Chapter VII

The Funeral Rites
(antyeṣṭi saṃskāras)

I

The Hindus lay no less importance on the rites and rituals connected with the death than on those performed during the life-time of a person. It is believed that the performance of the sacramental rites secures for one a good life on the earth and that of the funeral rites helps the soul of the deceased to obtain felicity and peace in the next world which is esteemed higher than the present one. In such cases the soul may shower blessings on the members of the family. Further, it is believed that the deceased may have some special attachment to certain persons or properties and thereby the spirit of the dead may haunt the household and spell disaster on the members of the family, or the property, if it is not propitiated and given a farewell with due rites. So, the survivors of the dead perform the funeral ceremonies with meticulous care.

Disposal of Corpses

There are three different methods of the disposal of corpses in Kamrup. They are: (1) sub-aerial deposit or leaving the body on the ground, (2) inhumation or burial under ground,
and (3) cremation or burning the dead body. Among all these methods the last one is the most prevalent mode of disposal in the district. Burial is admissible in case of the death of children. The dead body of a person is sometimes left on the cremation ground owing to certain unavoidable reasons.

The Crematory Rites

As soon as the symptoms of death of a person appear, a preparation of food consisting of water, milk and sugar is poured into the mouth of the person by the members of the family and other relatives present. This kind of food, called agrā (Skt. agrāgāna) is considered to be the last meal given to a person during his life-time.

It is considered ominous if a man dies indoors. So the dying person is at once carried out of the house and laid on the courtyard with the head turned towards North. A tulasi plant is kept near the head of the person. If possible, his head is smeared with clay obtained from the river Ganga, and sprinkled


2. The Bodos pour water as agrā into the mouth of the dead in the cremation ground. (Vide, B. Narzi: Bodo-kachārīr Sāmāj arū Sāmākrītī, pp.150-151).

3. In such case nobody usually lives under the same roof again. The house is abandoned or destroyed, or sometimes some sort of consecratory rite is observed.
with water of the same river, as these are regarded to have some purificatory powers. The body is wrapped with a cloth and bedecked with wreaths of flowers. Holy basils are scattered over the body. The nearest relatives and friends pay their last respects to the departed and make necessary arrangements for the cremation.

The corpse is taken in a stretcher of bamboos constructed for the purpose and carried to the cremation ground in a procession accompanied by the musicians and drumplayers. In some places the processionists utter the names of gods as "Rāma bolā, Hari bolā", etc. for the peace of the departed soul.

In the cremation ground the dead body is first laid on the bed of kusa grasses and plantain leaves. The body is then washed, anointed with oil or ghee and wrapped with new cloths. Seven small pieces of gold, silver, copper or bell metal are placed on the seven parts of the corpse, viz., eyes, ears, nostrils and mouth. If the deceased is a Brāhmin, a new sacred thread prepared without applying mantras, is exchanged with the old one. The śāstra enjoins an offering of pinda (i.e., a ball of boiled rice) to the manes of the deceased person in the cremation ground. But owing to the inconvenience of time and place it is usually done in a separate place afterwards on the same day or on the next day. A Brāhmin priest conducts the crematory and other funeral rites enjoined by the śāstras.

4. H.S., p.418.
The funeral pyre is usually made of bamboo-fuels within four bamboo posts in a rectangular shape, sufficient to hold the corpse. In some places of Kamrup four coins are placed under the bamboo-posts as a token price of the ground purchased from the mother Earth, as it were. The capable survivor adds some pieces of sandal wood and ghee to the fuel of the pyre. The corpse is laid on the pyre upside down if it is a male and upwards if it is a female. The eldest son, or in his absence, the youngest or any other son, or a near relative from the paternal side of the deceased, performs a function called mukhāgni. The chief performer of the obsequies is known as krivāchārī. He performs the mukhāgni function by moving round the pyre for three times and after completing each round he touches the mouth of the dead with the flame, and the priest simultaneously recites the appropriate invocations. Lastly, the performer kindles the pyre. After consumption of the body, fire is extinguished and the calcined bones (asthi) are collected and preserved in a vase. It is believed that the soul of the dead attains salvation if the calcined bones are thrown into the Gaṅgā or some other holy rivers.

After clearing the ashes from the pyre-place a small round thatched shed is erected. The well-to-do survivors of the deceased, however, erect a semi-permanent shed with C.I. sheet roofing. An earthen pot is placed inside the shed. The pot is filled with water. Four long bamboo-poles are erected on the four sides of the shed. The bamboo-poles are connected with one or more pieces of cloth, each corner being tied to one of the
poles. Lastly, some amount of mustard seeds are scattered around the cremation spot.\(^5\) The erection of a shed and four bamboo poles in the cremation ground may be a reminiscence of the funeral monument erected in the Vedic age.\(^6\)

The mourners then return from the cremation ground. They bathe first and ceremonially cleanse themselves at the gateway of the deceased or of their own by warming their feet over fire into which some cotton-seeds are put. Lastly they chew some neem or titaphul leaves. This is considered to be an antidote to poisonous vapours and evil odours. The mourners then take the second bath and change clothes. The performer of the obsequies brings the corpse consuming fire (kravyāda) from the funeral pyre and preserves it separately till the tenth day of cremation.

It may be noted that at the present time some of the old crematory rites have been discontinued, some are simplified, while some new and local customs have crept into others. As for examples, in the Vedic age a cow, called vaitaranī or anustaranī, was supposed to be the conductor of the dead over the stream of the unclean world. So, a cow was sacrificed, burnt with the deceased, or let loose to run away from the cremation ground.\(^7\)

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5. It may be pointed out that some tribes of Assam like the Bodos and the Garos leave some articles, viz., utensils, knife, paddy grains, etc. in the cremation ground with a belief that these are necessary for the departed soul in its journey to the next world.


7. Ibid., p. 429.
But instead of that a cow is presented today to the priest who conducts the funeral ceremonies. In early days the corpse was removed on a bullock cart. But now a corpse is carried by four persons preferably of the same caste of the deceased. Formerly women also went to the cremation ground and the sati custom, i.e., the burning of a woman with her dead husband, was prevalent amongst the Hindus. Some of the guru-caritas state that Satyasandha, Sañkaradeva's mother, performed sati in her husband's funeral pyre. But no such custom is prevalent in Kamrup today.

The Ceremonial Defilement (asaúca)

The death of a person causes defilement (asaúca) to the members of his family and other direct descendants of the common stock for ten days from the day of its occurrence. During the period of defilement these people are to observe certain rites. They abstain from taking meat, fish, some kinds of pulse and even mustard oil. Hair cutting and shaving are forbidden. The members of the bereaved family, besides observing these rites, do not take meals for the first three days. They take

8. Ibid., p.433.
11. The sati custom was prohibited by Lord William Bentinc in 1835.
only rice-powder, milk, gājī and fruits which are usually offered by their friends and relatives. The offering is popularly known as vācāguḍa, i.e., the offered rice-powder. The household members of the deceased are to lead an austere life for these days. They sleep on the floor and walk on bare foot. They forgo all comforts and business of life.12 There is a popular saying that the kriyādhārī or the chief performer of the obsequies is forbidden even to touch a straw.13 The sons of the deceased are to spend the whole period by wearing the same set of clothes.

The texts hold that the period of ceremonial defilement differed according to the caste, age and sex of the deceased.14 The carita-puthis (biographical literature)15 record that the period of defilement caused by the death of Śaṅkaradeva, lasted for a month and after that the śrāddha ceremony was performed. One could see about two decades back that certain castes in Kamrup observed the period of defilement for a month. But now there is a strong tendency among all castes, Brāhmin and non-Brāhmin alike, to terminate the period of defilement on the eleventh day. It may be due to the personal as well as social

12. Such rites are prescribed in the Garuḍa-purāṇa, ch.13.20-22.
13. tini kūṭa brahmacārī, tatkaival adhik kriyādhārī. Another popular say is: yatī vratī brahmacārī, tatkaival adhik kriyādhārī.
14. Matsya-purāṇa, ch.18.2; Mahiram Vidyaratna Bhattacharyya: Vvavahara-darpanana, p.86.
convenience of the people. In the present days of hardship most of the people are to lead a very busy life, and as such, it may not be possible for them to live an austere life for a long period.

The period of defilement, as noted above, is observed in case of the death of a grown-up person. But the death of a child inflicts defilement on parents for three days and on members of the lineage for one day only. Such rites were also enjoined by some Grhya-sūtras and smrtis.¹⁶

It is customary for the people of Kamrup that in case of the death of a maternal uncle the nephew is considered ceremonially defiled for one day and the death of a nephew inflicts defilement on the maternal uncle for three days. Again, the death of the father-in-law defiles the son-in-law for three days, but no defilement is caused to the father-in-law by the death of the son-in-law.

Offerings to the Deceased

The spirit of the dead is offered pinda¹⁷ at a place generally selected on the bank of a nearby pond or river for ten days from the day of death. The offering is considered a viaticum.¹⁸ According to the custom the sons of the deceased take in

¹⁶. H.S., pp.451-452.
¹⁷. Pandey defines pinda thus: "The ball was called pinda because it was supposed to constitute the body of the Preta."(H.S., p.465). The pinda usually consists of a ball of rice, curd, milk, sugar, ghēe and ripe bananas.
¹⁸. This is also stated in the Matsya-purāṇa, ch.18.5.
their hands some amount of sesamum and kusa grass, plunge under navel-deep water and turn their face towards the South. After that they offer in the name of the dead tilodaka (a handful of water and some of the seeds of sesamum) along with the uttering of the mantra - "satilodakānjali trpyasva." (please be satisfied with the oblation of water with sesamum). Then a pinda of rice-ball, water and milk is offered to the dead. It is believed that the soul of the deceased person hovers over the household for ten days after death. So, it should be provided with food for the whole period.

It is to be noted that on a certain day the preserved calcined bones of the deceased is taken out of the vase and purified by sprinkling dew, sugar-candy, milk, etc., and with the citation of some mantras. On the fourth day, called caturthā, bones are joined together so as to form a skeletal shape of the body of/deceased person. The structure is washed in holy water with the citation of mantra and burnt in a fire which is lit with embers taken from the funeral pyre with special care.¹⁹ The remains are preserved in a vase and buried in a sanctified place with a plant of basil on it. An arrangement is made by some people for pouring water on the calcined bones upto the eleventh day (śuddhir din). This is done with a belief that the soul of the dead will rest in peace and tranquillity if its bones can be

¹⁹. The embers are generally kept in a huge rope of straw. If the embers fade out the bones are burnt in some newly lit fire.
kept cool for the period. Afterwards the bones are taken out and thrown into the water of the sacred rivers like the Ganga, Brahmaputra, etc., on an auspicious day, for the salvation of the soul.

Caturthā

On the fourth day after death a small ceremony, called caturthā is exclusively performed by the Brahmins. On this occasion the persons present in the cremation ground (called śmaśāna-bandhus), are fed with rice-powder or bokā-caul, curd, molasses and ripe-banana. The food is, however, served by the relatives (jñāti) only, because the members of the bereaved family and others of the same line are considered defiled at that period.

Dahā

Dahā (Skt. daśā) is a purificatory rite. It is performed on the tenth day from the day of death. On this day the calcined bones of the deceased person (if he belongs to a non-Brahmin caste) are purified and some pieces of them are thrown into water with due rites. The tenth pinda is offered to the

20. The Garuda-purāṇa (ch.2) gives an account of the dahā rite. According to this purāṇa (2.37) a ball of flesh or māṣa should be offered to the forefathers on the dahā day. But this is not done in Kamrup.
spirit of the dead. It is believed that from this day the relation between the dead and the living members of the line is completely cut off and the departed soul becomes free from all worldly affairs. With that end in view the chief performer of the obsequies writes down the secret name (gupta-nāma) of the deceased on an earthen can (garu) which is afterwards plunged into water.

The sons of the deceased shave their hair and beard and pare their nails with the help of a barber who is usually offered a heifer or a token price afterwards. The lineals of the deceased also shave their beard and pair their nails. The sons of the deceased touch mahānimba leaves, a mirror, a consecrated pot, etc., for self purification. This is called sparśa-suddhi, i.e., purification by touching certain articles.

On this occasion some friends and relatives are fed with bokā-cāul. For the non-Brāhmin people it is as good as the caturthā rite of the Brāhmins.²¹

Suddhi

Suddhi is a rite of purification from the state of uncleanliness caused by the death of a person. Though a number

²¹. It may be noted that according to the Āśvalāyana Grhya-sūtra (iv.5) the purificatory rite was to be performed at the burning ground, or any place outside the town. The kinsmen, both male and female, were required to attend the ceremony by sitting on a bullock-skin (vide, H.S., p.458). But no such rituals are performed in Kamrup.
of non-Brähmin people seems to have adhered to the old custom of performing the śuddhi rite just after a month of the demise of a person, most Hindus of today perform it on the eleventh day after death.\(^{22}\)

On this day the houses of the deceased person and those of his lineals are cleansed. The household articles used during the period of uncleanness are purified by sprinkling holy water. The sons of the deceased are to go through a series of rituals according to the śastric injunctions. They perform a rite for atonement and offer libations of water and sesamum to the departed soul. This is followed by the śrāddha ceremony in which Lord Visnu is first worshipped.\(^{23}\) The nine planet-deities are also worshipped sometimes with a homa to ward off the supposed evil effects (puskara) from the members and other belongings of the family caused by the expiry of a person at an inauspicious hour.\(^{24}\) The śrāddha is called ādyā-śrāddha or the first ceremony performed in honour of the spirit of the dead by the surviving son or sons just after being purified at the end of the period of defilement. On this occasion varieties of articles, supposed to be used as viaticum by the soul of the dead in the next world,

\(^{22}\) The Garuḍa-purāṇa (ch.13) gives a detailed account of performance of the rite on the eleventh day after death.

\(^{23}\) Pandey remarks that the prayer for Visnu in such ceremonies is quite a new feature (H.S.T p.466).

\(^{24}\) Due importance to the graha-yaga or the worship of the planet-deities is given in the Garuḍa-purāṇa (ch.101).
are offered in the name of the dead. Some such articles are: a small bed (pretasaya) offered to the supposed ghost of the deceased, another bed for the departed soul (after being free from the preta condition), clothes, utensils and articles like a stick, an umbrella, a knife, a cow, etc.  It is believed that the cow helps the departed soul to cross the river Lethe, which is called vaitarani by the people of Kamrup. As referred to above, the cow appears to be a replica of vaitarani or anus-taran (a cow) which was sacrificed, burnt with the corpse or set free to go away from the cremation ground. Some survivors of the dead offer a bullock to their guru (the religious preceptor) who in turn showers blessings on them. The institution of the gurus seems to be a latter day custom originated from the influence of the Vaisnava movement.

An additional rite called vrsotsarga is sometime performed by the well-to-survivors on the suddhi day. Vrsotsarga literally means the offering of a bull (vrsa = bull, utsarga = offering). But the ceremony requires a bull and a heifer, besides a good number of articles to be offered together. The two animals are ceremonially washed and bedecked with coloured cloths and marks of vermilion. With the citation of mantras the pair

25. In eastern Assam the son-in-law of a deceased person offers a pair of utensils in the name of the dead on the occasion. But in Kamrup the son-in-law offers a castrated goat for the bhoj (feasting) ceremony held on the thirteenth day after death.
is then set at liberty for the well-being of the deceased. The cows are, however, given to the officiating priest or the close relatives of the performers afterwards. On the occasion a homa is also performed.

The vrsotsarga ceremony is an expensive affair. So, it is rarely performed now-a-days.

At the end of the śuddhi ceremony the invitees are fed and the Brāhmīns are offered daksīna. The articles offered on the occasion, are distributed among the officiating priest and the relatives of different lineage of the dead.

Sapindikarana

The ceremony of sapindikarana or 'uniting the Preta with the Pitaras' or the manes, is performed on the twelfth day after death. It is believed that just after death the soul of a person does not leave for the world of the fore-fathers; it hovers over the household for eleven days and on the twelfth day it moves to the abode of the fore-fathers as a consequence of the performance of the sapindikarana ceremony.

On this ceremony fourteen pindaś are offered to the spirit of the deceased person and to the manes of his five preceding

26. The vṛṣotsarga ceremony is referred to in the Garuda-purāṇa (ch.12.38-42) and in the Kriyā-paddhati by Gadādhara (vide, H.S., p.467).
27. H.S., p.467.
generations. Srāddha is also performed. Finally the priest is fed and offered daksīna.

Sapindikarana ceremony is mentioned by some early Assamese writers like Dāmodara Miśra, Mādhava Kandali and Durgāvara in their own works. This indicates the prevalence of the ceremony in Assam in early times.

The Feasting Ceremony

On the thirteenth day after death, a grand feast is arranged by the survivors of the deceased. On the occasion a good number of Brahmins, friends, relatives and neighbours are invited and fed with a sumptuous meal including fish and meat. The ceremony is popularly known in Kamrup as barambho (Skt. brahma-bhoja) meaning a feast to the Brahmins, or māch-cuwani (Skt. matsya-sparśa) meaning touching or eating fish. It is considered a meritorious and pious deed, if a feast can be offered to some Brahmins on the thirteenth day after death. On this day the members of the bereaved family and the members of the same lineage of the dead take fish for the first time after defilement. So, fish which is one of the most important delicacies of the people of Kamrup, is accepted on this occasion with the

29. Assamese version of the Rāmāyaṇa, Ayodhyākanda, 38.8-17.
celebration of a feast which provides delight to the guests and
the members of the family. It may be stated that in some parts
of Assam the ceremony is not held on such a large scale as it is
held in Kamrup.

On this occasion a meal, prepared with rice, fish, meat,
egg, etc., by the chief performer of the obsequies, is offered in
the name of the dead in some nearby orchard. Sometimes a tamol
prepared with areca-nuts, betel-leaves, lime and tobacco, is also
offered, if the deceased used to take it during his or her life-
time.

After the feasting is over a propitiatory rite (santi-
karma) is performed in order to ward off the evils. Here the in-
vited Brahmins are seated together in the courtyard, the sons and
daughters-in-law of the dead are made to circumambulate them for
four times while the officiating priest invokes blessings by
sprinkling sacred water and scattering handfuls of husked rice
and dūrvā grass on their heads. Besides, a holy book like the
Bhāgavata, Gītā or Kīrtana-ghosā is also recited.

On the day that follows the feast, a simple ceremony of
feeding takes place. It is called bāhi-bhōj. The word bāhi
means stale. But the combined word bāhi-bhōj is not used in the
sense of a feast of stale food. It means, however, a simple feast
arranged with the surplus articles procured for the purpose of
the main feast. On this occasion a few friends and relatives and
those who rendered help in different functions of the funeral
ceremonies are fed.
Different Types of Šrāddhas

The Hindus believe in the immortality of the soul. So, after the death of a person a ceremony called śrāddha, is performed to pacify the dead and to secure their blessings. The word śrāddha is derived from śraddha (love and respect). Śrāddha, is therefore, a ceremony in which something is offered to the departed soul with reverence. One popular object of the performance of a śrāddha is to commemorate the dead by their near and dear ones.

There are different types of śrāddha noted by different smṛti-nibandhakāras. Sūlapāni records twelve while Brhaspati classifies śrāddhas under five heads. Damodara Miśra, an eminent smṛti-nibandhakāra of Kāmarūpa, gives an account of the performance of eleven śrāddhas. Pīṭāmbara Siddhānta-vāgīśa Bhāṭṭācārya, another noted smṛti-writer of Kāmarūpa, also records a number of śrāddhas in his Śrāddha-kaumudi. But all the śrāddha ceremonies are not performed in Kamrup today. The śrāddhas now performed in the district, are the nāndimukha, ādva, sapindī-karana, māsika, sanmāsika, vātsarika, aukkādasta and nārvana. The

32. Sureshchandra Bhattacharya : Smṛti-gāstrā Bangāli, pp.87-89.
34. Pub. by Taranath Goswami, Gauripur, Goalpara.
nandimukha-śrāddha is also performed while performing the sacramental rites. The ādyā-śrāddha or ādyāikoddista śrāddha is performed on the eleventh day after death, when the survivors of the deceased become ceremonially pure. The sapindikarana ceremony, as stated before, is performed on the twelfth day after the death of a person. The māsika śrāddha is to be performed on the tithi of death falling in every month of the first year of death. Thus twelve māsika-śrāddhas are to be performed in the first year. But instead of that some people perform the chamāhīva or chay-māhili and particularly the bhaçharekīva śrāddhas in a grand scale. The former is performed at the end of six months (sanmāsika) while the latter at the first death anniversary of the deceased. However, the wife of the deceased, observes fast on the day of each māsika-śrāddha and offers a naivedyā with tulasī leaves in the name of God. She sometimes holds a prayer-service for the peace and tranquillity of the departed soul. The ekoddista-śrāddha is annually performed on the tithi of the corresponding month of the death of a person. The pārvana-śrāddha is performed by a number of people on the occasion of performing some festivals (pārvan) like mahālava and asokāstami. The pārvana-śrāddha is meant for offering oblations to the manes of six former generations. It may be mentioned that in early days offerings of cooked victuals, flesh, cakes and fruits were made in a śrāddha ceremony. But at present a śrāddha is usually performed with

35. Saurā-purāṇa, ch.19.
the offerings of some amount of rice, pulses, fruits, flowers, tulasi leaves, sesame, resin, incense, balls of rice, a piece of cloth, a sacred thread (if the deceased is a Brähmin), a fish, etc. At the close of the ceremony the priest is fed and paid daksinā. Guests are also entertained on the occasion.

**Mahālaya-śrāddha**

The dark fortnight preceding the Devānaka and falling in the month of Āśvina or Bhādara is called preta-pakṣa, aparā-pakṣa or pitr-pakṣa, i.e., the fortnight meant for offering pinda the to/spirit of the dead or to the manes. It is believed that during this period the ancestors come down to the earth to accept pinda and other offerings from their descendants. Some of the purāṇas like the Padma (Srśṭikhandā, 47), Skanda (VI,216) and Bhavisya (1.183) deal with this. The śrāddha performed in the preta-pakṣa, is called mahālaya-śrāddha which is regarded as

36. P. V. Kane defines mahālaya thus: "The śrāddha performed in Bhadrapada dark half is called mahālaya-śrāddha, since that fortnight is the abode (alaya), as it were, of the maha (i.e., festival day) for pitrs. The real idea is that the dark half of Bhadrapada is specially to be welcomed for a śrāddha when the Sun is in Kanya (virgo) during that fortnight and that even if the Sun is not in Kanya the dark half of Bhadrapada is still a good time for a śrāddha to the pitrs." (H.D., IV, p.531). The word mahālaya may also be defined in another way. On this occasion śrāddha is performed not only for the forefathers of the performers, but also of the heroes of the country of whom every one is proud, and those who have no heir to offer them pinda. Thus it appears that the śrāddha and tarpāna ceremonies performed during the period, honour unitedly all the souls of the dead of the universe, as it were, and make the earth (including the holy places, banks of the
the most eminent among all kinds of śrāddhas. Different views are held as to the exact date on which the mahālavā-śrāddha is to be performed. It may be performed on any day of the pitṛ-pakṣa or from the fifth day of pitṛ-pakṣa to the amavasya or any day on which the sun is in Virgo, or any other day till the sun enters Scorpion.37 But in Kamrup the mahālavā-śrāddha is performed on the new-moon day of the pitṛ-pakṣa during which the orthodox Hindus neither shave their beards nor worship a deity.

The pratapakṣa is popularly known in Kamrup as kanyā-gata, i.e., the arrival (āgata) of a bride (kanyā). The meaning of kanyāgata is perhaps the apparent arrival (āgata) of the sun to the Zodiacal sign of kanyā (Virgo) before the time of mahālavā already mentioned.