

I recently went to a cremation at Nigambodh Ghat. The sight of hundreds of bereaved people, the smell of the funeral pyres, the wailing and sobbing seems relentless at the place. The place is expectedly teeming with the *pandits* and the people who would take care of the actual burning etc. Watching the designated *pandit* perform all the rituals before and during the cremation, the peculiar resilience of rituals surrounding death struck me.

Nigambodh Ghat, for those who are unaware, is possibly the largest and the busiest cremation place in Delhi. Situated on the banks of the Yamuna, it has now grown into an efficient assembly line to dispatch your loved ones to the other world. With more than 100 cremation sites including a "V.I.P." one, the place truly functions like a factory with bodies coming and going so to say. As if the waters of the holy, though notoriously polluted Yamuna were not enough for the ritual ablutions, there is provision for water from the Ganga canal too. It has its own hearses as well as an army of *pandits* as well as people who would set up the pyre and ensure that it is burnt and so on.

From the time the body arrives, the performance of the rituals starts. Actually, it starts before that- most people bathe the bodies at home before coming to the cremation site. There are several rituals associated with this, all rich in symbolism. The tying up of the toes, dressing up of the body and so on. Then the body is placed on the platform and transported to the hearse which brings it to the cremation site. This too is accompanied by many rituals regarding the right and proper way to pick up the body and so on.

At the cremation site, the local, resident *pandit* takes over and a whole host of further rituals are performed, typically by the eldest male child of the deceased. Once this is done, the body is now picked up, (not on the shoulders as it was done prior to the final rituals, but below the shoulders now) and taken to the actual cremation site. Another set of rituals are done here before the pyre is prepared with wood pieces. Each person at the cremation is supposed to carry one piece of wood to the pyre. Subsequently, the pyre is lit accompanied by some more rituals and finally, about an hour or so into the burning, the ritual breaking of the skull is done. After this, the bereaved family informs everyone about the timing of the picking of the ashes (typically 48 hours or so after the cremation) as well as the arrangement for the condolence meeting.

Rituals, as we know, play an important role in any society. They are a way of us humans trying to influence forces and things which we don't understand or otherwise control. Rituals of birth, rites of passage, marriage, purification etc. abound in almost all societies known to us. Obviously, there must be something deeply significant about the universality of rituals (though not the specificities) either in terms of biology or psychology or both.

In the case of funerals or cremations, each of these literally tens of rituals are imbued with religious significance and sociological import. That is for the anthropologists and sociologists to unravel and then provide us with an insight into what it signifies for the society in which these prevail. However, there is an interesting point I think which needs to be thought of.

What is interesting to me is not the rituals per se or their significance- but instead the dynamics. That is, how with increasing literacy, economic progress, urbanization, scientific temper- in short, all the markers of "development", the practice of rituals change. In this context, I think it is noteworthy that in our own society, various rituals seem to have undergone a significant change. And this change is not just in the number of practitioners (which of course has decreased) but also in their complexity. Thus, for instance, I think that the most elaborate rituals associated with birth or rites of passage have become fairly simplified to suit the changing lifestyle of an increasingly urbanized society as ours.

However, and this is the point, there seems to be very little change, if any, in the ritual complexity associated with death. Yes, some highly educated, rational and progressive people might have done away with the elaborate paraphernalia of *pindaan*, *ganga snan*, *asti visargan* etc. However, if one looks at the number of people who have been able to, so to say, transcend the complexities of marriage or both rituals it would be significantly more than those who have given up on the death rituals. This I find perplexing. Clearly, for some sociological or psychological reason, people find it easier to rid themselves of all the baggage with marriage or birth or rites of passage. The very same people find it enormously difficult to rid themselves of all the traditions associated with death of their loved one.

Obviously, there must be a reason for people to differentiate between these two kinds of practices- and to me it seems clear that the reason cannot be sociological or religious since the other rituals which one easily simplifies have possibly the same importance in sociological terms. Thus, maybe the reasons are psychological. There are of course all the standard possible explanations regarding this surrender to rituals of death- the helplessness in the face of death, the fear of the unknown, the finality of the whole thing etc. However, I think there could also be another factor. Could it be that there is some kind of primordial guilt associated with the death of a loved one? This guilt- of being still alive while the other person has departed- then forces a person to suspend one's otherwise rational, urbane self to go along with whatever is prescribed.

Maybe one's subconscious is working in a way similar to that apocryphal story with the famous scientist Niels Bohr. Bohr had a horseshoe stuck to his door for good luck. Once a student asked him how, Bohr, being one of the greatest scientists of the twentieth century could believe in the nonsensical superstition that a horse shoe would bring good luck. Bohr's reply was – I am told it works even if one doesn't

believe in it! So maybe if one explores the psychological depths of most individuals, one might find that the guilt associated with being the lucky ones to survive results in people being more resistant to any change in elaborate rituals of death. And it is possibly the absence of any such guilt in the case of birth or rites of passage or marriage which makes it easier for one to forgo it in part or whole.