

# DEATH: HINDU RITES, RITUALS & PREPARATIONS FOR FUNERALS

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## INTRODUCTION

Death is an inevitable fact of life. It brings pain, grief and suffering to the family and friends. Many of us are not aware of what has to be done when such a tragedy strikes. This article is meant to help family and friends to understand some of the basic rites and rituals that are usually performed for the departed soul. These rituals allow family members to express grief, and for friends and relatives to bid a respectable and dignified farewell.

Hindu death rituals in all traditions follow fairly uniform pattern drawn from the Vedas. We recognize, some aspect of the rituals may vary within the subgroups of Hindu community. We have tried to summarize here common practices followed by the Hindu community in London and vicinity. Other subgroup specific rituals are included in the appendix.

## AS DEATH APPROACHES

Most commonly death occurs in the health care institution. However, in terminal illness cases, such as cancer, palliative care may be given at home.

When death is imminent, (at home), relatives and friends are notified. A *diya* (lamp) is lit near the head. A photograph of the family's favorite deity may be placed near by. Family and friends keep vigil by reciting mantras and prayers and/or reading the scripture. Alternatively one may play prerecorded spiritual/religious music.

At the moment of death, (there is no breathing, no pulse and eyes are fixed in one direction), family members may chant mantras in the right ear of the deceased. It is also customary to put holy (*Ganges*) water and *tulsi*, (*Ocinum Sanctum*), leaves in the mouth of the dying. After death traditionally the *diya* is kept lit near the head and incense is burned.

Friends or support group can help the family by understanding and respecting their wishes and the need for privacy. They can also:

- Answer phones and keep other friends and relatives informed;
- Organize food supply in an orderly manner;
- Organize schedules so that there are always one or two helpers with the family and,
- Look after conveniences of out of town relatives.

## **AFTER DEATH**

In the health care institution, staff will notify the physician to pronounce the death and will provide the Medical Certificate of Death (Form 16).

In a palliative care situation, when death occurs at home, ask the nurse or physician, if one is present, or readily available, to pronounce the death. A funeral home can also be contacted who will look after all the formalities, including the procurement of a death certificate (discussed later, Mandatory Documentation).

N.B.: If death is expected with known illness, do not call 911, ambulance, police or the fire department. This may result in transferring the deceased to the hospital, and unwanted attempt at resuscitation.

## **CORONER'S ACT**

All unusual deaths such as those due to foul play, suicide, accident, negligence or malpractice are to be notified to the Coroner and investigated by the Coroner.

Deaths occurring in certain types of institutions or judicial custody are to be notified to the Coroner. Unexpected deaths from illness not under the treatment of a qualified physician are also to be notified to the Coroner.

In the above circumstances, if death occurs at home, do not disturb the scene. Immediately proceed to phone 911.

In the above-referred cases, the Coroner will take charge and the body cannot be released without the Coroner's consent. About 30% of coroners' investigations require autopsy examination.

## **MANDATORY DOCUMENTATION AND REQUIRED INFORMATION**

1. A medical certificate of death (Form 16)  
Filled out by a legally qualified medical practitioner or coroner. It must be remitted to the local division registrar before the death can be officially registered & a burial/cremation permit is issued.
2. Statement of death (Form 15)  
A family member or relative or friend and funeral director jointly complete it. It is submitted to the local division registrar for registration of death.
3. Coroners' certificate for cremation  
The coroner completes it. Body cannot be cremated without this certificate.
4. Cremation application form  
Completed by authorized representative or legal custodian. It has to be submitted along with burial/cremation permit and coroner's certificate for cremation for booking cremation time.

## INFORMATION REQUIRED FOR THE DOCUMENTS

1. Full name and address of the deceased.
2. Date and place of birth.
3. Social Insurance Number.
4. Name of the physician or coroner who pronounced death.
5. Marital status.
6. Last name of the spouse or partner (before this marriage or relationship)
7. Type of work and/or business done most of the working life.
8. A father's name and place of birth.
9. A mother's name and place of birth
10. Name of the authorized representative or legal custodian
11. Status of the will.....Yes or No.
12. Names of the executor or nearest surviving relative.

## CREMATION OUTSIDE LONDON

If the family wishes to have the cremation outside London, in Ontario, there is no problem. However, if the body has to be transported to another province in Canada' or to a location in the U.S.A. or out of country the Coroner's permission is required. If the body is to be sent outside of North America, (say India), permission has to be granted by the Consulate of the country where body has to be sent. This takes minimum of 5-6 days. In these circumstances embalming maybe required.

Traditionally in Canada, the above documents and formalities are looked after by the funeral director for an agreed cost. If the deceased has paid into the Canada Pension Plan during his/her lifetime, the Government on application provides a final payment up to \$2500. A list of the funeral homes and crematoriums and costs are provided in the appendix.

Please note: There is no legal obligation to hire a funeral home or to embalm the body. Once a medical practitioner has pronounced the death and a death certificate has been obtained, family can carry out the pre-cremation ritual of washing and dressing the body. After obtaining a coroner's certificate and burial/cremation permit, with a duly completed cremation application, transportation of the body to the crematorium can be arranged at a mutually agreed time.

## RITUALS OF CREMATION AND LAST RITES

Traditionally the Hindus cremate the dead as soon as possible after the death. Rituals are centered on prayers for the final liberation of the departed soul from the cycle of birth and death. Living in western world Hindus face certain problems with regards to the last rites.

## BODY WASHING AND DRESSING

The dead body is washed and dressed and transported to the crematorium. In Canada funeral home staff prepares and dresses the body. The washing rites could be arranged at funeral home. Some funeral homes allow 3-5 people including a priest to perform the rites in the embalming room, provided they are not busy.

## EMBALMING AND VIEWING

*“Embalming and viewing of the body is not the practice of Hindus and law does not require embalming.”*

Embalming is done to preserve the body and to slow the decaying process. Hindus cremate the body as soon as possible after death. However, if the body is kept for some time and crowd of friends and relatives are to be present for the delayed cremation, and the face is exposed in the casket for people to view, embalming becomes necessary.

## CREMATION

There are only three crematoria in London and vicinity. The body has to be transported from the funeral home. Crematoria are usually open from Monday to Friday 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and on Saturday 9:00 a.m. to 1pm. They are closed on statutory holidays. The cremation is usually arranged in the morning or early afternoon. The service hall has a sitting capacity of about 40 people and it cannot hold a large crowd. However, funeral homes and crematoria will go some distance in meeting the needs of Hindus.

## THE LAST RITES

Required Items:

- *Thali*, catories (2) rice, flowers, incense sticks, *Ghee*, *Diya*, matchsticks, sandalwood or wood sticks, Havan Samagri, Havan Kundh, camphor, [Barley flour mixed with sesame seeds and rice are made into five balls called (Pind)], coconut, rice, deeyas, cottonballs, Holy water.
- Photos of the family's favorite deity and the departed person.
- Spiritual religious soft music.

In cases where a person dies in the astrological period of panchak; the ceremony will include the panchak pooja. (seek advice from priest concerning this ritual)

Usually a son or nearest relative with the help of a priest carries out and performs these rites. The rituals last about one to one and a half hours.

The casket is carried from the vehicle to the platform with the legs pointing south. The casket is placed in a way that the legs face the incineration chamber. A *diya* is lit near the head. A photo of the family's favorite deity and the departed person is kept near by.

The ritual starts with a prayer and mantras and *slokas* from the scripture such as, *Bhagvat Gita*, Raamayan, *Upnishads* etc. The theme is to remind us that the eternal Soul has commenced its peaceful journey to its destination, leaving mortal body behind in response to the Laws of Karma and Punar Janma

After prayers, family members and/or friends eulogize by recounting the deeds of the departed.

Pinddaans are given. Person who performs the rites walks around the body anti clockwise three times staring at the leg point followed by family members. Others would do only one round.

The casket is taken to the incinerator with legs first. Five stops are made prior to the casket being placed on the incinerator symbolically dropping off the five senses. Because of the safety reason, only a few people are allowed in the incinerator room. Others would keep the vigil by reciting *mantras* or spiritual music is played in the background.

After the cremation, ashes are collected with the help of the crematorium and disposed of as per family tradition or the individual's wishes.

Friends and relatives console the family members by recounting the deeds of departed and listening to readings of scriptures and/or spiritual *bhajans* that describe the transitoriness of life.

Mourning periods may last for the period of a few to thirteen days or more as per the family tradition. Prayers, and / or social ceremony as per family tradition may complete this. On this occasion the departed soul is remembered and offerings are made for his/her spiritual welfare. Gifts and donations are also made.

In some cases Das Gatr (10) days or akadashi 11 days and Triodashi ceremonies are completed. After this, maasik karma or monthly oblations are made. Please note traditions vary among groups.

In the eleventh month after death, Varshik Shraad is done (contact Panditji / priest)

Every year after this, there is a period referred to as pitr paksh or shraad when families can choose to make offerings of tarpana (contact panditji / priest).

## POST FUNERAL PRIVILEGES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

### Privileges:

1. If the deceased has paid in to the Canada Pension Plan during his/her lifetime, a final payment up to \$2500 is provided for the funeral expenses after the application. In addition, Surviving Spouse's Monthly Pension and Child's Monthly benefit may be available. For more information call the Human Resources development Canada at 1-800-227-9914.
2. If the person was disabled prior to death (it should be noted that long illness, like cancer also count as a disability), the family may be entitled to a disability by the Canada Pension Plan. The application has to be made prior to expiry of 5 months after death.

### Responsibilities:

1. A final "Tax Return" has to be filed on behalf of the deceased to the Income tax Department. Revenue Canada pamphlet is available in this regard, which explains all the modalities of the submission required.
2. Joint account with the deceased. It is better not to collapse the account or withdraw the account immediately after death. This is because some payments for the deceased may be forthcoming, or some bills may have to be paid. The payments will be hard to cash if the account has been collapsed, and will lead to a lot of hassle.
3. Probate of the will and assets.

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