

The Significance and Ritual of Shraaddha

(Excerpts from Satsang of Pujya Bapuji & Scriptures)

The next life of a jiva is essentially determined by its previous Samskaras. Shraaddha, as such, is performed with the objective that a jiva may attain a better life in its next birth. The ritual, that is carried out with faith, accompanied by recitation of Mantras for satiating the manes, is known as Shraaddha. In this process, 'Pindadaana' is made to the manes with 'Shraddhaa'; hence it is called 'Shraaddha'. We gratefully perform Shraaddha for the manes who in turn help us circumvent obstacles in our lives.

In the Varaha Purana, Markandeya Rishi has described the ritual of Shraaddha to Gaurmukh Brahmin in the following words:

"O Excellent among Brahmins! One should invite Brahmins who know all the six Vedangas, who perform yajnas, who carry out penance in the midst of five fires and who adore their parents. One should also invite one's sister's children, daughter's sons, father-in-law, sons-in-law, maternal uncles, an ascetic Brahmin, disciples and relatives.

The Vayu Purana states that, "One should not invite a Brahmin who betrays his friend, who has uneven nails or black teeth, who has illicit relationship with girls, who is an arsonist, who is held in disgrace by society, who sells 'Somrasa', a thief, a backbiter, the village priest, one who earns a living as a teacher, the husband of a remarried woman, one who has deserted his parents, one who raises low caste children, one who has married a Shudra woman, and one who makes a living by conducting worship in temples."

Method of Invitation

A conscientious man should send an invitation to self-restrained Brahmins one day before the actual day of Shraaddha. But if a virtuous Brahmin walks in uninvited on the day of Shraaddha, he too should be fed with equal honor. The host should wash the feet of all the Brahmin invitees. Then after washing his own hands he should offer water to them for Aachaman. Thereafter, meals should be served to the Brahmins after seating them properly.

If the offering of food is to propitiate the manes, an odd number of Brahmins should be invited, and if it is for propitiating the gods, one should invite an even number of Brahmins. There is also a custom of inviting two Brahmins on such occasions; one to represent the manes and the other, the gods.

Yajna during Shraaddha

O Illustrious one! Take prior permission of the Brahmins present on the occasion and make three oblations of salt less food prepared from grains and vegetables to the fire. The first offering should be made chanting the mantra **agnaye kavyavâhanâya swâhâ**, the second one with **somâya pitrimate swâhâ** and the third one with the recitation of **vaivaswatâya swâhâ**. The food left over from the yajna should be distributed amongst all the Brahmins.

Serving foods during Shraaddha

The food prepared for the occasion should be tasty, sweet and properly cooked to the liking of the invitees. The host should serve the food in suitable utensils, and then request the invitees in a sweet and soothing tone, 'O Illustrious ones! Kindly have your meals according to your liking.'

One should serve the food patiently and reverently without any irritation.

The Brahmins should complete the ritual of Shraaddha and then take the meal in total silence. If a Brahmin speaks or laughs during the meal, that portion of havishya is said to be usurped by the demons. While the Brahmins are having their meals, the host should constantly remember the name and form of Lord Narayana with sincere faith.

Recitation of Vedic Shraaddha Mantras

While the Brahmins are having their meals, one should recite the Rakshak, i.e. protective mantra, and scatter some sesame seeds on the floor. One should visualize those illustrious Brahmins as the manes.

The protective mantra is as follows:

**Yajneshwaro yajnasamastanetâ bhoktâ avyayâtmâ haririshvaroastu
Tatsannidhânâdapayântu sadyo rakshâmsyasheUâÔyasurâshcha sarve.**

'Lord Shri Hari (Lord Vishnu) is present here who savors the offerings made in all sacrificial Yajnas. As such, in his pious presence there is no room here for the wicked demonic elements who should flee immediately.' (Varaha Purana 14:32)

When the Brahmins are having their meals, visualize and make the sankalpa that your parents, grandparents, great grand parents are all present in those Brahmins, and may they be thus satiated.

It is a common knowledge that rupees can be transferred from here and delivered to other countries in their respective currencies. Similarly, the fruits of Shraaddha and the oblations thereof are transferred to wherever and in whatever state the manes may be. But one very important thing is that the name of the ancestor, his father's name and that of his lineage should be pronounced clearly.

According to the Vishnu Purana (3:16:16):

"The offerings of food, made in the course of Shraaddha with faith, and with name and lineage clearly pronounced, are duly delivered to those manes in the manner and form as may be conducive to them."

Rules of Distribution of Food Grains

When the invited Brahmins have finished their meals, deposit a little of the food on the ground. The Brahmins should be provided with fresh water for Aachaman. Subsequently, 'Pindadaana' should be offered to the manes made from all kinds of grains available on earth with the prior concurrence of the satiated Brahmins. There is also the custom of 'Balivaishwadeva' at the end of Shraaddha.

Both at the beginning and the end of the Shraaddha ceremony, the following Mantra should be recited three times:

**devatâbhyah pitribhyashcha mahâyogibhya eva cha.
namah svadhâya swâhâya nityameva bhavantu nah.**

At the time of offering the 'Pindadaana', this mantra should be recited with concentration. This facilitates the quick arrival of the manes and fast departure of the demons. The mantra satiates the manes present in all three lokas and works towards their deliverance. At the end of the Shraaddha ritual, while offering charity to the Brahmin, one should keep black sesame seeds, barley and Kusha dipped in water in the hand so that the merits of Shraaddha duly reach the manes and the risk of demons taking those merits away is prevented. The Brahmin should be

given grains of rice in his palms while reciting the following mantra. He too should be made to recite the mantra.

akshatam châstu me puÔyam shânti puÛtirdhritishcha me.

Yadichchhreyas karmaloke tadastu sadâ mama.

'Let my virtue be eternal. Let me be blessed with peace, nourishment and patience. Let me be the recipient of all the propitious things in this world'. One may say a similar prayer oneself and also use different words for the same.

The presence of the manes can be solicited only through total faith. It cannot be achieved through mere rituals or objects. The process of Shraaddha involves invocation of the manes through proper and correct recitation of mantras, their names along with those of their respective fathers and lineage.

If during the stipulated fortnight of shraaddha one is unable to serve a full meal to the Brahmins, one can instead offer wild tubers, fruits and vegetables along with a nominal Dakshina. If even that is not possible, one may do by just paying obeisance to a Brahmin and offering him a handful of black sesame seeds or by simply pouring on the ground a Jalanjali mixed with seven or eight sesame seeds with devotion and care for the sake of the manes. If one is in utter poverty and unable to do even this much, one should feed plain grass equal to the meal for a day to a cow with love and reverential faith seeking to propitiate the manes. If one has absolutely nothing on hand, one should go to the jungle, raise up the arms, showing one's armpit to the Sun as a sign of surrender and recite the following verse in a loud voice,

**Na measti vittam na dhanam na châyachchhrâddhasya योग्यं स्वपित्रिन्नतोस्मि
त्रिपयान्तु भक्त्या पितरो मयाताम भुजो तताम वरतमानि मारुतस्य**

"I neither possess material wealth nor any other means to perform the ritual of Shraaddha. Therefore I offer my salutations to the manes. May they be satiated with my devotion itself! I have raised both my hands to the sky." (Varaha Purana 13:58)

The essence of all this is to emphasize that one must do Shraaddha (during the stipulated period for the same) for the manes, seeking their welfare. They are satisfied with whatever their Kinsmen offer with love and devotion, and in turn they help their lineage.

The best and the most auspicious period for performing Shraaddha is the specified fortnight meant for Shraaddha. One must perform Shraaddha on the very same lunar day on which one's forefather happens to have left his body. Our ancestors, who have died and not taken a new birth, reside in Pitriloka or wander at other places. It is for their sake that the Pindadaana are offered.

The ritual of Pindadaana is not performed for children and sanyasis. As far as children are concerned, they do not have the sense of 'I' and 'mine' developed in them; and a Sanyasi on the other hand is supposed to have repudiated the illusion of considering oneself as the body. Since they have no affinity for their physical forms, no Pindadaana is necessary for neither of them.

The process of Shraaddha is not limited to the external symbolism of offering lumps of rice, but has a deeper philosophical and spiritual significance as well.

Those, who have physically died, live in a Pinda (body) of nine elements: four of the antahkarana viz. internal organ, mind stuff, intellect and ego and the five senses. They don't have a physical body but do possess an ethereal body. They can show their forms but one cannot feel or touch them. They emotionally accept your offerings from a distance. They also inspire you from a distance; sometimes even appear in your dreams in order to guide you on the right path.

If the Pindadaana and the Shraaddha were all nonsense, then why would the manes appear in dreams and say, 'We are distressed. Make an offering of Pindadaana for us so that we may be relieved from our attachment to this ethereal body and proceed to the next birth.'

Shraaddha is performed so that the manes may be satiated with our offerings made with reverence and recitation of mantras, and in turn bring good to us.

Every action creates a reaction.

If you talk nicely and politely to someone, with his welfare in mind, he in turn will talk to you with affection and your welfare in mind. If you get work done by others and turn away from them, then they will also ignore you in future. If someone has some physically handicapped or disobedient children who give a lot of trouble, it is said to be attributable to his not having satiated and worshipped the manes, or not having taken proper care of his parents. Thus he is said to be getting in return what he has given.

When Sri Aurobindo Ghosh was in jail he wrote, "I constantly get inspiration from Swami Vivekananda's soul and for the last 15 days I have had the feeling that Swami Vivekananda's astral form is providing me with guidance to make spiritual exploration of the subtle world."

As he was practicing the art of astral travel Shri Aurobindo felt that even the astral body of Ramakrishna Paramahansa was guiding him along that path.

One, who performs Shraaddha and makes offerings with reverential faith, is invariably benefited therefrom. The biggest advantage of performing Shraaddha is that it reminds one of the fact that the jiva exists even after death. The second advantage is that it helps in the redistribution of wealth in society. The poor are fed. Feasts, otherwise organized, have Rajasic or Tamasic food items, whereas the food, offered on the occasion of Shraaddha, promotes righteousness and inspires us to think of the other world and also enhances our devotion towards God.

Lord Rama also performed Shraaddha for his father Dasharatha, and the Enlightened Saint Eknathji Maharaj too used to perform Shraaddha for his late father.

While performing Shraaddha, the body, earnings, wife, place, mind, mantra and Brahmin, all these seven have to be absolutely pure. One should pay special attention to three things –piety, control over anger and avoiding hastiness.

For the purpose of performing Shraaddha, earnings from agriculture or business is considered the best source; money received against favors is considered to be of a medium standard and earnings from lending or through deceit are considered the worst. The gods and manes are satiated by offerings made from the best earnings; the medium earnings provide medium level satisfaction, whereas the worst earnings help those ancestors who are in the lower states of existence i.e. born in the lowest caste etc. It is said that the food, deposited here and there under the ritual of Shraaddha, help satiate our ancestors currently in animal forms.

A lot of importance is attached to mantra recitation in Shraaddha. Howsoever expensive be your offering, if the pronunciation and the intonation of the mantras are not correct, then the entire ritual goes waste. The pronunciation of the mantra as also the names of the manes concerned should be correct and clear enough.

If we don't know or remember the actual tithi of the death of an ancestor, the Shraaddha for such manes should be done on the new moon day, because the new moon day is noon-time for the manes and noon is the time when everyone feels hungry.

Our good deeds purify the heart and bring progress and prosperity to our relatives. When a Hindu wife is virtually on the deathbed, she prays with folded hands to her husband, "If I have committed a misdemeanor please pardon me and kindly pray for my salvation." If the husband happens to be departing first he also makes a similar request, "If, knowingly or unknowingly, I have been harsh to you, please forgive me and kindly pray for my salvation." We think of each other's salvation while we are alive, we do the same at the time of death and we continue to work for it even after death.

The performance of Shraaddha naturally inculcates the noble trait of gratefulness in its performer and helps him along the path of salvation even after death. The performance of Shraaddha satiates gods and the manes; and one, who performs it, also experiences a sense of inner satisfaction. Our ancestors have done a great deal for our well being and therefore if we work for their salvation, it is sure to give us a great sense of satisfaction and fulfillment.

Aurangzeb had imprisoned his father Shahajahan and would give him a meager quantity of drinking water in a broken earthen pot. Shahajahan then wrote to his son, "Blessed are the Hindus who offer sweetmeats, puris and puddings even to their dead parents and here is my son

who cannot even give proper drinking water to his father who is alive. The Hindus are far better than you, for they try and serve even their dead parents.”

Indian culture espouses not only the welfare of the family and immediate clan, its concerns are not limited even to society or the nation rather, it aims and endeavors for the good of the entire universe.