

PITRIPAKSHA – GAYA

Ritual of a Lifetime



Aswin Krishnapaksha (dark fortnight of the month of Aswin – September - October) dedicated to departed soul in which Hindus undertake different rituals in remembrance of their ancestors. This fortnight is known as Pitripaksha. Some follow rigorous rituals known as Parwan which dictates that they ceremoniously feed Brahmins on the Tithi (stellar time) of the souls departure from the physical body. Others opt for Tarpan in which tilodak (water mixed with sesame (til) seeds), with Kushaa (kind of sharp bladed grass), is offered to the gods, Rishis (ancient sages), and the ancestors.

To do the ritual offering to the gods one faces East, for Rishis North and for ancestors South. Accordingly the right palm is placed in the three positions and is known as the tirth, each one assigned to the gods, rishis and ancestors. The tips of the fingers are called dev tirth, the base of the little finger is called rishi tirth and the gap formed by the base of the index finger and thumb is known as pitri tirtha. As per this when a person offers water to the gods, it is allowed to flow via the tips of the fingers, for rishis fingers are closed a little and hand turned to the left so that water flows through the base of the little finger. For the ancestors, water is allowed to flow along the root of the thumb by turning the hand right.

The custom is to make the offerings to father, grand father and great grand father in that order. The maternal grand father, great grand father and maternal great great grand father come next. Offerings are then made to mother, grand mother and great grand mother. Finally tilodak is offered to maternal grand mother, maternal great grand mother and maternal great great grand mother.

The magnanimity of the Hindu religion is demonstrated that even if none of the ritual offerings and ingredients are available, just three palm-fulls (anjali) of water may be offered while remembering the person to whom it is offered.



Shraddha & Tarpan

In Hindu religion it is important to distinguish between Funeral rites and Shraddha. Funeral rites (antyeshti) are considered inauspicious or 'amangal' while Shraddha constitute an auspicious 'mangal' ritual. It is the belief that when a person dies, his or her gross body (sthula sarira) only is consecrated to the flames. The 'antya ishti' (antyeshti) the last sacrifice offered is in fire, but the soul cannot quit the gross body without a suitable vehicle. This vehicle is the Linga-sarira or subtle body, sometimes described as angushtha-matra (of the size of a thumb), in which the deceased persons soul keeps hovering near the burning ground or crematorium.

The departed he or she is then in the state of a simple individual soul with a subtle body, and is called a preta, which means a departed spirit of ghost. This disembodied soul (jiva) which has departed from the physical body at death is called a preta. He or she has no real body capable of enjoying or suffering anything, and is consequently in a restless, uncomfortable plight.

More importantly, in this condition, the departed one is held to be an impure being, and all family members who participate in his or her funeral rites are held to be impure until the first Shraddha is performed. If a person dies away from kindred (relations), who alone can perform the funeral ceremonies, and who are perhaps unaware of his or her death and unable therefore to perform them, he or she becomes a 'pishach', a foul wandering ghost, disposed to take revenge for its misery upon all living creatures by a variety of malignant acts.

The Antyeshti or funeral rites, which are carried out for twelve days after death, is not only to soothe or give shanty (peace) by liberations of consecrated water to the troubled spirit, but to furnish the preta with an intermediate body, between the 'linga' or subtle and the 'sthula' or gross body – with a body, which is capable of enjoying or suffering, and which is composed of gross particles, though not of the same kind as the earthly gross body.



The Soul

The Bhagvad – Gita which forms a vital and philosophically important part of the great epic Mahabharata, states that on the eve of death the individual soul contracts all its energies and centers these into the bustle body. Our ordinary sight is incapable of perceiving it. The individual soul inhering in the linga-sharira enjoys the consequences of its needs from one birth to another and can only be perceived by Yogis with their extraordinary cognitive insight.

The great rishi Vyasa said; Those that are conversant with the scriptures behold, with the aid of acts laid with in the scriptures, the Soul with is clothes in a subtle body and is exceedingly subtle and which is dissociated from the gross body. As the rays of the sun that course in dense masses through every part of the firmament are incapable of being seen by the naked eye though their existence is capable of being inferred by reason, after the same manner, existent beings freed from gross bodies and wandering in the universe are beyond the ken of human vision.

As the effulgent disc of the sun is beheld in the water in a counter image, after the same manner the Yogi beholds within gross bodies the existent self in its counter image. All those souls again that are encased in subtle forms after being freed from the gross bodies, in which they resided, are perceptible to Yogis who have subjugated their senses and who are endued with knowledge of the soul. Indeed, aided by their own souls, Yogis behold those invisible beings”.



How Shradha and Tarpan benefit the Departed Souls

Shradha is the name of the ceremonies performed by relatives to help the Jiva (individual soul) who cast off his physical body in death. A Jiva who has cast off his physical sheath is called a Preta. The part of the Shradha performed to help him at this stage is called the Preta Kriya.

Gifts to deserving Brahmanas for the benefit of the Pitris, in the proper time and place and with faith, are known as Shradha. Shradha gives satisfaction to the Pitris. By the offering of the sixteen Shradhas, the son helps his father to dwell in joy with the Pitris. The son should perform the Sapindikarana rites for his father. Performance of Shradha and Tarpan relieves the hunger and thirst of the departed soul during its journey to the Pitri Loka.

Those who go to hell are extremely oppressed by hunger and thirst. Performance of Shradha and offerings of rice and oblations to them, relieve their sufferings. Hence, performance of Shradha is indispensable. Those who dwell in heaven also get satisfaction, strength and nourishment.

Performance of Shradha in honour of the manes or forefathers is indispensable. Shradha must be performed with faith, devotion and reverence. The son who does not perform Shradha and Tarpan is an ungrateful son. He goes to hell. The sacred scriptures declare: "He who does not perform Shradha takes his next birth in the lowest caste. He leads a miserable life and suffers from poverty.

