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Rāmāyaṇa'da Ölüm Ritüelleri: Kremasyon, Śrāddha ve Cenaze Törenleri

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Öz

Bu çalışma Rāmāyaṇa destanında tasvir edilen ölüm ritüellerini ve Śrāddha törenlerini Vedik ve Dharmasūtra gelenekleriyle karşılaştırarak incelemektedir. Çalışma, özellikle Daśaratha, Vālī ve Rāvaṇa gibi figürlerin cenazelerinde bu ritüellerin Brahmanik normlar tarafından nasıl şekillendirildiğini ve farklı kültürel bağlamlara nasıl uyarlandığını araştırmaktadır. Ritüellerin sosyal ve kozmik düzenin korunmasındaki rolleri vurgulanmakta, özellikle ataerkil ve hiyerarşik yapıların nasıl yeniden üretildiğine odaklanılmaktadır. Makale, Śrāddha törenlerinin toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini ve kast hiyerarşilerini nasıl yansıttığını, erkek varislerin soyu ve sosyal düzeni yeniden teyit etmek için ritüeller gerçekleştirdiğini göstermektedir. Kadınlar ve marjinal gruplar genellikle sınırlı rollere sahip olup Brahmanik Hindu toplumunun ataerkil ve kast temelli yapısını pekiştirmektedir. Tara ve Aṅgada arasındaki ritüel rol paylaşımı gibi örnekler kadınların marjinalleştirilmesini ve erkeklerin bu uygulamalardaki merkezîliğini göstermektedir. Çalışma aynı zamanda Śūdra ve marjinal grupların bu ritüellere kısıtlı erişimine değinerek Brahmanların bu törenleri kutsallaştırmadaki merkezî rolünü vurgulamaktadır. Bu analiz, Rāmāyaṇa'nın ölüm ritüellerinin sosyopolitik ve dinî işlevlerinin altını çizmekte, hiyerarşik ilişkileri ve kozmik dengeyi korumadaki rollerini vurgulamaktadır.

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Death Rituals in the Rāmāyaṇa: Cremation, Śrāddha, and Funeral Ceremonies

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Abstract

This study examines the death rituals and Śrāddha ceremonies depicted in the Rāmāyaṇa epic, comparing them with Vedic and Dharmasūtra traditions. The study explores how these rituals, especially in the funerals of figures like Daśaratha, Vālī, and Rāvaṇa, were shaped by Brahmanic norms and adapted to different cultural contexts. The rituals' roles in maintaining social and cosmic order are highlighted, particularly focusing on how patriarchal and hierarchical structures are reproduced. The article shows how Śrāddha ceremonies reflect gender roles and caste hierarchies, with male heirs performing rituals to reaffirm lineage and social order. Women and marginalized groups generally have limited roles, reinforcing the patriarchal and caste-based structure of Brahmanic Hindu society. Examples like the ritual role-sharing between Tara and Aṅgada illustrate women's marginalization and men's centrality in these practices. The study also addresses the restricted access of Śūdra and marginalized groups to these rituals, emphasizing the central role of Brahmins in sanctifying these ceremonies. This analysis underscores the socio-political and religious functions of the Rāmāyaṇa's death rituals, highlighting their role in preserving hierarchical relationships and cosmic balance.

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Introduction

In Hindu cosmology, death is not perceived as an end, but as a transitional stage in the cycle of samsāra, the continuous process of birth, death and rebirth. Death rituals are of great importance in this tradition because they are believed to facilitate the passage of the deceased's soul from the earthly realm to the afterlife. An important part of this process is the transformation of the deceased from preta, a wandering or restless spirit, into pitṛ, an honored ancestor. This transformation is not automatic; rather it requires the careful performance of certain funeral rites. The antyeṣṭi or funeral sacrifice and the Śrāddha ceremonies that follow are crucial in enabling the soul to be liberated from the preta state and elevated to higher planes of existence (Asvalayana Grhyasutra, as cited in Shastri, 1963, p. 158).

The Śrāddha ritual in particular reflects the Hindu emphasis on ancestral continuity and the duty of living descendants, especially male heirs, to care for their deceased ancestors. As explained in the Dharmasūtra texts (Āśvalāyana Grihya Sutra, IV.7.1; Āpastamba Dharmasūtra, II.7.16.1), these rituals not only secure the future welfare of the dead but also reaffirm the social and religious hierarchies of Brahmanical Hindu society. In particular, they emphasize the role of male descendants in the preservation of the lineage through ritual offerings, which in turn glorify the spirits of both kin and ancestors (Kane, 1930-1964, Vol. IV. Part 1, p. 350-351). If these rites are not performed, the soul continues to suffer and cannot fully pass into the ancestral realm. As Gonda (1980) notes, ritual offerings, especially piṇḍa (rice balls), symbolize the relationship between the deceased and the sacrificer, strengthening both their physical and spiritual bonds (p. 163).

Within this ritual framework, the Rāmāyaṇa, one of the foremost epics of ancient India, offers a rich narrative reflecting these Vedic and Brahmanical traditions. The text presents the death and funeral rites of important figures such as Daśaratha, Vālī and Rāvaṇa, reflecting the moral and religious obligations of sons and grandsons to their ancestors. These depictions emphasize the fundamental role of funeral rites in maintaining social and cosmological order, highlighting the personal duty (dharma) of individuals, especially sons, to honor the dead by properly performing these necessary rites (Sharma, 1971, p. 165).

1. Historical Perspective on Related Studies and Contributions

The concept of Śrāddhā occupies a unique and transformative position within Hindu philosophy and ritual practices, having evolved significantly from Vedic times through the classical period. In the Hindu context, Śrāddhā encompasses a broad range of meanings, including devotion, trust, and a profound sense of spiritual commitment. This multifaceted concept serves as a bridge between human beings, deities, ancestors, and even broader environmental movements, indicating its dynamic and evolving significance in Hindu traditions.

Early scholarship by Bhattacharya (1971) provides a foundational understanding of Śrāddhā's evolution, tracing its journey from early Vedic rituals to a pivotal element of later ritual life. Bhattacharya reveals Śrāddhā as a cultural innovation that transformed early Vedic practices, contributing to a coherent ritual framework that addresses both individual and collective spiritual needs. This evolution highlights Śrāddhā's adaptability and its integral role in maintaining the

continuity of Hindu religious life. Nicholas (1981) offers insights into the socio-religious aspects of Hindu rituals, focusing on śrāddha in relation to impurity. He showcases how śrāddha's role in navigating relationships between the living and the deceased, particularly through practices like piṇḍa-dāna, is crucial in maintaining social and cosmic harmony. Nicholas highlights how these rituals serve not only a religious function but also reinforce social cohesion and familial responsibilities, illustrating Śraddhā's integration into both spiritual and communal aspects of Hindu life.

Sayers (2015) further explores the innovative aspects of Śraddhā in the context of ancestor worship. He discusses how the development of śrāddha rituals, arising from the synthesis of solemn and domestic traditions, underscores Śraddhā's adaptability in responding to shifting social and theological needs. Sayers emphasizes the role of Śraddhā in integrating ritual practices into the domestic sphere, making ancestor worship accessible and relevant to everyday life. This blending of ritual traditions marks a significant innovation within Hindu practices, bridging Vedic sacrificial rituals with domestic spiritual engagement. Turci (2015) extends the relevance of Śraddhā beyond traditional religious confines by linking it to contemporary movements like Eco-Dharma and Deep Ecology. He illustrates how Śraddhā serves as a universal force transcending doctrinal boundaries, offering a philosophical foundation for addressing modern ecological concerns. This perspective suggests that Śraddhā is not only central within Hindu spirituality but also offers a unifying principle for fostering awareness of the interconnectedness between humanity and nature, fostering an inclusive worldview that integrates spirituality with environmental ethics. Kutlutürk (2016) provides an examination of antyeṣṭi saṃskāra, or Hindu funeral rites, emphasizing the importance of Śraddhā within these rituals. He discusses how Śraddhā plays a crucial role in ensuring that funeral ceremonies fulfill their spiritual purpose, supporting the cosmic cycle of rebirth and liberation. By outlining the practices involved in antyeṣṭi saṃskāra, Kutlutürk highlights Śraddhā as a key element that upholds the spiritual and cultural fabric of Hindu society. Bhawuk (2020) offers a more recent analysis of Śraddhā in the Bhagavad-Gītā, providing insight into its role as a critical psychological and spiritual construct within Hindu thought. He presents Śraddhā as a virtue of the highest order, profoundly shaping an individual's ethical and spiritual life. According to Bhawuk, Śraddhā acts as a mediator between jñāna (knowledge) and moksha (liberation), facilitated through practices like eager spiritual engagement (tatparah) and self-restraint (samyatendriyah). This perspective distinguishes Śraddhā as an active force essential for liberation, underscoring its fundamental importance in Hindu spirituality.

An examination of Śraddhā across various contexts reveals its novel and transformative significance within Hindu traditions. Śraddhā is an active, evolving force that shapes ritual, theology, and social obligations. Its role extends from the philosophical teachings of the Bhagavad-Gītā to practical rituals of ancestor worship, and even to modern environmental consciousness. The adaptability of Śraddhā, as seen in its incorporation into diverse aspects of life, positions it as a central and enduring element in Hindu spiritual practice. Building upon this foundation, the present study examines death rituals and śrāddha ceremonies in the Rāmāyaṇa, highlighting how these rituals were shaped by Brahmanic norms and adapted across cultural contexts. By analyzing the funerals of figures like Daśaratha, Vālī, and Rāvaṇa, the research illustrates the reinforcement

of patriarchal and caste-based hierarchies through śrāddha, thereby showcasing the socio-political role of these ceremonies. Emphasizing the role of male heirs and Brahmins, the study underscores how śrāddha is not only a spiritual practice but also a means of preserving social order. This reflects both the continuity and adaptability of Śrāddhā within Hindu society and contributes to a deeper understanding of its multifaceted roles.

2. Vedic Foundations of Death and Śrāddha Rituals

2.1. The Origins of Śrāddha in Vedic Texts

The origins of Śrāddha rites can be traced back to Vedic rituals, where death was not simply the end of life, but a critical moment that required careful ritual processing to ensure the proper passage of the deceased's soul. In early Vedic literature, the death of an individual required the performance of antyeṣṭi saṃskāra, the final sacrifice that consecrated the individual's departure from the earthly realm (Kutlutürk, 2016, p. 178). Śrāddha is an important ritual associated with different ritual practices throughout the Vedic period. There are various references and practices of the śrāddha ritual in Vedic texts, especially in sources such as the Rigveda, Grhyasutra, Dharmasutra, Yajurveda, Brahmanas, and Upanishads. Although the Rigveda does not directly mention the term "śrāddha," it does include practices that involve the initial stages of the śrāddha ritual, especially "pitṛyajña" (offering to ancestors) (Monier-Williams, 1883: 281ff; Nicholas, 1981 s. 374). For example, Rigveda 10.15 includes hymns and offerings dedicated to the pitṛs (ancestral spirits), invoking their blessings and ensuring their satisfaction in the afterlife (Sayers, 2015, p. 184). These rituals laid the foundations for a system in which devotion to ancestors (pitṛ tarpaṇa) was maintained through offerings, ensuring patrilineal continuity and the blessings of the deceased (Shastri, 1963, p. 99).

The development of the śrāddha ritual is discussed in more detail in the Grhyasutras and Dharmasutras. The Āśvalāyana Grhyasutra is one of the first texts to use the term śrāddha, where it is described as a complex ritual involving both the offering to the deceased (piṇḍa dāna) and the feeding of brahmanas (brāhmaṇa-bhojana). In these texts, an important feature of śrāddha is the transformation of the deceased from the preta (wandering soul) state to the pitṛ (ancestral spirit) state. Special types of śrāddha, such as ekoddishtha śrāddha, are also involved in facilitating this transition (Kane, 1930-1964, p. 350). The Gautama Dharmasutra and Baudhayana Dharmasutra further provide detailed rules and practices for śrāddha, emphasizing its significance in maintaining familial and social order. Śrāddha rituals comprise three main stages: agnaukararṇa (offering to the sacred fire), piṇḍa dāna (offering rice balls), and the feeding of brahmanas (brāhmaṇa-bhojana). These stages are deeply connected with the sacred elements of Vedic rituals. The Yajurveda, particularly in the Taittiriya Samhita 1.8.6, contains references to offerings resembling piṇḍa dāna, emphasizing the importance of food offerings as a means of sustaining the spirits of the deceased (Sayers, 2015, p. 184). Similarly, in the Satapatha Brahmana (13.8.1), offerings to agni (fire) are detailed as a crucial part of facilitating the soul's journey to the other world (Gonda, 1980, p. 163).

The role of brahmanas in śrāddha is particularly emphasized in the Grhyasutras and Dharmasutras. Brahmanas act as intermediaries between the living and the ancestors, and their presence is crucial to ensure the efficacy of the ritual. The Chandogya Upanishad (3.16) elaborates

on the role of brahmanas in transmitting sacred knowledge and blessings, positioning them as essential figures in bridging the gap between the earthly and the spiritual realms. The involvement of brahmanas in śrāddha serves not only to sanctify the ritual but also to reinforce the hierarchical structure of Vedic society, a process often referred to as brahmanization (Sharma, 1971, p. 165).

The śrāddha ritual, originating from Vedic scriptures, played a pivotal role in maintaining the spiritual well-being of the deceased and the continuity of the family lineage. Through ceremonial offerings to the sacred fire, ritualistic practices involving food, and the participation of Brahmin priests, the śrāddha ritual established a connection between the living, the ancestors, and the cosmic order. The evolution of the śrāddha ritual, from its early Vedic forms to the intricate ceremonies described in later texts, underscores its enduring significance within the religious and social framework of ancient Indian society.

2.2. Evolution of Śrāddha

The Śrāddha ceremony evolved over time, becoming more complex and formalized, especially as Brahmanical influence increased. Initially these rituals were relatively simple and centered on the offering of basic items such as oil, rice and water to the sacrificial fire (Monier-Williams 1883: 284). But as Brahmanical norms solidified, the participation of brahmaṇas became a critical component of the ritual. By the time of the Grhyasutras, Śrāddha had evolved into a more elaborate ceremony involving not only offerings to the dead, but also the feeding of the brahmaṇas, who were considered essential agents in ensuring the efficacy of the ritual (Shastri, 1963, p. 127). The Śrāddha ritual is a complex ceremony that forms an important part of the Indian death rituals (antyeṣṭi saṃskāra) and is intended to maintain the patrilineal (pitṛvaṃśa) family structure. Śrāddha is usually performed in three main stages, which shed light on the evolution of the ritual and the processes by which brahmanical norms came to the fore.

The first stage, agnaukararṇa, begins with the throwing of the materials of the dead into agni. Agni represents transformation, both physical and symbolic, enabling the body to be purified (śuddhi) and the soul to continue its journey (ātman's orientation towards mokṣa). While this stage aims at the liberation of the dead body from physical existence, it also emphasizes the bond between the living and the dead (Shastri, 1963, p. 158). Agnaukararṇa is also linked to the agnihotra tradition of the vedic period, and this ritual emphasizes the soul-purifying power of agni. The second stage is the piṇḍa dāna, the offering of piṇḍa (rice balls). This ritual symbolizes the continuation of the physical and spiritual bond between the deceased (preta) and those left behind. Piṇḍa both provides physical nourishment for the deceased and supports the journey of the soul. With this ritual, the bond between the living and the departed ancestors (pitṛ) is strengthened and maintained through monthly offerings (māsika śrāddha) (Gonda, 1980, p. 163). Piṇḍa dāna is crucial to ensure that the preta (wandering spirit) is transformed into pitṛ, and this transformation plays a central role in maintaining ancestral veneration and patrilineal continuity (Kane, 1930-1964, p. 350). The third and final stage is completed by the addition of brahmana participation (brāhmaṇa-bhojana). The participation of brahmanas in these rituals increases the impact and sanctity of the rituals. The brahmanas are regarded as an intermediary (madhyastha) between the living and the ancestors, and the offerings made to them (dakṣiṇā) reach the ancestors. This

participation reinforces the brahmanical hierarchy and class structure in society in many ways. The feeding of the brahmanas (brāhmaṇa-bhojana) and the gifts (dakṣiṇā) given to them both provide spiritual peace for the deceased and help the living to gain the blessings (āśīrvāda) of their ancestors (Kane, 1930-1964, p. 351). This stage emphasizes the power of the ritual mediation of the brahmanas to maintain sacred order and reveals the function of ritual in reinforcing social hierarchy.

These three stages show how the śrāddha ritual ensures patrilineal continuity. The performance of these rituals by male descendants (putra) ensures the continuation of the lineage (vaṃśa) and the preservation of ancestral loyalty. These rituals are crucial for the maintenance of social and cosmic order (ṛta) and support the continuation of the patriarchal structure (pārivārika vyavasthā) (Sharma, 1971, p. 161). Each stage of ritual is associated with the fulfillment of dharma and reinforces the individual's place in the social and cosmic order (Sayers, 2015). As ceremonies became more formalized, śrāddha came to symbolize not only the spiritual well-being of the deceased, but also the continuity of the patrilineal family lineage. Through the performance of these rituals, descendants reaffirmed their place in the family and their duty to their ancestors, thus maintaining social and cosmic order.

3. Funeral Ceremonies in Rāmāyaṇa

3.1. Cremation Applications

The Rāmāyaṇa provides vivid and detailed accounts of funeral rites that reflect the varying cultural traditions of the different societies within the narrative framework, including humans, vānara (monkey-like beings) and rākṣasa (demon-like beings). The funeral rites of Daśaratha, Vāli and Rāvaṇa are particularly revealing, showing both the pomp and solemnity that accompanied royal funerals in ancient India.

King Daśaratha's funeral is one of the most detailed ceremonies described in Rāmāyaṇa's Ayodhyākāṇḍa. After his death, Daśaratha's body was preserved in a barrel of sesame oil to delay cremation until his sons returned (Rāmāyaṇa II, 72, 47-50). Vedic fires symbolizing the king's sacred status were carried in front of the body and his body was placed in a large palanquin (śībikā) for the funeral procession (Rāmāyaṇa, II.70, 19)¹. Luxury items such as sandalwood, agarwood and fragrant resins were used to make the funeral pyre, emphasizing the splendor of royal funerals (Rāmāyaṇa, II.70, 16)². The mourning period lasted ten days (Rāmāyaṇa, II.70, 23)³, with Daśaratha's wives, priests and ministers adhering to ritualized observances before the final Śrāddha rites were performed on the twelfth day. This comprehensive narrative offers profound insight into the cultural and religious rituals of the era.

The cremation of Vāli, king of the Vānara tribe, offers a striking parallel to human funerals in the text. After Vāli's death, his body was washed, dressed and adorned with jewels, as is typical

¹ śībikābhīś ca yānaiś ca yathārhaṃ tasya yoṣitaḥ nagarān niryayus tatra vṛddhaiḥ parivṛtās tadā

² candanāguruniryāsān saralaṃ padmakam tathā devadārūṇi cāhṛtya citāṃ cakrus tathāpare

³ kṛtodakam te bharatena sārddham; nṛpāṅganā mantripurohitās ca puraṃ pravīśyāśruparītanetrā; bhūmau daśāham vyanayanta duḥkham

for kings (Rāmāyaṇa IV.24, 23-24)⁴. Unlike Daśaratha, whose funeral rites were delayed, Vāli was not kept waiting; Sugrīva directly instructed Tāra and Aṅgada to arrange the funeral rites without delay (Rāmāyaṇa IV.24, 13)⁵. His body was carried by the people of Vānara in a solemn ceremony in which a fire was prepared using dry wood, sandalwood, ghee, and incense (Rāmāyaṇa IV.24, 25)⁶. His son Aṅgada performed the cremation ceremony, circling the fire according to the ritual rules. The people of Vānara would then go to a sacred river to offer water libations, thus following the ritual sequence seen in human funerals (Rāmāyaṇa IV. 24. 42)⁷. This meticulous depiction not only emphasizes the sacred obligation to honor the dead, even among the monkey-like Vānara tribe, but also reflects the shared ritual values that transcend the boundaries between humans and other beings in the epic narrative, blurring the line between mythology and cultural practice.

In the case of Rāvaṇa, king of Rākṣasa, his funeral rites reflected the royal customs of both human and vānara societies. Despite his demonic nature, Rāvaṇa is described as a Vedic scholar who practiced severe penances and was well versed in the scriptures (Rāmāyaṇa I. 19. 16)⁸. Upon his death, his brother Vibhīṣaṇa reluctantly organized the cremation ceremony, as he initially argued that Rāvaṇa's actions were contrary to dharma (Rāmāyaṇa VI. 99. 37)⁹ and rendered him ineligible for any of the four types of liberation (Rāmāyaṇa VI. 99. 39)¹⁰. However, adhering to his duty (dharma), Vibhīṣaṇa conducted the rites, using a gold bier and a pyre built from scented wood and oil¹¹. Brahmins recited hymns from the Yajurveda as the fire was lit (Dutt, 1893, p. 1496)¹², and the ceremonies concluded with offerings to the ancestors, indicating that even Rākṣasa kings followed Vedic traditions in death (Sastri, 1981, p. 326). Collectively, these accounts emphasize the grandeur and ritual precision of royal funerals across different societies in the Rāmāyaṇa. The use of luxurious materials, the participation of priests, and the strict observance of mourning periods underscore the social and religious significance attributed to -even if rākṣasa- kings during their passage to the afterlife.

3.2. The Role of Śrāddha in Rāmāyaṇa

The Śrāddha ceremony following cremation is depicted with special prominence in the Rāmāyaṇa, both because of its religious significance and its symbolic role in ancestor worship. A notable example is the modest Śrāddha that Rāma performed in honor of his father Daśaratha while in exile. Lacking the resources for a grand ceremony, Rāma uses simple materials found in the forest - piṇḍa made of aiṅguda (sacred fig) and badara (jujube fruit) - to offer to his father's soul (Rāmāyaṇa, II, 95, 30)¹³. The simplicity of this ceremony contrasts with the grandeur of

⁴ āropya śibikāṃ caiva vālinam gatajīvitam alaṃkāraiś ca vividhair mālyair vastraiś ca bhūṣitam/ājñāpayat tadā rājā sugrīvaḥ plavageśvaraḥ aurdhvadehikam āryasya kriyatām anurūpataḥ

⁵ kuru tvam asya sugrīva pretakāryam anantaram tārāṅgadābhyāṃ sahito vāline dahanam prati

⁶ viśrāṇayanto ratnāni vividhāni bahūni ca agrataḥ plavagā yantu śibikā tadanantaram

⁷ saṃskṛtya vālinam te tu vidhipūrvaṃ plavaṃgamāḥ ājagmur udakaṃ kartum nadīm śītajalām śubhām

⁸ sa brahmaṇā dattavaras trailokyam bād hate bhṛṣam mahābalo mahāvīryo rākṣasair bahubhir vṛtaḥ

⁹ adharmāntasamṃyuktaḥ kāmam eṣa niśācaraḥ tejasvī balavāñ śūraḥ saṃgrāmeṣu ca nityaśaḥ

¹⁰ maraṇāntāni vairāni nirvṛttaṃ naḥ prayojanam kriyatām asya saṃskāro mamāpy eṣa yathā tava

¹¹ tvatsakāśān mahābāho saṃskāraṃ vidhipūrvakam kṣipram arhati dharmajña tvaṃ yaśobhāg bhaviṣyasi

¹² "We understand the unexpressed subject of the verb arhati, "he deserves or merits," to be Rāvaṇa. But this seems to force the grammar. This interpretation, however, is followed by Dutt (1893, pp. 1495–96), who renders, "It behoveth thee to perform ... his funeral ceremony." see *An Epic of Ancient India*, Volume VI: Yuddhakāṇḍa, Translation and Annotation by Robert P. Goldman et al. p. 1401

¹³ aiṅgudaṃ badarīmīśraṃ piṇyākaṃ darbhamaṣṭare nyasya rāmaḥ suduḥkhārto rudan vacanam abravīt

Daśaratha's cremation, but emphasizes Rāma's deep filial piety and commitment to upholding dharma even in difficult circumstances

In Rāmāyaṇa, rivers also play an important role in funeral and Śrāddha rites, serving as sacred sites for offering drink to ancestors. Sarayū and Mandākinī, for example, are often mentioned as places where water offerings are made. Water, symbolizing purity and continuity, is a key element in Hindu funeral rites, and its presence in these sacred rivers emphasizes the bond between the living and their deceased ancestors. The fact that Rāma performed Śrāddha on the banks of the Mandākinī after hearing of his father's death further reinforces the sanctity of these sites as places of ancestor worship (Rāmāyaṇa III.27).

4. Brahmanical Influence and Ritual Significance

4.1. The Role of Brahmins in Death Rituals

In both the Vedic texts and the Rāmāyaṇa, the role of the brahmaṇas (Brahmins) is central to the proper performance of death rituals, especially the Śrāddha ceremony. Brahmins are not only ritual experts, but also mediators between the living and the deceased. Their participation is considered indispensable for sanctifying the funeral process and ensuring the smooth transition of the soul from preta (wandering soul) to pitṛ (honored ancestor). According to Vedic tradition, the soul's successful journey to higher planes of existence depends on the proper performance of these rites, which must be led by qualified brahmaṇas (Kane, 1930-1964, p. 351). In the Grhyasutras, the feeding of the brahmaṇas is described as a vital part of the Śrāddha ceremony and represents the idea that offerings to Brahmins reach the ancestors through these priests (Shastri, 1963, p. 162).

Rāmāyaṇa continues this tradition by emphasizing the role of Brahmins in important funeral ceremonies. In the cremation of Rāvaṇa, despite being a rākṣasa king, the participation of Brahmins underscores their indispensable position in the religious structure. Brahmins recite verses from Yajurveda as part of the cremation process, symbolizing that cosmic order is maintained even in the death of a ruler (Sastri, 1981, pp. 326-327). In the case of Daśaratha, Brahmins carry his Vedic fires during the funeral ceremony, further emphasizing his priestly role in the sanctification of death (Sharma, 1971, p. 165).

One of the most important aspects of Brahmin participation in funeral rites is the practice of ritual gift-giving (dāna) to Brahmins. Typically consisting of food, cows, jewelry and other valuables, these gifts are offered as part of Śrāddha to ensure that the blessings of the ancestors are secured and the soul passes safely to the afterlife. Rāmāyaṇa describes how Bharata generously performed Śrāddha rites for his father Daśaratha, giving Brahmins precious objects, food, cows, slaves and large houses to fulfill their ritual obligations (Rāmāyaṇa II.71). Without such offerings, Śrāddha was considered incomplete and the soul of the deceased might remain restless or unable to attain spiritual peace (Kane, 1930-1964, p. 534).

4.2. Symbolism in Funeral Ceremonies

The symbolic nature of death rituals in Hinduism extends beyond their practical function and touches on deeper metaphysical concepts such as transformation and continuity. As a

transformative process, cremation symbolizes the release of the soul from the physical body and the transition to a new state of being. The case of Kabandha, a rākṣasa in the Rāmāyaṇa, vividly illustrates this idea. After Kabandha is killed by Rāma, he asks that his body be cremated so that he can regain his original form. After cremation, Kabandha transforms from a terrible demon back into his celestial form, symbolizing the purifying and liberating power of fire in Hindu funeral practices (Rāmāyaṇa III.67).

The use of fire, water, food and offerings in death rituals strengthens the bond between the living and the dead. Fire purifies the body through burning and facilitates the soul's journey. Water, used in drinks during the Śrāddha ceremony, serves as a means by which the living pay their respects and offerings to their ancestors. Food offerings, especially piṇḍa (rice balls), are symbolically consumed by ancestors and preserve the bond between generations. Together, these elements form a holistic ritual framework that ensures the continuity of the cycles of life and death and the maintenance of familial and social order (Gonda, 1980, p. 165).

In Rāmāyaṇa, rivers such as Sarayū and Mandākinī serve as sacred sites for funeral libations and Śrāddha rituals, further emphasizing the cleansing and life-sustaining properties of water. The Śrāddha performed by Rāma for Daśaratha by the Mandākinī River emphasizes the importance of these natural elements in maintaining cosmic balance and honoring the deceased (Rāmāyaṇa III.27).

5. Gender and Ritual Exclusion

5.1. Marginal Role of Women in Death Rituals

In Rāmāyaṇa and the wider Vedic and Brahmanical traditions, women play a distinctly limited role in the performance of death rituals such as Śrāddha. Despite their visible role, especially as members of the royal family or as mourners at important funerals, they are largely excluded from the active performance of rites that ensure the spiritual well-being of the deceased. The responsibility for performing these rituals has traditionally been assigned to male heirs, especially sons, who were considered essential for continuing the paternal lineage that secured ancestral blessings (Shastri, 1963, p. 159). The Śrāddha ceremony in particular is almost exclusively a male-dominated event, with women often relegated to passive roles as spectators or mourners.

A notable example of this is Tara's participation in Vāli's funeral in Rāmāyaṇa. While Vāli's widow Tara is present during the cremation and actively mourns her husband, she does not perform the basic ceremonies. Instead, her son Aṅgada performs the cremation rituals, emphasizing the gendered division of ritual responsibilities (Rāmāyaṇa IV.24). While Tara's role is emotionally significant, it underscores the limited religious authority accorded to women in these contexts. This marginalization reflects broader Brahmanical norms that privilege male agency in maintaining social and spiritual order through ritual practices.

However, there are rare instances in Vedic texts where female ancestors are mentioned in connection with Śrāddha offerings. While some Grhyasutras suggest that offerings can be made to female ancestors, this is the exception rather than the rule. The Paraskara Grhyasutra, for

example, mentions offering “sacrifices to mothers”, but even then the primary focus remains on the male lineage (Kane, 1930-1964, p. 365). Such references, though rare, suggest that women are not completely excluded from the conceptual framework of ancestor worship, but that their participation is clearly secondary compared to that of men.

5.2. Caste and Ritual Exclusion

In addition to the exclusion of women, caste hierarchy also plays an important role in determining who can participate in or benefit from death ceremonies. For example, Śūdras and other marginalized groups are often excluded from performing or organizing Śrāddha ceremonies, reflecting the strict Brahmanical social order. The Dharmasūtras and Grhyasutras state that only those from the two-born (dvija) varna - Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas - are eligible to perform such rites. The Śūdras, at the lowest rung of the varna system, are not permitted to perform such rituals, neither for their ancestors nor for others (Kane, 1930-1964, p. 366).

Rāmāyaṇa reinforces this exclusion by emphasizing the importance of Brahmanical authority in funeral rites. For example, the presence of Brahmins is essential for the proper conduct of Śrāddha, and rituals without their participation are considered incomplete. In the cremation of Rāvaṇa, despite belonging to the rākṣasa race, Brahmins are called upon to lead the rituals, indicating that Brahmanic norms transcend caste and species distinctions in the narrative (Sastri, 1981, p. 327). This emphasizes the centrality of the Brahmin caste in sanctifying not only the living social order but also the rituals that govern the afterlife. These exclusions reflect the hierarchical nature of Brahmanical Hinduism, where access to religious rites and rituals is determined by both gender and caste. Women and Śūdras, along with other marginalized groups, are systematically denied religious authority to conduct or benefit from key death rituals, thus reinforcing their subordination in both the social and spiritual realms (Shastri, 1963, p. 160).

5.3. Socio-Cultural Effects of Gender and Rituals

The impact of gender roles on ritual practices requires an in-depth analysis of these rituals. The ritual role-sharing between Tara and Aṅgada highlights the central ritual roles of men, while showing the subordinate position of women. In this case, the concept of “subordinate positioning” proposed by feminist theories is important; the positioning of Tara as a passive or symbolic figure in rituals indicates that rituals are shaped by gender biases to maintain patriarchal order (Ortner, 1974, pp. 80-85; Bynum, 1987, pp. 123-130). This subordinate role in rituals also significantly affects the sociocultural position of women. The fact that women do not have the authority to lead rituals, especially in death rituals, represents a practice in a patriarchal society that reaffirms men’s ritual authority and relegates women to a socially subordinate position (Butler, 1990, pp. 45-50). Feminist theorists refer to this as “ritual power” and argue that this power plays an important role in the reproduction of not only spiritual but also social power (Scott, 1988, pp. 102-110). At this point, feminist criticisms of ritual power and gender inequality are very important. The exclusion of women from rituals and their restriction to symbolic roles limits women’s space for movement within society, especially given the power of rituals to reproduce social order (Lerner, 1986, pp. 150-155). Tara’s presence at Vāli’s funeral illustrates this; while Tara actively mourns her husband, the main ritual responsibility is given to Aṅgada. This example illustrates the marginalization of

women as emotional supporters in contrast to the central and sacred role of men.

The marginal role of women in rituals is an example of how gender hierarchy is reproduced through ritual practices. In this case, feminist critiques emphasize the role of women in rituals in the reproduction of not only spiritual but also social and political power (Daly, 1978, pp. 90-95). By ensuring the centrality of men in such rituals, Brahmanical norms contribute to the preservation of the patriarchal order in the social structure. In this way, rituals not only serve a spiritual function but also become a tool that perpetuates gender inequality (Mohanty, 1988, pp. 62-65). In conclusion, this feminist analysis of the place and impact of gender in rituals shows that the death rituals depicted in the Rāmāyaṇa have not only a religious but also a socio-political function. The subordinate position of women in rituals reveals how patriarchal norms and Brahmanical influences are deeply embedded in the social structure and helps us understand how these rituals shape the sociocultural position of women.

6. Conclusion

The Rāmāyaṇa presents a rich tapestry of death rituals reflecting traditions found in Vedic and Dharmasūtra texts and stands out as a narrative that builds upon these traditions. The epic emphasizes that death is an important transition that must be carefully managed through ritual to ensure the soul's passage from preta to pitṛ. The role of Brahmins, the use of fire and water, and offerings to ancestors are all elements that reinforce the sacred obligations of the living towards the dead. The text also reveals how death ceremonies, especially in the ritual practices of the vānara and rākṣasa communities, were adapted to local cultural peculiarities while remaining within the Brahmanical framework. The funeral rites of figures such as Vāli and Rāvaṇa, while adhering to Brahmanical norms, also exhibited the distinctive cultural practices of these communities. This demonstrates both the continuity of the Vedic tradition and the flexibility of the death rituals in the Rāmāyaṇa to adapt to the specific needs of the narrative.

The function of death rituals is not limited to ensuring the spiritual well-being of the deceased; they also play a central role in maintaining social and cosmic order. The performance of Śrāddha ceremonies, especially by male descendants, reaffirms the ancestral lineage and ensures the continuity of the bond between the living and the dead. Ancestral blessings guarantee the well-being of the living and allow the dying to make a peaceful transition. The Rāmāyaṇa not only reflects the Brahmanical values and rituals of Vedic literature but also shows how these practices can be adapted to different cultural contexts. While the primary function of these rituals is to maintain cosmic balance and social continuity, the epic clearly demonstrates how these rituals can be reshaped according to new social and cultural needs.

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