

PLANNING & ARRANGING A HINDU FUNERAL



By Pandit Ram Sivan

Australian Council of Hindu Clergy

www.australiancouncilofhinduclergy.com

28:10:2016

PLANNING A HINDU FUNERAL



Philosophical Considerations.

1. The body is a product of organic matter and is a vehicle for the *ātman* (self).
2. The 'soul' is not the same as the *ātman*. The soul is something one possesses whereas the *ātman* is what one IS. During the course of the funeral please refrain from using the western phrase — "may his/her soul rest in peace!" This statement implies that the deceased is the real subjective person and the soul an objective possession. You can rather say — "so and so has left his/her body and gone onto a higher rebirth."
3. God has nothing to do with death and rebirth. God does not give life nor does S/He take it (This is a Judeo/Christian/Islamic concept). We are born in a human body through our own previous good Karma and according to our Karma we die. Please do not talk about God giving or taking life or "plucking beautiful souls to decorate heaven!"
4. Throughout our lives as Hindus we worship fire as a visible form of the Divine, the funeral service consists of sanctifying the body and offering it as the final oblation into the fire.
5. Any contact with death, cemeteries and crematoria are ritually polluting and require avoidance of eating and drinking while attending a funeral. No food or refreshment is to be served either before or after the funeral. Upon returning home a shower is to be taken.

Time Required: 1 Full Day or More

1. Plan Ahead

If you are the type of person who likes to plan ahead or if you know you have a life-limiting illness, planning your own funeral may be the right thing for you. You can plan your own funeral, and even pay for it, well in advance of your death.

If you are caring for a loved one who is dying, you also, can plan the funeral in advance. Planning ahead is a good idea, as it's more difficult to make decisions when you're already grieving.

2. Covering the Cost

Paying for the funeral in advance may appeal to those individuals who prefer not to burden their families with difficult decisions and untimely funeral costs.

Remember that most Hindus cremate and therefore an appropriate coffin should be bought which has minimum of trimmings. There are a number of companies who produce recycled cardboard coffins which meet the regulatory requirements of the Australian Funeral Industry.

<http://cardboardcoffinsaustralia.com.au/>

The recommended option is a sea-grass coffin which many funeral directors carry.



You don't necessarily need to pay for funeral services in advance but you can still set money aside, so as not to burden your family members financially, by setting up **Funeral Plan Management fund** through your chosen funeral director. Discuss your options with a funeral director, they will give you a quote and will assist you in setting up the trust account.

<https://www.fpmanagement.com.au>

3. Make Your Wishes Known

If you're planning your own funeral, talk with your family about your wishes to make sure they know what you want. Having a conversation about your wishes will paint a better picture for your loved ones than written requests.

Consult with your family priest (*purohit*) to discuss funeral protocols and decide what rituals you want performed or not performed.

Keep a written record of your funeral arrangements close at hand, perhaps in a filing cabinet at home or with a trusted relative. You'll want your family to have timely access to your records when they need them.

4. Organ Donation

The body is merely a vehicle for the *jivatman*. There is no greater act of merit (*punyam*) that one can do, than donate one's organs to save the life of another. The body is going to be cremated and it would be an egregious waste of precious organs not to benefit others through gifting them. So please consider this great act of merit — discuss this with your relatives.

AFTER DEATH

If death takes place in a hospital, hospice or nursing home the attending doctor will need to sign the Death Certificate. If the attending doctor is away, this could entail a delay of hours or even days. Most public hospitals have mortuary facilities, so the situation is not urgent. Private hospitals do not usually have a mortuary, so it is important to call a funeral director without much delay so that your loved one may be transferred to a funeral home.

If the death takes place at home the attending G.P. will need to sign the Death Certificate.

If the death was unexpected or the deceased person has not seen a doctor in the last 6 months before death, no matter what the age, it is possible that the Coroner may wish to conduct a post mortem. Your funeral director will welcome your call at any time during this process and they will offer advice on who to contact and the procedures involved. It is important to note that much of the funeral arrangement process can be carried out prior to the completion of the coroner's role and it's prudent that contact be made with your funeral director as soon as possible. Your funeral director will then liaise with the coroner regarding when the funeral can be held. Hindus prefer to cremate ASAP.

4. Contacting Funeral Directors & Funeral Priests

Contact several funeral directors in your area to compare prices and available options. You can request written information about the cost of the merchandise, services, and professional fees before finalizing any plans.

The funeral directors will contact the hospital to arrange for the Death Certificate and will to collect the body. They will also contact the crematoria and make the booking, they will also arrange for an obituary.

Discuss freely any religious or cultural preferences that you would like honored with the funeral director. Remember that not all Hindu priests will perform funerals and you will need to locate a Funeral Priest — you can check our website www.australiancouncilofhinduclergy.com for qualified priests. The funeral director can also help you to contact a clergy member.

5. Mortuary Preparation

Mortuary preparation involves washing and dressing the body, ensuring that the eyes and mouth are closed, applying makeup when appropriate and requested, styling hair and shaving as required.

Discuss your requirements with the funeral directors, most of them are happy to accommodate the participation of the family in washing and dressing the body. Having the family members wash and dress the body is the most appropriate way to go rather than leaving it to the care of strangers, as professional as they may be. Hindus are usually cremated in traditional clothing — *Dhotis* and *Anga-vastras* for men and *Saris* for women (red for married women and young girls and white for widows.)

Once the body is washed and dressed, a garland of flowers can be placed around the neck¹, a *tilak* applied to the forehead, a *tulasi* leaf is usually placed in the mouth. If the person had a *japa-mala* (rosary) this too can be placed in the coffin or around the neck.

6. Flowers vs. Donations

Most attendees at a funeral in Australia will bring flowers or will have them sent unless they are instructed otherwise. In Hindu funerals floral arrangements are not required.

If you are going to have *shraddhanjali* (an offering of flowers in the coffin as a gesture of farewell) done then loose flower petals are preferred.

If you would rather your family and friends donate money to a charity in lieu of flowers, you can make that request in the obituary and by email. Be sure to include instructions on where to send donations. Examples of charities to donate to:

- the hospice that cared for your loved one
- the cancer or other society of the illness your loved one had
- a charity that your loved one regularly donated to him/herself.

7. Cremation or Burial

- **Cremation** – Cremation is a heat process which reduces the remains to ashes. Cremation is the preferred option for all adult Hindus without exception. There is no provision in Australia for an outdoor cremation and all cremations are done through crematoria.
- **Burial** is usually reserved only for still-born babies and small children up the age of 5 — in these cases there are no rituals to be performed. The funeral director will

¹ Professional flower garlands and loose flowers can be ordered from Mala (02) 9631 9497 or mobile 0406 565 025

make all the preparations and many cemeteries have a baby section where the burial can take place.

8. The Timing of the Cremation.

It may be a consideration to bear in mind that there are certain times during the day which are suitable and unsuitable for cremations. *Yama-ghanta* is the most appropriate time for any activity related to funerals whereas *Gulika*² must be avoided. These times are based upon the length of the day so the chart below only shows approximate times assuming sunrise and sunset are 6:00 and 18:00. The actual times need to be ascertained from

<http://www.agasthiar.org/panchang/rahu/rahu2.cgi>

Weekdays	Yama-ghanta	Guli-kalam
Sunday	1200h – 1330h	1500h – 1630h
Monday	1030h – 1200h	1330h – 1500h
Tuesday	0900h – 1030h	1200h – 1330h
Wednesday	0730h – 0900h	1030h – 1200h
Thursday	0600h – 0730h	0900h – 1030h
Friday	1500h – 1630h	0730h – 0900h
Saturday	1430h – 1500h	0600h – 0730h

If it is inconvenient to perform the cremation during *Yama-ghanta* then at least try to avoid *Guli-kalam*.

There are also five days in the month during which cremations are not done — this is known as **Panchaka**. If it is necessary to perform the cremation on these days then special ceremonies will need to be done. This should be discussed with your appointed funeral priest.

<http://www.drikpanchang.com/panchang/panchak-dates-timings.html>

9. The Funeral Service.

The dress protocol for a Hindu funeral is to dress down rather than dress up. Simple white cotton is preferred as clothes need to be washed upon return to the house. White *kurta* and *pyjama* would be appropriate for men or simple white casual shirts or T-shirts and cotton slacks and simple white dresses or saris for females. Black suits and ties and dark saris are totally inappropriate!

Western funerals usually have a eulogy component and often a slide show of the deceased person's life and achievements, often accompanied by music.

Traditional Hindu funerals follow a set format without eulogies, slides or music. Eulogies and slide shows are more appropriately kept at the memorial service held at the end of mourning.

² It's believed that any activity carried out during *Gulika* (Flowering Time) period will be repeated once again. So it's an auspicious time for starting activities like building a house, buying assets or vehicles. Marriage should not be conducted during this period for obvious reasons. And a dead body should not be taken out of the house to the cremation ground during *Gulika*.

There are a number of rituals that are performed which differ among the various communities. They range from very simple to quite complex and can be modified according to the wishes of the deceased as well as elders of the family. So discuss with the family members as to which format they'd like — a traditional or modern funeral.

10. Venue — Home, Funeral Parlor or Chapel

Traditionally Hindu funerals are held at the home. The funeral directors will bring the coffin home and set it down upon the floor with feet to the south and the coffin open. It is brought in head first and removed feet first.

Please note: If the body is brought home, nothing whatsoever is to be served to the attendees! No tea, coffee, water, biscuits etc.

All the rituals can be done comfortably at home and then the coffin will be transported to the crematorium. At the crematorium a chapel is booked for a short ceremony of farewell in which some verses from the scriptures read and everyone files past and offers handfuls of flowers (*shraddhanjali*). Take into account the number of people attending when booking the chapel — as this could take a long time. Also appoint someone to gently keep the line of mourners moving.

If bringing the deceased home is not an option for whatever reason, then some funeral directors have parlors in which the rites can be conducted. The 3rd option is to book a chapel at the crematorium for conducting all the rites — depending on the size of the congregation and the details of the rituals 2 time slots may need to be booked.

11. Witness Insertion

It is customary for the elder son to perform the funeral rites for the father and the younger for the mother. After the formal rites in the chapel, the chief mourner accompanied by 4 to 6 relatives and the priest can witness the actual *insertion* of the coffin. There are a number of small rituals done before insertion including the lighting of a fire on the coffin by the son or chief mourner.

If you wish this to be done you'll need to discuss the matter beforehand with your funeral director so that the time can be booked with the crematorium. There is usually an additional fee of about \$500 charged for this.

It is also customary to tip the workers at the incineration.

12. After the Cremation

Nothing is eaten or drunk until the cremation is over and the mourners have bathed. It is recommended that the family go to the beach or river-bank and sit there in silence until sunset and then return home to bathe and eat.

There are formal and rather elaborate mourning rituals and observations, but these need to be discussed with your family priest and elders. The minimum period of mourning to be observed is three days but some communities extend the period up to forty days.

13. Collecting the Ashes and dispersal

In Australia there are no health regulations regarding the cremated remains, or ashes of a person. Nevertheless, it would be best to consult with your local council in case there are some specific by-laws which regulate the dispersal of ashes.

The ashes are usually collected on the 3rd day after the cremation. The crematorium will hand the ashes over in a box or you can provide your own container. It can be made of timber, ceramic, metal, glass, etc. Biodegradable varieties are available from funeral directors.

There are some ceremonies to be conducted when collecting the ashes and a special ceremony is done at the time of scattering the ashes — these procedures should be discussed with your family/funeral priest.

The ashes can then be taken directly for dispersal locally or overseas. If there is a delay in transporting them to India then they should not be brought into the house but kept on the porch.

One can disperse the ashes into a local running river or into the sea from any beach. In Sydney there is a place allocated by Liverpool council for the disposal of ashes.

Georges river bank near HAIGH PARK, Bridges Road, MOOREBANK

<http://satyamghatsydney.blogspot.com.au/2013/06/satyam-ghat-sydney-location.html>

14. Death Overseas and the transporting of the body

If the death takes place overseas then it is best to cremate the body there with or without ceremonies and to transport the ashes to the home country for immersion. The cremation needs to be done as soon as possible.

The funeral and post death ceremonies are time-bound and do not require the presence of a body.

If the body was not found or recovered, then a substitute is made from darbha grass and then cremated and the ceremonies performed accordingly.

The period of mourning begins from the day of the hearing of the death and the ceremonies commenced immediately.

It is not advisable to transport the body back to the home country for cremation. This is a lengthy and a costly process. It takes from 1 — 3 weeks and costs around \$15,000.

By the time the body is repatriated for cremation the time frame for the post-mortem ceremonies would already have expired and all the ceremonies would be pointless.

One needs to appoint a funeral director in both countries to dispatch and to receive the body. The exact process will be managed by your appointed funeral director.

Please note that the embalming process required for transport is extremely toxic to the environment.

15. Suicide

Suicide is considered very detrimental to one's spiritual life especially when it is done with violence to oneself, and which causes trauma to others who witness the act, or discover the body. In these cases it is believed that the deceased becomes an earth-bound *preta* (hungry ghost)

The Shastras do in fact condone ritual suicide which is done in the case of chronic and terminal illnesses. This is known as *prayopavesh* - fasting to the death. The patient

summons all the family and makes known to them their intention. A priest is invited who will administer the *sankalpa* (formal statement of intent). The individual settles all his/her affairs and then commences a fast, either total or abstaining from food only.

In the case of violent suicide no formal rituals are performed for the cremation. The family can choreograph the funeral as they desire. A priest can be invited to read from the Gita, chant some hymns and give a discourse.

There are no mourning observances or rituals, but a purification ceremony must be done after 10 days. On the 12th day or 12th month after the funeral, a special ceremony is performed to liberate the deceased from the state of being earth-bound known as *Narayana Bali* — consult with your priest about having this ceremony performed.

Recommended Funeral Directors

Albert & Myer.

