

Basic Information on Shraddha Rituals

Shraddha (Sanskrit) is a ceremony in honour and for the welfare of dead relatives, observed with great strictness at various fixed periods and on occasions of rejoicing as well as mourning by the surviving relatives. It is not a funeral ceremony, but an act of reverential homage to a deceased person performed by relatives, and is supposed to supply the dead with strengthening nutriment after the performance of the previous funeral ceremonies has endowed them with ethereal bodies. In Hinduism, the deceased relative is considered a preta (wandering ghost) until the first shraddha ceremony, when he attains a position among the spiritual pitris in their blissful abode.

Shraddha Activities

Shraddha rituals consist of following main activities –

Vishwadeva Sthapana (विश्वेदेव स्थापना)

Pindadan (पिण्डदान)

Tarpan (तर्पण)

Feeding the Brahmin (ब्राह्मण भोज)

Pindadan is the offering of rice, cow's milk, ghee, sugar and honey in form of Pinda (rounded heap of the offering) to ancestors. Pindadan should be done with whole-heartedness, devotion, sentiments and respect to the deceased soul to fulfil it.

Tarpan is the offering of water mixed with black sesame (तिल), Barley (जौं), Kusha grass (कुशा) and white flours. It is believed that ancestors are appeased by the process of Tarpan.

Feeding the Brahmin is a must to complete the Shraddha ritual. Offering to the crows are also made before food is offered to the Brahmin.

Pitru Paksha Period and Duration

Pitru Paksha is the period of fifteen lunar days when Hindus pay homage to their ancestors, especially through food offerings. Each lunar month is divided into two equal Paksha which are known as Shukla Paksha and Krishna Paksha. Each Paksha consists of fifteen lunar days.

According to North Indian Purnimant Calendar, fifteen days period during Krishna Paksha of Ashwin month is known as Pitru Paksha. But according to South Indian Amavasyant Calendar, fifteen days period during Krishna Paksha of Bhadrapada month is known as Pitru Paksha. It is interesting to note that it is just nomenclature of lunar months which differs and both North Indians and South Indians perform Shraddha rituals on similar days.

Many sources include Bhadrapada Purnima which usually falls one day before Pitru Paksha into fifteen days period of Pitru Paksha. Bhadrapada Purnima which is also known as Proshthapadi Purnima is an auspicious day to perform Shraddha rituals but it is not part of Pitru Paksha. It should be noted that Mahalaya Shraddha for those who died on Purnima Tithi is done on Amavasya Shraddha Tithi during Pitru Paksha and not on Bhadrapada Purnima.

Pitru Paksha starts one or two days after Ganesh Visarjan. Pitru Paksha is also known as Mahalaya Paksha. The last day of Pitru Paksha is known as Sarvapitri Amavasya or Mahalaya Amavasya. This is the most significant day of Pitru Paksha. If the death date of the deceased person in the family is not known then his or her Shraddha can be performed on Sarvapitri Amavasya.

In West Bengal Mahalaya Amavasya marks the beginning of Durga Puja festivity. It is believed that Goddess Durga was descended on the Earth on this day.

Why is Shraddha done?

According to Garuda Purana, after thirteen days of the death soul starts its journey for Yamapuri and it takes seventeen days to reach there.

The soul travels through Yamapuri for another eleven months and only in twelfth month it reaches to the court of Yamaraj. During the period of eleven months it has no access to food and the water. It is believed that Pindadan and Tarpan done by the son and family members satisfy the hunger and thirst of the soul during its journey till it reaches the court of the Yamaraj.

Hence Shraddha rituals are considered very important during first year of death.

*** “Shraadh” ceremony is not to be performed in the puja altar or shrine room, but in any other room arranged for this purpose.

Terminology of Shraddha:

- A. Pitar: When a person being dies, its subtle body gets freed from the dead body after performing the ritual of Shraddha and it gets position in the subtle plane meant for souls of dead persons. At that moment it assumes the designation of Pitar.
- B. Parvan: After performing Sapindikaran Shraddha (Shraddha performed one day prior to one-year completion after the death of the person is called Sapindikaran Shraddha), the soul that has assumed the designation of Pitar now joins other Pitars and then gets further categorised as Parvan. Also, it gains authority so as to allow its descendants to perform Parvan Shraddha for it.
- C. Pitru trayi (Trio in Pitars): Generally, the son of the dead person has authority to perform Shraddha for the dead person. In his absence, other options are explored. The terminology of Shraddha has been prepared assuming the son as being the person who performs the shraddha. Therefore the soul of dead person for whom the Shraddha is being performed, is invoked as 'father' (father of the son performing Shraddha). One generation before, i.e. the father of dead person is referenced as 'Pitamaha' (grandfather of the son performing Shraddha). The grandfather of the dead person is referred to as 'Prapitamaha' (great grandfather of the son performing Shraddha). The earlier generations than these are not counted in trios of Pitars (Pitru trayi), because it is assumed that they are liberated. 2
The Hindus set aside sixteen days in a year; which are known as 'Shraadh', 'Pitrapaksh' or 'Kanaagath'. Pitru Paksh Shradh, or Pitru Paksha Shraddh, is the annual rituals dedicated to dead parents, relatives and ancestors that are performed in the Krishna Paksha (dark phase) of the Ashwin month in Hindi calendar. The Mahalaya Sharadh Pitru Paksh fortnight begins with Purnima in Ashwin month. It is believed that the Shradh performed during this period is highly auspicious as it reaches the dead relatives immediately and therefore their souls rest in peace.
- D. Jivatpitruk: When there is a male person whose father is alive, then such a person does not have authority to perform Shraddha. But he has right to perform Shraddha for his mother and grandfather (mother's

father). Also, generally, he even does not have the right to perform rituals of Narayannagbali, Ttripindi etc; however if these rituals are performed with the objective of conceiving a child, then the jivatpitruk can do so. In order to perform 'Apasavya', a jivatpitruk can only hold the thread in the thumb of the left hand and cannot hold it completely in his left hand.

- E. Three ways of wearing the thread (janve) are Savya, Apasavya and Nivit: The thread should always be worn on the left shoulder. This style of wearing the thread is known as 'savya'. When it is worn on the right shoulder it is known as 'Apasavya'. When worn as a necklace, it is known as 'Nivit'.
- F. Offering 'kshan': During the ritual of shraddha, the deity and the deceased ancestors' soul are invited by offering grass twigs (darbha) to them. This is called the offering 'kshan'.
- G. Pishangi: Rangoli drawn using ash and with chanting of mantras, around the meal plate arranged for the priest (Brahmin) is called as pishangi. (Offering food to priest (Brahmin) is considered as an important part of Shraddha. Rangoli is drawn in a clockwise direction (similar to circumambulation) around the food offering plate arranged for the deity and in the reverse direction around the plate arranged for the ancestors' soul. Pishangi is one of the aspects of the ritual of shraddha. Nowadays, Pishangi is drawn only in case of offering of Pinda (Pinda daan). However, Pishangi should be drawn during all types of shraddha.
- H. Vikir: During Shraddha, after finishing offering of Pinda (Pinda daan) and worship of Pinda, 'Savya' is performed and a morsel of rice is kept in front of the plate with the food offering arranged for the deity. This is termed as Vikir.
- I: Prakir: After performing Vikir, 'Apasavya' is done and a morsel of rice is kept in front of the plate which has the meal arranged for deceased ancestors' soul. This is called as Prakir.
- J: Uchista Pinda: After performing Prakir, pinda is kept for the ones who have died by getting burnt in a fire or due to partial burning or for the dead fetus, near the plate of food arranged for the deceased ancestors' soul or close to other offerings of pinda.
- K: Shraddha Sampat: If two shraddhas occur on the same date (as per Hindu calendar) then it is termed as Shraddha Sampat.

