

## Hindu funeral rites

It is customary for a Hindu funeral to take place as quickly as possible, depending on which occurs first tradition states it must take place by the next dusk or the next dawn. This is, therefore, deterrent on the time of death.

In the United Kingdom this is not always possible, but in an ideal situation, no more than 24 hours should have passed between the death and the funeral of the deceased unless they died in suspicious circumstances which require that the body goes under a post-mortem legally. If necessary it is suitable for the body to undergo embalming however, this is not standard procedure.



Before the funeral service traditionally, the body of the deceased is washed by family members and close friends. Many funeral homes understand this is an important part of the Hindu culture and so in most cases will allow the family time to do this. If this is not possible then staff at the funeral home will prepare the body within the constraints of the faith. For the washing ritual, the deceased's head must be facing southward, with a lighted oil lamp and a picture of the deceased's favourite deity placed above their head. Then the "abhisegram" or holy bath can be started. The body is washed with a combination of ghee, honey, milk and yoghurt, whilst the body is being washed the washers should recite mantras. When the body has been cleaned essential oils are placed on the heads of the deceased, with turmeric for females and sandalwood for males. After this, the big toes should be tied together and the palms placed in a position of prayer, palm-to-palm, then dressed in their best clothes if contemporary Hindus or if more traditional then shrouded in a plain white sheet. If the deceased is a woman who has died before her husband she will be dressed in red.



## What happens at a Hindu Funeral in the UK?

Hindu funerals take place in the home of the deceased's or those of their close family members. In the funeral service, the casket will be open and all guests are expected to view the casket but not touch the deceased.



The service led by a Hindu priest and the elders of the family will consist of chanting and prayers. Non-Hindus are welcome to join in but this is not mandatory to attend the service. In traditional Hindu ceremonies, there are no eulogies read for the deceased; however contemporary Hindu funerals in the United Kingdom are starting to adopt more westernised traditions such as the use of eulogies.

Traditionally all Hindus, with the exception of babies, children and saints are cremated, this is due to the Hindu belief that it is the fastest way for the soul to escape and be free from the tethers of the soul's old body.

## What happens at a Hindu Cremation in the United Kingdom?

After the funeral service, the body will be taken for cremation. In line with the faith, this is something that must be observed by family members and sometimes a few close friends. It is extremely rare that non-believers and non-followers of the Hindu faith would be invited to observe this particular part of the ceremony. This is especially rare in the United Kingdom due to strict and restrictive laws surrounding cremation and who is allowed to be present to witness cremation.

The position of the deceased's body at this time is very important as due to religious tradition, it must go through every doorway from leaving their house to entering the crematorium to entering the incinerator with their feet first. Ideally, the feet would need to be facing south at this final stage.

According to Hindu tradition, the eldest son of the family is responsible for lighting the funeral pyre



However, as open funeral pyres are illegal in the United Kingdom, the modern equivalent is him pushing the button that controls the flames in the incinerator.

The deceased's close family that have to witness the cremation will pray during the incineration while the eldest son circles the body, this can be done prior to putting the deceased in the incinerator or by circling the actual incinerator itself.

Once the cremation is complete the family take the ashes and scatter them. Strict tradition in the Hindu religion states that they must be scattered into the Ganges river. This is because in Hinduism this is considered a sacred river and due to this many Hindus according to travel to India with their loved one's remains in urns to lay them to rest in the holy river.

This, however, is not always practical and therefore more rivers are becoming acceptable substitutes all over the world. It is, in fact, acceptable to scatter the ashes of loved ones of the Hindu faith in any river that flows to the sea and in the United Kingdom, many rivers have been

designated legal scattering places for the ashes of Hindus including the Thames, the Wye and the Soar.



The Holy

Ganges River

## What to wear to a Hindu funeral?

It is customary for guests at a Hindu funeral service to wear all white. This is because the colour represents the purity of the soul of the departed and their reincarnation. Therefore due to this black would be an inappropriate colour to wear.

It is seen as the most respectful attire to wear casual, loose-fitting clothes which convey humility. Men and women are required to wear long sleeves and full trousers without any bold jewellery or excessive makeup. It is also advisable to wear shoes that could be taken off and put on easily and quickly, as you may be asked to remove shoes before entering the funeral service,





## Hindu funeral flowers

Some followers of the Hindu faith put garlands of lotus flowers on the heads or necks of their deceased loved ones before the cremation. This is significant due to the symbolism of the lotus in Hinduism, in the fact that despite growing from mud and water it still blossoms and grows into a beautiful flower. Thus, lotus flowers represent triumph over pain and adversity purity and the ability to contravene earthly sins. This is, therefore, a fitting symbol for the reincarnation of a deceased soul.



Although some family members will often cover the coffin of the deceased in flowers leaves and herbs, it is not a tradition in Hinduism to bring flowers as gifts to a Hindu funeral. In comparison to other religions, this is often thought to complicate funeral rituals in Hindu traditions.



Should you wish to offer your condolences and express your sympathy with a gift of flowers then they should be sent to the family separately and not brought to the funeral. In India the gifts of lotus flowers and yellow and white chrysanthemums, the official flower of



mourning throughout Asia are the most fitting gifts for this situation.

It is a common occurrence that the deceased's family request that guests make donations to charity or to a religious organisation instead of donating flowers to them. This is considered a holy gesture one that demonstrates consideration for others, kindness and selflessness even in death.

Regardless of this, many Hindu's choose to lay a single garland before a photograph of the departed loved one following the funeral.

## Hindu funerals explained: what happens afterwards

The immediate family and close relatives return home after the cremation, there are all required to bathe, change their clothes and help clean up the house, after which they all eat a meal together.

The Hindu mourning period traditionally lasts thirteen days and it officially starts immediately after the cremation ceremony. Traditionally, the family doesn't visit any temples, public festivals or other homes during this period although close friends and family may visit them and bring them food. The third, fifth, seventh or ninth day the family have a special dinner of all the favourite foods that the departed enjoyed. A plate is offered to the spirit of the deceased at the dinner table and then is later abandoned place outside.

After this a smaller ceremony is held at home to free the soul, allowing it to transcend to a higher state of being. This is more joyful than the funeral and symbolises closure for the family. Visitors to this bring gifts such as baskets of fruit, or hampers containing nuts, cakes and other desserts for the family. If you are bringing food to show your respects you must be sure that it is vegetarian and cooked without the use of onions or garlic, as in the Hindu faith these foods, as well as animal products and alcohol, are considered worldly pleasures that can cause disordered sensory states. This runs counter to the Hindu belief in detachment from the physical being.

After this memorial, there are then additional memorials carried out on the thirty- first day after the death and on the one year anniversary.