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The funeral rite as delineated in the *Agnipurāṇa*

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Abstract:

The *Agnipurāṇa* is considered as a vital source for the study of ancient Indian religion, culture, history, polity, society etc. So far the religious life is concerned the *Purāṇa* contains plentiful information. Being a vital part of religion, Saṁskāras occupy a prominent position. Amongst forty eight Saṁskāras, the *Agnipurāṇa* provides lucid description of the *Antyeṣṭi Saṁskāra* which is known as funeral rite. Here in this paper an attempt has been made to highlight this particular *Saṁskāra* as delineated in the *Agnipurāṇa*.

Keyword: Saṁskāras, Agnipurāṇa, Antyeṣṭi, sapinḍikaraṇa, asthisāncayana, ancestor

Introduction

The Saṁskāras play an important role in the life of Hindu individual. In order to lead a disciplined way of life, Saṁskāras were performed since the age of the Vedas. The references of this sacrament can be traced back in to the *R̥gveda* [1], as well as the *Atharvaveda* [2]. In one *mantra* of the *R̥gveda*, the seer requests the Fire God not to burn the deceased fully, nor to scatter his skin or body here and there [3]. In the *Atharvaveda*, there is a *mantra*, where, Agni is invoked to take the departed, to the world of the ancestors [4]. The vast Purāṇic literature can be considered as a vital source for the study of the Saṁskāras. Out of the eighteen Mahāpurāṇas, the *Agnipurāṇa* occupies a position of great importance. The *Purāṇa* refers to forty-eight Saṁskāras, amongst them *Antyeṣṭi* or funeral rite is a distinct one. *Antyeṣṭi* is a composite Sanskrit word of *antya* and *iṣṭi*, which respectively mean last and sacrifice. Literally the word *Antyeṣṭi* means last sacrifice. This rite is considered as the last *Saṁskāra* in the traditional cycle of Saṁskāras. It refers to the funeral rites for the dead, which involve cremation of the body.

Objectives of the Study

- To find out the significant features of funeral rite as described in the *Agnipurāṇa*
- To highlight the rituals and beliefs related to the funeral rite of the *Agnipurāṇa*

Methodology

In the present study analytical method has been used. We propose to rely upon both primary and secondary data. The primary data are collected from the original Vedic texts, their commentaries and for secondary data various books, research reports, articles, journals have been consulted.

Funeral Rite in the *Agnipurāṇa*

According to the *Agnipurāṇa*, as soon as an individual dies, the dead body should be given a bath, and it should be cremated after being worshiped with flowers [5]. The dead body should never be cremated without clothes, but, a part of the body should be left uncovered [6]. The *Purāṇa* enjoins that the persons belonging to the same family with the deceased should place the body on the funeral pyre [7]. A person who is an *āhitāgni*, i.e. one who keeps the three fires throughout his life, should be appropriately cremated with the three fires, viz. *gārhapatya*, i.e. the fire perpetually maintained in the house, *āhavanīya*, i.e. a consecrated fire taken from the previous, and *dakṣiṇa*, i.e. the sacred fire lit on the south [8]. One who is not an *āhitāgni* who has not consecrated the sacred fire, the body of that person should be cremated with one of these three fires [9]. The others should be cremated with the ordinary fire [10].

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P. V. Kane observes, “Funeral rites and rites after death varied according as the deceased was an *āhitāgni* (one who had consecrated the *śrauta* fires) or one who had only kindled the *smārta* fire, or one who had neither the *śrauta* fires nor the *smārta* fire.....”^[11]. With regard to the funeral of an *āhitāgni*, Rajbali Pandey says, “The first special funeral rite was that of the *Āhitāgni* or the householder, who maintained all the three Fires. He distinguished himself from the rest of the society by his religious regularity”^[12]. The *Agnipurāna* holds that the son of the deceased should place the fire at the face by reciting the *mantra*, *asmātvambhijāto’si tvadayam jāyatām punaḥ// asau svargāya lokāya, i.e., ‘You were born from this, may this be born from you again, this is for the heaven’*^[13]. Thereafter, the relatives of the departed should utter the name and clan of the dead, and once sprinkle water^[14]. In another context, the *Purāna*, states that one who performs the cremation of the dead, should solemnly vow that he is a relative and then circumambulate the funeral pyre from the left side, and then coming back from the cremation ground, all should take bath with their clothes^[15]. They should offer three handfuls of water to the dead^[16].

The *Agnipurāna* enjoins that after completing all the works at the cremation ground, when one returns back to the home, then one is ordained to follow certain rules. One should enter the house, after placing the foot on a stone at the entrance to the house, unbroken rice should be offered to the fire, and Margosa leaves should be eaten^[17]. Further, the *Purāna* adds that after returning back from the cremation ground, one should bite Nimba leaves, sipping water at the entrance of the house, all should touch fire, water, cow dung, white mustard, and place foot slowly on a stone, and then only enter the house^[18]. Yājñavalkya also holds that taking the young boys at front, coming back from the cremation ground, being self-controlled, standing at the doorstep, one should bite Margosa leaves, should perform *ācamana*, touch fire, water, cow dung, white mustard, and then by placing foot on a stone slowly, enter into the house^[19]. Manu observes that if somebody goes willingly, after the dead body of a *sapiṇḍa* or *asapiṇḍa*, he should take bath along the clothes, then touch fire and then take *ghṛta*, i.e. clarified butter^[20]. The *Agnipurāna* maintains that a *Sūdra* should never carry the dead body of a *Brāhmaṇa*, and a *Brāhmaṇa* should not carry the dead body of a *Sūdra*, because both the acts produce sin^[21]. It has been added by the *Purāna* that by carrying the dead body of a destitute *Brāhmaṇa*, one would attain heaven^[22]. Until the pollution of death goes, those who had joined the cremation ground should abstain from taking all alkaline substances, salted rice and animal diet, and should sleep on the floor^[23]. Gautama also says that during the period of pollution the *sapiṇḍa* should sleep on the floor^[24] and should abstain from partaking meat until the *śrāddha*^[25]. Further, the *Agnipurāna* observes that after having bath, one should eat food, bought from outside^[26].

It is believed by the Hindus that on the death of a person certain religious rites should be performed in respect of the deceased, so that the departed soul gets peace in the heaven. The word *śrāddha*, i.e. offering in funeral rites in honour of the departed soul, is derived from *śraddhā*, i.e. respect. According to the *Agnipurāna*, on the death of a person, the son should offer the libation of water for ten days with the Rgvedic *mantra*, *apa naḥ śośucad agham.* (RV., 1.97.1)^[27]. Yājñavalkya observes that the relatives of deceased should offer libations of water, before seven or ten days, facing towards the direction of the ancestors, i.e. south, with the *mantra*, *apa naḥ śośucad agham..*^[28] Gautama opines that

the son is entitled to offer oblation to the ancestor, but, in his absence, the *sapiṇḍas*, i.e. brother, nephew, etc., or the maternal uncle, and the like, or a student can offer oblation in an ancestral offering^[29]. Regarding the persons who are entitled to perform the funeral rite, P.V. Kane observes, “A competent son is the first *adhikāri* for offering *piṇḍa*; in default of a son, husband, wife and co-wives; in default of these, the brother’s son, the brother, daughter-in-law, daughter, daughter’s son, any other *sagotra*, a *sapiṇḍa*, a fellow-student, a friend, a pupil, the teacher, any relative and anyone who takes the wealth of the deceased may offer *piṇḍa*”^[30].

The *Agnipurāna* enjoins that at the death of a *Brāhmaṇa*, ten balls of rice should be offered, for a *Kṣatriya*, twelve balls should be offered, for a *Vaiśya*, fifteen balls should be offered, and thirty balls should be offered for a *Sūdra*^[31]. Further, the *Purāna* holds that a son or daughter, or anybody else may offer the balls of rice, like the son^[32]. The person who performs the first day rite, should do rites for the ten days, and in his absence, a *Brahmacārī* may offer the balls of rice, the libations of water, etc.^[33] A ball should be made, and offered from the remnants of the ceremony, by repeating the name and clan of the deceased^[34]. Thereafter, feeding the excellent *Brāhmaṇas*, and propitiating them with gifts, and having offered the oblations of unbroken rice and libations of water, the performer of the rite has to recite his name and clan^[35], and dug up three pits of four cubits breadth and depth, and of twelve cubits length, and near the pits one should kindle three fires^[36]. Feeding of the *Brāhmaṇa* is considered an integral part of *Śrāddha*. Gautama maintains that according to capacity, the son should select the best food, and feed uneven numbers of *Brāhmaṇas*, or at least nine *Brāhmaṇas*^[37]. Then oblations should be offered to Soma, Agni, and Yama, three times each, and balls of rice should be offered separately in each of these^[38]. The *Agnipurāna* ordains to fill the pits with cooked rice, curd, honey and flesh^[39]. This ceremony should be completed within twelve days^[40], and at the completion of one year, the annual ceremony should be performed^[41]. The *Agnipurāna* enjoins that on the death of an individual, the balls of rice should be offered to the ancestors of the three ascending line^[42]. After having worshipped by reciting the *mantra*, *prthivī samānā*, the ball of rice offered to the dead, should be united with those intended for the other ancestors^[43]. Then the vessel for the dead should be united with the vessels for the ancestors, and this rite of uniting the vessels should be done one by one^[44]. The ceremony of uniting the *preta*, i.e. the deceased, with the ancestor is named as *sapiṇḍīkaraṇa*^[45]. Rajbali Pandey observes, “The soul of dead person does not reach the world of the Pitaras at once. It remains separate from them for a time as a *Preta* or Spirit. During this period special offerings are presented to it. But after certain time, the dead man passes into the abode of the Fathers through the instrumentality of *Sapiṇḍīkaraṇa*”^[46]. The *Agnipurāna* holds that the *sapiṇḍīkaraṇa* of a *Sūdra* should be done without the recitation of *mantra*, while, in case of women also this rite should be performed in the same way^[47]. It is added by the *Purāna* that if someone dies, a pitcher, full of cooked rice should be offered for a year, and the ceremony should be done every year^[48]. Highlighting the importance of performing the *Śrāddha* ceremony, the *Agnipurāna* holds that whether the ancestors in the heaven, or in the hell, they would certainly acquire the benefit of the ceremony^[49].

In certain circumstances the *Agnipurāna* prohibits to perform the cremation of a deceased. In case of a child whose teeth

had not yet grown, or for the one that died just out of the womb, cremation is prohibited ^[50]. Further, the *Purāṇa* holds that if a child dies when two years old, no cremation should be done, it should be buried in the ground, and libation of water should not be given. If it has been named, if the child has grown teeth, libation of water should be given ^[51]. No cremation is laid down for those, who has committed suicide, and those fallen from righteousness ^[52].

The *asthisāncayana*, i.e. the collection of the bones of the deceased, who has already been cremated, forms a significant part of the funeral rite. According to the *Agnipurāṇa*, the time of collection of bones depends upon the caste of the deceased. The collection of the bones of a Brāhmaṇa should be done on the fourth day, and the gathering of the bones of a Kṣatriya should be done on the fifth day, of a Vaiśya, on the fifth day, and of a Śūdra, bones should be collected on the ninth day respectively ^[53]. It is clearly stated in the *Purāṇa* that the dead gets redemption, if the bones immersed in the waters of the river Gaṅgā ^[54]. Further, it holds that one remains in the heaven, till his bones remain in the waters of the Gaṅgā ^[55]. The *Agnipurāṇa* observes that even those, who have committed suicide, and fallen from righteousness, would be benefited, in case, their bones have dropped into the water of the river Gaṅgā ^[56]. This practice of immersing the bones of the dead into the river Gaṅgā is held in high esteem by every Hindu till date.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it can be said that the *Agnipurāṇa* portrays the funeral rite or *Antyeṣṭi* in a very lucid manner. Some practices related to funeral rite depicted in the *Purāṇa* are relevant to the present day society also.

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1. RV., 10.14-18
2. AV., 12.3
1. 3.mainamagne vi daho mābhi śoco māsyā
2. tvacam cikṣipo mā śārīram/RV., 10.16.1a
3. jīvanāmāyuh pra tira tvamagne pitṛṇām
4. lokamapi gacchantu ye mṛtāh/AV.,12.2.45a
5. nayetpretyam snāpitam ca pūjitam kusumairddahet/AP.,158.50a
6. nagnadeham dahennaiva kiñciddeham parityajet/Ibid., 158.50b
7. gotrajastu grhītvātu citām cāropayettadā/Ibid., 158.51a
8. āhitāgniryathānyāyam dagdhavyastribhiragnibhih/Ibid., 158.51b
9. anāhitāgnirekena...../Ibid., 158.52a
10. laukikenāparastathā/Ibid.
11. Kane PV. *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol.4, p.190.
12. Pandey, Rajbali, *Hindu Saṃskāras*, p.269
13. AP., 158.52b-53a
14. sakṛtprasiñcatyudakam nāmagotreṇa bāndhavāh/Ibid., 158.53b
15. Ibid., 157.36b-37a
16. pretāya ca tathā dadyustrīmstrīmścaivodakāñjalīm/Ibid., 157.37b
17. Ibid., 157. 38
18. Ibid., 158.57-58a
19. YS., 3.12-13
20. anugamyecchayā pretaṃ jñātimajñātimeva ca/snātvā sacailaḥ sprṣṭvāgnim ghṛtaṃ prāśya viśudhyati//MS., 5.103
21. dvijaṃ na nirharetpretaṃ śūdreṇa tu kathañcana// na ca śūdraṃ dvijenāpi tayordoṣo hi jāyate/AP., 157.34b-35a

22. Ibid.,157.35b
23. Ibid., 157. 38b
24. adhaḥ śayyāsanino brahmacāriṇaḥ sarve/GDS., 2.5.35
25. na māmsam bhakṣayeyurā pradānāt/Ibid., 2.5.37
26. kṛtālabdhāśanāḥ snātā .../AP., 158.59a
27. apa naḥ śośucadagham daśāham ca suto'rpayet/Ibid., 158.55a
28. saptamādaśamādvāpi jñātayo'bhyupayantyapaḥ/apaḥ na śośucadaghamanena pitṛdimḥkūhāh//YS., 3.3
29. putrābhāve sapinḍā mātṛsapinḍāḥ śiṣyāśca dadyuh/GDS., 2.6.13
30. Kane, P.V., Op. cit. Vol.4, p.257
31. brāhmaṇe daśapinḍāḥ syuh kṣatriye dvādaśa smṛtāh// vaiśye pañcadaśa proktāḥ śūdre trimśatprakīrtitāh/AP., 158.55b-56a
32. Ibid., 158.56b
33. Ibid., 158.59
34. Ibid., 157.17
35. Ibid., 157.18
36. Ibid., 157.19-20a
37. śaktitāḥ prakarṣed guṇasaṃskāravidhirannasya/ navāvarānbhojayedayujah/ GDS., 2.6.6-7
38. somāya vahnaye rāma yamāya ca samāsataḥ/juhuyādāhutiḥ samyaksarvatraiva catisrayah/pinḍanirvāpanam kuryādprāgvadeva pṛthak pṛthak//AP., 157.20b-21
39. Ibid., 157.22a
40. Ibid., 157.23a
41. Ibid., 157.24b
42. Ibid., 157.25a
43. Ibid., 157.26
44. Ibid., 157.27
45. Pandey, Rajbali, Op.cit. p.267
46. Ibid.
47. mantravargamidaṃ karma śūdrasya tu vidhīyate/ sapinḍīkaraṇam strīṇām kāryamevaṃ tadā bhavet//AP.,157.28
48. Ibid., 157.29a
49. Ibid., 157.31a
50. AP., 157.40b-41a
51. Ibid., 158. 9
52. Ibid., 159. 2b
53. caturthe pañcame caiva saptame navame tathā/ asthisāncayanam kāryam varṇāmānupūrvaśah//Ibid.,158.18
54. Ibid.,159.1b
55. gaṅgātoye narasyāsthi yāvattāvaddivi sthitiḥ/Ibid.,159.2a
56. Ibid.,159.3a

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