerji).

In the foundational book on ritual structure, *Rites of Passage*, Arnold van Gennep exemplifies sharing of a meal as a rite of incorporation. Partaking in a meal after funerals is an especially symbolic act of reconciliation. The purpose is to reunite all the surviving members of the group with each other, and sometimes also with the deceased, in the same way that a chain which has been broken by the disappearance of one of its links must be rejoined. Sometimes a meal is taken when mourning is lifted, when the funerals are observed in two stages (provisional and permanent), as in Bali. There is usually a communion meal for the relatives at the end of the first, and the deceased is thought to partake of it. If the tribe, clan, or village are involved, - *banjar*, in the example of Bali - convocation by drum, crier, or messenger gives the meal even more of the character of a collective ritual. There are other special rites that signify incorporation, such as the “dance of the dead,” in Bali, which assist in the dead joining their new community, as well as symbolizing the perpetual dissolving and reforming of the world (Van Gennep 164-165).

Where Exactly Do the Dead Go?

Despite all the promises of the epic-puranic texts, and despite all the clarity of the philosophical *karma* texts, the question remains where the deceased goes, and when, and whether he goes at all? (Michaels 205). Do the dead go to the world of spirits? Or to the world of ancestors? Or to the world of the forefathers? To Yama’s abode of Hell? Or to Swarga, Heaven? Does the soul get reincarnated, and if so, when, and how, and as what, and why? Obvious inconsistencies remain in the concept of life after death: reincarnation conflicts with the desire to

be free, *karma* theory conflicts with rituals of begetting a son, the idea of an immediate re-incorporation after death contradicts the sequence of generations of ancestors.

“It is not coincidence that there are no massive monuments to the dead in Hinduism, no tombs, sarcophagi, or pyramids to mark the final resting place of the dead, because death is not in any sense a final stopping point. All beings that die will be reborn as long as they are still engaged in the karmic process, so their physical remains are only a transient and insignificant reminder of their passing; and all beings similarly have the possibility of final salvation, although this may be many lifetimes in the future. Any individual death is, therefore, only a transition point in a larger cycle that will present many conditions and opportunities in the course of many lifetimes. What matters is how one uses the circumstances that each life provides to work toward the ultimate afterlife of one’s choice” (Hopkins 15).

What choices do Pandita Barron, Pandit Oumashankerji, and Pandit Janakbhai Shukla think are available to the Hindu community to save a spot in a better afterlife and in successive lifetimes? How does one know what the choices are, and what to pick? And more importantly, how do people know if they got a better afterlife? All three of them said that one must follow their *dharma*. Life is an accumulation of *karma*. The afterlife and future lifetimes are determined by one’s karmic collection. When a person is born, there are a set of circumstances, such as one’s gender, caste, family status, position in family and society, etc. Upholding one’s *dharma* (duty) based on birth circumstances leads to a better afterlife and successive lifetimes. This knowledge is communicated to the Hindu community through scriptures and family traditions. However, it’s important to do one’s duties because it is the right action, not because one hopes for personal gain. Like birth, the afterlife, and rebirth are in the “Giver’s” hand; a good Hindu person follows *dharma*, having faith that the rewards and punishments are meted out in Divine Time. One must have *Shraddha* (faith) in their actions to generate positive circumstances.

Comparison of Post-cremation Rituals in Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas

In general, Balinese-Hindu religious practices depend heavily on rituals which can be classified into five groups, known as the *Panca Yadnya*, five sacrifices. *Pitr Yadnya* are the most crucial post-mortem rituals for the Balinese Hindu because the main goal of these rites is to liberate the soul (atman), the non-physical aspect of the self, and allow it to enter the world of deities and ancestors. The body of human beings is a microcosm of the universe, made up of the same life elements as those that constitute the physical universe, the *panca bhuta*, the five elements of *pertiwi*, *apah*, *teja*, *bayu*, and *akasa*, earth, water, fire, air, and ether, respectively. The post-cremation rituals serve to release the five elements which confine the soul in a physical human form. The intent of the *ngaben* (general cremation) and *palebun* (high caste cremation) rituals is to release these elements back to their origin. It is important to connect this idea of dissolution and return to the universe directly back to the Rigveda hymn 10.129, composed no later than 900 BCE, in which the universe is said to evolve out of a primal condition that was neither *sat* (being) and *asat* (nonbeing), neither cosmos nor chaos. Man was created from the five elements of nature, and he is dissolved back into the five elements (Basham 22, Chatterji 12, Doniger- Hindu Myths 27).

About twelve days after the cremation, the *nyekah* (also called *memukur*), the immersion ceremony, takes place. Ash and charred bones are gathered and placed inside a coconut, which is then wrapped in a yellow cloth and carried in a procession to the beach, in the *kelod* southern direction. Here, the high priest offers prayer and the contents of the coconut are poured into the ocean, where they are thought to dissolve completely into the five primal elements. The soul of the deceased is symbolically released from its earthly existence to become an ancestral spirit who

can be worshiped at the family shines until he or she is reborn as a human infant. These rituals are held on the twelfth day after cremation, modeled on the Vedic mourning rituals of twelve days. The soul takes twelve days to travel to the *pitr-lok*. Including the day of death and the day of *pitr miloni* (meeting with the ancestors), that's a fortnight, one cycle. Every Balinese home has a compound, which contains a family temple shrine. The shrine is dedicated to the three major Hindu deities, Wisnu (Vishnu), Brahma, and Shiva, and at the same time represents the deity-ancestors. Whenever the family thinks of the dead relatives or dreams about them, they place offerings in the shrine. Some families make offerings on a daily basis. Dreams are a sign from one's subconscious mind, and "the Balinese Hindus interpret it as the ancestor is remembering us. The offering is an acknowledgment of the dream" Wayan said. The offerings are a visual means of communicating a connection to the ancestors. One of my informants at the high caste ngaben cremation said that the offerings he has made to his ancestors included cans of Fanta, a favorite drink, opened and with a straw placed in the can so that the ancestor can symbolically consume the drink right away. In some of the shrines, there were offerings of chewing gum and candy, rice cakes, incense, tirtha (holy water), and cigarettes, in addition to flowers and fruit trays. Each new offering requires a clean plate and placement in high places; offerings cannot be made on a chair, on a stool, or on the ground, because they are deemed opposite of sacred spaces (Wayan Ariati 1-5, Lansing 32-34, Davison & Granquist 16-17).

In Mauritius, both the cremations were open-air on a funeral pyre, but in different locations. In both the cases, the men in the family returned on the following day to the *samsana* cremation ground to receive the remains. Although one cremation was for a poorer and much older man in the *vanaprastha* stage of life, and the other was a young family man, the post-

cremation rituals remained the same and were led by the family priest. The remains were immersed in the Grand Bassin (Ganga Talao) prior to the twelfth day due to the end of the lunar cycle (Figures 56, 57 and 58).



Figure 56: Worshippers before a statue of Goddess Laxmi (the goddess of wealth) at the Grand Bassin (Ganga Talao) in Mauritius. A status of Lord Ganesha is on the far left. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.



Figure 57: Worshippers making offerings to a statue of Lord Hanuman at the Grand Bassin (Ganga Talao) in Mauritius. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.



Figure 58: Serpent images from Hindu mythology reflect a belief in nature and spirit worship. Grand Bassin (Ganga Talao), Mauritius. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Pandit Dhawdall said, “Generally, twelve days of mourning are followed faithfully, along with the Sapindikarana ritual on the twelfth day to mark the end of ritual pollution and mourning. A year later, the *Shraddha* ritual would be performed to celebrate all ancestors.” The fervor and zeal of ritual “correctness” are of paramount importance in Mauritius as they attempt to maintain their continuity of “displaced” Hindu identity in a new homeland. Heavy exchange of priests and priestly knowledge guide the Mauritians in Hindu practices, sometimes reviving practices lost in the Indian Hinduism, such as cleansing the surviving family by chewing dry red chilies or basil leaves, in addition to bathing, after contact with the corpse. Red chilies are very hot and induce sweating, a form of purging. To subdue the hot-flavor, people drink water, which is a cleansing agent. Basil leaf is considered a holy and purificatory substance. Pandit Harshvardhan, who has performed priestly services in India, in Mauritius, and in Dallas, observed, “Mauritian Hindus are stricter about rituals than the Hindus in India. In Dallas, the Hindu rituals are casual and centered around the temple, not people’s home.”



Figure 59: An earthen pot filled with ashes and bones at the crematorium in Mauritius. The metal pan in the background is used to transfer the ashes and bones from the cremation vault to the pot. The pot will be covered with a white or red cloth and tied at the neck so that the ashes do not fall. Family members would untie the cloth and pour the ashes into the sacred water. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

In Mauritius, the remains after cremation are placed in an earthen pot (Figure 59). They may be ashes and small bone, which are not ground, like in Dallas crematoriums. The earthen pot is immersed in the water, along with offerings of flowers and garlands, and well as prayers. An interesting aspect to immersion in the Grand Bassin, Ganga Talao, (Figures 60 and 61) is that when Hindu Mauritians are marketed tours to India, they take the form of a pilgrimage.



Figure 60: View of Grand Bassin (Ganga Talao). Hindu-Mauritians believe the lake is subterraneously connected to the river Ganges, making it sacred. A pot of water from the Ganges was also immersed into the lake to attribute it with the sanctifying properties of the Ganges. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.



Figure 61: The Hindu Mauritian community performs various rituals at the Grand Bassin (Ganga Talao). Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.



Figure 62: Water from the Ganges river is bottled and sold in numerous Dallas Indian grocery stores. The water is used to sprinkle on the ashes in the cremation vault, symbolizing a cooling and neutralizing of the ashes. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

In Dallas, the Funeral Home plays a central role in all cremation rituals. The Funeral Home obtains the death certificate and clears all the paperwork for the cremation to take place at its facility. The undertaker attends to the body, cleans it, and prepares it for the cremation. Family members contact a temple priest and schedule a cremation time. They inform family and friends of the time and location of the cremation. A pooja ritual and sometimes an assembly is held prior to the cremation. Some families sprinkle “bottled water” from the Ganges River on the

corpse during the pooja. The water can be bought at Indian grocery stores in Dallas (Figure 62).

After the cremation, the Funeral Home utilizes a grinder to reduce the size of the cremains (Figure 63). The cremains are boxed and identified as cremains. This seal of the Funeral Home makes carrying or shipping the box very convenient with very few questions regarding the nature of the “suspicious” looking box (Figure 64).



Figure 63: Placed close to the cremation vault at the Funeral Home is a grinder. The grinder grinds the bones into powder so that the cremains remain a consistently small size. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.



Figure 64: Cremains are placed in a plastic bag and placed inside this standardized box. The family picks up the box from the Funeral Home and carries it for local immersion, or places it in the garage at home, or will arrange to have the Funeral Home take care of the cremains until a visit to India is made. This box of cremains belongs to a family who drove to the Funeral Home on their way to the airport to pick up the cremains. They had kept the cremains in the Funeral Home vault for over six months due to the content’s polluting attributes. The cremains are carried as hand baggage, considering their immeasurable emotional value. Security clearance is guaranteed by the stamp marked by the Funeral Home certifying the contents of the box. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

The Dallas area Hindu community has more than one option for immersion of the ashes. Not too long ago, the only option available to families was to carry the ashes to India and immerse them in a nearby river. This is still an option for the community, especially if the deceased person wished to be immersed in their homeland (Figure 65).



Figure 65: One of my Dallas informants traveled to India and immersed his mother's ashes in the Godavari River in Nasik, India. Source: RMS on 9/18/2017.

One family could not travel to India at all. When the mother in the family passed away, they collected the ashes and drove straight from the Funeral Home to the Gulf of Mexico in Galveston and immersed the ashes there. They did not inform any priest. They recited the prayers and scattered the ashes. They did not offer the customary flower garlands and lamps, out of fear that these items would appear conspicuous and there may be questions, a reality they wanted to avoid at all costs.

The Hindu community has grown significantly in the Dallas area, hence a request was made to obtain a permit to conduct the immersion ritual in Dallas itself since it is now home to the community. The Nepali and Bhutanese Hindu communities also practice cremations, so the need for a local immersion site was large. Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs also cremate their dead. In consultation with the City of Dallas and the Hindu temple priests, the cremains can be immersed in the Trinity River. Practical and ritual functions determined this location. A priest always meets the family at the site where immersion can take place. The water from the river flows into the Gulf of Mexico. The Funeral Home disseminates the immersion location information to the families using the Funeral Home crematoriums. Temple priests also inform the impacted community.

It is a common practice in the Dallas area to hold a post-cremation assembly for bhajans, devotional songs, and music, in memory of the departed soul. Typically, a framed photograph of the person is placed on a table; a fresh flower garland adorns the photo. The image is anointed with a sandalwood mark on the forehead. The person is now an ancestor-deity, and the placement of the garland identifies the departed soul as such. This innovation is practiced in India and also among almost all of the Hindu diaspora. The assembly may also be referred to as Prarthna (prayer), which includes devotional hymns and music. This is the time for mourners to come together as a community, chanting, reciting, and invoking various deities. The purpose of this assembly is to enable the mourners to find peace and comfort in the aftermath of the death.

Innovations and Popularity of Cremations

In America, as elsewhere, cremations are practiced by members of different faiths, not only the Hindus. Cremations have proliferated over the last few centuries, and the art of memorials has blossomed along with their rise. At the heart of cremation remains is the question of disposal of the cremains. Since the cost of the actual cremation was so low, cremationist businesses in America had to make their money some other way. That way took the form of memorializing the dead. Those who were buried had a headstone to memorialize them. What about those who were cremated? The answer was to sell urns, buildings in which to place the urns, and strangely enough, a plot of ground in which to bury the ashes. Placing the ashes in the urn, a final resting place and a “rite of committal,” completed the cremation (Rosen 97-102). Many faiths do not have any prohibitions on memorializing the cremains. However, this practice is unacceptable as per the Hindu belief of liberating the soul.

While it is possible in a Funeral Home in America to store ashes in decorative urns made of metal, wood, china, and other materials, this practice is not adopted by the Hindu community because any kind of containment or permanence defeats the purpose of liberation.

For non-Hindus in America who do not wish to take the urns home, they can be placed in a wall or indoor niches in a columbarium. The usual niches are about ten inches wide, twelve inches high, and fifteen inches deep. Cremations experts have speculated that along with the popularity of cremations, the need for a variety of urns and architectural settings is on the rise. While the choice of urns seems large even today, it is possible to see an explosion of urn designs to revive ancient Greek amphora and kylix pottery-shapes. Rococo curves and Romantic themes of nature, as well as Baroque illusory motion, and even urns shaped like an Egyptian

sarcophagus or a favorite character aren't too far off (Rosen 126, Eassie 52). The Funeral Home storing the box of cremains for later immersion is as far as Hindu custom allows for storage. No matter how aesthetically pleasuring an urn is, Hindu rites do not allow for storing of the cremains.

Funeral Homes in America also afford the option of interring the ashes in the ground. The ashes, in the urn or another container, are placed in the earth. Up to four sets of cremains can generally be placed in one regular –sized burial plot. This option would not be acceptable for the Hindus because it is another form of “entrapment.”

A cremains business model that the Hindu community in the Dallas area can relate to is the scattering of the cremains, which is a big business (Rosen 130-131, Prothero 198). The color of the cremains is different from that of dirt, so they will be noticeable; there's also the problem of high winds. But scattering can occur in places far and away. The Association Francaise d'Information Funeraire (AFIF) advertises their scattering of ashes over three different sites in the French Alps: Mont Blanc's summit, Vallee Blanche, and Mer de Glace. In 1999, a new law was instituted in California that made it legal for the first time to scatter ashes on the ground and close to shore. If a family cannot travel to the scattering location, then the cremains can be mailed to the businesses specializing in scattering services. Mailing ashes is quite simple and inexpensive. USPS requires ashes to be sealed in sturdy and durable containers. The plastic bag and cardboard box packaging provided by the crematory meets USPS standard. This kind of scattering is un-Hindu. It's vital for the family to scatter the remains themselves; that is *dharma*, doing one's duty. The family would not want to scatter the ashes in unfamiliar rivers and places, either.

Eternal Reefs sells reef balls made by mixing cremated remains with concrete. Memorial reefs are then deployed in a permitted location approved by federal, state, and local governments. These locations in the United States are Virginia's eastern shore, in the waters off Fort Lauderdale, Marco Island, and Sarasota, Florida, as well as Charleston, North Carolina. With every memorial reef, the executor of the estate receives two memorial certificates that identify the longitude and latitude of the memorial. The coordinates are recorded when the reef is placed on the ocean floor. The popular and exclusive Atlantis reef attracts the larger species of sea life. The Community reef is cost-effective, and the cremated remains of several people are mixed together in the concrete. By the year 2000, there were over one hundred thousand scientifically designed artificial reefs in the water (Rosen 132-133, 143-144, Prothero 198). One might think that this alternative method of scattering in nature (ocean) might appear attractive to the Hindu community in Dallas and elsewhere, but the idea behind the reef ball is that of permanence (due to the concrete material). The cremains also exist as some part of one's old self, which is incompatible with the Hindu belief to dissolve and redistribute oneself at immersion.

Another fantastic innovation in cremation that the Hindu community in Dallas and elsewhere cannot relate to is making diamonds out of the carbon released during the cremation. A company called LifeGem can convert one's deceased aunt or grandpa into diamonds! Though expensive, the diamonds provide a great comfort to the deceased's loved ones, who can wear the gem and keep it with them at all times. To make the diamond(s) the family authorizes LifeGem to collect the carbon of the deceased midway through the cremation process using a special carbon collection kit. The door to the retort is opened. Four ounces of organ tissue (where most of the carbon is) are separated from the body and moved to a special sealed container. The tissue

in the container is sealed and placed back in the retort. The door is closed and the cremation continues. At the end of the process, the door is opened and the container is removed. The tissue inside has been reduced to dry, crispy flakes of carbon. The carbon is placed in a special graphite crucible that is engraved with a unique sixteen-digit tracking number. A crucible is placed in a vacuum induction furnace. All oxygen is pumped out and the furnace is heated to a temperature of 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit. All impurities such as calcium, ash, iron, aluminum, and oxygen are removed and pure carbon is preserved. Boron, which has a boiling point of 3,200 degrees Fahrenheit, is retained in the carbon, as a result, the boron present in the carbon gives the diamonds its blue tint. The longer the press time is, the larger is the diamond. Pressure replicates the forces beneath the earth that form natural diamonds. The diamonds can measure between .25 carats and 1.3 carats, the same quality as diamonds found at high-end jewelers (Rosen 139-142). These innovations are superb but against the Hindu belief of liberation. Technology and innovation have enabled the preservation of the deceased in many forms, but as Pandit Janakbhai Shukla said, “for the Hindu community these innovations are unnecessary.” A 36-year old male BAPS community member said, “The crematorium is for cremation only. Death should not be a business opportunity because the goal of life is to be free to flow, not get entrapped and remain stagnant.”

Is there anything specifically sold to the Hindu community? Stephanie Hughes at the Hughes Funeral Home in Dallas shared, “It is very difficult to get the Hindu community to buy into the idea of memorialization.” In her interactions with the community members at the cremations, she learned that even subtle memorials like a thumbprint of the deceased on a bracelet plate was unappealing and unmarketable to the Hindu persons. The Funeral Home has a

sample of a tiny vial pendant, to carry ashes of the dearly departed. Inscribed on the vial is the auspicious Aum sign (Figure 66). There were no takers so far. Ms. Hughes admitted, “We have not made a concerted effort to market these memorials to the Hindu community.” If a first-generation Hindu person in the Dallas area opts for any of these “memorials”, then it is a breach in ritual tradition and the funerary rituals would be compromised because they would be acting counter to what the person knows to be true about liberation in Hinduism. Perhaps second-generation and later Hindu persons may opt for these memorials to echo or adapt to the more established majority traditions in the Dallas area. After all, the Funeral Homes are not exclusively Hindu, and Hindu cremations are not their major livelihood.



Figure 66: Pendant-vial with Aum inscription on it. The intent is for ashes of the departed loved one to be placed in the vial and the wearer remains in “close contact” with the loved one. Photographer: Aditi G. Samarth.

Two priests, Pandit Janakbhai Shukla and Pandit Harshvardhan Shukla, had the same thought regarding memorials. Informants at the temple and in the community shared similar surprise at “marketing” memorials to the Hindu community. Everyone seemed to understand that

capitalism is at the heart of American enterprise and innovation, but making a business out of death appeared outside the moral and ethical realm of the community. It appeared that businesses prey upon the impacted families during this most vulnerable time, trying to get a financial advantage from an emotionally broken family. A 41-year old electrical engineer who has lived in America for thirty years wondered if it was pure greed to make money in America that prompted these memorials. A 50-year old housewife who has lived outside of India practically all her life said that she thought this attitude might be one of cultural ignorance. In summation, the informants, in different ways said the same thing that the funeral homes in Dallas are not Hindu owned and operated. They don't know the Hindu beliefs and ritual practices except when their cremation facility is requested. The fundamental concept of the Hindu cremation is to set a person free.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: HINDU CREMATIONS - CONTINUITY, CHANGE, AND COMMUNITY

The 4,000-year-old Hindu *Agni Sanskar* (cremation) myth and ritual prescribed in the ancient scriptures remain the backbone of contemporary Hindu tradition. Hindu communities in Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas have continued the *Agni Sanskar* in their respective “New” homelands through local ritual adaptations. The ritual adaptations are based on personal factors such as age, gender, socio-economic status, educational qualifications, and family situation, as well as broader societal issues such as the socio-economic and political power and position of the Hindu community within the larger nation or city, as well as the historical context for settlement of the Hindu community in the “New” homelands.

Pandits, mourners, families and community persons interviewed in this study provide different viewpoints into many ideas that make up Hinduism, which appears to be firmly established in Bali, guarded closely in Mauritius, and in developmental stages in Dallas. The broad term Hinduism legitimizes Hindu rituals. Rituals enable the communities to identify aspects of Hinduism that are most compatible in their “new” homelands, and then negotiate place and time to establish their identity through ritual performance. Rituals, therefore, are not simply markers of rites of passage. Rituals celebrate and retain the community, maintain connections and provide comfort that is “really or imaginarily lost” outside of the original context.

However, faithful performance of rituals lends validity to them, as the rituals become visible and identifiable attributes of Hinduism. In the *Agni Sanskar* ritual, two non-negotiable Hindu components remain intact. One, cremation and subsequent immersion of the cremains to

dispose the body, and two, the release of the soul from earthly ties through post-cremation rites. Within the framework of these two ritual pillars, wide variation in funerary practices exist.

The Hindu communities in Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas believe in the stern consequences for failing on these two fronts. They believe that bad luck will befall the surviving family members if these two rites are compromised. Bad luck takes the form of the deceased soul turning into a ghost to disturb the survivors and future progeny; this disturbance impacts the financial, familial, home, and health aspects of the survivors, taking away their peace of mind and well-being, literally and figuratively. For this important reason, survivors ensure that funeral rites are fulfilled.

The Two Non-Negotiable Components of the Agni Sanskar Ritual

Why are cremation and the subsequent immersion of the cremains, and release of the soul from earthly ties the two non-negotiable components of the *Agni Sanskar* ritual? Established long ago by the Vedic rishis, the corpse is an offering to the universe. This practice was introduced millenniums ago with Sanskrit as the ritual language. Sanskrit is an obsolete language today, but the ritual survives in lands far away from the original Gangetic Plains. The cremation ritual has transcended language, time and place to represent the Hindu tradition through its survival.

The cremains take on the cosmic dimension of the five elements as the corpse is purified by fire, dispersed by air, dissolved by water, assimilated into the earth, and neutralized by the sky. Just as a river makes its way toward the ocean, the body, too, blends itself in the universe's macrocosm, returning to the source. The source of life is the universe. Hindu scriptures emphasize the human place within the universe; human beings are not separate from the

universe, but are one with it. The Sanskrit phrase *Tat Tvam Asi* (Thou are That) teaches that we are made from the same elements as the source. This idea is shared by all the three communities and its practical manifestation is the cremation. Hindu cremation rituals convey the myth of Eternal Laws; thus, the myth and ritual reinforce one another.

The Balinese concept of *Tawur* states that if you take, you should return; otherwise, the balance is lost. Cremation is the ritual act that maintains the delicate balance between the Hindus and the universe. The role of humankind to live in synchronicity with the Eternal Laws is fulfilled, since the cycle of one life is complete at death, which also is the point of origination for the next cycle. Death brings life into the fold of natural order, which makes the universe possible and sustains human life. Despite the myriad variations in form, all the cremations function to reiterate this original myth and ritual of Eternal Laws.

An analysis of the Eternal Laws indicates that the Laws are old but wholly relevant in contemporary times. Based on my Humanities education background, it is easy to identify ancient scriptures (Enuma Elis, the Babylonian creation myth), religions (Ancient Egyptian, Ancient Greek, etc.), monuments (Parthenon, Pyramids, etc.) and rituals (human sacrifice) that have not stood the test of time for one reason or another. The Hindu theory of Eternal Laws, on the other hand, has survived millenniums of an onslaught from myriad sources. Yet, it remains intact. The ideas contained in Eternal Laws are sound and logical; one need not be a Hindu to appreciate the Universe as a source of all life-energy, as a sustainer of all life forms. Eternal Laws are consistent with the human experience of the universe's energy. One cannot discount the validity of the central Hindu tenet of Eternal Laws because it is the oldest living tradition in the world, a testament to its past and contemporary relevance. The truth contained in the Eternal

Laws does not change according to whim, time, place, politics, or person. The objective truth (as opposed to circumstantial truth) in the Laws elevates them above human time and places them in cosmic time.

The five elements are crucial for the dissolution of the body in all three cultures. The reason for this is the universe is composed of elements. Human beings are given life from the same elements as the universe's, hence at death, there is a return to the elements. The central idea in the immersion ritual is balance, to give back what was taken, so that balance is maintained in the universe. In this way, human beings are created from the universe, and are a part of the universe, and not apart from it. So the question of human dominion over rest of creation does not arise. In the same creative vein, fire is a symbolic agent of transformation through the heat that it generates. Fire is purificatory and not punishing in all three cultures. Fire mixed with chanted prayers and mantras is the medium of making offerings, which ascend skyward, the open expanse of the universe. Everything that fire touches is either destroyed or purified. Time and place are abrogated at this moment; sacred space and sacred time are reconstructed yet again in the *yajna*, fire oblation. The rebuilding begins again after the destruction, and what is rebuilt will be destroyed again. Death is the guarantee of life. The focus is not on the creating and destroying, though, but on the continuity of an uninterrupted cycle. An individual person is only a temporary member in the cycle of life and death, which is why the community is necessary for the continuity of the endless cycles.

The soul is believed to be eternal, taking on a new physical form fitting its preceding *karma*. The soul is thought to be free to pursue its onward journey after the ashes are immersed in a body of water. Hindu scriptures are ambiguous regarding the fate of the soul in the

afterworld. The three Hindu communities have varying beliefs and time frames for rituals regarding what happens to the soul between cremation, immersion, and rebirth, but all three believe in maintaining mourning rituals for the soul until it is believed to be free from earthly ties.

Observances, Similarities and Differences in the Cremation Tradition in Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas

The following table shows the observances, similarities and differences at death, in cremation and in port-cremation rituals in Bali, Mauritius and Dallas.

Table 3: Observances, Similarities and Differences

	Bali	Mauritius	Dallas
Death	Beating of a drum announces death to the <i>banjar</i> neighborhood; lamp is hung on a bamboo pole to guide the wandering spirit home	Inform neighbors and family; call the family priest	Hospital calls the family to inform of the death; family calls the funeral home; calls the temple for a priest
	Neighbors and family arrive to help the grieving family	Neighbors and family arrive to help the grieving family	Community or temple organization offers assistance; friends and family arrive; may need to call 911 if the death occurred at home
	Burial tradition for all except for priests and upper-caste		
	Burial ceremony at a graveyard or at Pura Dalem, Temple of Death. Family promises to cremate as soon as they can; burial is a temporary disposal of the body		

	Silence in death rituals of children; general chatter for adult deaths; refrain from crying openly	Sad and silence during rituals; refrain from crying openly	Sad and silence during rituals; refrain from crying openly
	Burial in the <i>Kelod</i> south direction	Rituals are performed on the corpse, which is laid facing south.	Rituals are performed on the corpse, which is laid facing south.
	Auspicious time determined by the <i>pedanda</i> for death rituals	Prepare to cremate as soon as possible but within 24-hours	Family, the funeral home and the priest decide on a mutual time for cremation
	Neighborhood <i>beleganjur</i> orchestra sets a solemn tone.	Hymns and mantras are recited.	Hymns and mantras are recited.
	Elaborate offerings required daily for 12 days after burial to appease the ancestor-soul		Family purchases a casket and use of the facility.
	Days, months and years spent in burial. Soul believed to leave the body after 42 days; family no longer makes daily offerings to it.	Corpse is prepared at home for cremation.	All permits must be secured before the cremation can be held.
Cremation	Ngaben (cremation) in open-air at the <i>Setra</i>	Arya Samaj or Puranic cremation in open-air at the <i>Samsana</i>	Enclosed in the funeral home cremation vault
	Visual language of the Saput poleng black and white checkered cloth, which represents the dualities of life and the grey section merges the opposites; Sekala and Niskala (the seen and the unseen worlds of the living and the spirits)	Belief in <i>preta</i> -ghost if rituals are unfulfilled or untimely.	Flexibility and convenience mark the rituals.
	Grand funeral processions with <i>bade</i> tower and symbolic sarcophagus indicating one's caste. Angklung <i>gamelan</i>	Corpse carried in a fresh flower decorated aluminum casket by a car and then on the shoulders	Wooden casket for the assembly; cardboard box for cremation, unless the

	(percussion 4-note bronze orchestra) music and offerings lead the dead to cremation. Men carry the tower of the corpse. Horseplay on the way to confuse the spirits.	of men to the cremation ground. Attempts to confuse the spirit.	family buys an expensive casket
	Corpse placed from the tower into the sarcophagus by community members. <i>Pedanda</i> sprinkles tirta, holy water on it and prays to Yama as he introduces the dead person.	Wooden funeral pyre built by the hands of men. Ceremonial offerings fare made to the corpse for the journey ahead. Ghee is offered as a pure substance to invite Agni (fire) to emblazen the funeral pyre.	Symbolic wooden chips may be offered in the cremation chamber.
	Rame aesthetic – convivial and specifically intended to ward off the evil spirits	Ascetic and philosophic aesthetic	Sterile, institutional, and mournful set-up
	Baris Gede dance by male dancers who assist the departing soul in its journey to the afterlife	Symbolic breaking of the skull ritual to indicate release of the soul.	
	Cremations start at 1 pm	Cremations start at 12 noon	Cremation time set up by Funeral Home and priest appointment.
Post-Cremation	Nyekah (also called Memukur) = purification of the soul – immersion ceremony held in the <i>kelod</i> (south) direction; Deifying the deceased in nyekah takes place generally between 12-42 days after cremation. Coincides with the first 42 days of a newborn’s life when they are considered god.	Local “sacred” geography: Immersion – Grand Bassin/Ganga Talao	Immersion: Trinity river, the Gulf of Mexico
	Immediate immersion; wealthier families host	Immediate immersion.	store cremains until immersion

	elaborate post-cremation ceremony to thank the <i>banjar</i> .		
	Deifying the deceased and regular ancestor worship through offerings and prayers.	Yearly <i>Shraddha</i>	<i>Shraddha</i> is flexible.
	12 days offering to the grave; 12-42 days mourning; soul flees the body on the 42 nd day; the number of days inversely mirror birth rites; 12 th day is name keeping for a new born; 42 days ends the “sacred” god-like status of the new born	13 days of mourning	13 days of mourning
	Believe the deceased will be born as the 4 th generation in the family		
Estimated total cost	Indonesian 8-12 million Rupiah (US\$600-900).	Mauritian Rupees 6510-97,651. (US\$200-\$2,000 for Arya followers; US\$400-\$3,000 for Puranic followers).	US\$2,000 (basic cremation in a cardboard box).

All three Hindu traditions believe that cremation is mandatory to release and separate the soul from the body. However, in Balinese Hinduism, cremations are expensive rituals. To compound that problem, a family’s socio-economic standing is illustrated through the *bade* (tower) carrying the corpse to the *setra* (*samsana*, cremation ground). Families face social and economic pressure to host a respectable cremation, which in turn makes them delay the cremation, which is not a Vedic-Hindu practice. Native Balinese traditions mixed with Hindu traditions to develop the uniquely Balinese Hindu practice of interring the corpse until enough resources have been gathered for a fitting cremation at a future time.

Rather than sad and solemn occasions, Balinese cremations are marked by boisterousness and conviviality, food, *gamelan* (orchestra) music and ritual dance. The release of the soul at cremation is a cause for celebration, and the ritual procession and offerings are embedded in the Balinese aesthetic of *rame*, an excess of stimulation for the senses to ward off evil spirits. Joy is evident at Balinese Hindu cremations, whereas cremations in Mauritius and Dallas are sad, solemn occasions, although all the three cultures are witnessing the shared phenomenon of the release of the soul.

The mourning period is a shared theme for all the three communities. However, various patterns exist in formal and personal mourning practices. *Pedanda* and *Pandit* (priests) cite Vedic scriptures against outbursts of mourning as the corpse's energies are distracted from the aim of uniting with the *pitr* (ancestors) by emotional and social attachments. Generally, mourning is held for thirteen days, but priests and families have made adaptations to this practice in all the three cultures based on personal circumstances.

All the three cultures practice cremation, but each culture has created its local perception of an ideal cremation ritual. Bali has the unique innovation of group cremations in which the entire *banjar* (neighborhood) assists with funeral preparations to curb the cost of cremation. Of the eight cremations I attended in Bali, they can be grouped into three types: one was for a male member of the upper-caste royal family, who merited an individual cremation because of his caste, and also upper socio-economic class. The second type was for a poor man, whose family consulted the Balinese calendar and based on an auspicious day, cremated him right way since they had no economic means to indulge in even slightly elaborate social ceremony. The third type was a group cremation, sponsored by the *banjar*, neighborhood that shared the resources to

cremate six of their deceased members at one time. The six people had died at different times and were buried in their respective family cemeteries until they were exhumed for the cremation ceremony. Group cremations among the same socio-economic class or of the poor with one wealthy upper-caste person are a common occurrence in Bali since the cost, time, and resources associated with cremations are exorbitant. These cremations prove the great variations exist within the Balinese Hindu cremations.

Caste is an integral aspect of Hinduism. This is because caste is an identity mark, which indicates one's place in society as a social marker. It is given to an individual at birth by his family. Hence, caste is socially binding. Caste is intricately tied to *karma*; karmic theory states that one is born according to his karmic deeds from previous lifetimes. Caste is often seen as a derogatory social stratification system, privileging a few and ostracizing all others, but the original intent of the caste system was societal organization. Every human society has some sort of organization system that sustains it; mostly, the powerful members deem the system functional. The caste system, on the other hand, was inherently interdependent; the Brahmin no more important than the Dom. At death, for example, the Brahmin recited chants and the Dom provided the crematory fires. It was a perfect system in its origin and intent but got corrupted over time and by some greedy brahmins who steered the system in their favor and caused the resulting unfairness. One of the merits of the caste system is that it retained indigenous languages and occupations since only the particular caste could speak those languages and practice those occupations. It is no surprise, then, that the rich linguistic, ritual, cultural, and regional diversity of India – and its diaspora - has been retained through the perceived divisiveness of the caste system. Every caste protected its members for its own benefit.

The greatest variation and simplification of cremation rituals are evident in Dallas. The more a family belonged to a larger, established “community” (whether it was caste, state, or language based), the more likely the family was to receive the community’s support (protection) and follow the rituals established by the community. By contrast, members who did not belong to organizations or communities were left to the priest’s guidance, individual decisions, and institutional policies to enact the cremation rituals. It is important to note that none of the rituals were deemed wrong in the Hindu tradition.

The two Mauritian cremations began just after noon and were completed before sunset, aligning with the passing of the sun in the sky. Socio-economic status, caste, and age played important roles in the two cremation rites. The older man was from a lower caste and a poorer family. Social reforms introduced by the Arya Samaj organization are ideally suited to assist and empower families in the lower socio-economic rungs of society, whose members have little or no knowledge of actual Vedas or other priestly texts. The Vedic priesthood produced the Vedic ritual action and the Upanishad path of knowledge, which appealed to the elite social classes, but whose access was denied to most Hindus. This limitation was addressed by the second century B.C.E. through the creation of a third path – devotional theism – which had greater popular appeal and accessibility. *Bhakti*, or devotional theism, emphasized the worship of various popular deities, and its use is encouraged in the Bhagavad Gita, or Song of the Lord (500–200 B.C.E.). Devotional theism emphasizes faith and grace. Faithful devotees who exhibited *bhav*, or spiritual emotion, could receive the divine gift of release from rebirth. Afterlife, then, was not the sterile or abstract “*pitrlok*” (Land of the Ancestor Fathers) but a life - or afterlife - of devotion to God. Consistent with the mission of social upliftment through ritual access, the Vedic – Arya

Samaj cremation focused on individual relation with God through acts of devotion. While conducting this first cremation, Pandita Barran had appealed to the congregation of the bhakti (devotion), which is a path that God is love. She also consoled the gathered by explaining the Eternal Laws, that if we are born, then we must die. The Bhagavad Gita presents the very same concept through a dialogue between Krishna, the divine teacher, and Arjuna, the warrior disciple. Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu, is disguised as a charioteer, and listens to Arjuna's despair at the prospect of fighting his kinsmen to retrieve land that is rightfully his. Then Krishna speaks, "All things born must die." Echoing Yama's words to Nachiketas in the Upanishads, Krishna goes on to say that death is an illusion. Like those of the Katha Upanishad, Krishna's teachings on death argue that the soul does not die. The death of one's physical body is inevitable and should not cause prolonged grief, because the soul does not die at death, rather it takes on a new form. The atman (eternal soul) is birthless and deathless, and cannot be destroyed; one who realizes the eternal self while yet alive will not be reborn but, at death, will merge with the Brahman (Ultimate Reality), what the Upanishads call Brahman (Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2). The Vedas speak of this Brahman as the Source, the universe. This is the reason that even today, mourners in Bali, Mauritius, and Dallas are advised to feel joy at the release of the soul at the time of death, and to not cry.

Whereas the practice of sacrifice (*yajna*, *yadnya*, *havan*, *homa*) in the Vedas is an external ritual offering through the mediums of fire, drink, chants, stories, grain or animal, the path of devotion is an internal ritual offering that requires only spiritual emotion, love of God, and to perform one's duty without attachment to the results. The Arya Samaj cremation ritual interweaves all the preceding philosophies entailed in the three paths to release from *samsara*,

making it inclusive and accessible to the masses. Pandita Barren herself is a *Sudra* woman performing Vedic rituals. That alone should confirm the extremity of the cremation ritual variance.

In Bali, all the rituals within the home and around the corpse were done barefoot, but everyone wore their shoes during the funeral procession and at the open ground of the cremation. In Mauritius, everyone was barefoot within the home but wore shoes at the *samsana*. In Dallas, the pooja is always performed barefoot.

An assembly is a Dallas adaptation, modeled on the tradition of viewing. But the assembly ritual is not a great variation from family and neighbors congregating to pay final respect to the corpse. The ritual is compatible with Hindu final rites, but the ritual form of the assembly is a local adaptation.

The guest-book is a Dallas funeral home innovation. Many Hindu persons in Dallas may not have families locally so perhaps the guest-book, filled with messages of memories of the departed or condolences to the grieving family, is an important object of comfort in a difficult time. Ritual objects communicate larger truths, so the memory of the deceased is symbolically contained in the signed guest-book. The book gives the surviving family something tangible in memory of their departed family member.

The most obvious (and disappointing) feature of Dallas cremation is that it is not an offering for the universe to witness, open-air and cosmos-centered. Balinese and Mauritian cremations are a visual spectacle and an open-air cosmic concert. Electric crematoriums are available in Mauritius but most people choose the open funeral pyre. There are no open-air cremations anywhere within 300-miles of the Dallas area.

The treatment of the corpse is very different in Dallas than in Bali and in Mauritius. The treatment of the corpse and cremation practice in Dallas are shaped by the funeral home, and its standardization (forms, permits, laws, “packages”, list of priests, etc.) reflects institutional and organizational end-of-life experience. City laws mandate cremations to be done in a funeral home. The funeral home director ensures all permits, city codes, and laws are followed. Families almost never take the corpse home. When I asked a 41-year old male computer programmer at the Hanuman Temple in Frisco why that may be the case, he said because the family won’t know what to do. “We need a priest,” and “We need to prepare for the cremation,” he said. Another informant, a 39-year old woman and a banker said, “In India, we can ask neighbors or older family members what to do. People will arrive within minutes.” The BAPS funeral director made an unpleasant expression when I asked him why the corpse is not taken home and prepared there for cremation. After all, homes in Dallas are far bigger than the homes in Bali and in Mauritius. I wanted his answer in words, so I asked if it had anything to do with the deceased’ age or number of family members at home. He told me that the reason no one would like the corpse to go home is because it is “dirty, it is dead.” My research analysis also indicates that surviving family members want as little contact with the dead as ritually permissible. In olden days and where larger, joint-families still exist, it might be possible to take care of the dead within one’s home as persons are available to attend to various needs of attending to the dead body. In nuclear families, generally there are two adults and it is not possible for two persons only to take care of all the end of life rituals. Compounding the small family-size limitation would be the grieving emotions of the persons. Plus, in modern times, attitudes toward death are impersonal. Death is unpleasant and polluting; like a foul smell, it must be eliminated. Hindu persons are conditioned

with the idea of death as the end, certain, and non-negotiable. Considering this fact of life, death must be treated matter-of-factly. Looking at the corpse is like looking at death in the face, a truly vulnerable time for the impacted family, and vulnerability should be minimized, if not avoided at all times. A good reason to not bring the corpse home is because it cannot be brought home. Community members, like agencies and institutions, inform one another of what can and cannot be done. Stephanie Hughes said, “I can be called at any time to pick up a (dead) body from the hospital. A majority of people die in the hospital. The hospital contacts the family to inform them of the passing, and asks the family to which funeral home the body should be released. Bringing the body home is not an option.” Mr. Ashokbhai Patel, who is the BAPS temple service coordinator for *antim vidhi* (final rites) said, “If a person dies at home, then they have to call 911. Depending on various factors (age, method of death, placement of the dead body, etc.), the police will ask for a medical examiner. If not, then the family will be asked to contact a funeral home to pick up the body.” All these practices in Dallas appear law-bound and institutionalized by the funeral industry. Perhaps families do not bring the body home because the laws say they are not supposed to, and the attitude toward death as polluting makes people not want to bring the body home for fear of contamination. It is also possible that the collective ritual knowledge and the accumulated experience, in matters of death, is scant for the much younger and newer diaspora community. That, compounded by a series of forms and legal paperwork related to end of life, are unfamiliar areas for the community. In fact, the family must rely on the funeral home to get all the permits in order, and on the priest to lead the funerary rites. For all these reasons, families don’t know what to do with the corpse or how to get the permits, and hence the corpse is not taken home. In Bali and in Mauritius the corpse is prepared at home for the cremation, then the

pooja ritual is performed to the corpse, and then it is ceremoniously carried, or driven and then carried for a short distance, to the cremation ground. The streets that the now-dead person walked, the stops he made on the way home, the air he breathed, all bear witness to the person's death in the funeral procession.

The Hindu community is growing in Dallas. New precedents are established regularly for the community by community members and service providers. As an example, if anyone wanted to perform the barefoot walk to the crematorium or break a symbolic jug at Hughes Funeral Home, the ritual template has already been laid for them. With the growing community, the needs for specialized services will grow. We can already see this phenomenon taking place in the Indian restaurant and grocery-store chain industries. The needs of the population will be absorbed by existing agencies or businesses, and new businesses will be formed around special needs. When compared to much larger Indian Hindu populations on the east and west coasts, we can find Hindu funeral homes that are owned and operated by Hindu persons. A similar projection can be made for Dallas with its growing population.

The emphasis on cremation time is shared by the Balinese and Mauritian Hindus who cremate around 1 p.m. and 12 noon, respectively. This preference is a symbolic crossing of time after the sun has crossed the zenith and begins setting. In Dallas, cremations take place by appointment; the funeral home preserves the body until the cremation appointment.

Embalming is a permissible Hindu practice but is used among the upper-caste and the priests in Bali, and in rare cases in Dallas. The reasons are different in both the locations. Hindu tradition states that the body must be cremated as soon as possible but not after sunset, or within one day of death. To bury the upper-caste person in Bali would mean defilement through contact

with earth. Embalming, in this case, maintains the ritual purity of the corpse. The three upper-caste members are dvija (twice-born), which means they are reincarnated and elevated souls. They have already undergone the purificatory rite through earth contact in some previous lifetime. To go back to the earth would be reverse, a defilement. Hence, the body remains intact as an offering to the fire (Anantha Murthy 19, Wood 62).

Delayed cremations are rare, and uncommon as of now, but diaspora is scattered everywhere, so a family must make the decision to wait for others to arrive, or proceed on its own. Each family must choose from the tradition what best meets its needs of the moment. “For Hindus, a reverence for scriptural authority can often mean simply that they think that what they do somehow comes from the Vedas, texts which in their antiquity are very rarely used or understood anymore... They exist now primarily as words of power incorporated into newer rites” (Van Voorst, 31).

Because cremations must follow death as soon as possible, the Hughes Funeral Home is prepared for a Hindu cremation always by keeping an *Aum* inscribed casket ready at their large funeral service home. They are accommodating of Hindu cremations right away if there is no other scheduled service; to this end, they will also cite Hindu ritual requirement to city authorities to hasten the permits and processing of forms. Ritual sanctity is maintained when there is cooperation among all the entities involved in the cremation process. Cremation processes are part of the geography in Bali and in Mauritius. Both these locations are islands, but more importantly, they are Hindu-majority and empowered. Hindu beliefs and practices permeate all aspects of life in both the places. In Dallas, on the other hand, Hindus are a minority and much recent arrivals. Given their minority numbers, fewer funerals are done for the Hindu

community than for any majority or larger population. It is possible that one of the temples will acquire land to perform open-air cremations to uphold the tradition. American laws allow for freedom of religion and do not discriminate on religious basis, so it is only a matter of time and someone suggesting to the right community entity the real need of a growing Hindu Dallas community. The community leaders will need to give this development weighted thought. Most Hindus associate the temple with sacred spaces; crematorium, on the other hand, are polluted spaces. Would the crematorium be outside of city limits? Who would be its guardian? Would traditional caste play any role in the cremation attendants? Are these caste members already in Dallas, or would it create a need to bring in newer H1B workers from India? This can be an area of another research study. Pandit Harshvardhan Shukla said, “Priests who perform auspicious rituals (birth, marriage, etc.) do not perform inauspicious rituals (death, *shraddha*, etc.) The two rites are opposite, like birth and death.” He explained that depending on how far back in Hinduism one wishes to go, which is “politically incorrect in today’s society” he said, priests cannot perform both these rites. The Mahapatra brahmin priests, which is a caste within brahmins, perform funerary rituals. “This is not the case anymore because many Hindu rituals have been reformed” he said.

One difference between the Christian and the Hindu viewing of the corpse is that the casket is kept open for full viewing for the Hindus. Unlike in some other traditions, the corpse does not need to appear calm and restful and is not thought to be sleeping or in deep slumber. Irrespective of its comfortable physical and current location, the corpse is still in a limbo, polluting state, awaiting release through cremation.

Women accompany the men in the funeral procession to the cremation ground in Bali, whereas in Mauritius this is not a practice. In Dallas, men and women go to the funeral home and can perform the pooja and attend the assembly, but only the men will go to the crematorium vault. In the exception case of the man in his 30s, the men went first since they were carrying the corpse, and the women followed. The wife with young son briefly stepped forward to turn the switch on. This was an exception, but not an innovation, as the Garuda Purana encourages this practice. “She who does the funeral ceremonies on the death of her husband, and the annual and the fortnightly is called by me, “the Faithful.” This faithful wife lives for the good of her husband; the life is fruitful of her who worships her dead lord” (Garuda Purana, verses 70-72, page 78). An important factor regarding women’s participation in cremation rituals is the religious disposition of the priest, as well as the scriptural texts that the priest adheres to. Given Hinduism’s long-standing tradition, it is possible to draw examples from both sides of women’s participation, in favor of it, or against it.

Priests serve as the bridge between Vedic knowledge and the Hindu community. Each location has a different relationship with the role and position of the priest in ritual performance. The example of immersing the ashes in the Gulf of Mexico by the undocumented family illustrates that rituals must be performed, without the assistance of a priest, if the circumstances demand.

Karma and the theory of rebirth is vague for the Hindu communities in Mauritius and Dallas. Balinese Hindus believe that the deceased will be reborn as the great-grandchild. The Balinese belief could be influenced by the Polynesian animist culture that emphasized ancestor worship. Ideas of rebirth are vague in Hinduism. The Vedas focus on life and the later

Upanishadic texts emphasize on the soul's path to liberation. Concepts of hell and heaven are not original to Hinduism, and when they are borrowed, these are not permanent afterworld locations. The soul has the ability to improve its position through its own *karma*; as a self-correcting entity, it can elevate its own standing. The caste system prescribed in Manu-Smriti indicates one's caste birth as a result of previous life *karma* but does not specify the time needed for rebirth, nor does it advise on any rituals or measures to better one's position in the rebirth.

Ritual adaptations lend continuity to the ritual traditions. Newer technologies such as electric and gas crematoriums are possible means of reducing the corpse to ashes. Plus, these innovations are environmentally safer, ecologically better, and cheaper than open-air fire. The Dallas community does not have a choice in this matter, whereas the Balinese Hindus do not wish for anything other than a combust funeral pyre. From a ritual perspective, one can judge the aesthetics and spectacle of both methods of disposal of the dead, but is the crematorium vault a digression from the tradition, or an advancement in the tradition? In the vault, we don't see the fire flames hungrily devouring the ghee drenched corpse, nor do we witness smoke billowing the offering skyward, making the onlookers wonder about their own inevitable fate in the great turning of Time. Although the spectacle of the ritual is missing, the ritual form is intact, because both the methods result in the remnants of ashes. They are different ways to the same goal of reduction of the body.

Ritual Adaptations and Hindu Cultural Values

Ritual variation and adaptations are not random, impulsive, or simply convenient. Rather, an analysis of each of the cremation adaptations in this study points to their reinforcement of Hindu worldview and cultural values.

Bali – The upper-caste in the Lembu-bull sarcophagus cremation reinforced the merit of one's *karma* to be born as an upper-caste person. The poor man's cremation implies that one must work their way up the caste-ladder. Further, lower-caste and poor are mutually inclusive. When poor and lower-caste people cremate their dead with wealthier and upper-caste persons, there is an elevation in status of the poor and lower-caste through association with the upper-caste. Caste hierarchies are reinforced through the socio-economic transactions of the cremation. The strongest reinforcement of the value of community is carried out in the group cremation of the six-persons. The harmonious functioning of the community enabled the early "release" of the souls of the six persons.

Mauritius – Both the cremations reiterated the value of immediate release of the soul and on the son as the progenitor of the family. Unique to Mauritius is the necessity to maintain a unified Hindu front. Unity of the community is essential in maintaining its positional power. Ritual diversity may be perceived as divisiveness in the community, so concerted effort is made to project homogeneity in the tradition. The two cremations styles absorb the socio-economic differences within the community, reinforce a unified Hindu identity and assert its majority positional power.

Dallas - The release of the grandmother's remains in the Gulf of Mexico serves as a metaphor for release of the soul that was trapped in the body, and for this particular family, trapped in America. The death rites for the young woman's mother and the "bad" death of the young man reveal Indian-American cultural adaptations as the assemblies were held in honor of both the deceased persons. The social nature of the assemblies indicate a broader inclusion of community and friends, which surprisingly, even the Garuda Purana advises (69). The cremation

of the old man that was delayed due to his children living in other places indicates family unity and a deep connection to family. This is exactly what post-cremation rituals are intended to do, to maintain family unity, which the man accomplished through his own vision and death planning. The funeral procession recreated for the man in his 30s attempted to recreate an ideal funeral procession, a Vedic tradition value.

Interdependence of Rituals and Community

The individual is only a temporary figure, so the community's survival is dependent on rituals, and the rituals' survival is depend on the community. Paresh Patel, who is a 40-year old Computer Engineer living in Dallas for 20 years, and who is the BAPS temple administrator said, "We (Hindus) have to teach our culture to our children, otherwise they will get absorbed in others' culture. Our children (referencing the Indian-Hindu children raised in Dallas) have already lost a lot of their culture because they are growing up here (America). If they see us (adults) following our culture, rituals, and traditions, then they will at least know something about themselves, about where we came from. Otherwise, we will lose who we are." Each one of us will pass on, but if we do not leave a connecting dot for our progeny, then they will not know the line that has extended over millenniums to form their identity. If we do not retain the rituals, then they will be lost. Hence, every individual cremation ritual ensures the survival of the community and advances the tradition.

Scope for Further Study

This study places Hinduism outside of India and into a global system. It provides a bird's eye view on global Hinduism, identifying similarities and differences among the communities. Some possible areas for further study are to look at how rituals are used to negotiate position and power among other Hindu diaspora communities, as well as to study how position and power of the diaspora communities impact rituals. A related area of study can be pursued in innovative Hindu rituals developed among the diaspora communities, such as Nyepi, the Balinese Hindu New Year, and the week-long Mahashivratri festival celebration among the Hindus in Mauritius. A much needed area of study among the Hindu diaspora is in countries with Hindus in less positional power and influence in their "new" homelands. Some examples are Fiji, Guyana, and Suriname. There is extensive room for documentation and ritual study in countries with high Indian-Hindu diaspora and workforce population, but with restrictions on public religious or ritual practices. Middle Eastern countries are examples where such studies could take place. Finally, this study focused only on the *Agni-Sanskara* rites in the three Hindu communities; there are endless possibilities for the study of numerous rituals among the many Hindu diaspora communities.

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Aditi Samarth was born in India, and grew up in Bahrain and America. She earned BFA and MA degrees from Texas Tech University in Lubbock, TX. She works in the Dallas County Community College District as a full-time lead faculty member in Arts and Humanities. She is married, and is a mother to two boys and four dogs.

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