
UNIT 29 LIFE CYCLE RITUAL-II: DEATH

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29.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying the following unit you should be able to

- describe Hindu death rituals
- discuss Syrian Christian death rituals
- explain Sikh death rituals
- describe death rituals of the Korku
- discuss some approaches to ritual.

29.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will describe and analyse the rituals of death in four communities. These are the Hindus, Syrian Christians, Sikhs and the Korku tribals. Before proceeding further it is advisable you to go over Section 28.2 of Unit 28, *Life-Cycle Rituals-I: Birth and Marriage*. This section discusses aspects of ritual. You should then read Section 28.3 which is Saraswati's *Functions of Ritual*. These are important to an understanding of this unit (Unit 29). We point out here that birth, marriage, and death are integrally related. The form part of a whole. This whole process can be of two types

- i) cyclical
- ii) linear

In the case of a cyclical process we find as in the case of Hinduism, that there is no belief in the permanent cessation of life. Birth leads to marriage, old age and then death. This is followed by birth again. The soul, which is vital to life and living simply gets a new body to inhabit. In many tribes too of which the Todas and

Korkus are good examples there are similar beliefs. This is often held to be traceable to their Hinduization but it is not necessarily so. Tribes can have these beliefs without being accused of borrowing them from Hinduism. Thus reincarnation and *Samsara* make our study of ritual of Hinduism into one that is governed by the essentially cyclical nature of these concepts. Life does not stop for more than a moment. It goes on and on until *Moksa* or absorption into godhead is reached. This is not meant for any but the most elevated souls. A majority of Hindus must travel in *Samsara*. From one life to another working out their *Karmas* or deeds until in some hypothetical future they too draw very close to sainthood and the consequent *Moksa*.

In the case of linear rituals of life cycle we have the case of Christianity and Mohammedanism. Here birth, marriage, death and heaven or hell form a linear stretch. In Christianity it is heaven or hell and in Islam it is again heaven or hell. There is no return to the earth. Death is a full stop so far as life on earth is concerned. It then continues in some other world. The sources for this unit are given in the section on Further Reading.

29.2 THE IDEA OF DEATH

Unlike birth and marriage which bring pleasant memories with them, death is another name for horror. Death shocks the relatives, friends, and acquaintances very deeply. Death ceases normal relations and the fear of the body decomposing is very great. There is a non-acceptance of the same. In order to ward off the fear and malignancy of death many rituals arose. So stark a reality as death has to be accepted and rituals devised for the next stretch of life whether cyclical or linear.

According to primitive beliefs of Hinduism the soul survived the body. Thus death was that process by which the soul separated from the body. Again in dreams and sickness the soul separated temporarily from the body. But death was unique. The soul went away never to inhabit the same body again. Those who were alive felt mixed sentiments towards the dead. These were primarily feelings of dread release and fear.

Additionally there was the practical need to dispose of the dead body. Decomposition which occurs after death makes it difficult to keep the body for a long while. It was thus removed with care and disposed off with ritual. The rituals connected with disposal of the dead are to free the survivors from pollution of death and to put the dead to rest with dignity. We will now describe death rituals among various communities.

29.3 HINDU FUNERAL RITES

There are several variations all over India of the Hindu funeral rites. After death the body is bathed and laid out on view for all those who want *darshan* of the departed soul. A picture or some article belonging to the dead person is garlanded and joss sticks lit around it, if this is possible.

In some cases *mantras* are repeated at the side of the dead body. In some cases *tulsi* (basil) water is dropped into the dying persons mouth.

29.3.1 The Bier of the Corpse

A structure is made of bamboo which looks like a six feet ladder upon which the corpse is laid. The big toes of the corpse are tied together. The corpse is already covered with a white or red sheet depending upon the status of the dead. It is a married women then a red shroud is used. There are several other rituals for a

married woman. White shrouds are used for everybody else. The dead body needs to have been washed and cleanly clothed. These are preliminal rites which take place before the funeral itself. In a sense they are rituals which have the function of maintaining ritual order and securing the corpse to the bier.

Box 29.01

Cremation is the most recognised form of disposal of a corpse among the Hindu from the Vedas upto the present day. This custom is believed to be the most refined by the Hindus. Some causes could have led to this belief.

- i) Tribes which were nomadic found it convenient to cremate and carry only some bones of the ancestor.
- ii) Desire to be free of the ghost is also a powerful motive. When the body was gone the ghost could not stay.
- iii) Fire which consumes entire forests at times probably suggested its utility in burning away the dead as well.
- iv) These reasons were strong in the early phases but later on it was the prestige and honour given to 'Agni' (fire) that made it the method par excellence to exhume a corpse.

Once it is put on the bier and secured firmly onto it with rope, the near male relatives shoulder the bier and carry it towards the cremation ground. Shoulders are changed several times on the way to the cremation grounds. In urban areas however a hearse-van is usually requisitioned and the body is driven to the cremation ground. It is led by the eldest male, a son preferably.

29.3.2 The Funeral Procession

The procession then goes to the cremation ground by foot. Here the body is put near the cremation shed and wood is piled up into the pyre for the corpse. Meanwhile the priest performs certain ceremonies on the corpse for its betterment in the next world.

Thereafter the corpse is laid on the pyre without the bier and covered up with wood. The pyre is always lit by the eldest living son. Except in the absence of the same, a male relative lights the pyre. The main mourners go around the funeral fire keeping their right shoulder, towards the pyre. This is not always so. Among the Coorgs and the Kumaonis some groups go in an anticlockwise manner keeping the left shoulder to the pyre. This varies from group to group. The fire is then left to burn and the cranium is staved in by the eldest son. This is to free the trapped soul. This is a liminal stage in which the body transits from flesh and blood to bone and ashes.

29.3.3 Collection of Bones

The bones are collected a day later when the pyre has cooled off and put in earthen pots. These pots are taken to a river and immersed there. Holy men's bones and ashes are made into a memorial called a *Samadhi*. On the fourth day from death a prayer is organised for the peace of the departed soul. Finally a prayer is held annually for the departed soul. We must remember however that this is a variation not found all over India. It is also to be remembered that a funeral is a polluting event and the mourners either go home and bathe or bathe in the cremation ground itself if the inclination and facilities are there. There may also be a funeral feast later on. Collection of bones and their immersion into a holy river are all postliminal customs. They indicate an incorporation into the world of ancestors. This postliminal

phase include rituals like *Chautha*, *Pagade* and *Shraddha* among the Punjabis which comprise the postliminal phase. *Chautha* is held on the fourth day after the death and towards its termination *Pagade* is given to the eldest remaining survivor. It vests him with the authority of the head of the household. *Shraddha* is kept annually in memory of the deceased and the welfare of his or her soul.

29.4 SYRIAN CHRISTIAN DEATH RITUALS

The death ceremonies of the Syrians reflect reverence and solemnity. In the Syrian Christian church there is no such ritual as the extreme unction or last rites. But there are certain rituals at the time of illness. The priest is usually at the bedside and as the end approaches, prayers are chanted. The priest whispers the basic doctrinal beliefs in the dying person's ear. When death occurs women commence weeping and beating their breasts. It becomes obvious to the neighbourhood that death has taken place. Kitchen fires are extinguished and no cooking is done until after the funeral has taken place. The body is washed and dressed and placed in a room facing East with a cross at the head and candles to either side. Incense is burned. Prayers and hymns are chanted throughout the time the body is in the house. Clearly these are preliminal rites when the priest is at the bedside of the dying person. However death does not occur gradually all the time. There may be an accident. In such a case the rest of the rites are observed as given above. They are rites of separation. The group is attempting to separate themselves from the deceased and preparing themselves for transitional/liminal rites.

29.4.1 Procession to Graveyard

The dead body is anointed with oil by the priest. The sign of the cross is made on the face, breast, and knees with oil. The funeral procession then leaves for the Church to lay the body to rest. Graveyards in Kerala are usually in the church compound. The body is placed in a coffin and carried to the graveyard. Women of the household do not accompany the procession. The elaborate funeral service comprises prayers and hymns. When the coffin is lowered into the grave the priest throws mud into it in the sign of a cross. Each mourner also throws in mud while



A graveyard with symmetrically laid out graves with epitaphs on the head stones.

the prayers are said. The Syrian Christians bury the corpse with head to the west so that it faces the east. This follows the firm belief that the messiah will come from near Jerusalem. The ceremony right from the anointing of the corpse with oil and the priest making signs of the cross, till when it is laid into the ground, head facing west are all rites of transition. The body is in the grave and mud is being thrown in. It will gradually disappear and will not longer inhabit the social world. These rites indicate this liminal phase. This ritual communicates this 'disappearance' nonverbally.

After the funeral the mourners return home. Here they are served a simple meal of rice.

29.4.2 The Purification Ceremony

In older times mourners were considered to be under pollution till the eighth or tenth day. A purification ceremony known as *pullakuli* was held thereafter. This custom was borrowed from the Nambudiris. Except daily wage earners the mourners do not keep engagements till the fortieth day. On this day a special ceremony is held at the end of which the priest blesses everybody by letting them kiss the back of his hand. A non-vegetarian meal is provided and this brings to end the period of official mourning. On each death anniversary a ceremony is performed. A requiem mass is held in the church. A candle is also lit on the grave and some charity is distributed to the needy. It is clear the rites of post liminality are somewhat extended among the Syrian Christians who do not keep social engagements till the fortieth day. The priest then blesses and declares this phase closed and after several ceremonies described above. Further mourning is kept to a death anniversary.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What are the main points of the Syrian Christian funeral. Describe the same in about 5-7 lines.

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- 2) Discuss the significance of the collection of bones among Hindu death rituals. Use about 5-7 lines.

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29.5 SIKH DEATH RITUALS

Sikhs are of the view that in a hot climate the funeral should take place quickly, preferably a day after the death has occurred. They practice cremation. Burial at sea is permitted and not considered wrong, but cremation has been the tradition of five hundred years. The ashes can be buried and this has happened in the case of samadhis and shrines of saints. However, usually the ashes are immersed into a nearby river. Funeral moments are not considered desirable and the Gurus forbade any such thing in their case, but we find that *gurdwaras* sprang up in such locations. Thus the preliminal customs are done quickly and with efficiency and cremation is the favoured method.

29.5.1 Cremation, A Family Affair

Cremation is attended by the entire family, unlike the Hindus where the women stay behind. The body is washed and it is ensured that the five Symbols of *Sikhism* adorn it, that is the *Kirpan*, *Kaccha*, *Kanga*, *Kara* and *Kesh*. It is taken on a bier to the cremation ground in a procession. The mourners sing hymns. The funeral pyre is lit by a close male relative and the evening hymn is sung during the cremation. Prayers are also offered, including the *Ardas*.

When the mourners get home again it is customary to wash one's hands and face and many of them bathe as well. A complete reading of the *Guru Granth Sahib* begins and goes on for the next ten days intermittently in stretches of about an hour of reading followed by intervals, till the include reading is completed. The preliminal customs do include getting the body ready and dressed. However when the fire is lit we are with the transitional/liminal rites. The post-liminal rites then begin and go on until the mourners get home, bathe and the complete reading of the *Guru Granth Sahib* is done in the next ten days as described. These rituals indicate aspects of ritual as an occupation by those who chant (*Guru Granth Sahib*) and ritual as a way of life in that death will always be where life is.

29.5.2 Karah Prasad

An important social custom which has deep cultural significance in Sikh rites is the distribution of *Karah Prasad*. The mourners are given *Karah Prasad*. The sharing of the food has deep meaning and signifies the continuity of social life at a time when it is ruptured due to death. This method of affirming life contrasts with such practices as going into isolation, fasting, and manifestations of ritual grief *Karah Prasad* is also a postliminal rite and indicates that the transitional phase has ended. **It is also a ritual which rejuvenates society as it is given to all present in the ritual.**

It is believed that good *Karma* leads to birth as a Sikh. It gives one a chance to come into contact with *gurbani* and to seek liberation. Dying persons are read *gurbani* to, the message of which is that the holy name is the most precious possession and those who do not chant it will repent their ways.

Activity 1

Describe in two pages the details of any Hindu/Christian/Sikh death ritual that you have attended and can remember. Try to interpret the meaning of the various rites according to popular explanations. Compare your notes with other students in the Study Centre, if possible.

29.6 DEATH AND FUNERAL AMONG THE KORKUS

When a man is close to death among the Korkus, the dying person is served rice water or plain water to drink. If he is unable to swallow it he is considered to be close to death. He is then laid on the ground. If a Korku dies on a bed, then that bed is discarded forever. No one would sleep on such a bed for fear that the dead persons spirit would come and bother him.

Korkus lament every death in the Clan. The women strike themselves on their head and chest. They cry words of sorrow. These words express a longing to go with the dead person. A bier is made by the men with bamboo poles and seven cross bars. The corpse is denuded of all clothes and jewellery. The dead body of males is wrapped in a white sheet. The corpse of married women is wrapped in a red cloth and that of widows in a white sheet.

When a women becomes a widow she laments and takes off all her jewellery. On the other hand a widower does not do anything like that. He sits mourning near the corpse of the wife. A Korku widow is allowed to put on her jewellery after ten days. These are all preliminal aspects of a funeral and the Korkus are similar to Syrian Christians in the beating of the chest in sorrow. Among the Hindus too a widow removes her jewellery, just as a widow does among the Korkus.

29.6.1 The Funeral Procession

When all funeral arrangements are ready the procession begins. The eldest son carries with him an earthen pot containing rice water. If the eldest son is not there, a younger brother or a close relative takes over. At half distance to the graveyard the group stops. The bier is put on the ground and carriers change place from left to right. Women do not accompany the procession as their wailing and crying disturb the spirit world.

The Korku villages have their own graveyards where graves are dug somewhat haphazardly and mounds are seen covered with stones and thorns.

In the burial ground a hole 3-4 feet in depth is dug. A north-south direction is kept, the face being kept looking north. The Southern bottom where the head is kept is coated with cowdung and leaves. Before putting the body into the grave a few copper coins are thrown in. Flour and turmeric is sprinkled around the grave. The body is placed on its back with head to the south facing north. A coin is sometimes put into the mouth of the diseased, so that he or she may use it in the next world. The grave is half-filled with mud and lined with thorns. It is then filled with earth. The earth is loose and not pounded since this may hurt the dead person. When he or she will be reborn, they believe, the signs of such pounding will be on his body. The 'packing' of thorns and boulders into the grave is to keep wild animals from gnawing at the body. Occasionally a coin; flute or other articles are buried with the body. The pot with rice water is broken at the head of the grave. This is for the diseased to eat if he is unable at once to find something to eat in the other world. **We can see so far that these rituals are those of separation from the social world and incorporation into the other. These are rites of passage.**

All these rites are also an expression of affections at the separation of the dead person. They feel obliged to send off the dead person in the best possible way. The liminal customs are such that they make it clear to everyone who is participating that the man or woman has passed over to the world of the dead. They are rituals of socialization and spiritual merit. They also have an aspect of therapy in them. Once the man or woman is buried the liminal aspect gradually closes with the pot of rice being broken at the head of the grave.

Activity 2

Note down the main features of the Korku funeral. Compare these notes with those you have made in Activity 1. What similarities and differences do you find in the Hindu/Christian/Sikh funerals as compared to the Korku funeral. Try to analyse the differences and similarities of the ritual. Compare your efforts to those of other students, if possible at the Study Centre.

29.6.2 Post Funeral Customs

When the funeral is over the mourners (men) bathe in a closeby river or bathing area. They wear a turban which is washed later. The bonds with the diseased are broken at about the half way point under a *ber* tree. Here they each pluck a leaf and pick up a stone. They wave them overhead and throw them away. This is a rite of purification and segregation. It expresses the breaking of all bonds with the diseased. A brass pitcher full of water is carried back and a little water is poured in each persons hand. He waves it over his head and drops it on his left foot. This foot is held over the fire at the door. **This is a purificatory ritual that accompanies every funeral.**

The postliminal rites continue. In the evening at the house of mourning a flour silhouette of the man is drawn. It is usually 10 cm long. A top of this a basket is kept upside down. After an hour the basket is removed and the silhouette is examined. From any changes in the patter made by insects the people try to find out why the man died and how his spirit would be. If changes are found near the stomach, for instance, it is said he died of stomach disorder. Disturbances during these rites are also taken as signs of witchcraft. The divination especially the aspect concerning the spirit can be viewed as a rite of incorporation in the other world. The postliminal rites here among the Korkus are very specific and include bathing, throwing leaves overhead and pouring water from a brass pitcher into the hand of each mourner. These rituals are communicating that there is a distinction between the dead and those who are alive. These actions also have a therapeutic value giving the mourners something to do. The flour silhouette, 10 cm long also serves to convince the bereaved group of people that there was specific reason for the death.

After divination is over a chicken is killed and roasted. It is eaten with rice. After this meal, often a woman goes into a trance and the belief is that it is the dead person who possesses her. She advises the mourners often about the future.

Then a dinner is proposed in the house of the mourners. No food is cooked while the body is there. Dirges are sung each morning in this house. They become shorter and shorter as the separation becomes complete.

The memorial banquet is held about two weeks later. All the guests contribute to it. At the start a goat and some chickens are sacrificed. These are an offering to the dead and helps the spirit to find peace. Once this sacrifice is over the spirit comes to the "middle post" of the house. here a prayer is offered for forty-five days after the banquet. As mentioned earlier these postliminal rites through which the dead person will become incorporated into the 'other' world are more elaborate among the Korkus including the forty-five days prayer offered at the "middle post" of the house.

After death people become spirits if they are old, and if they die young they are devoured by an evil soul. **Naturistic beliefs are there and spirits are believed to exist in whirlwinds and other natural phenomena.** Belief in rebirth does exist among the Korkus. They also believe that dead people are usually indifferent

to those who are alive. They place memorial stones in a pile under some shady tree just outside the village. There are basic beliefs of retribution and reward according to the deeds that have been performed in heaven by the individuals concerned. Good deeds mean good rewards in heaven and bad deeds punishment in hell.

29.6.3 The Memorial Feasts

The postliminal rites described above are not complete and after one year a memorial feast is given. *It is only after the sidoli feast that the spirit is finally laid to rest that incorporation into the other world is considered to be complete.* All this while liminal aspects remain and the spirit exists but only in transition.

The feast is served, organized and arranged by the family. All kinsmen and affines are invited to the feast. The feast sets the spirit at rest. All their remains are aken to the riverside. A memorial post called '*munda*' is erected out there. It is made of teak wood. It is usually two feet below the ground and three feet above it, and is square in shape. If a man dies at a foreign location the *munda* must be rector at his original home. However not all clans of the Korku erect *mundas*.

Further a *mando* hut facing a north-south direction is also erected. Inside it are seven cone shaped stones got from the river. Each stone represents a deity. Such a hut is meant only for shamans and village priests.

Several other feasts follow and they are indicative of an attempt by the living to remove the dead person, body and soul, from them. It is also an attempt to help the dead person to be incorporated into the other world. In between, it may be said, lies a type of liminal phase for the dead person's spirit. One interesting rite of solidarity is the carrying of the basket with a light (*diya*) in it to every neighbours' house since the last *sidoli*. Then hymns are sung. The chief organizers of the feast dress like groom and bride. Their garments are knotted together. A boy or girl may substitute for them with no obligation to marry subsequently. After midnight the two are separated and go to opposite sides of the room and shout at and abuse each other. The other guests soon follow suit. This is an old ritual and the abuse may even seem grossly abscent to outsiders. It is quite obvious that their concerns are now with this world and with each other rather than any spirits. On the third day of the feast the *munda* is carried to the place of the *Kharkia* where holi is celebrated.

A male goat is killed here. On the fourth day of the feast the *munda* is erected near a river. Several other rituals occur. However, they all express incorporation for the dead persons spirit from the world of the living, and life in the world of the dead.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Discuss the significance of the post-funeral customs among the Korkus. Use about 5-7 lines for your answer.

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2) Describe the main points of the Sikh cremation in 5-7 lines.

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29.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit is the second part of the life cycle rituals and deals mainly with death rituals. It is not separate from the unit on birth and marriage but has been put in a separate unit due to reasons of convenience. The unit begins with the idea of death and Hindu funeral rites. We next studied Syrian Christian funerals followed by Sikh funerals and lastly Korku death rites. We have therefore covered the subject adequately.

29.8 KEY WORDS

- Cremation** : The act of burning a dead body with fire so as to exhume it completely e.g. Hindu funeral.
- Cyclical view of ritual** : A ritual which occurs periodically such as the death anniversary. Also applied to the cyclical view of life cycle ritual e.g. the Hindu where death leads to life and life to death in an endless cycle till liberation or *Moksa* is attained.
- Linear view of ritual** : A ritual which has a full stop such as death among the Christians. The dead person never returns to earth, hence death is an ending on a linear path, which moves from birth to death.
- Samsara** : The Hindu view that the soul moves from one body to another for an indeterminate number of times till it attains *Moksa*.

29.9 FURTHER READINGS

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Fuchs, Stephen. 1988. *The Korkus of the Vindhya Hills*. Inter-India Publications : New Delhi.

29.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The main points of the Syrian Christian funeral are that it is a burial presided by a priest and mourners. The graveyard is in the compound of a church when the coffin has been lowered into the grave each mourner throws in some mud. The face is put facing towards, east, that is Jerusalem, from where the Messiah is expected to come.
- 2) Among Hindus the bones are collected the day after cremation when the pyre has cooled off. These bones are usually immersed into the nearest river. Holy men's bones and ashes are made into a memorial mound called a *Samadhi*.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The post-funeral customs of the Korkus are that they bathe after the burial. They pause half way back and throw a leaf and a stone away. A local diagnosis of the death is made with a flour silhouette. Two weeks later there is a memorial banquet. After an year the *sidoli* feast is also held.
- 2) For the Sikhs cremation is the preferred method of disposal. Funeral mounments are not made. The corpse is washed and the five K's are put in order. The body is cremated amidst prayers. The mourners return and a reading of the *Guru Granth Sahib* is begun. *Karah Prasad* is given prayers and *gurbani* is also sung.