

# HINDU CARE AMIDST COVID-19

Prepared by:

Shaunaka Rishi Das, Hindu Chaplain to Oxford University, shaunaka@ochs.org.uk  
& Pandit Madhava Turumella, Hindu Priest, madhava@madhava.net

It is disturbing for anyone who cannot be close to a seriously ill or dying relative, partner, or friend. It is distressing to not be able to say goodbye personally, at the death bed, or at a funeral. The current pandemic has made this a reality for many. Our aim here is to offer helpful and hopeful guidance for carers dealing with Hindu patients, before and after death, and to families and friends of the ill and deceased.

We will discuss, as simply as possible and in two parts, the basic needs and concerns of Hindus facing death, and the process after death, with specific attention to the demands of this time.

## THE VERY ILL AND THE DYING

In the famous scene in Richard Attenborough's film Gandhi, the Mahatma is shot and says, "O God, O God". In fact Gandhi said, "He Ram, he Ram". The difference is significant. For an observant Hindu, dying with the name of God on one's tongue is considered the most auspicious death – Ram being a Hindu name for God.

Attenborough, although very well meaning, seemed not see the significance of Gandhi's last words. For many Hindus, Gandhi was a mahatma, a great soul, as much for the focus it took to remember God at the time of death as for a life in politics.

Many Hindus, particularly the elderly, will be anxious for opportunities to remember God's name when in crisis or at the time of death. During the difficulties of isolation during this pandemic, and the ensuing potential for a lonely death it will be of great comfort if Hindu patients have the possibility of hearing the chanting of the names of God, (called kirtan and bhajan).

We presume that at this time that most patients will be in a shared ward, and we want to be sensitive to others, so we recommend the use of headphones, which can be supplied by family members.

Hospital staff or chaplains may want to suggest this facility for chanting to family members, who may be in shock, or grieving, or unaware that staff are sensitive to this need. They will be thankful for, and comforted by the suggestion. Jain and Sikh patients will also appreciate chanting at this time, and in many cases the same mantras or chants will serve.

An online search using the words kirtan or bhajan will easily bring one to recordings to download or stream to create a playlist.

## AFTER DEATH

The normal purification and funeral rites Hindus would expect after a loved one's death are mostly not possible during this pandemic.

While unfortunate, this circumstance is not unforeseen in Hindu ritual practice.

Pilgrimage is very important in Hindu life. Many people set off on pilgrimage when retired and elderly, with the consequence that some do not



A RECOGNISED INDEPENDENT CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

13-15 Magdalen St  
Oxford OX1 3AE  
Tel. 01865-304300  
www.ochs.org.uk  
Regd Charity No. 1074458

The aim of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies is the study of Hindu culture, religion, languages, literature, philosophy, history, arts, and society, in all periods and in all parts of the world. All Hindu traditions are included.

return. It is the same with military service. In World War 1, for instance, nearly 75,000 Indians who left for war in the West were not seen again by their relatives.

In such cases of unusual death, and in this context Covid-19 is considered an unusual death, there are two processes recommended for the bereaved family.

Hospital staff should note here that some Hindu relatives may want to attach some sacred items to the body before cremation, and just after the moment of death, including beads. Fulfilling their wishes would be a mercy.

As this is an unusual case there is no need to consider regular funeral rites, although most funeral homes are offering family only services, which are live-streamed to a wider audience.

Sharing the following suggestions will also be of comfort for the bereaved.

### **THE PERIOD OF THIRTEEN DAYS AFTER A DEATH IN UNUSUAL CIRCUMSTANCES**

1. The process begins after hearing the news of death. At that time family members can wash their hair and head to mark the beginning of a period of mourning.
2. Establish a small shrine for the departed with a photograph, beside which you light a lamp or candle. Offer a flower garland to the picture. Do this every evening for twelve days.
3. During this twelve-day period read verses 2.12–25 and 8.23–26 of Bhagavad-gita daily. It is also very usual to chant at this time.
4. On the thirteenth day make three balls of cooked rice and offer them to the birds. End this period of mourning with another washing of hair and head.
5. The Sraddha period falls in the month of September. Further offerings can be made at that time.

### **RITEs TO BE PERFORMED AT A CONVENIENT TIME**

1. Pitru Paksha is a period of fifteen lunar days, which takes place during Sraddha, when Hindus pay homage to their ancestors, especially through food offerings.
2. The last and most significant day of Pitru Paksha is known as Sarvapitri Amavasya. On this day, a ritual called Kusha Antyeshti (or Palasa Dahana) can be performed using a replica body of the departed made of grass. It is a thirty minute ceremony which any competent Hindu priest can perform.
3. After the Kusha Antyeshti ceremony one can offer food and water to the departed.
4. It is, of course optional, but if possible make a pilgrimage to Gaya, in India and offer prayers. Otherwise, ask any Hindu priest to do this on your behalf.

*We hope these simple perspectives and suggestions will be of benefit to health care professionals and family members at this difficult time.*



A RECOGNISED INDEPENDENT CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD