

Death Rituals and Remnants: Understanding the Death Rituals of the Working Community

Sneha Shruthi. S

This study investigates death rituals among marginalized communities in Bangalore, India, focusing on the socio-cultural, economic, and gender dynamics that shape these practices. It explores the intricate connections between these rituals and communal identity, social hierarchy, and tradition through qualitative research methods such as interviews, case studies, and participant observation.

The research emphasizes how these rituals function not only as expressions of grief but also as status symbols, reinforcing societal norms and gender roles. The paper also discusses the challenges these communities face in balancing the preservation of traditional customs with adapting to modern influences. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on how death rituals play a crucial role in cultural continuity, identity formation, and social cohesion, particularly within economically disadvantaged groups.

Keywords: *death rituals, socio-cultural practices, gender dynamics, marginalized communities, cultural continuity, communal identity, Bangalore*

When a family decides to conduct a death ritual, a lot of manual and capital labour goes into making it a reality. Death rituals are a direct reflection of a status symbol for any family belonging to a community, and they are not an overnight task but rather a planned and executed ritual with feasts, prayer offerings, and other [ritualistic objects].

In a country like India, diversity exists even in the most remote areas, which is convincing and pressurising.

It is plausible as there is a chance for exchanging ideas and knowledge proliferation, where people learn about other cultures and cohabit in an informed manner. The idea of it being pressurising is because of the constant judgments that people exhibit when something is not executed in an orderly fashion, which is a disrespect to the dead.

This paper delves deep into the customs and traditions of people from different economic strata, focusing on their grieving patterns, rituals, personal insights, and the historical background of their inveterate traditions.

The research aims to uncover the deeper meanings and quintessential events that are critically mapped out while trying to understand the diversity involved in these rituals about different families during the fieldwork and surveying.

There are multiple connotations, both positive and negative, when death-related research is conducted, and there are stereotypes to some and accurate stories to others.

In this exposition, the rationale for conducting this research is:

- 1. What is the reason behind their rituals regarding burial or Burning, and is it for economic or spiritual reasons?*
- 2. What is the rate of influence of Death rituals and practices on the proliferation of Death studies in Asia?*
- 3. If these rituals contribute to the afterlife, if so, then how?*
- 4. The different death practices observed by the indigenous group and whether they have helped them re-create their current practices.*

How to identify and analyze Gender Inequality in the family, the functioning of Death rituals, how they differ from Birth or wedding rituals, and the root cause of the disparity witnessed.

Beings and group identities, and ultimately, the sustained survival of the living community based on the formation of communal memories of the past and the future. With so much capability and potentially destructive means, mortuary ceremonies run enormous risks if they fail to accomplish their goals (George, 1996) [5]

The nature of an individual's support and expression of sentiments at mortuary ceremonies often reveals the complex communication between societal strictures and a person's duties to the deceased and their kin, as well as obligations to the living participant's web of social, economic, and political ties (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991, p. 61). [9]

The Chumash community appears to have been that between the deities Sun. The Sun was considered a male god, while Earth was a female entity, "the Indian's mother and god," who was worshipped for her fertility and provision of food for humans and animals (Hudson et al., 1981, p. 37).

The idea that is relatively perpetuated here is that Gender has been an essential factor even regarding the traditions and customs some communities follow and has a direct relationship to the cosmos. Chumash public rituals revolved around the esoteric and metaphorical worship of earth and sun deities (Blackburn, 1976, p. 235). Although Sun was revered for his vivifying ability to provide light and warmth (Hudson et al. 1981:37), he was also fundamentally associated with death.

Mandelbaum alludes to the need to finish "the correct request of an individual's profession" (Mandelbaum: 197). This last stage must be commended similarly to past social advances set apart

They participate in funerals and share their views of his character, accomplishments, and victories. In traditional society, "normal human occasions", such as demise and wedding, are given unique and holy status. Precious Stone calls them "ceremonial shows" as man becomes the focus. He views these rituals as an artistic expression of the "quintessential musicality of life and culture" (Diamond: 199).

[4]

Custom is conducted; it is "religion in real life" (Wallace: 102). [19]. It is close to home and private, as it is social. A wiped-out patient appealing to God for solidarity while suffering torment and the fighter petitioning God for insurance while experiencing siege represent a single custom.

All social orders recommend a time of grieving for close family members and other kinfolk of the deceased. A start and an end are indicated. The span relies on the family's association with the dead: the closer the association, the more drawn out the grieving time frame.

The grievors are physically isolated from different individuals in the gathering. Society allows or requires a declaration of sorrow during the grieving period. In the nineteenth century, two common ways of dealing with death and funeral home customs were created in social hypotheses. One had an expansive "intellectualist" direction that examined specific parts of death, such as ripeness imagery or the idea of the spirit (e.g., Frazer 1933).

The second methodology is this school, known as *L'Année sociologique*, which was additionally the name of its lead diary, which came to rule the human studies of funeral home custom. In this research The Theoretical Framework, based on the Kuber-Ross design, or the five phases of grief, introduces an evolution of reactions sensed by patients at death's door preceding demise or individuals who have

Charles Corr has illustrated a design of four parts of initiating activity (physical, mental, social, and supernatural) and theoretical sorts of errands identified with readjusting to biting the dust in every one of those zones. Corr identified two fundamental kinds of death: fulfilling, in essence, needs and limiting physical manifestations of trouble in a way sufficient to and consistent with the passing away of an individual's qualities.

This research has also addressed the different understandings and concepts related to "various death practices and rituals practised by communities." The topic is explained well, but the facts are only sometimes revealed.

Death rituals rigorously involve the family grieving and mourning the death together. Members of the family will gather together in the home of the deceased to mourn together for several days at a time. As the family's unity is heavily emphasized in Asian culture, the grief process is undertaken together. Asians will continue to mourn and celebrate the lives of their family members by honouring their ancestors.

Through rituals that continue long after a family member's death, Asians believe in the importance of living a good life and fulfilling filial obligations to offer respect to their ancestors.

The population I studied consisted of groups of manual labourers and street vendors in Bannerghatta Road, Bangalore, India. I began by conducting qualitative research as my primary research, which included sample interviews, case studies, oral narratives, and histories of ancestral occupations of the working community.

The questions focused on their first-ever encounters with death rituals with the occupation they do and their personal opinions, biases, suggestions and insights.

The order of questioning was open-ended and then specific, with Gender coming into the questioning, where the responses were assumed to be more subjective, and a few questions of a closed-ended nature.

The reason for introducing closed-ended questions was to collect and interpret the data received through the responses from the chosen samples better. In terms of observation, participant and non-participant observation had multiple perspectives when drafting the collected data. The mapping out of the labourers' settlements and their duration of work were also keenly observed.

The other modes of research were foot surveying, mapping, fieldwork, journal articles and the internet. The present study uses qualitative fieldwork; the interview was the most prominent method. It is precisely how it has been used in this research to promulgate the question on which the foundation of the study is entirely built. Interviews were chosen as a method of conducting the research because they are descriptive and interpretative narrations of the case's gist. In social science, interviews are widely used and gain centre stage for their versatile attributes regarding explanation and substance and their reproductive ability to reference future researchers.

The audience's answers were clear, and a wide range of the population seemed to agree with them: what they were doing, they were doing it. However, the people were uncomfortable being recorded for several reasons, so it was equally challenging to transcribe their responses.

The head of the community, Mr Sahadevappa, is the oldest person with an ancestral line and one who contributed to and developed their system. He has been involved and currently heads it, which will be passed on to his son Murugappa.

Case Study 1: Murugappa

While interviewing Murugappa, he spoke about witnessing his first ever death ritual of his mother as she passed away when he was 12 years old; he never left his side, is what he told us, and keenly observed what happened and learnt about the grieving practices.

He expressed that the practices are different for different genders. The community they belong to addresses women as the goddesses' messengers; thus, when they die, they take ownership of their jobs and hence receive a grand death ceremony on their demise.

Murugappa's wife, Gowri Amma, is a daily wage labourer who works at construction sites. She died of anaemia and malnutrition, and these are commonly noticed in places that have low sanitation means and health care.

Case Study 2: Manjunatha

Manjunatha was the following case study, and he came up with an exciting tale. He belongs to a family with assets, and he is pursuing Law and is more open to discussing the underlying death rituals and practices in that area.

Manjunatha spoke of his unique experiences dealing with death and watching these rituals in the interview. He aspires to become a Lawyer who will help this community have more access to their rights and laws. He opened up about this incident he witnessed a few months ago, of how there was a suicide case in his area, and it was a 24-year-old man who died by suicide as the family suffered from huge loans and he was being pressured to earn more.

Manjunatha was his friend, and he had a heavy heart talking while explaining about it; he was upset as the Post mortem service providers demanded money from the parents as a bribe, and the parents could not do anything about it and had to sell things in the house to receive their son's body. This was not comforting to listen to. He also elaborately spoke of how the grieving process was divided into 3,7,9,13,17, and 21 days with different customs. It was all new to him, as his family followed an entirely different set of traditions and Rituals.

Case Study 3: Lalitha

The following case study was about Lalitha. She is married to Guna, who does electrical work in the nearby areas. Lalitha spoke of the vast number of death rituals she had attended since she was a child.

She felt the death rituals and customs followed were direct messages from the ancestors whom the gods blessed, and it was thus essential to follow them and not question them.

She also said that death Ceremonies do not involve many women, for "Women's bodies are menstruating and can create a wrong cause to the family who are grieving if they participate or demonstrate any activity in the ritual.

Case Study 4: Kishore

Kishore was the first person I interviewed, and I had to break down the questions for him to understand the purpose of my research. Only then was he willing to respond. Kishore elaborately explained how he disagrees with the majority of differences and rituals practiced in his community, as he does not see the logic behind them.

He also spoke about equality and how he is all for it and does not appreciate how women are treated here; these rituals do not fit into his ideas. Considering his responses, I asked him how he was different from the rest, and he told me that he was a voracious reader of politics and science.

Preliminary Suppositions and Implications:

The framing of the research question was gender-focused to analyze the implications revolving around the concept. The assumption of how in the interviews, with Gender coming into the question and the responses from the audience will be more subjective as they belong to different socio-economic backgrounds.

The term 'Gender' is loosely used by individuals, and some do not seem to understand its true meaning; they prefer not to unlearn it or see those aspects in between, which undoubtedly influences them in their practices. The women that I had a chance to interview mostly pointed out how they were not permitted to the burial spot, and when I asked them why is there such a custom, the unanimous answer was that:

"The Female's biological function will be affected because of the negative aura released from the corpse".

The concept of culture has been around since the primitive stages of Neanderthals and Homo Sapiens, and it's pretty much of the category of dominant, emergent and residual traits of how any culture evolves itself and gets deep-rooted in the system.

Considering the practices carried over by their ancestry, this research on death rituals and how communities participate in and conduct them constructs a similar understanding of this connotation.

While the idea of Gender is marginalized, Women themselves are for the notion of being treated with less. To address the research question, the root cause here is ignorance of gender equality and acceptance of patriarchy. This research highlights the profound significance of death rituals within various communities, emphasizing the complex interplay of cultural, economic, and social factors that shape these practices.

The findings suggest that gender roles, economic status, and social obligations are deeply embedded in these rituals, often perpetuating long-standing inequalities and cultural norms. Despite the evolution of practices due to modern influences, the essence of these rituals remains anchored in tradition, where adherence to ancestral customs and the collective memory of the community plays a pivotal role. This is particularly evident in how communities balance preserving tradition and adapting to contemporary challenges.

Moreover, the study underscores the resilience of these communities, where death rituals offer solace and act as a mechanism for social cohesion. The diverse rituals observed—from elaborate ceremonies to more restrained practices—indicate that, regardless of socioeconomic status, honoring the deceased remains a universal expression of respect, continuity, and communal solidarity.

In conclusion, this research sheds light on how death rituals are potent vehicles for cultural continuity, identity formation, and social unity. As communities grapple with modernity and changing cultural landscapes, these rituals will likely persist, adapting in form but retaining their core function as expressions of collective values and beliefs. Understanding these dynamics offers valuable insights into the broader themes of tradition, change, and identity in rapidly transforming societies.

References:

1. Bonsu, Samuel K., and Benet DeBerry-Spence. "Consuming the dead: Identity and community building practices in death rituals." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 37.6 (2008): 694–719.
2. Borneman, John. "Until death do us part: marriage/death in anthropological discourse." *American Ethnologist* 23.2 (1996): 215–235.
3. Chesson, Meredith S. "Social memory, identity, and death: an introduction." *Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association* 10.1 (2001): 1–10.
4. Diamond, Stanley. *In search of the Primitive*. New Brunswick: Transaction Books. 1974.
Firth, Raymond. "The Fate of the Soul," in *Anthropology of Folk Religion*, edited by Charles Leslie. New York: Vintage Books, pp. 301–332. 1960.
5. George, K. M. *Showing Signs of Violence: The Cultural Politics of a Twentieth-Century Headhunting Ritual*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1996.
6. Hoy, William G. *Do funerals matter? The purposes and practices of death rituals from a global perspective*. Routledge, 2013.
7. Kong, Lily. "No Place, New Places: Death and Its Rituals in Urban Asia." *Urban Studies*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2012, pp. 415–433. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26150849. Accessed 10 Jan. 2020.
8. Mandelbaum, David G. "Social Uses of Funeral Rites," in *The Meaning of Death*, edited by Herman Feifel. New York: McGraw Hill, pp. 189–217. 1959.

9. Metcalf, Peter, and Richard Huntington. *Celebrations of death: The anthropology of mortuary ritual*. Cambridge University Press, 1991.
10. Nabokov, Isabelle. *Religion against the self: An ethnography of Tamil rituals*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
11. Parkes, Colin Murray, Pittu Laungani, and William Young, eds. *Death and bereavement across cultures*. Routledge, 2015.
12. Rosenblatt, Paul C. "A social constructionist perspective on cultural differences in grief." (2001).
13. Reimers, Eva. "Death and identity: Graves and funerals as cultural communication." *Mortality* 4.2 (1999): 147–166.
14. Robben, A. C. G. M. "Death and anthropology: An introduction." *Death, mourning, and burial: A cross-cultural reader* (2004): 1–16.
15. Robben, Antonius C. G. M., editor. *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader*. 2nd ed., John Wiley & Sons, 1991.
16. Rosaldo, Renato. "Grief and the Headhunter's Rage." Reprinted in *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, 1–23. Boston: Beacon Press. 1993.
17. Sumiala, Johanna. *Media and ritual: Death, community and everyday life*. Routledge, 2012.
- Sahoo, Kalyanamalini. "Rituals of death in Odisha: Hindu religious beliefs and socio-cultural practices." *International Journal of Language Studies* 8.4 (2014).
18. Ucko, Peter J. "Ethnography and archaeological interpretation of funerary remains." *World Archaeology* 1.2 (1969): 262-280
19. Wallace, Anthony F.C. "Religion: An Anthropologic Archaeologyw York: Random House." (1996).

APPENDIX-A

QUESTIONNAIRE ON DEATH RITUALS

1. Can you please tell me a little about the grieving pattern, the traditional ritual practices following a death, its origin, and a few historical background details you can remember, such as their immunity/family?
2. If you could talk to me and shed some light on your more extensive understanding of these grieving patterns, some light on the area, and how it has changed your perspective on the way of living life and challenged you, how would you describe how it has beliefs and biases?
3. Organizing, as we know it, is tedious and requires a fair amount of intrinsic planning, so elaborate on the wedding feast and the different kinds of capital. Could you explain how to prepare and conduct it?
4. Describe your first-ever experience guessing a death ritual and the kind of questions and thoughts that came across your mind.
5. Were you able to decipher the answers to the questions?
6. Are you partially aware of the schema/process of the death rituals that are prevalent in a specific indigenous group/community apart from yours, and if so, how different is it from yours?
7. What are the boundaries regarding the beliefs and rituals between genders in the community/family you belong to, and how are the days calculated for the different offerings and prayers made and the overall fulfilment of the ritual?
8. What are the various conflicts and politics people in your group undergo regarding execution rituals, and how do you feel about them?

Created by Simpo PDF Creator Pro (unregistered version) <http://www.simpopdf.com>

Shruthi 13

9. What are the different offerings or tasks those belonging to your family are expected to do while performing a death ritual that family members were denied the ability to perform by the elders in your community?
11. Have you been advised to conduct it in a particular fashion to retain the traditional ways of the rituals?
12. Do you think family practises and the way of doing things change over some time to adapt to practices and ways
13. What is the cause of the change that is taking place in your changeover, if any, and how do you go about getting ag-reroot causes to agree to it?
14. If you could put your finger on and point out one specific reason for this being the reason contributing to that change, what would that be, and who would you feel so too?

