

History and Evolution of Cremation in Indian Context

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ABSTRACT

The practice of cremation in India has a rich and ancient history deeply intertwined with religious and cultural traditions. This paper examines the historical origins and evolution of cremation in the Indian context, focusing on its significance within Hinduism and its cultural practices. It explores the ancient roots of cremation in the Rigveda and highlights its role in facilitating the soul's journey to the afterlife. The study delves into regional variations and the establishment of dedicated cremation grounds or "smashanas" across the country. It also explores the influence of legal frameworks, such as the Cremation Act of 1902, in formalizing and modernizing cremation practices. Additionally, the paper discusses the impact of changing societal attitudes, including concerns about environmental sustainability, on the adoption of electric and gas-based cremation systems. Overall, this research provides a comprehensive overview of the historical trajectory and cultural significance of cremation in the Indian context, shedding light on its evolution and adaptation to contemporary needs and beliefs.

Keywords: Cremation, history, evolution, Indian-context, cultural practices, religious beliefs, funeral practices, smashanas, cremation Act, modern cremation, societal attitudes, environmental sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

The history and evolution of cremation in the Indian context are deeply rooted in religious and cultural practices. Cremation, the process of burning the deceased's body, has been an integral part of Indian traditions for centuries. In this paper, we will explore the origins and development of cremation in India, focusing on its significance within Hinduism and the cultural practices associated with it. Throughout history, cremation practices have evolved and adapted to changing circumstances. Traditional cremations in India often took place in designated cremation grounds, known as "smashanas," typically located near rivers or sacred bodies of water. These locations held symbolic significance and were considered auspicious for the departing soul. In more recent times, cremation practices have undergone modernization. With the enactment of the Cremation Act in 1902, cremation was officially recognized and regulated in India. Societal attitudes towards cremation have evolved as well. Moreover, environmental sustainability has become a growing concern in recent years. In response, there has been a greater emphasis on eco-friendly cremation practices. Modern cremation technologies aim to minimize the environmental impact by reducing emissions and conserving resources.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the history and evolution of cremation in the Indian context. By examining religious, cultural, legal, and societal dimensions, we will gain insights into the significance of cremation and its adaptation to contemporary needs and beliefs.

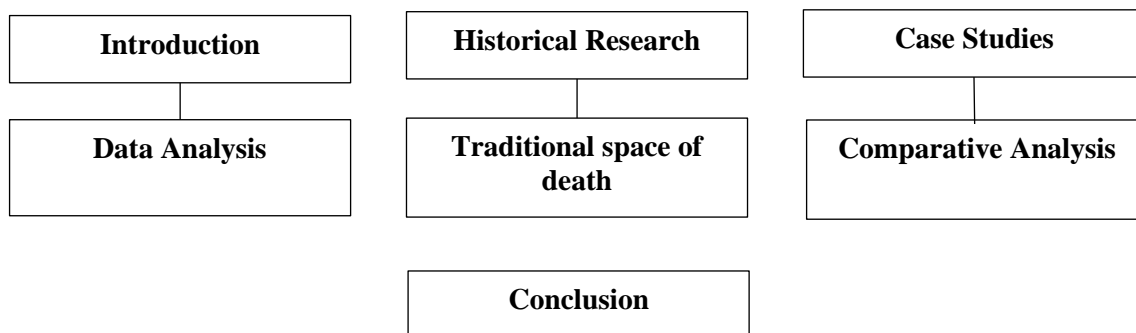
AIM AND OBJECTIVES

To trace the evolution of the cremation spaces in Indian context.

The objective of this study is to examine the history and evolution of cremation in the Indian context, with a specific focus on its cultural, religious, and societal dimensions.

METHODOLOGY

To study the history and evolution of cremation in Indian context, including its cultural, religious, and societal aspects



HISTORY OF CREMATORIUM

The Cemetery H culture, which is associated with the early Vedic civilization in India, is believed to be the earliest documented evidence of cremation in the region. The Cemetery H culture existed during the Bronze Age and dates back to around 1900 B.C.E. to 1300 B.C.E.

FUNERALS IN INDIA

In ancient India, as throughout India's history, cremation was the usual practice in caring for the dead.

ANTYESTI

Antyesti, commonly known as the "last sacrifice," refers to the funeral rites and rituals performed for the deceased in Hinduism. These rituals are considered vital for the soul's transition to the afterlife and are believed to facilitate its journey towards moksha (liberation from the cycle of birth and death).

Antyesti encompasses a series of rituals and customs that may vary based on regional traditions and community practices. Here are some key elements commonly associated with Antyesti:

Bathing and Preparation: The body of the deceased is traditionally bathed and purified before the rituals commence. It is then dressed in new clothes or wrapped in a white cloth as a mark of purity.

Prayers and Offerings: Religious hymns, chants, and prayers are recited by priests or family members to seek blessings for the departed soul and ensure a peaceful transition. Offerings of water, flowers, incense, and lamps are made as symbolic acts of devotion.

Cremation: Cremation is the central aspect of Antyesti. The body is placed on a funeral pyre, typically made of wood, and ignited. The eldest son or a close male relative usually lights the pyre, symbolizing the final farewell and release of the soul from its earthly form.

Funeral Procession: Before the cremation, a procession may be held, where the body is carried from the home or mortuary to the cremation ground. Family members, relatives, and friends often accompany the procession, paying their respects and offering support to the grieving family.

Mourning Period: After the cremation, a mourning period begins, during which family members and close relatives observe certain customs and practices. This period typically lasts for several days or weeks and may involve abstaining from certain activities, wearing simple or white attire, and reflecting on the memories of the departed.

Antyesti holds deep religious and spiritual significance in Hinduism. It is believed that performing the rituals with devotion and adherence to tradition helps the departed soul on its journey towards moksha (liberation from the cycle of reincarnation). The ceremony also provides an opportunity for family and community members to come together to offer support and console one another during the grieving process.

While Antyesti is primarily associated with Hindu funeral rites, similar concepts of last rites and funeral rituals exist in other Indian religions such as Jainism and Sikhism, albeit with some variations in practices and beliefs.

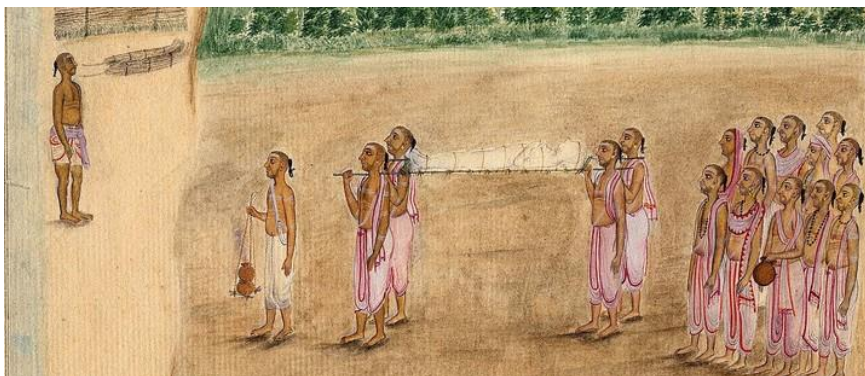


Figure 1 An 1820 painting showing a Hindu funeral procession in south India.

TRADITIONAL SPACES OF DEATH

Study of a traditional space of Death - Varanasi

Studying the traditional space of death in Varanasi, also known as Banaras, Uttar Pradesh, provides valuable insights into the cultural, religious, and sociological aspects of death and funeral practices in India. Varanasi is considered one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world and holds immense spiritual significance in Hinduism.

Significance of Varanasi: Varanasi is believed to be the abode of Lord Shiva, one of the principal deities in Hinduism. It is considered a sacred pilgrimage site where people seek spiritual purification and liberation. The city is believed to offer moksha or salvation to those who die here or have their last rites performed in Varanasi.

Ghats along the Ganges: Varanasi is renowned for its ghats, which are steps leading to the banks of the sacred River Ganges. The ghats serve as multifunctional spaces where various rituals and activities related to life and death take place. While there are over 80 ghats in Varanasi, a few hold particular significance for death rituals.

a. Manikarnika Ghat: Manikarnika Ghat is the primary cremation ghat in Varanasi. It is believed that cremating a body here ensures liberation and breaks the cycle of reincarnation. Many cremations occur simultaneously, and the perpetual pyres burn day and night.

b. Harishchandra Ghat: Harishchandra Ghat is associated with the mythological story of King Harishchandra, known for his truthfulness and sacrifices. This ghat is also dedicated to cremation and is considered spiritually significant for performing the last rites.

Rituals and Practices: The rituals and practices associated with death in Varanasi are deeply rooted in Hindu traditions. Families bring the deceased to Varanasi to perform the cremation rituals and immerse the ashes in the Ganges, considering it a sacred act that releases the soul from the cycle of birth and death.

a. Antyesti: The last rites or Antyesti rituals are performed before cremation, involving bathing the body, adorning it with garlands, and chanting prayers and hymns. The eldest son or male relative usually lights the funeral pyre, signifying the final farewell.

b. Pind Daan: Pind Daan is a ritual performed to offer food and water to the departed soul. It is believed to provide nourishment and satisfy the ancestral spirits, ensuring their peaceful transition.

Pilgrims and Spiritual Seekers: Varanasi attracts pilgrims, spiritual seekers, and people from various cultural backgrounds who come to witness and participate in the funeral rituals. The city's unique atmosphere, rituals, and the presence of sadhus (holy men) create a distinct experience for those seeking spiritual enlightenment and an understanding of the cycle of life and death.

Spiritual Practices: Apart from funeral rituals, Varanasi is a center for various spiritual practices associated with death and the afterlife. Sadhus, ascetics, and spiritual seekers flock to the city to engage in meditation, yoga, and philosophical discourses centered around life, death, and spiritual liberation.

The study of the traditional space of death in Varanasi provides a deep understanding of the cultural and religious practices surrounding death and the role of Varanasi as a spiritual and final resting place. It showcases the beliefs, rituals, and customs associated with death and offers insights into the complex relationship between life, death, and the pursuit of spiritual liberation in Indian society.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN PRESENT-DAY INDIAN TRIBAL CREMATION PRACTICES

A LITERATURE CASE STUDY

PUBLIC CREMATORIUM FOR G.K.D. CHARITY TRUST

- **Architects:** Mancini Enterprises
- **Area:** 4856 m²
- **Year:** 2013
- **City:** Coimbatore



Figure 1 Entrance Approach

A crematorium in Coimbatore, South India, for a charitable foundation. Given the variety and depth of rituals and beliefs, the designs aim to create a unified space in which each family may carry out its traditions.

ABOUT THE CREMATORIUM

The structure is a humble and expansive setting that uses basic natural materials in well-crafted features to create not only longevity but also a quiet and dignified setting inspired by the traditional open ground, river bank, and pavilion setting. The crematorium is open to all religions, and as part of a charity trust, it donates the majority of its income to the government and other charitable causes.

Parking and administrative spaces are included in the entry areas, and any cremation place is separated from the above-mentioned locations to provide privacy and minimize crowding. In the case of conventional or electric cremation, a huge hall is given as a congregational and waiting place where family members can wait.



Figure 2 Site plan

Site Area

The Complex is made up of two distinct pavilion structures, courtyards, an administration building, and a smaller pavilion where ashes and urns are maintained. It is located within of a walled garden.

Circulation

Administration and the pavilion are easily reached from the entrance.

so that the body may be taken from the pedestal by the visitors, and the chief mourner can handle the procedures in the meantime. After that, ceremonies are carried out, and the body is placed in the furnace on its back.

Zoning

The site is extremely effectively zoned based on how both management and users would use it. In general, the storage, services, and administration are on the left side of the property, while the crematorium and public restrooms are on the right.

Ritual Pavilion

It is a pavilion made out of concrete. There is built-in room for sitting and ritual.

The ceremonial pedestal was created with the flow of the water in mind.

On the roof, there is a skylight with the same dimensions. A multi-column and interlaced beam structure is the Pavilion.



Figure 6 A cross-section through the pedestal that reveals the drainage system

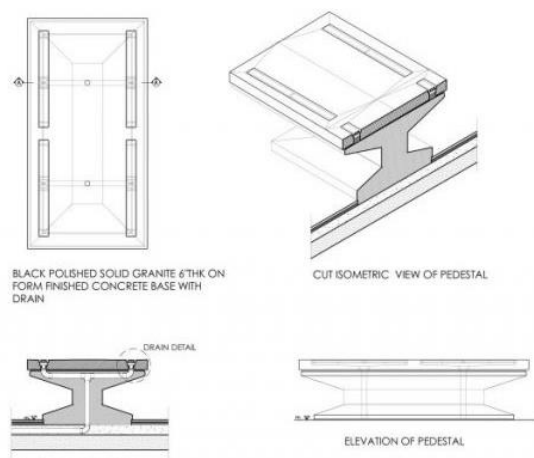
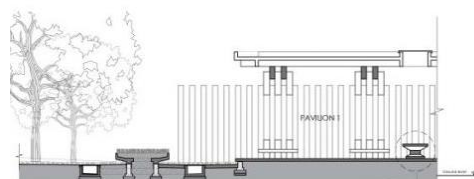


Figure 3 The design includes two pavilions for rituals, which are used for the ceremonies.

Figure 5 Ritual Pedestal

Administration



The complex just has one two-story structure, which is the administration. A store for urns is located on the ground floor. There is a meeting room on the top floor. Forms are filled out here one hour before to the cremation. The entire crematorium is managed by 8–10 staff members.

Electric Furnace

A typical electric furnace is installed. A manual pushing system is incorporated into the floor. There is a skylight above it that has an exhaust fan to let the heat out. The arrangement is similar to an electric oven; by running electricity via a solenoid-type device, the body is burned.

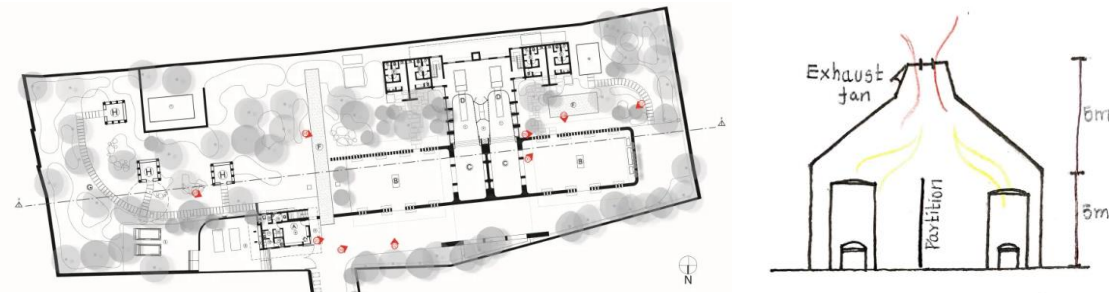


Figure 7 Electric Furnace

Basement

The electric furnace's basement is where the whole functioning mechanism is put up. The 105-foot chimney treats and exhales the grey and white smoke. The basement also has a collection of ashes.

Material Construction

Concrete is mostly used in the construction. In a different design, concrete pieces are interconnected to create a semi-open area. The pedestals are made of granite stone. Around the structure, chains are hung to collect rainwater and direct it to the water system.

Inferences

- Working Hours: 10 am to 5 pm.
- As a result, a maximum of 8 bodies can be burned in a single day, with an hour allotted for each. Charity trust; as a result, 70% of revenues go to the municipal corporation and 30% to the trust.
- Cost Breakdown A.C. Van: 750; Ordinary Van: 600; Freezer Box: 1600; Staff: 3 Security Guards, 1 Office Incharge, 1 Electrician, 1 Sweeper, and 1 Driver: No separate cabins.
- The food offering ritual is performed on the boundary wall on the second day following the cremation because there is no designated area for it.
- People ask for extra seats, but the management does not believe in giving it because it is a place to show respect.
- Coimbatore has 18–19 electric crematoriums, suggesting a preference.
- When it was first constructed, there was no surrounding building, but over time, slums began to appear. Residents in the area currently hold the crematorium responsible for the odour and pollution.

COMPARING THE HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES OF CREMATION

Comparing the historical and contemporary practices of cremation across different regions of India reveals variations influenced by cultural, religious, and regional factors. While cremation has been a prevalent practice throughout Indian history, the specific rituals, customs, and traditions associated with cremation can vary significantly across regions.

	HISTORICAL	CONTEMPORARY
Rituals and Customs	In ancient times, cremation rituals often involved specific prayers, hymns, and offerings to the deceased. The ashes were collected and either immersed in a sacred river or buried in a designated area.	While the basic act of cremation remains consistent, contemporary cremation rituals vary across regions. The specific prayers, rituals, and offerings may differ based on local customs, religious affiliations, and family traditions.
Funeral Pyres	In the past, funeral pyres were typically built using wood, with the body placed atop the pyre. The pyre was ignited by a family member or a designated person.	Today, the construction of funeral pyres can vary. Some regions continue to use traditional wood pyres, while others use alternative methods such as electric cremation or gas-based crematoriums. The use of electric cremation is becoming more prevalent due to environmental concerns and limited availability of wood.
Cremation Grounds	Historical cremation grounds were often located near rivers or other sacred bodies of water. The ashes or remnants of the cremated remains were typically dispersed in the water.	Contemporary cremation grounds, known as crematoriums or electric crematoriums, are established in various locations, including urban areas. These facilities provide modern infrastructure, cremation chambers, and proper facilities for handling cremations.
Ash Disposal	In the past, ashes from cremations were often immersed in rivers or scattered in significant bodies of water, symbolizing the soul's journey and purification.	Ashes are typically collected and given to family members, who may choose to perform immersion rituals in rivers or other sacred water bodies. Alternatively, ashes may be preserved in urns or

		scattered in memorial gardens.
Regional Beliefs and Practices	<p>North India: Historically, cremation in North India often took place on open-air platforms known as "Shamshan Ghats" near rivers. The city of Varanasi holds great significance as a sacred place for cremation rituals.</p> <p>South India: In the southern regions, cremation practices usually involved the use of raised platforms and specific rituals like breaking a coconut before the cremation. Ashes were often immersed in the Bay of Bengal or other nearby rivers.</p> <p>East India: The Ganges River holds immense importance in the eastern regions of India. Cremations were commonly performed on the riverbanks, and the ashes were often immersed in the Ganges as part of the ritual.</p> <p>West India: Cremation practices in the western regions varied across communities and states. Some communities have traditions of burying the ashes or preserving them in family tombs or cenotaphs.</p>	<p>Environmental Concerns: With growing environmental awareness, there is a shift toward eco-friendly cremation methods, such as electric or CNG-based cremation. Electric crematoriums have gained popularity in urban areas due to their efficiency and reduced pollution compared to traditional wood-based cremations.</p>

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the history and evolution of cremation in the Indian context can be traced back thousands of years. Cremation has been practiced since ancient times, with evidence found in the Indus Valley Civilization. During the Vedic period, cremation gained prominence as a funeral rite, as mentioned in the sacred texts of Hinduism. Cremation continues to be the preferred method of disposal of the deceased in Hinduism, based on the belief in the release of the soul and its journey into the afterlife. Traditionally, cremation was performed in open-air funeral pyres near rivers. Over time, cremation practices have evolved, with modern crematoriums equipped with advanced facilities now being used. Despite the evolution, cremation remains an integral part of Indian culture and religious traditions.

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