

# HINDU DEATH RITES: SUGGESTED GUIDELINES

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## Table of Content

- *Foreword*
- *Action required soon after death*
- *Items required for Cremation / Burial*
- *Things to be done (at home) soon after death*
- *Preparing the body*
- *On reaching the Crematorium*
- *Items required for ash collection*
- *Procedure for ash collection*
- *Death rites - Some explanation*
- *Significance of Cremation and Ceremony*

## FOREWORD

Hindus generally observe many rites throughout their lives. However in this age of rapid changes, many have forgotten some of the rites. Many are also at a loss when confronted with a situation, which necessitates the observance of some of these rites. The last rites performed for the departed souls of those near and dear to us are the most important rites that have to be performed for the peaceful transmigration of the soul to reach the lotus feet of the Lord. **Many of us are not aware of or do not know what has to be done when a sudden death takes place in the family.**

This article has been prepared to help Hindus to observe some basic rites that have to be performed for the departed soul. It attempts to explain the way the rites are performed and the reasons for doing so. Some aspects of the rites may vary from the practices of the sub-groups of the Hindu community.

## ACTION REQUIRED SOON AFTER DEATH: OUTSIDE THE HOME

When a person is pronounced dead, the following formalities have to be attended to. Obtain the death certificate from the appropriate authorities. Follow the standard procedure in obtaining such a certificate. The nearest Police Station may also be approached for assistance.

## FOR CREMATION

With the Cremation Permit, a person has to approach anyone of the Funeral Services to book the cremation hall and get the time of cremation. One has to book the vehicle to carry the casket to the crematorium. The company has to be clearly informed of the time of cremation.

If a person dies in hospital the body can be handed over to a Funeral Service for necessary preparation for public viewing. On the day of cremation, if one wishes the body can be brought home to perform last rites. Alternatively, these rites can be performed at the Funeral parlor if the home is inconvenient.

No one will be in the mood to discuss the price of the casket but one should not pay more than necessary. Understandably, the price varies from company to company. Get a receipt for the payment.

## ITEMS REQUIRED FOR CREMATION

1. Two mud pots (one small, one big) with covers
2. One kg of rice
3. Black Gingelly
4. A few packets of camphor, agarbathi (*udubathi*) and an oil

lamp if one is not available at home.

5. 2.5 metres of white cloth
6. Betel leaf and nut
7. Flowers or garland and Tulasi leaves
8. A few pieces of dry wood and charcoal, match box. One sandal wood splinter if available.
9. Turmeric, kumkumam, if deceased is female (non-widow); vibhuthi and sandalwood paste, if deceased is male
10. One packet of milk, if deceased is a child
11. \$10 worth of coins and Ganges water
12. Small wood splinters for torches (pandham)
13. Abhishekam materials for bathing (depending on family custom)
14. One tin of ghee for torch

Any other items depending on the advice of the elders in the family, group or community. Please bear in mind that this is not the time to argue with anyone about the relevance or irrelevance of things. Please proceed calmly and patiently.

### THINGS TO BE DONE (AT HOME) SOON AFTER DEATH

1. Pour a few spoons of Ganges water or Tulsi water into the mouth either at the time of death or soon after a person is dead. Place the body on a mat, head facing south. Repeat 'Nama Shivaya' three times in the right ear of the deceased. The son or an elder of the family should do this.
2. Make sure that the mouth and eyes are closed. Tie the toes with a piece of string bringing the two legs

together. Place the hands with the two thumbs tied together on the chest as if he or she is doing a namaskar.

3. If Tulsi is available place a few or them below the head next to the right ear. Cover the body up to the neck with a white cloth (for males and widows.) If deceased is female (married or unmarried), an orange, yellow or red cloth is used.
4. An oil lamp (with one wick only) and an agarbathi are lit and kept near the head. A photograph of deceased family's favourite deity may be placed at the head side. Outside the house prepare a fire in an earthen pot using a few pieces of wood, charcoal and camphor. This fire should be kept alive all the time.
5. If possible, recite Shivapuram by Saint Manikavasagar, the Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2 from Sloka 12 to 30, Narayana Sukta, or play a tape of these with soft background music (without drums). Other types of prayers or thevarams can also be sung without emotion.

### PREPARING THE BODY

1. A white piece of cloth is held over the vessel containing the water. Close relatives rub oil and seekka (bath powder) on the head of the dead person before it is bathed. If the condition of the body permits, it can be given a bath with abhishekam materials. One or two hours before leaving home, the body should be bathed. A new or the favorite dress of the deceased is used to decorate the body. The body of the female should be washed and clothed by females only. The whole procedure should be done without commotion and noise. The performer also takes a bath and remains in wet clothes.

2. After the body has been dressed up, it should be placed for viewing in the casket. For men and widows either vibhuthi or chandanam is used to decorate the forehead. For females the turmeric powder and kumkumam are used. The body should be kept in a simple state without decorations and jewellery. Betel leaf and nut is to be placed next to the body on the right side. Some people keep the milk packet next to the dead body of the child. Others keep a few coins and fruits tied in a new piece of cloth or towel in the casket.
3. Thevaram is usually sung at this stage. Before the casket is removed, the ladies should pay their last respects first by placing rice or rice and gram at or near the mouth. The relatives follow suit followed by friends. Women are not advised to perform this ceremony at the crematorium. The names of deceased family's favourite Gods should be recited continuously and throughout. The casket is removed out of the house - the legs first.
4. Before the casket is placed in the vehicle, the grandsons of the deceased go around the body thrice holding a small torch (*pandham*)
5. The casket is placed in the vehicle and driven to the crematorium. Two persons should accompany the body; the person who performs the rites and one other who could be an elder in the family. The person who performs the rites should carry the earthen pot with the fire in it. Small coins are thrown on the way to the crematorium by some people, signifying that irrespective of the size of the personal or family wealth, the dead has to leave everything behind.
6. Those that remain at home will clean the house up to the main entrance. All of them take a bath after rinsing the clothes they were wearing and other things used. Discard the mat or any other spread on which the body was lying.

#### ON REACHING THE CREMATORIUM

1. In the crematorium, the casket is carried from the vehicle to the platform with legs pointing South first. It is preferable to keep the casket in such a way that the leg faces the incineration chamber. In case it is not in this direction (e.g. facing the gathering), please ensure that it is carried with the legs first when entering the incineration chamber.
2. After placing the body on the platform, the person who conducts the rites circumambulates to walk around anti-clockwise three times, usually starting at the leg point followed by close relatives. Others would do the same but just one round. A few grains of rice, or coins or flowers are placed at the mouth by the relatives and friends after each round.
3. Last prayers - this is the time to recite the prayers which can be mantras, slokas from the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, Thevaram etc. The theme is to remind ourselves that the eternal soul has to commence its journey leaving the mortal body behind. The soul and body are finally separated and the soul peacefully journeys to its destination.
4. After the prayers are recited, the person who performs the rites will carry a mud pot of water on his left shoulder. Another person - next of kin, stands behind him with a sharp

iron instrument. Both of them go around the casket anti-clockwise three times. When the person carrying the pot reaches the head side, he stops for a second or two, and the one with the iron instrument hits the pot gently to make a hole so that water flows out from the hole. The first hole is made at the bottom of the pot, the second one at the centre above the first hole and the third one at the top, above the centre hole. This water is splashed with the back of the left hand onto the body by the person who follows. This procedure is repeated till three holes are made. At the third round, the pot is dropped behind the person carrying it. He walks away without turning back or looking at the body. The water or Ganga is the medium that separates the dead from the living in this case the nearest of the kin.

5. The close relatives and friends may go up to the viewing window. The others disperse quietly.
6. Whatever things that were brought from the home should be left behind or discarded and are not to be taken back home. Keep the place clean.

#### ITEMS REQUIRED FOR ASH COLLECTION

1. Two mud pots
2. Big plastic bags
3. One Kg of rice mixed with green gram
4. Two or three banana leaves (entire)
5. Betel leaf and nut
6. Few bananas
7. Loose flowers
8. Cooked rice and green gram
9. Few darbha grass

10. Udubathi (agarbathi), camphor match box.
11. Two or three packets of milk
12. Small mud oil lamp, wick and oil
13. A small towel or piece of cloth (about 1 yard long) white or red
14. Cooked Sesbania (agathee) leaves

#### PROCEDURE FOR ASH COLLECTION

1. The person who performs the rites and others will go to the crematorium the next morning to collect the ashes which will be kept on a long metal tray.
2. The procedure is as follows:
  - a). The Karmi (performer) standing at the head-side will sprinkle water and then milk on the ashes three times.
  - b). Pick up the bones from the head, neck, chest region (vertebrae), the hip and leg and place them in two pots. The remaining ashes can be lumped together and placed on a banana leaf. Any excess to be placed in plastic bags.
  - c). If the ashes are taken to the sea, carry three to four litres of water with you. Whether at the crematorium or near the sea, the performer and if necessary others who help him will take a bath and remain in wet clothes while performing the rites.
3. Whether it is done in the crematorium or at the seaside, the following rites are performed:
  - a). Spread the banana leaves one over the other with ends visible (tips facing south). Spread the rice and gram on the leaves in an oval shape. Arrange the bones on the spread of rice. Place the bigger bones in the same order it was collected (from head to toe, with head facing south).

- Place the other pot with ashes next to the bones on the banana leaves.
- b). Light the lamp and *uthbathi* Arrange the betel leaf, nut and fruits and place them near head side. The towel or the cloth is to be placed around the heap of bones and the mud pot with ashes.
  - c). Take the Ganges water, mix it with tap water and sprinkle it over the bones followed by milk and water. Make sure that all the bones are soaked completely. Recite the names of Shiva, Narayana, Govinda or whatever you are used to or the one who died used to recite.
  - d). Sprinkle the water on the betel leaf, rice and fruits and offer it to the departed. Say the appropriate mantras (if known). Pindas to be placed on darbha.
  - e). Perform the final arathi, anti-clockwise.
  - f). The performer should place all the contents in one mud pot and pour milk and water to the brim so that the contents are immersed with the liquid.
  - g). If it is done near the seaside, immerse the ashes in the sea by walking into the sea up to the chest with a supporter. When doing this, one is to look at the sun or turn east and offer a silent prayer to God requesting that peace be granted to the departed soul. The performer and others will take a bath in the sea recite the names of God or offer a prayer before returning home.
  - h). Clean the premises before you leave. Except for the utensils, pack up all the perishables and place them in the garbage bins. Nothing to be taken back home.

- i). While doing the above in the crematorium, the attendants will assist in washing out the ashes and bones. Before returning home from the crematorium take a bath.
4. On the 10<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> or 31<sup>st</sup> day, depending on family tradition (take the advice of your elders) visit the Shiva or Vishnu temple or any other that your family members prescribe or decide. Pray for peaceful journey of the departed soul.

### DEATH RITES - SOME EXPLANATION

1. *Why are the final rites not performed by women/ladies?*

According to the Hindu Dharmas, womenfolk are given the right to only serve their husbands to the best of their ability. The sins and good deeds done by parents are inherited by the sons. Hence only they have the right to perform the death rites.

2. *Before cremation, why is a pot filled with water brought round the body three times? Why is it that before each round a hole is made into the pot and finally broken completely after the third round?*

After death, it is believed that our soul is sent to three places during its journey to eternity to face the consequences of sins committed during our lifetime. And these three places are called *Nagaram*, *Rouravam* and *Maharouravam*. Water is not available at these three places and hence a pot full of water is brought round the body three times and then broken. Thereafter it is believed that in whichever place the soul is, there will be sufficient supply of water. There are also other explanations for this ritual.

3. *Why are thevarams and hymns sung besides the body following death?*

When the soul departs the body, it's feelings do not depart immediately. Hence, the thevarams and hymns that we sing can be heard by the soul. Besides Thevarams, the Karmakaandam from the Vedas are also recited, As a result, the sins committed by the deceased is reduced and in his next lifetime, he can be reborn with high esteem.

4. *Is it correct to cremate or bury a Hindu?*

According to Hinduism, only *Sanyasis* are buried. Their life is said to leave through a gap in the skull. But for others, it leaves through the eyes, nose, mouth or ears. Another theory is that as our body develops with heat, when life leaves us, we should also be burnt, hence we are cremated. However in the case of a male child below eleven years old and a female who is 7 years and below, burial is practised upon death.

5. *Why is the ash mixed in the sea?*

All the holy rivers join the sea and by throwing the ash into the sea, it is believed that it is mixed with all the holy rivers in the world. As such the soul can also be reborn in any part of the world.

6. *After how many days can an individual visit the temple following a death at home?*

If the father or mother in the family departs, it is the normal practice for the eldest son not to leave the country's borders for a year. And this code is also extended to visiting temples - i.e. the eldest son does not go to the Temple for a year. However in the developing world

today, observing such a practice may not be completely feasible. As such, the individual can visit the temple after 16 days of mourning.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF CREMATION AND CEREMONY

Last rites or ceremonies performed for the dead is to help the further journey of the *jiva* or *atma* (soul) who has left or put off the gross body. The *jiva* or more appropriately called *prana*, the invisible factor, remains (now called *Preta*) near and around the body in this world (*Bhuloka*). The gross body is carried to the crematorium so that it is burnt and convened into basic constituents as early as possible. When the gross body (*Sharira*) is burnt, the *prana* is rapidly detached and the detachment is solemnised by the mantras or prayers at the cremation. After the mortal remains of the body are returned to nature the *jiva* or *preta* stands by itself in its own domain called *pretaloka*. Further ceremonies or Shanthi prayers are performed which help the *jiva* to travel from its domain to the domain of ancestors (*Pitruloka*). The *preta* is enrolled or joined (*Sapindi-karnam*) along with *pithrus*. After some times, the journey of the soul or *atma* continues to join the supreme soul or *paramatma*.

