

## **Till Death Do Us Part: Casteism, Economic Divide and Patriarchy in the Death Rituals of the Bengali Hindus**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*It is no secret that the rituals regarding life, death and marriage among the Hindus are predominantly Brahminical (and subsequently casteist) in nature. This paper analyses the Yajurvedic Shraddhyakriyabiddhi or the Hindu book of last rituals. This book, read out at almost every last ritual of a deceased Hindu, is inevitably casteist. The last rituals also include the prospect of feeding Brahmins as a part of the proceedings. This paper analyses the aforementioned text's shlokas and the directions given in it to question the necessity of carrying such a casteist tradition forward. In addition to being grossly subversive towards the caste minorities, the Shraddhyakriyabidhi is also, unsurprisingly, patriarchal. Using the philosophy of B. R. Ambedkar and other scholars of caste studies in the contemporary age, the paper proposes a more holistic approach towards paying the last tribute to someone's memories, without demeaning other castes. Finally, the paper refers to the caste-based discrimination prevalent in Indian society and questions the necessity of such an elaborate programme of last rituals in a post-pandemic world.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Casteism, Death rituals, Hinduism, Brahminism, Discrimination*

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The Bengali poet Michael Madhusudhan Dutta had famously written, *jonmile morite habe,/ amor ke kotha kabe,/ chirosthir kabe neer, hai re, jibon-nade* (“Those who are born must die/ From immortality we have fallen shy/ Whosoever is a constant in the river of life?”).<sup>2</sup> The path of a human after death has remained one of the biggest mysteries that science and reason have hitherto failed to completely uncover. As a result of that, some organised religions takes the advantage of the lack of scientific proof of the post-life trajectory to propagate their rituals, the greatness of their religions, and the several layers of bigotry and discrimination which inform almost all formats and procedures of religious interactions. The requirement of death rituals in many cultures have their roots in sociological and anthropological requirements of the human society to mourn for the dead. In several religions, the mourning period is marked by solemn interactions between the family members of the deceased.

In Hinduism, particularly in Bengali households, the rituals of ‘shradhya’ (the last rituals of the deceased, the word being derived from ‘shrodhya’ or respect) have been deftly summarised in the book *Shraddhyakriyabidhi* [SK].<sup>3</sup> This book has a set of instructions, shlokas and ingredients to be used in the process, all of which is laden with casteist implications. However, the reason behind such an elaborate ceremony could be traced back to the notion of paying alms to the Brahmins, often seen as an act of benevolence that would ease one’s journey towards heaven. Another possible reason why the Bengali hindus (particularly in West Bengal and Bangladesh) wore white after someone in their family dies was because many people in that area used to die from contagious diseases. These white robes were an indicator of the fact that those family members could also potentially be contagious. In the echelon of the COVID 19 pandemic, such a ritual could probably find some logical explanation.

### **The Base and Superstructure of the Last Rites**

To this day, these rituals are almost exclusively performed by Brahmins, especially in upper caste households. Needless to say, they charge exorbitant amounts of money as Dakshina

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from Bengali and Sanskrit are the author’s own.

<sup>3</sup> This paper refers to the Yajurvedic version of this book, compiled by Bamdev Bhattacharya.

to perform these rituals. It leaves us to question: why this needless division of caste has to be followed even after someone has passed away? Pittu Laungani's assumption in his "Death in a Hindu family", where he writes "Let us first assume that we are dealing with a high-caste Hindu family. Such an assumption prevents us from getting tiresomely involved in trying to distinguish between different sects and denominations within Hinduism." (Parkes, Laungani and Young 52). Laungani also assumes an upper-class male's death for all the conventional reasons, which makes the piece questionable at best. Significant criticism awaits the scholar as one dives into a more inclusive understanding of the situation at hand. Outside this essay, as well, in my twenty-six years of life, I do not recall being invited to the shraddhya of a single shudra person. This assumption by Laungani was probably necessary, but significant light needs to be cast on why was it necessary. The Brahminical dominance has long taken the shape of a hegemonic rule, and its superstructure can be easily explained using the following pyramid in Figure 1.

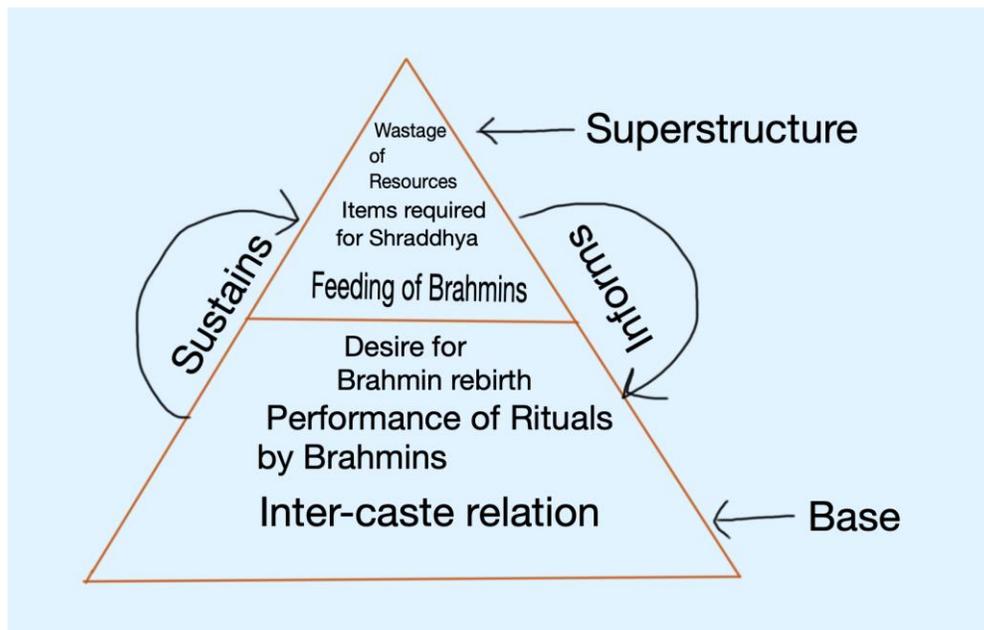


Figure 1

The lower half of the triangle in Figure 1 is the base, while the top triangle is the superstructure. The former sustains the latter and the latter informs the former. For instance, the relationship between Brahmins and other castes (part of the base) sustains the feeding of brahmins and the requirement for a variety of items during the last rites. The

flip side of the coin depicts the reverse relationship, insofar as the feeding of Brahmins is one of the ways in which the members of the deceased person's family attempt to make sure that their loved one is born as a Brahmin in the next birth, an issue which is depicted in the shlokas of the SK, and will be analysed in a subsequent part of the paper. The relationship between the base and the superstructure is a by-product of the social production of mankind:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely [the] relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness (Marx 4).

“The economic structure of society” can be understood in terms of interlink between the base and the superstructure, since the entire proceedings involve a significant exchange of money, which in turn contributes to the economic functioning and structure on which the society is built.

In addition to Brahmins performing the last rites of everyone, including other Brahmins, there is also the ritual of feeding three to seven Brahmins (depending on the availability and budget) on the day of the shraddhya. This could be interpreted as a smart act conceived by the Brahmins to ensure that they do not die from starvation. There already exists the idea of the Brahmin beggar, refusing alms to whom apparently results in significant baggage of sin (that led to Sita's capture in the *Ramayana*). Since death is inevitable, and anyone who can afford these rituals would probably go through with them, either out of belief or surrendering to social pressure, this concept of feeding the Brahmin would indeed keep their bellies full and minds sharp for the next decoy. It comes as no surprise that the number of days for which the family members are supposed to mourn is not uniform across the country. A case study of a Bengali family will prove the point further. In my household, when my mother's uncle passed away, his son mourned for a total of

eleven days, whereas when my maternal grandmother died, the mourning period was for thirteen days, followed by shraddhya, matsamukhi (consumption of fish) and niyam bhanga (the breaking of rules). When my paternal aunt passed, her two daughters mourned for a total of three days. In the case of my paternal grandmother, who passed away in January 2015, her two sons mourned for thirteen days, whereas four of her daughters mourned for only three days.

### **Casteist Impositions and its Implications**

The discrepancies mentioned in the previous section of the paper show that the rules can be bent for the convenience of the family members who are to be involved in the process. The interpretation of the rules, some of which are not directly mentioned in the *SK*, also vary from priest to priest. However, the common element in all these deaths was the last ritual, carried out by Brahmins. In all cases, the *SK* was read out, and its instructions followed. Some of the contents of the *SK* are *pitristotram*, *matristotrom*, *ruchistrotrom*, *pitrishorhoshi*, and *matrishorhoshi* (translated respectively as the hymn of the father, the hymn of the mother, the aesthetic hymn, rites for the father, rites for the mother), and so on. In addition to being patriarchal in nature, these shlokas and directions are full of casteist interjections which render the process problematic. The most significant of them being the refrain *shribishnudaibatam yathasambhab gotronamne brahmhonayo ohong dadey* (Praise be to Lord Vishnu, so that the deceased may be born as a Brahmin irrespective of their subcaste and name) (Bhattacharya 6). This shloka is repeated more than seven to ten times, depending on how extensively the priests follow the *SK* while they are performing the rituals. It is significant because Hindus believe in the concept of karma and rebirth, and apparently if one can please the Gods enough during these last rites of the deceased, then they would be born as a Brahmin in their next birth. Keeping aside the obviously problematic aspect of this anecdote wherein the status of a person is decided on the caste in which they are born, it is self-contradictory in many ways.

Firstly, Hindus believe in the idea of karma which states that an individual will get rewards or punishments in tandem with their good and bad deeds on earth, either during

life itself, or in after-life, or in the next birth. The baggage of virtues and sins is carried forward through births. Therefore, if that is the case, then how can the wish for a better caste at the next both sit with this understanding? It is almost a blasphemy, not only in the context of wishing for a whitewash of other castes but also in terms of compromising the 'unity in diversity' for which India is well-known. Secondly, this shloka submits to the authority of Vishnu, who is a part of the holy trinity of Hindu Gods (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva), and he is responsible for maintaining the balance of the universe. Should this not have been addressed to Brahma, the creator and the God who shares the etymology of his name with Brahmins? The creator is the one responsible for creating new life, and thereby should also be equally responsible for assigning them with castes. Instead, the prayer to Vishnu situates the shloka in the realm of self-contradiction. Since Vishnu is the deity responsible for balance, it cannot possibly be his will to assign everyone to a Brahmin household in their next births, as that would inevitably hamper the balance of the world in terms of its caste ratio.

The section called *adyoshradhyo* (Immediate Death rituals) in *SK* starts with the line *madhyahno samaye shraaddhokaari dwip jwaliya, brahman hoile, onnopak koribe* ("At the time of noon, the lamp has to be lit up by the one performing the ritual. If they are a Brahmin, they will cook for themselves") (Bhattacharya 34). There follow no instructions in the immediately succeeding sentences or paragraphs about what the other castes are supposed to do. In the *Dakshina* section, there is a clear distinction in the instructions about what the family member should do and what the priest should do. The agency of the priest is deliberately made suspect here since there are more lines that are to be uttered by the family member who is executing the last rites as compared to the priest. This downplaying of the agency is an attempt to make the mourning family members feel like they have been given some power and autonomy in the decision of what happens to the soul of the deceased. In reality, though, without the guidance of the priests, the family members would be almost clueless.

The way in which the interrelation of caste identities function in the last rites of Hindus reminds of what B. R. Ambedkar in the prologue to his magnum opus *Annihilation of Caste* wrote about the fundamental aspect of doing away with the very existence of caste

I have discussed the ways and means of breaking up the caste system. It may be that the conclusion I have arrived at as to the best method of destroying caste is startling and painful. You are entitled to say that my analysis is wrong. But you cannot say that in an address which deals with the problem of caste it is not open to me to discuss how caste can be destroyed. (358)

The “problems of caste”, in the context of the paper, are many. The entire process of the last rites is not only dependent upon but also impossible without the presence, intervention and active participation of the Brahmin priest who would guide the lost soul across the river Baitarani. It forefronts a narrative of discrimination and hierarchy, and the hegemonic dominance of the Brahmins extends itself to one more wing of the functioning of the society. The difference between the executioner and the priest is problematic on two counts. Firstly, it showcases a geopolitical space for the Brahmin to inhabit along with the people who have lost someone very dear to them. This gives the Brahmin the agency to not only mourn similarly but also allows him<sup>4</sup> to take control of the space.

Moreover, it establishes and spreads the wrong message for all the young members of the household who are present during the ceremony. In Indian households, the children are often called in to pay their last respects to the one who passed away, and due to their insatiable curiosity, might take a look at the proceedings. Even if they do not, it does not take away the fact that the innocuous priest, dressed in incandescent white dhoti and the sprouting sacred thread, behaves in a manner as if they are doing the mourners a favour by ensuring that the soul of the deceased does not roam around for eternity or end up in *narak* (hell), when in reality they are performing a ritual in exchange for money, clothes, food and some optionally added amenities, depending on the opulence of the household in which the death has occurred. In the section called *sapindikarankriya* (Last rites through

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<sup>4</sup> Almost all Brahmins who perform these rituals are men. Only recently has this tradition started to give way to the inclusion of female priests. The headlines were made by Nandini Bhowmik who was the priestess at many weddings, followed by the four female priestesses at 66 Pally (which included Bhowmik)

submission), there exist two separate sitting mats, one for the family member and one for the priest (or more, if there are more priests). This section, in particular, reeks of casteist favouritism, which is evident from the way in which the text of this section is arranged.

The refrain mentioned in the earlier part of the paper changes itself slightly in this section and is repeated thrice within the first three pages. The changed refrain reads *sribishnudaibatam yathasambhab gotronamne brahmhanaya dadaani* (Praise be to Lord Vishnu, so that he may allow the deceased to be born as a Brahmin irrespective of their subcaste and name) (Bhattacharya 81). The repetition is not only for this line but for a range of shlokas that appear in this section. It has an interesting anecdote. While writing these shlokas, Bamdev Bhattacharya was aware of the fact that it would be used by people across Bengal, therefore he does not provide any specifics about the dead person's month of passing away, time, *gotra* (sub-caste), *tithi* (the specific time of death with respect to the position of the sun and the moon), and so on (81). The element of patriarchy kicks in when the instruction asks for the names of the ancestors but restricts itself to the names of the male ancestors. This would have been era-appropriate in the nineteenth century when women were not allowed to inherit property from their parents, but in the twenty-first century, this discrimination is almost blasphemous.

### **Economic Imposition and the Game of Privilege**

The list of items provided at the end of the book is not only two pages long but amounts to thousands of rupees in the present-day market. The price is not affordable for a large section of Indian society, as a significant part of our population is below the poverty line. It comes as no surprise that people with no financial strength, lack of medicare, infrastructure, nutrition and constant care like the privileged lot would be more prone to death than those who can afford both their hospital bills and the price of every single item on the *sradhyadrobyer fardomala* (List of times for the last rites). In addition to these items, there are certain restrictions on the type of clothes one can wear and the kind of food one is allowed to consume in the largely variable time of mourning. One such rule is that the immediate family members (sons, fathers, or whoever executed the customary act of

igniting the deceased's body at the crematorium) have to wear white for the mourning period. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the reason for this has become clearer to some. It was developed in more primitive times when there was no way of telling who dies from an infectious disease and who did not. All the members who stay in the house of the deceased, and other close family members (there is no hard and fast rule about who should follow this) are also supposed to survive on an exclusively vegetarian diet during their mourning period.

The economic implications of these restrictions are manifold. It subtly promotes a culture of being able to pick and choose items in one's diet, which is a privilege not available to many. However, the flip side of the coin is that non-vegetarian items like eggs, meat or fish are way costlier than vegetables or fruits, so the ones who are economically backwards would not consider consuming these items, even when no one in their family has passed. The mention of consuming only vegetarian items proves that this book has been decidedly written for the middle, upper-middle and the upper class only. The items in the list, as mentioned earlier, also cost a significant amount. Does this not imply that the Gods will only favour the ones who are already way too privileged, to begin with? The Hindu idea of Gods and Goddesses (with rare exceptions like Kal Bhairav or Parashuram) projects them as benevolent, caring and diligent deities who should not discriminate between people based on their caste, creed, economic status or ability (and willingness) to perform the last rites of their loved ones. This distinction, inherent in the *SK*, sets up the platform for a richer and more nuanced interpretation of these rituals which is not only casteist and patriarchal, but also surprisingly malleable.

For instance, the rituals mentioned in *SK* were meant to be carried out physically, and the book, being written at the turn of the millennium, has no provision for an online execution of these rituals. However, following the pandemic, there was a significant spike in deaths in India due to a contagious disease, the only possible prevention against which was staying home and not being physically close to other people. Therefore, like every other aspect of life, the last rites also shifted online in many cases. How such an elaborate process, one that requires the presence of the priest and the family member in close proximity, was

successfully executed through a screen and social distancing, escapes the logical mind. An article on the changing ways of death rituals across cultures following the pandemic writes “Many of India's majority Hindus believe that being cremated next to the Ganges, or having ashes submerged in its waters, ensures salvation. But with limited public transportation and travel curtailed under lockdown, families are unable to transport the bodies or ashes of their loved ones to the river” (Frayer, Estrin and Arraf, Michigan Radio).

These changes that were brought forward by the raging pandemic only establish the fact that all these rituals are based on mutual conveniences, and the moment a minor inconvenience occurs in the path of executing them, both the family members and the priests are always ready to find new ways to getting things done. In addition to the layered nuances of the economic divide created by the rituals, items and proceedings of the death rituals, the activities carried out during the time of mourning also have economic implications. The idea of paying one's homage to the memories of the deceased through *habishyi* (a generous donation of rice and/or money to the family of the deceased) is complicated and problematic from two angles, but generous and humane from another. It implies that the family members of the deceased would have to bear substantial financial outpour in the days following the death, so this gift could alleviate some of that burden. On the flip side of things, it could also be a symbolic gesture of sympathising with the mental state of the family members, who might not be in a position to buy grocery supplies or cook food themselves.

### **Patriarchy after Death**

A website called Funeral Partners summarises the Hindu death rituals quite where the relevant article says, “Traditionally, the mukhagni is only attended by men, however, modern Hindu funerals allow women to attend” (Funeral Partners). This has long changed in the Hindu customs, especially in West Bengal. My mother was the one who did the mukhagni for my grandmother, when the latter passed away in February 2021. Though this website is primarily built for logistical and pragmatic purposes, its subject matter still manages to catch the essence in a succinct way. In addition to this, there are several

instances where a woman had performed the last rites of their family members. However, the ritual still remains that if the deceased had a son, then they are expected to do all the work themselves, even if they are not the eldest offspring. It is anecdotes like these which reek of the patriarchal privilege that is abundantly sprinkled on the rituals around death. In SK, as well, there are different hymns for the father (*pitristotrom*) and the mother (*matristotram*) respectively.

The former has ten steps, whereas the latter has only six. The former claims the father to be the birth-giver *namah pitre janmodatre sorbodebamayay* (I bow to thee, father and birth-giver, who are the greatest of all deities) whereas the mother is portrayed as an epitome of kindness and forgiveness, *matadhoritri janani doyardrahridaya sati* (Mother, you are an epitome of kindness and benevolence, and you are the perfect woman). Even in death, the role of the mother as a wife is highlighted as a pure and perfect partner to her husband. The *matristotram* begins with a salutation to Vyas deva, who is thought of as the original writer of *The Mahabharata*. Her hymns are directed in a tone of asking for forgiveness and focusing on the ultimate salvation of the soul, whereas the *pitristotrom* has huge praises for the father. This comes as no surprise as the tradition in a standard Hindu household dictated the importance of the father over the mother, but why such a faulty representation of the genders, even after death, has been unquestionably carried forward through generations is an issue that could be dealt in greater detail in another venture like the one in this paper.

## **Conclusion**

The discrimination between castes is not limited to death rituals or marriage, but extends itself to every other section of the Bengali Hindu's social life. Preferences in marrying someone from the caste of the person who is about to get married, ignorance about the plight of the Dalits and some subsequent mockery at the expense of the extant reservation system in India (which recently also introduced a reservation for the Economically Weaker Section) are some daily examples of the social discrimination which exists in a quintessential Bengali society. Despite the reservation system in India, the discrimination

against Dalits in almost all institutes is an incident known to almost everyone. Right from the time of the epics where Karna was discriminated against for being a Shataputra (son of a charioteer) by the Pandavas. This discrimination on the grounds of caste has perpetrated itself through different strains at different points of time in India, and more particularly in contemporary Bengal.

The problematics of the rituals do not end with casteism, financial divide or patriarchy. Shirley Firth in her “End of life: A Hindu View” writes, “A good death (*su-mrtyu*) occurs in old age, at the right astrological time, and in the right place (on the ground at home if it cannot be on the banks of the sacred Ganges) ... Bad deaths (*akal mrtyu*) are violent, premature, and uncontrolled deaths in the wrong place and at the wrong time, signified by vomit, faeces, urine, and an unpleasant expression” (683). This difference between good deaths and bad deaths, on which the dying person has no influence whatsoever, often determines the way in which they are remembered and affects the proceedings of their last rites as well. These problematic aspects open up significant questions for the ardent Hindu and for the distant observer as well.

It can therefore be said that the necessity, logic and practicality of these rituals are not completely unnecessary, as they often play an important role in providing the family members of the deceased with necessary closure regarding their relationship with the deceased. However, the unnecessary, problematic and arguably harmful aspects of these rituals far outweigh the positives, which are few and far between, to begin with. There is an immediate necessity of an extensive revision of not only the text of *Shradhyakriyabiddhi*, but also the generic (and unnecessary) importance Hindus give to Brahmins, men and people of a higher economic status. These people, who have a privilege which they did not earn (in most cases), are the reason why levels of discrimination exist within the Hindu society, which has extended itself to other cultures, religions and sections of India in their own ways. The possibility of a revision only builds up in time, as the society and its people become more aware, sensitive and cautious of minor acts of hegemony which they might unconsciously propagate in their lifestyles and possibly even after their death.

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