

Make That Sesame on Rice, Please! Appetites of the Dead in Hinduism

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Abstract: This paper documents the rituals of feeding the 'the *preta* or *jiva*...that spirited entity that hovers, lingers, flits about after escaping from a useless body' through the course of a Hindu funeral. The minutiae of the codes of stratification that accord special 'unseeable' status to the Brahmins who conduct the ritual and the menu of the food offerings—ranging from cereals to sweets to beverages—are listed. This list describes how food serves as a medium of vitality for the *preta* in transition between one life and the next and opens questions about the 'life' of the departed among the living.

Speaking of food in Hinduism

Discussing the ritual, symbolic, and folkloric significance of food in Hinduism would demand a shelf of books.¹ There are all the minutiae of hierarchic food exchanges, cosmic qualities residing in foods, veg versus non-veg human cuisine, distinctions between flesh-and-blood-demanding goddesses and vegetarian deities, the meanings of leftovers and feces, the endowment of food stuff with body-code substance, the importance of fasting, the sacred space of the kitchen, and on and on. The two earliest Upanisads, Brhadaranyaka and Chandogya, those foundation blocks for classical Hinduism in the eighth c. BCE, inform us that apart from liberation one's fate is to come back as rain, grow from the earth, and be eaten as plant food. The secret teaching of the Taittiriya Upanisad is *aham annam aham annam*, "I am food, I am food. I eat the eater of food."

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If we narrow the focus to funerary food we are immediately in the company of a durable tradition in folklore and the history of religions, the funeral feast, eating food *in the company* of the departed, a striking demonstration of solidarity between the visible community of the living and the invisible but existentially relevant community of the dead. Funerary feasts are depicted not only in sacred texts and folklore but also in sculptures, frescoes, and paintings of all ages. To cite but one ancient and two contemporary examples, Etruscan representations of funerary feasts may become even more revealing with current studies of mitochondrial DNA taken from Italian burial sites, pointing toward possible Anatolian or Near Eastern origins for Etruscan culture. The complex cosmogonic symbolism of pre-Hispanic Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*) rituals has lived on in Roman Catholic Mexico. And historians of religion on China watch, where there are an estimated 400 million believers in the major faiths today, observe the enduring tradition of the Spring Festival (*Qing-ming*) every April in which families gather to cook meat and vegetables at their gravesite in the cemetery, offer incense, wine, paper money, and sit down to a full meal in communion between living family members and their ancestors. These are just a few examples of the perseverance of funeral rituals through massive cultural and geographic change.

Right away, however, we might contest the title of this essay, “appetites of the dead.” In Hinduism there is no dead person, only a dead body, and that body no longer needs or ingests food and in fact is quickly disposed within hours of its demise. The title should read “appetites of the *preta* or *jiva*,” two of several favored names for that spirited entity that hovers, lingers, flits about after escaping from a useless body. Some other Sanskrit terms, from the time of the early Vedic Samhitas to the Upanisads, are *asu*, *manas*, *prana*, and *atman*, but these should not detain us here.² Let us proceed with *preta* and *jiva*, terms with a long textual history that are both in use today by Brahman funeral ritualists and accepted by most of their clients across the broad spectra of castes and Indic languages.

2. From food for Agni to food for the *preta* becoming a *pitr*

a. Initial questions

Certain questions regarding food in Hindu funerary traditions seek possible answers:

- i) Precisely what food is presented to the spirit of the deceased, this *preta* or *jiva*?
- ii) In what order are these items presented?

- iii) Is this food raw or cooked or some of each?
- iv) Does the menu change during the sequence of rituals?
- v) Is that food actually eaten?
- vi) Are there witnesses to the consumption of this food?
- vii) What does the history of Hinduism tell us about the order and meanings of specific foods presented to the *preta* or *jiva*? And finally,
- viii) Do we see in Hinduism the amalgamation of two communities—the living and the departed—in a commensal funerary feast, as we do, for example, in *Dia de los Muertos* or *Qing-Ming*?

b. Class distinctions

As in discussions of all Hindu classical or folk ritual, complexity, contradiction, and paradox are the rules of disorder. There is no single or simple answer to any one of these queries. One central dilemma is this: The *preta*, although unseen, must receive visible food, not an invisible substitute. In the most significant rituals that food must be seen by mourners to be eaten. At a certain point the eaters, known as *bhoktas*, must be Brahmans. No self-respecting Brahman would enter a house of death and impurity, let alone take food there. What could be the solution? A special subclass of Brahmans eats outdoors in a special venue. That subclass and that venue are set apart as impure by nature, a condition qualified by the presence of a sacred river, sacred tree, and expiatory mantras for the eater. In fact, even the necessary texts regarding procedures, Sanskrit *paddhatis* for funerals, are often set apart, not to be included with manuals for auspicious ceremonies such as those for pregnancy, childhood, initiation, and marriage. The event of a single death brings pollution (*asauca*, literally, “im-purity”) and danger to the family and living quarters until rites are completed, with certain circumscriptions lasting a full year.

We must distinguish some basic categories here. First, there are procedures of “brahmanical” Hinduism, thought to be normative, employing Vedic mantras in funerals for castes within the so-called twice-born classes (*varnas*), Brahman, Ksatriya and Vaisya. Thirteen days of rituals begin with cremation, *antyeshti*, the “last sacrifice,” that is, of the body to Agni *kravyad*, the fire who eats the corpse. And here we have, on the day of death, a first consideration of food, the dead and useless body as food for the god Agni. Ten days of *nava* or new *sraddhas*, rituals for the departed, follow in succession, with the feeding of Brahmans as *bhoktas* on the eleventh day, then conversion of the *preta* into a *pitr*, an ancestor, in the rite known as *sapindikarana* on the twelfth day, and

a concluding thirteenth day, often an assembly of Brahman pandits for debates, recitation of mantras, and important honoraria.

Simultaneous with the basic Sanskrit textual *nava sraddhas* are ten days of growing nine grains, *navadhanyas*, worshipping the *preta* in a stone (*pretila*), wearing a piece of the deceased's shroud by the chief mourner (*karta*), and casting leftover *nava sraddha* rice-sesame mix to the crows. These four ritual actions, partly textual, partly non-textual, allow latitude for "local custom." In other words, the door is open for folk ritual, some of it very ancient indeed, to augment the traditional Vedic-Sanskrit funerary calendar. Consider the following time-line.

<i>n a v a s r a d d h a s f o r 1 0 d a y s</i>				
cremation day				
....1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7.....8.....9.....10.....11.....12.....13.....
constructing and completing a cover for the preta	hunger & thirst removed	<i>bhoktas</i>	<i>sapindikarana</i> 1-yr journey	honor of pandits
<i>navadhanyas</i> grown for 10 days.....				
<i>pretila</i> worshipped for 10 days.....				
shroud-piece worn for 10 days.....				
crows fed for 10 days.....				

Somewhat different procedures apply to the various communities of Sudras, Scheduled Castes, and others who make up the bulk of the population. Scheduled Castes and some Sudra communities, Visvabrahmans, for example, may have a tradition of burial rather than cremation, and this is true also of Virasaivas with their Jangama ritualists. Non-twiceborn classes use Sanskrit slokas from the Puranas rather than Vedic mantras, following *puranokta* as it is known, instead of *vedokta*, in a schedule two, three, or often several days fewer than the brahmanical one, often with the "Big Day" on the tenth or eleventh day after death, rather than the twelfth. That is a basic distinction, although in contemporary life Brahman and non-Brahman communities alike frequently abbreviate funeral schedules with few or no qualms.³

c. Funeral priests

There are also different categories of funeral priests, all of them presumed to be Brahmans. A common name in much of North India is *mahapatra* or *mahabrahmana*, "great vessel," "great Brahman." In the South they are known as *aparavettam* or *apara* Brahmans, those who deal with rituals required "later," "in the future," *apara*. They are contracted

as specialists, different from the routine family priest. Cremation is generally a matter of negotiation between the family and supervisors of the burning ground. The funeral priest steps in for all *śrāddhas* that follow daily, then monthly, then annually. Some conduct funerals only for Brahmans, some for Brahmans and other Brahman-emulating Twice-borns, some only for Sudras. A fourth category could be labeled “Jackleg Brahmans,” following the U.S. Southern Appalachian appellation for moonlighting, self-ordained preachers in rural communities, like Jim Casey in John Steinbeck’s novel *Grapes of Wrath*, played unforgettably by John Carradine in the classic 1940 film. His Hindu counterpart all but wears a sign “Will Work For Food” since it is usually hunger that drives him to jump status and even caste into the degraded role of funeral Brahman. Funeral priests are also called *dāna* Brahmans because they accept ritual gifts, *dānas*, food in particular. Many will perform other unclean services such as bearing corpses from the place of death to the cremation ground, or accepting substances meant to unload the evil effects of planets -- including predictions of imminent death—when these are found by an astrologer to be in someone’s horoscope.⁴ In the South they are called “faceless” Brahmans because one should never remember seeing one. He might come back to haunt you! Again in the South he is a *kṛsnabrahman* and should necessarily be dark skinned, like Yama, Lord of the Dead. Thus the highly polluting office of funerary specialist is left to degraded Brahmans who have the remarkable status among Brahmans in general of untouchability, even “unseeability.” Thus far this degraded Brahman has been referenced as “he,” but in fact there is a remarkable category of Brahman women who serve as funeral priests for the ritual of *musivayanam*, an *auspicious*, obligatory funeral for a wife who dies while her husband is still living, a subject to be addressed in 3.e. below.

Some time has been devoted here to funeral priests because these are the folks who serve as *bhoktas*, those who eat, and must be seen by the mourners to eat and to enjoy (the Sanskrit verbal root means both “eat” and “enjoy”) food offered to the still active *preta* on each successive day after disposal of its old body. Their visible enjoyment is a sign that the departed one is satisfied with the offered food and has no ill feeling toward relatives.

d. The menu

To return to the first on the list of questions: what food is presented to the spirit of the deceased? At first blush this seems easy to clarify: rice, sesame, barley, water, a few other items are commonly observed. But when reviewing my field data, several hundred photos, and Sanskrit texts, I was astonished to find more than seventy different items on various regional menus. Many *thali* meals with an array of metal cups

on trays may be seen on their way to the burning-and-burial grounds for the satisfaction of some hungry relative. In a full thirteen-day set of rituals there are hundreds of individual presentations of food, including what is easy to overlook, the many occasions where a quick scattering of rice or sesame grains is accompanied by specific mantras. Here is a preliminary sketch, with apologies to the departed for omission of any special favorites:

Water goes with all offerings; water brought from the river Ganga being particularly sacred, or from the Godavari, Krishna, or Kaveri, perhaps.

Raw cereal grains: rice, sesame, barley.

Milled flour: rice, and particularly barley for those who departed some time ago.

Cooked, that is, boiled or fried, cereal grains: rice, sesame, barley; sometimes wheat, millet, sorghum.

Roasted cereal grains: rice, sesame.

The set of *navadhanyas*, nine grains: rice, sesame, barley, wheat, various grams, etc.

Vegetables: the full array of routine vegetables, peas, beans, lentils, pulses, etc., but no onions or garlic.

Dairy products: *pancagavya*, five products of the eternally pure cow, all mixed into a cocktail, milk (particularly cow's rather than buffalo), ghee, curds, urine, dung, to which honey is often added to take the ammonia bite out of urine. So sacred and powerful is *pancagavya* that a portion is often placed in the mouth of a dying person as final sustenance.

Nuts: *supari* (nuts from betel, the climbing pepper).

Prepared digestives such as *pan*, made with betel nut and leaves as base for lime, etc.

Sweets: sugar, honey, prepared sweets such as *laddus*.

Beverages other than water, milk: coffee, tea, *arrack* (distilled from palm trees, poured directly into the mouth of a S. Indian non-Brahman)

Other liquids: because of the high cost of preferred ghee, sometimes vegetable oil substitutes.

Spices: salt, various peppers, turmeric, basil, mustard seed, saffron, etc., but no garlic.

Certain leaves are prescribed, some serving as plates on the ground: mango, black plum, as well as basil and betel.

Grasses such as *kusa* or *darbha* stalks are ritually omnipresent but not eaten.

Finally, *mamsa*, meat, deserves special mention: in ancient practice it was bovine. Vedic texts highlight the sacrifice and consumption of cows and bulls in funerals; *ursotsarga* sacrifice was a climactic point of the eleventh day. Manu 4.132 admonished a Vedic pandit to be careful after eating meat at a ritual for the dead. In the medieval period (c. twelfth c. CE) meat was dropped from *sraddha* menus and today it is lower castes and tribal communities who offer dark-colored male sheep, goats, chickens, sometimes pigs or fish.

3. The Sequence of Rituals

a. Covering and energizing the *preta*: *pindas* and *navadhanyas*

It is frequently thought that a dying person should not take food,⁵ but, once the end arrives, offerings of food begin almost immediately in the home at the spot of death, then continue perhaps three or more times each moment the bier is set down on the path to the *smasana*, on the body on its pyre both before and after lighting fire, on the bones and ashes before their collection (*asthisamcayana*), on the ground cleared away after collection, and then during *nava sraddhas* for one to thirteen days at the riverside near a pipal tree or in a funerary choultry designated for this purpose. In other words, there is constant provision of food for the departed from the very moment of death. Water offerings are equally extensive, beginning with the smashing of a water pot close to the head (mouth) after three circumambulations of the pyre or grave with three small streams emerging from the pot. Water, sometimes milk, may be dripping slowly from a pot pegged to a pipal tree, with another pot with a lamp to light the way for the thirsty *preta*. The *karta*, wearing a shroud piece as he represents the deceased, sips water. Food offerings prior to the formal *nava sraddhas* may be a simple scattering of rice and sesame grains, or may be small portions of cooked food, but the ten-day assembly of a cover for the *preta* must involve cooked rice with sesame. The mourners, and the *karta* in particular, should closely observe all acts of eating, whether it is the *bhoktas* on the ritual ground or crows receiving proffered leftovers on the outskirts. Spiritual consumption of the ritual food is being done by the *preta* and satisfaction must be monitored by the living.

Among communities who still sacrifice an animal, following the ancient tradition before flesh was proscribed in post-Vedic texts, feasting shared between the deceased and the mourners may be elaborate. Here, as in some other respects, low-caste, not high-caste practice parallels

Vedic tradition by sacrificing an animal, dripping blood on the spot of death, cooking it, touching a portion to the mouth of the body, adding this meat or fish to the feast of the *bhoktas*, then throwing remainders to the crows who represent yet another class of surrogates for the *preta*. Sometimes today, given the expense of animals, a broken coconut or string of bananas may serve in lieu of the chicken, goat, or pig, or a cow may be rented momentarily in a symbolic form of "sacrifice." The Satana Vaisnava ritualists of Andhra routinely come to eat meat and drink country liquor on behalf of the deceased.

One of the more arresting private, not shared feasts occurs among the Visvabrahmans (Goldsmiths) of coastal Andhra. The body is buried in a seated posture, thumbs tied together with a cord stretched up to a stake above ground. The next day a full cooked rice meal, including coffee or tea and sweets, is poured into the hole marked by the stake directly above the hands.

To return to the *nava sraddhas*, their central task is to construct, by means of cooked food and water offerings, an invisible transitional body, a cover for the naked *preta* that has survived the physical body. Water is offered in a small earthen cup while the food is a ball of cooked rice with sesame known as a *pinda*. What the rice, sesame, and water assemble comes to be known as a "carry-over" (*ativahika*) body. This requires ten days, each day creating an essential part of this subtle body, beginning with the mouth and forehead on the first day, eyes, ears, nose on the second day, then in sequence, arms, chest, neck; navel, bladder, penis; thighs; back of the neck; skin, bones of the head; body hair; testicles on the ninth day; and the removal of hunger and thirst on the tenth day when the transitional body is complete.⁶

b. Feeding all the *bhoktas*

On the eleventh day according to the brahmanical schedule there is an important feast in which the special *bhokta* who represents the *preta*, now covered with its carry-over subtle body, invites his family members to eat in a line fed by the *karta*. If possible, they should be eleven in number. If the family is orthoprax this ritual day becomes quite busy meeting the *preta's* culinary demands in multiple ways. There is a spectacular sixteen-fold *sraddha* truly beautiful to behold when all sixteen ghee lamps are burning beside their respective *pindas*, each covered with threads as clothing for the naked *preta*, as well as sixteen each of water cups, burning incense sticks, leaf plates of cooked food, and bananas. The extensive history of sixteen as symbol may reach back through Purusa-Prajapati to cosmogonic regeneration in the Purusa Sukta, itself with sixteen verses, in order to mirror the microsmic return to the macrocosm. At some point

after the period between death and *sapindikarana* was reduced by ritual authorities from one year to a symbolic “year” of twelve days,⁷ the sixteen *sraddhas* that formerly stretched across the year were all squeezed into the eleventh day and the oddity of reduplicating monthly *sraddhas* was all but overlooked. Certainly the various Dharmasastra authors appear forced to reach the number sixteen by any possible calculation. It is also on the eleventh that a wicker basket containing 360 smaller barley *pindas* may be offered to cover daily offerings an entire year in advance. This basket would suffice for one of the daily *mahayajnas*, the scattering of food remnants to the *bhutas*, disembodied spirits, in the form of crows or kites, but here the entire lot is dedicated to the *preta*. The mourning family has attempted to satisfy the deceased well ahead of schedule.

For Sudras and others who follow *puranokta* rather than *vedokta* schedules, either the tenth or eleventh is reckoned as the “big day,” as it is known in South India. Three Brahmans may be invited, one being the family *purohita*, and each is given food to take away for self-cooking. In advance of their eating in their own homes, the *karta* must ask if they are satisfied and, taking note of the quantity and quality given as well as the amount of *daksina* ritual payment in cash, they reply as they see fit.

c. Transforming and dismissing the *preta*: *sapindikarana* and food for a year

In the brahmanical pattern, *sapindikarana* is the crucial ritual of transition from vulnerable *preta* to *pitr*, ancestor, now secure in the company of previous ancestors in *pitrloka*. Daily feeding of the *preta* ended on the tenth day after death, *bhoktas* were fed on behalf of the deceased on the eleventh, and now on the twelfth day the deceased is dismissed, blended into the previous three generations of his or her forebears in dramatic fashion by mixing one cup of water into three others and three slices of one elongated ball of rice into three other *pindas*. Thus water and sesame mixed into rice are the media of transformation. But that ceremony, which may be half an hour or an all-day event, is not the end of food-based rituals. In fact, there now comes a re-doubling of food offerings on top of the sixteen-fold ritual on day eleven. The special *bhokta* (*Mahapatra*, *dana*-brahman, *apara*-brahman, or other name) who represents the deceased for *sapindikarana* is presented with great quantities of food, a one-year (*samvatsara*) supply, as well as cooking utensils, clothes, a bed, an umbrella, sandals, and many other presents. The journey to the other world requires a year and one who represents him is given *svayampaka*, raw food taken away from the ritual for “self cooking” and eating away from the scene. In parts of South India it may be called mouth rice.⁸ Since this is food ritually gifted to the *pitr*, care must be taken by this surrogate to eat precisely what is given, and all of it.

d. Continuing *sraddhas*

By no means is the eleventh or twelfth day after death the end of food offerings. For many families, within the year of the deceased's journey to *pitrloka*, *masikas* begin with *sapindikarana* (or thirty days after the eleventh or twelfth-day rites) and continue monthly. These take place in the kitchen or dining area of the deceased's house, rather than the riverside, and involve family members and two or three *bhoktas* if Brahmans are invited. On the anniversary of death the *samvatsarika* feast concludes the monthly rites and begins annual ones for as long as the family cares to feed this particular *pitr* along with *bhoktas* representing preceding ancestors. Some important people may be celebrated on birth as well as death anniversaries by the feasting of gathered pandits. Another important annual occasion is *mahalaya* in a dark fortnight of Bhadrapada (August-September) or, alternatively, *pitrpaksa*, the ancestor dark fortnight in Asvina (September-October), when once again *bhoktas* representing collective ancestors are invited along with the family priest to receive first a shower of rice and sesame grains and then *pindas* of cooked rice and sesame.

e. A variant: the *musivayanam* and *Gauriloka*

Mentioned earlier is an important ritual in coastal Andhra in which a Brahman woman becomes a *bhokta* to represent an auspicious married woman (*suvasini*) who dies before her husband. She receives the hypothetical year's supply of food for self-cooking later. Having located and embodied the *preta*, sometimes in a state of possession, the ritualist transforms her into the goddess Gauri and dismisses the deceased not to *pitrloka* among her maternal ancestors but to *Gauriloka*, the realm of that great goddess. There are several remarkable features of the *musivayanam*, an auspicious funeral controlled and attended by women with only a background role for the family *purohita* and no role at all for the husband. The *karta* is often mother or sister of the deceased. Central is the presentation at the feet of the Brahman ritualist of two identical covered baskets (thus the Telugu name) containing edibles as well as cosmetics, ornaments, new sari and blouse-piece, and a new *tali* (marriage thread), all ritual items that return the deceased to her wedding day. Her marital history is erased. These baskets come from her natal relatives on one side, her affinal relatives on the other, all of whom, at the conclusion of the ritual, queue up along with unrelated bystanders to receive portions of the edibles as *prasada* to take home for sharing. This is quite remarkable for a funerary feast and another illustration of the powerful nature of ritual food.⁹

4. Some Conclusions

a. About *pindas* and *navadhanyas*

It appears that the *preta* is watered and fed in multiple locations simultaneously. The *preta* received water even before fire was kindled (or before earth covered over the grave), then milk onto its burned bones and ashes, then water in cups every day for ten days. Note that the *preta* received a new mouth on the first of the *navasraddha* days. It is explained textually that the *preta* has massive thirst from the heat of burning. Raw grains are offered before cremation, cooked food is then offered to the *preta* as bones and ashes, as stone (*pretasila*), as seeds (in the *navadhanya* basket), as crows, all while the chief mourner wearing a piece of the shroud acts as both *preta* and host at his own feast. On the tenth day the temporary body has hunger and thirst removed. The *navadhanya* basket, with water dripping into it and food offerings placed carefully every day beside it, contains potential food, not actual food. All nine shoots of grains are destroyed by throwing them in the river before fruition on the tenth day. Thus the *preta-as-basket* receives food but its contents never become food.¹⁰

If *navadhanyas* are not food, could they be energizers, like battery rechargers? Could their presence hanging there be sufficient in some process of absorption by the *preta* of *svadha*, energy? In some ways the *preta* can be seen to gain sustenance from all possible kingdoms, vegetal, animal, and even mineral, before departure from the known world. But then the sesame in the *pindas* could also be a source of *svadha* for the *preta*. If we think of the development of this temporary body to cover the *preta* as a growing, developing fetus, *garbha*, then the image of the mother's body providing the entire process of ingestion and digestion is perhaps a good one. On the day of completion of the subtle body, the tenth day, there is a *birth*, the *bhoga-sarira*. The independent covering of the *preta* now requires sustenance in the form of food and water. A mother eats visible food, her fetus does not. Perhaps the ten days of ritually "growing" a new (invisible) cover for the *preta* are understood as a similar process. In fact, the ten days are parallel to the ten lunar months required for the development of a fetus in the womb. And a ritual purifying lamp burns for ten days in the birth room after delivery, a kind of reinforcing decad. Thus: ten lunar months of human gestation, ten days of gestation for the "proto-pitr", ten days of readiness for a pollution-free infant leaving the birthing room. This liminal period is shared by the embryo in the mother, the newborn child in the birthing room, and the *preta* on the ritual arena. All three emerge on the tenth day, an infant free of the body of the mother, an infant free of birth pollution and the recipient of a secret name on the tenth day, and a *preta* free of death pollution and in readiness to become a *pitr*.

Reinforcement of the notion that rice-sesame mixture energizes the departed comes from the post-Vedic expression *lepabhagin*, referring to those ancestors beyond the immediate triad of father, grandfather, great-grandfather who receive full *pindas* in *sraddhas*. Ancestors in the hierarchy above the great-grandfather need only the “wipings” (*lepa*) of the hand after presentations to the basic three, perhaps because these remote ones are dissolving into the process of rebirth.¹¹

To revisit choices on the menu, why are the basic offerings in *pindadanas* rice, sesame, and water? Water is a given in the context of regeneration that is as old as Rgveda funeral hymns. And as we have seen with the hanging baskets, water is indispensable for germination of the energy-providing grains. Rice, included as one of the nine grains in *navadhanyas*, is promoted above them all, although barley, especially finely ground barley, can be a substitute for rice in offerings. Why is rice privileged? Rice is *annam*, another word for “food” in general. In the South rice is the basis for all two or three meals a day. If one has not eaten rice one has not eaten food but undertaken a fast. In both North and South rice is the first solid food to touch an infant’s tongue, in the *annaprasana* ritual, usually in the sixth month of life. Rice cultivation requires not only intensive irrigation but also the procedure of transplanting seedlings into wetlands, thus disclosing a symbolism of rebirth so important in funerary contexts. And rice is often homologized to semen, *retas*. Three substances—rice, milk, and semen—are white and nourishing.¹² Rice is solid state, hot in temperature by Indian food codes. If milk, ghee, honey, or another additive is mixed into the *pinda*, the state changes to semi-solid but the temperature is still hot, perhaps an important regenerative quality.

As for sesame (*tila*), the other essential ingredient in the cooked-rice *pinda* and another one of the *navadhanya* seeds, its prominence is not as transparent. Both rice and sesame are hulled, hard shells that contain inner food grains. Winnowing works off the hull and reveals the grain, as disposal of the dead body reveals the *preta*. Thus the significance of a *surpa*, winnowing fan, a symbol of death, but of refinement as well, the instrument that reveals an essence, soul. Sesame has various species, black preferred for death rites, Yama’s color as well as that of the planet Sani, Saturn, who loves both seed and oil. The important role of sesame is indeed quite deep seated. Funeral verses in the Atharvaveda appear to have honored in sesame and other grains *svadha*, an internal energy tapped to enliven the dead. The Kausika Sutra and other later texts employed these Atharvan mantras, including their plea for expansion, in the procedure of distributing seeds over the collected bone fragments of the deceased. Fourteen seeds scattered in furrows ploughed by six oxen is a recommendation for a ritual in both the Taittiriya Samhita and the Satapatha Brahmana, all being quite busy for one funeral.¹³

b. About two communities: the living and the ancestors

The final question posed at the outset was this: Do we see in Hinduism an amalgam of two communities—the living and the departed—in a demonstration of solidarity and mutual responsibility in this commensal funeral feast, as we observe, for example, in *Día de los Muertos* in Mexico or *Qing-Ming* in China? The answer is qualified: yes, in certain ways, and no, in other respects. As to mutual responsibility, it is obvious that human food and water can be provided ritually to the recently departed and the ancestors, with appropriate Vedic mantras or Puranic slokas, only by living descendants. The departed demand satisfaction. And in return, it is acknowledged that celestial residence of the ancestors, the “Fathers,” privileges them with regard to continuing blessings and guidance. There is even the folk belief (although contra brahmanical textual authority) that a grandparent or great-grandparent is reborn in the family within the lifespan of grandsons and granddaughters, and that is certainly an expression of solidarity. On the other hand, a three-fold hierarchy of ancestors reminds us that rank and stratification are not confined to this world. And regarding class and caste status, one or more Brahmans, traditionally esteemed for textual and ritual expertise, are necessary in every *śraddha* to be there *as* the deceased, consuming food for the newly departed and recent ancestors. But the danger and impurity of consorting with Death itself looms so large that such a role condemns the eater, the *bhokta*, to virtual untouchability and, outside of ritual arenas, unseeability. In this regard, food becomes a medium not of solidarity but of estrangement. Only when a recently departed one is securely installed in the other world can he/she be routinely fed among his/her own kind. In India, ancient, medieval, or modern, food has always been a primary medium of separation between kinds (*jatis*) of humans and kinds of beings in general. Although we all end up as food, we literally are what we eat.

In the last analysis, this commonplace transformation that is a Hindu funeral, one accomplished thousands of times daily on riversides throughout India and Nepal, is nevertheless unique, personal, and loaded with ancient, classical, and folk symbols. The entire schedule is midwife to the mystery of a new existence. True, certain aspects of funerals occur out in the open where outsiders may observe, unlike the mysteries of Mithras or Demeter and Persephone. But they remain strangely private and in most respects inexplicable, without the transparency of domestic or temple worship involving goddesses and gods. They concern the invisible journey of an ineffable being, the personal self in transition from a known life to an unknown *other* life. And food, necessary for life in this world and the next, is the medium of perpetuation and vitality.

Notes

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented to the annual meeting of the American Society for the Study of Religion, Berkeley, California, April 22, 2007. The topic of the conference was "Food" and the essay was illustrated by fifty photo-slides of rituals occurring in Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Nepal, and Uttar Pradesh.

² See Knipe 2007 172ff.; cf. 187 nn. 5 and 6 references to Edgerton, Keith, Bodewitz, and Gonda.

³ On the enormous variety of *sraddha* performances see Caland 1893, Padfield 1908, Kane 1953, Shastri 1963. Kane (vol. 4, 485f.) chooses illustrations from two *sakhas* in two different regions, the Rgveda with both Asvalayana Sutras in Western India (486-503) and the Madhyandina Sukla Yajurveda with Katyayana Sraddha-Sutra in Bengal (504-09). Despite wide divergence in details throughout India and Nepal there are broad structural similarities in both *mantra* and *kriya*. See further Knipe 1977, 2005a, 2005b, 2007.

⁴ Such tasks are described with case studies in Knipe 1995.

⁵ Justice 1997 213-15, 230, 236-38

⁶ For variant constructions in this ritual see Knipe 2005b.

⁷ Reasons for this reduction are discussed in Knipe 1977 116. Narayanabali is another ritual that some choose to perform on the eleventh and it also has a sixteenfold structure, this one promoting the deceased to Visnu's heaven, Vaikuntha. Sixteen days, incidentally, is also the number of days of mourning for some non-Brahman communities.

⁸ Clark-Deces 2005 2, 166. A portion of this rice goes into the mouth of the deceased shortly after death.

⁹ The full ritual, first observed in coastal Andhra in 1992, and many times thereafter, is described and interpreted in Knipe 2003.

¹⁰ For discussions of sesame (*tila*), the winnowing fan (*surpa*), and bone/tooth/ash collection (*asthisamcayana*), see Knipe 2004. I have made a case that the unharvested, ritually killed *navadhanya* sprouts are "gardens of the preta" akin to the gardens of Adonis noted by Marcelle Detienne, the grains in the ancient Greek festival of Adonis. Being the antithesis of cereal grain cultivation the Adonia festival sprouts are deliberately cooked to death in the July sun as a statement *against* the cult of Demeter and Persephone.

¹¹ On *lepabhagins* and the Visvedevas see Knipe 1977 118f. with chart.

¹² On homologies of milk, semen, rice, *soma*, etc., see O'Flaherty 1980b ch. 2 "Sexual fluids."

¹³ TS. 5.2.5.2-5; SB. 13.8.3.3.

Basic Sanskrit terms (diacritics following J. P. L. Gwynn, A Telugu-English Dictionary [Delhi: Oxford University 1991]).

Agni kravyad, agni kravyaad, Agni as cremation fire.

anna, “food,” particularly “rice.”

antyeesti, antyeSTi, “last sacrifice” of the body into earth (burial) or fire (cremation, i.e. Agni).

apara Brahman, the South Indian funerary Brahman specialist.

asthisamcayana, collection of bone fragments and ash one to three days after cremation.

ativahika, aativaahika, temporary cover or body created by the *nava sraddhas* for the *preta*.

bhokta, “eater” and “enjoyer” of food offered by the living for the *preta* or the ancestors.

dana, daana, Brahman, one who accepts gifts such as food for the deceased.

garbha, “embryo, fetus” during ten lunar months of human gestation.

karta, kartaa, the chief mourner, usually the eldest son, but others may take the role.

lepabhagin, lepabhaagin, one of the remote ancestors who receive only the rice that sticks to the hand during *sraddhas*.

mahalaya, mahaalayaa, in a dark fortnight of Bhadrapada (August-September), when *pitrs* are feasted; cf. *pitrpaksa*.

Mahapatra, Mahabrahmana, mahaapaatra, mahaabrahmaNa, “Great vessel or Brahman,” a Brahman priest who embodies a *preta* (particularly in North and Central India), eats food and accepts clothing and other items offered in *sraddhas*; also known as a *dana*-Brahman since he is willing to accept *danas*, “gifts.” He and his female equivalent are socially degraded as they are *bhoktas*.

mahayajnas, mahaayaj~nas, five requisite daily offerings including one to *bhutas*, originally spirits of the dead, but gradually taking on the meaning of dangerous ghost.

masikas, maasikas, *sraddhas* every month for a year after death.

musivayanam, muusivaayanam, Telugu “covered offering” ritual in coastal Andhra for an auspicious married woman who dies before her husband; her *preta* is embodied by a Brahman woman who accepts *preta* food and is ritually transformed into the goddess Gauri and sent to Gauri’s heaven.

- navadhanyas*, navadhaanyas, “nine grains” (rice, sesame, barley, grams, etc.) sown into earth in a small basket hung up on the day of death under a dripping water pot, then thrown in a river on tenth day along with a *silā*, small stone, and a piece of the shroud, both representing the *preta* for ten days.
- navagrahas*, “nine planets,” sun, moon, eclipse nodes Rahu and Ketu, and five visible planets, incl. **Sani**, Saturn, who receives sesame seeds (*tila*) and sesame oil (*taila*) as do the departed.
- pinda*, piNDa, ball of cooked food, usually rice mixed with sesame seeds, sometimes other items; in certain circumstances *yava*, barley, or uncooked rice may be offered.
- pitr*, pit.r, literally “father;” an ancestor, male or female, among the *pitrah* as a community.
- pitrloka.*, pit.rloka, world of the ancestors.
- pitrapaksa*, pit.rpakSa, a dark lunar fortnight in Asvina (September-October) when collective ancestors are feasted; cf. *mahalaya*.
- preta* or *jiva*, jiiva, life force that departs from and survives the body for another rebirth; other terms include *asu*, *manas*, *prana*, praaNa, *atman*, aatman.
- pretasila*, preta’silaa, small stone hosting the *preta* for ten days.
- puranokta*, puraaNokta, according to the Puranas.
- samvatsara*, a year, the time required for the dismissed *pitr* to reach *pitrloka*.
- samvatsarika*, death anniversary.
- sapindikarana*, sapiNDiikaraNa, twelfth-day rite that blends a newly covered *preta* with her/his ancestors.
- sauca*, ‘sauca, “purity,” and *asauca*, “im-purity,” the latter caused by, e.g., a death in the family.
- smasana*, ‘sma’saana, burning and burial ground located near a pipal tree on a river or stream.
- sraddha*, ‘sraadha, from the Grhya Sutras on, a ritual for the departed, daily, monthly, annually, or occasionally; *nava* or “new” *sraddhas* for ten days after death construct a temporary cover or body for the *preta* until it is ritually promoted to the status of ancestor.
- surpa*, ‘suurpa, winnowing fan, a multi-layered symbol in funerals.
- svadha*, svadhaa, “power, energy,” said to reside in sesame and other grains (e.g. Atharvaveda 18.3.69).
- svayampaka*, raw food taken away from the ritual for “self cooking” and eating.

tila, sesame grains producing *taila*, sesame oil.

vedokta, according to the Vedas.

Visvedevas, vi'svedevas, remote ancestors from great-great-grandfather and beyond.

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