

Shraddh and Tarpan, Pittr-Paksha, obseques

(By Pawan Pandita)

Rituals of religion, like the husk of a seed , preserve its life and make it germinate. Philosophy without religion becomes meaningless. Religion without rituals becomes insipid. The rituals of a religion, like the husk of a seed, preserves its life and make it germinate. It is only when the rituals are separated from the faith and assume an independent existence that they become mechanical and lifeless.

Human beings have not yet reached those heights where they can dispense with all sorts of symbols and rituals and devote themselves to purely abstract principles. Rituals give a concrete shape to the abstract spiritual ideals and add colour and zest to life.

Worship of God through symbols and images, offering oblations into specially consecrated sacrificial fires, the practice of meditation at sunrise, noon and sunset,- these were some of the rituals obligatory on almost all the Hindus during the ancient days. Even to this day, these have been kept up, though in a modified form, and with lesser intensity.

A wisely planned and solemnly conducted ritual prepares the ground, creates the atmosphere, suggests the mood and predisposes the mind so that the spiritual aspirant may easily detach himself from the world and feel the mysterious presence of the Supreme power called God. Shraddh is a ritualistic custom unique to the Hindu religion. The Hindu scriptures which include the Vedas and the Puranas like the Agni puran, Garud puran, Vayu puran etc. explain the significance of "shraddh", for whom it should be performed, who performs it, when and how it should be done . What is Shraddh ?

श्रद्धया पितृन् उद्दिश्य विधिना क्रियते तत् श्राद्धम् ।

What ever you do with faith in the name of pitras is called Shraddh.

देवकार्यादपि सदा पितृकार्यं विशिष्यते । देवताभ्यो हि पूर्व पितृणामप्यायनं वरम् ॥

(हेमाद्रिमें वायु तथा ब्रह्मवैवर्तका वचन)

Shraddh are mangal (auspicious). It is auspicious to do Pitra kariya before Dev kariya , and pitra is to be satisfied first.

श्राद्धात् परतरं नान्यच्छ्रेयस्करमुदाहृतम् । तस्मात् सर्वप्रयतेन्न श्राद्धं कुर्याद् विचक्षणः ॥

(हेमाद्रिमें सुमन्तुकावचन)

There is nothing auspicious than Shraddh, therefore always perform Shraddh.

एवं विधानतः श्राद्धं कुर्यात् स्वविभवोचितम् । आब्रह्मस्तम्बर्षन्तं जगत् प्रीणाति मानवः ॥

(ब्रह्मपुराण)

When you are performing Shraddh you are not satisfying pitras only, you are satisfying every

thing in this universe from grass to Brama Ji.

योऽनेन विधिना श्राद्धं कुर्याद् वै शान्तमानसः । व्यपेक्ष्य लभो नित्यं याति नावर्तते पुनः ॥

(हेमाद्रिमें कूर्मपुराणका वचन)

Who ever performs Shraddh with shraddha, he goes to Vishnu Dham and doesn't take birth again.

To understand this it should be borne in mind that when a person dies, his or her gross body (sthula sharira) is burnt. This being in fact the 'Antya ishthi' (antyeshthi) the last sacrifice offered in fire, but the soul cannot quit the gross body without a vehicle of some kind. This vehicle is the Linga-sharira or subtle body, sometimes described as angushtha-matra (of the size of a thumb), invested in which the deceased person remains.

तत्क्षणात् सोऽथ गृह्णाति शरीरं चातिवाहिकम्। अङ्गुष्ठपर्वमात्रं तु स्वप्राणैरेव निर्मितम्॥

;स्कन्द 1/2/50/62छ

He or she is then in the condition of a simple individual soul invested with a subtle body, and is called a PRETA, i.e. a departed spirit or ghost. Thus an embodied soul (jiva) who has departed from the physical body at death is called a Preta. He or she has no real body capable of enjoying or suffering anything, and is consequently in a restless, uncomfortable plight.

Moreover, while in this condition he or she is held to be an impure being, and all the relations of that Gotra who participate in his or her funeral rites are held to be impure (Ashoch or Honch) until the first Shraddh is performed. Furthermore, if a person dies away and his funeral ceremonies are not done, and who are perhaps unaware of his or her death, and unable therefore to perform them, he or she becomes a 'pishach', a foul wandering ghost, disposed to take revenge for its misery upon all living creatures by a variety of malignant acts.

श्राद्धं न कुरुते मोहात् तस्य रक्तं पिबन्ति ते। ;ब्रह्मपुराणछ

पितरस्तस्य शापं दत्वा प्रयान्ति च। ;नागरखण्डछ

The object then, of the antyeshthi or funeral rites, which are carried out for twelve days after death, is not only to soothe or give shanti (peace) by libations of consecrated water to the troubled spirit, but to furnish the preta with an intermediate body, between the 'linga' or subtle and the 'sthula' or gross body- with a body, that is to say, which is capable of enjoying or suffering, and which is composed of gross particles, though not of the same kind as the earthly gross body. In this manner only can the preta obtain gati or progress onwards.

When is Shraddh performed?

Shraddh is performed every year on the anniversary of the death of the person as per the Hindu Calendar (Panchang). Mahalaya (Aripakay) shraddh is performed during a fortnight called as the "Pitru paksha" in the month of Ashwin of the Hindu samvat. This year this period falls between 27th September 2007, to 11th October 2007.

It takes twelve months (thirteen months if there will be extra month) for the departed soul to reach the abode of the Pitris or the souls of the ancestors. The word Pitris primarily means the immediate ancestors. Viz. Father, mother etc. This abode of the Pitris is known as PITRI-LOKA.

Shraddh is the name of the ceremonies performed by sons and daughters to help the departed soul. The ceremony of Shraddh performed to help the soul at this stage is called PRETA_KRIYA. Hence a Shraddh is not a funeral ceremony but a Pitri-Yajna. It is performed by making offerings of round balls of rice (Pindas) etc. with accompaniments of sacred grass (kusha grass, Darab), flowers, and sprinkling of water, and with repetitions of mantras and texts from the SamVeda the whole ceremonial being conducted, not in a temple or any other place, but tenth day at any sacred spot such as the margin of a river and eleventh and twelfth at home.

Shraddh proper is performed for three generations of Pitris (the father, the grand-father and the great grand-father), or to all Pitris. Pindas are offered to the father, grand-father and great grand-father. Gifts to deserving Brahmins (priests) for the benefit of the Pitris, in the proper time and place and with faith, are known as Shraddh. Shraddh gives satisfaction to the Pitris. Performance of Shraddh and Tarpan (libations of water) relieves the hunger and thirst of the departed soul during its journey to the Pitri Loka. By the offering of the Shraddh, the sons and daughters helps his father / mother to dwell in joy with the Pitris.

Shraddh must be performed with faith, devotion and reverence. The sons and daughters who does not perform Shraddh and Tarpan are an ungrateful sons and daughters. The sacred scriptures declare: "He who does not perform Shraddh will lead a miserable life and suffer from poverty".

न तत्र वीरा जायन्ते नारोग्यं न शतायुषः। न च श्रेयोऽधिगच्छन्ति यत्र श्राद्धविवर्जितम्॥

(हारीतस्मृति)

श्राद्धमेतन्न कुर्वाणो नरकं प्रतिपद्यते ॥ (विष्णुस्मृति)

The ceremonies performed during Pitr-Paksha have very special effects. According to a legend, the offerings of libations of water-tarpan, arghya, Shraddh etc. to the departed reach the Pitris immediately, due to a boon from Lord Yama (the God of death).

The Bhagavad Gita, states that on the eve of death the individual soul contracts all its energies and centers these into the subtle body. Our ordinary sight is incapable of perceiving it. How the individual soul inhering in the linga-sharira enjoys the consequences of its needs from one birth to another can only be perceived by the Yogis with their extraordinary cognitive insight.

उत्क्रामन्तं स्थितं वापि भुञ्जानं वा गुणान्वितम्।

विमूढा नानुपश्यन्ति पश्यन्ति ज्ञानचक्षुषः॥ (अध्याय 15 श्लोक 10)