

Notes for teachers on Hindu funeral rites

The first extract is taken from the BBC Bitesize website

Hindu funerals

Most Hindus are cremated as it is believed that this will help their soul to escape quickly from the body.

The exact details of the funeral ceremonies (antyeshti samskara), which form the last of the **samskaras**, vary according to tradition and place.

Funerals are usually conducted by a priest and by the eldest son of the person who has died.

Various rituals may take place around the dead body:

- A lamp is placed by the head of the body.
- Prayers and hymns are sung.
- **Pindas** (rice balls) are placed in the coffin.
- Water is sprinkled on the body.
- A **mala** (necklace of wooden beads) may be put around the dead person's neck as may garlands of flowers.

How the cremation takes place depends on where this happens:

- In the United Kingdom the coffin will be closed and taken to a crematorium.
- In India people hope to have their funeral at the burning ghats on the shores of the sacred river **Ganges**. Here the body is placed on a large pile of wood, the eldest son says the appropriate **Vedic** prayers and lights the fire. Incense and ghee are poured into the flames.

Prayers are said for the dead person:

O Supreme light, lead us from untruth to truth, from darkness to light and from death to immortality.

Afterwards the ashes of the dead person are sprinkled on water. Many people take the ashes to India to put on the waters of the Ganges, others may take them to the sea near to where they live.

After the funeral the widow or widower will wear white as a sign of mourning.

The close family may mourn for twelve days. On the thirteenth day the samskara ends with **Kriya**. During this ceremony, rice balls and milk are

offered to the dead person to show the gratitude of the family for the life of that person. After this, the mourners can continue with their normal lives.

Every year after the death **Shraddha** takes place. At this ceremony food such as pindas is offered to the poor and needy in memory of departed ancestors.

This extract is taken from www.staffspasttrack.org **commemorating death in Staffordshire**

Hindus believe in reincarnation and view death as the soul moving from one body to the next on its path to reach Nirvana, heaven. Death is a sad occasion, but Hindu priests emphasise the route ahead for the departed soul and a funeral is as much a celebration as a remembrance service.

Hindus cremate their dead, believing that the burning of a dead body signifies the release of the spirit and that the flames represent Brahma, the creator.

Family members will pray around the body as soon as possible after death. People will try to avoid touching the corpse as it is considered polluting. The corpse is usually bathed and dressed in white, traditional Indian clothes. If a wife dies before her husband she is dressed in red bridal clothes. If a woman is a widow she will be dressed in white or pale colours.

The funeral procession may pass places of significance to the deceased, such as a building or street. Prayers are said here and at the entrance to the crematorium.

The body is decorated with sandalwood, flowers and garlands. Scriptures are read from the Vedas or Bhagavad Gita. The chief mourner, usually the eldest son or male, will light some kindling and circle the body, praying for the wellbeing of the departing soul.

After the cremation, the family may have a meal and offer

prayers in their home. Mourners wash and change completely before entering the house after the funeral. A priest will visit and purify the house with spices and incense. This is the beginning of the 13-day mourning period when friends will visit and offer their condolences.

Often, a garland of dried or fake flowers is placed around a photograph of the deceased to show respect for their memory.

'Shradh' is practiced one year after the death of the person. This can either be an annual event or a large one-off event. This is the Hindu practice of giving food to the poor in memory of the deceased. A priest will say prayers for the deceased and during this time, usually lasting one month, the family will not buy any new clothes or attend any parties. Sons are responsible for carrying out Shradh.