

Etiquette for a Hindu Funeral – Lastingpost.com

Introduction

Hindus believe in reincarnation and see death as the soul moving from one body to the next on its onward path to reach Nirvana or Heaven. Hindus mourn the passing of their loved one but will also celebrate the onward journey of the soul to the next incarnation which they see as a step closer to Nirvana.

Hindu funeral rites consist of cremation followed by disposal of the ashes in a sacred river or place. The flames of the funeral pyre represent Brahma, the God of Creation and the burning of the body signifies the release of the soul to move on to its next incarnation.

There are over 600,000 Hindus in the UK and they represent the third largest faith group after Christians and Muslims.

The funeral

Hindus try to hold the funeral service before the sun goes down on the day that death takes place. This may not always be possible outside India but it will take place as soon as possible.

The funeral will be organised by the chief mourner who will usually be the eldest son or closest male relative to the deceased. The family will usually wear white, the traditional Hindu colour for grieving.

The family will gather as soon as possible after death to pray by the body and to perform certain rituals. The family priest will help. The deceased person will usually be dressed in new white clothes. If the deceased is a married woman (if her husband is still alive) or a young unmarried girl she will be dressed in red or yellow. The body will be decorated with sandalwood, garlands and flowers.

Various rituals will take place around the body. A lamp will be placed by the head of the deceased. Prayers will be offered and hymns sung. Water will be sprinkled on the body. Care will be taken by the mourners to avoid touching the body as it is considered to be a symbol of great impurity.

In India the relatives of the dead person will then carry the body on a stretcher in procession to the cremation ground. In the UK a coffin will usually be used to transport the deceased person to the crematorium. The funeral procession may well stop on the way at places of personal significance to the deceased person for prayers to be said.

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Hindus living outside India hold an adaptation of the traditional funeral service at the crematorium. The service will be conducted by the priest assisted by the chief mourner. The priest will chant Holy Mantras (scriptures).

The chief mourner will be responsible for lighting the crematorium pyre and will circle the body praying for the deceased person's soul.

Collection of the deceased's ashes

The chief mourner will usually collect the deceased's ashes three days later. These will be placed in an urn. Afterwards the ashes will be placed on water; this may often be a river or the sea. The ashes will be accompanied by garlands and flowers.

Hindu families will often carry or send the deceased person's ashes to India to be placed in one of the holiest of places such as the River Ganges or the Himalayas.

A meal and prayers

After the cremation, the family return home and bathe as everything to do with death is ritually impure. They will then clean the house. A priest will purify the house with spices and incense. The family may have a meal and offer prayers in their house. Mourners will wash and change completely before entering the house.

Mourning period

The family of the deceased will grieve for a thirteen day period after the funeral. They will perform rites intended to provide the soul of the deceased person with a new spiritual body for the next life.

During this period, relatives and friends are expected to visit the family to offer their condolences and support.

One year memorial

A priest will conduct the Shradha rites on the anniversary of the deceased's death in the family's home. Prasad (a gracious gift), often small balls of rice called pindas, will be offered to God and the departed soul. Food will also be offered to the poor in memory of the family's ancestors.

Sending flowers

It is traditional to bring gifts of food and particularly fruit. Although flowers are not part of Hindu tradition, they may be sent without causing offence.

Modest attire

Although the family of the deceased person will wear white, it is customary for other people attending the funeral to wear conservative clothing and subdued colours.

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