

# HINDU ASCETIC AND ANCESTRAL MEMORIALS IN UPPER GANGETIC INDIA

By

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Fire is supposed to purify the mortal remains of Hindus before the soul of the departed joins the ancestors (*Pitri* in Sanskrit) in heaven. Among the North Indian Hindus, funeral rites involve cremation and immersion of ensuing ashes in flowing water, preferably in the river Ganges (*Ganga*) or in other sacred water body. According to the Hindu mythology, this enables the human body to return to nature which is composed of five-elements (*pancha-tatwa*): earth (*bhoomi*), air (*vaayu*), water (*jal*), sky (*akash*), and fire (*agni*). The formal sanctification of last rites at the pilgrimage sites is done by *brahmin* priests who may also maintain ancestral records. Indo-Gangetic region in northern India has faced intense turmoil, leading to forced or voluntary mass migration of population over the centuries, and as recently as 1947 when India was partitioned to gain independence. The pilgrimage records in the safe-keeping of priests in holy cities in the region like Hardwar, Jwalapur, and Kurukshetra, etc. provide a valuable source of genealogical information for many Hindu families, particularly in the absence of written family information or physical evidence such as burial markers.

The burial among common north Indian Hindus is reserved for ascetics and small children whose purification by fire is not required. Ascetics are regarded sin-free due to their renunciation of the world and children are considered too young to commit sin. Alternatively, their bodies weighted with stones are drowned in rivers. This practice is called giving water-burial (*jal-samadhi*) which leaves no trace of the departed as is the case for ashes after cremation. The last resting place of Shaivite ascetics, the followers of Hindu God *Shiva*, is called “*samadhi*” where they are buried in sitting or meditation posture. Burial spots (*shown below*) are marked with a tumulus shaped like an un-opened lotus bud or a larger, variously ornamented, structure on a square or an octagonal platform. A domed roof may cover a stone *Shiva-linga* representing *Shiva* in the center of the platform. These *samadhi* sites are regarded sacred and may receive offerings from the devotees. Most often, these are located adjacent to temples where generations of ascetics prayed and spent their lives. Such ascetic monuments may or may not have an inscription revealing the identity of the entombed. Elaborately constructed cenotaphs (empty tombs marking the cremation sites), called *chhatriyan* (*plural of chhatra or umbrella in Sanskrit*), of royalty and other important persons dot former princely states such as those in Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh. Compared to the cenotaphs of the royalty, ascetic *samadhi* monuments are humble structures. No memorial structures are built for buried children.



Hindus believe in reincarnation and in immortality of the soul. In agricultural areas where landed Hindu families have lived for several generations, as in the land between Ganges and Yamuna rivers, small monuments are erected sometimes to venerate ancestors. These shrines called *pitrasthans* or *devasthan* are small hut or inverted “V” shaped structures, usually as high as a foot or two, to allow placement of a lighted lamp (*deepak*). Ancestral shrines typically are located at the periphery of family’s agriculture land. Offerings of food, water, and flowers are made on festive and special occasions such as marriage to seek blessings, to ensure benevolence, and to reduce the chances of malevolence by any unsatisfied or angry ancestor. A new shrine may be added when an unmarried young man of the family dies since there would not be any direct descendants to perform yearly memorial ceremony. In towns or larger settlements, ancestor shrines from various families may be placed together usually in the vicinity of a temple or trees (*shown below*), especially such as *bargad* (*Ficus bengalensis*) or *pipal* (*Ficus religiosa*) that are considered sacred by the Hindus.





During the medieval times, and later whenever a new village was settled in the upper Gangetic plain, the first resident to die was honored by building a small monument. It is typically a simple four pillared brick structure with roof on a small platform at the periphery of the village where cremation took place. Similar to *pitra-muth* or *deva-sthan* these structures, called “*Bhumia* in Hindi”, are devoid of idol of any Hindu deity. Prayers are offered and blessings may be sought by the villagers but ceremonies are not officiated by a priest.

Ancestor memorial building is more common among the original settlers and emigrants of several generations ago compared to other Hindu residents who may have lost or did not have ancestral land. They, like others, may perform only the yearly memorial ceremony or *shraddh*. The word “*shraddh*” originates from the Sanskrit word “*shraddha*” or devotion. Every year, based on Hindu lunar calendar, a period of about two weeks is dedicated to the remembrance and worship of ancestors. During these two weeks, no wedding or any other auspicious ceremony takes place. The eldest son conducts *shraddh* when offerings of rice and sesame are made to ancestors and *brahmins* or poor people are fed and given gifts of clothing, etc. This ritual has played an important role in linking new generation with the older generations because it motivates one to remember the names of immediate forefathers. In my own case, my parents

were refugees from Western Punjab, which is no longer part of India. Yet, I know names of my grandmother, aunt and forefathers because my father performed these yearly rituals for them. With the exception of my grandfather, no photograph or any other record is available indicating their very existence. Some Hindu sects such as *Arya- Samaj* reject the concept of *shraddh* and do not follow this ritual.

During the medieval (and also in the modern times), *samadh*s were built in places where venerated Hindu historical figures like Indian Maratha warrior king Shivaji Bhonsle (17th century) and Mahatma Gandhi (20<sup>th</sup> century) were cremated. These are considered hallowed grounds that people visit to pay homage.

Over the years, the practice of ancestor worship or remembrance by yearly *shraddh* ceremony is dying out, even among those north Indian families who formerly practiced it. In part, it is due to the fact that in modern times, family members get scattered across India and abroad in pursuit of education and profession. In some places, ancestor memorials suffer from neglect as families die out or move away. In other situations, like the temple with ascetic tombs photographed above, sites are abandoned by ascetics and taken over by the householder devotees who take care of the place. In some sites devotees may start worshipping the *Shiva-linga*, mostly unaware of the presence of entombed ascetic remains (*shown below*) or without realizing it to be a cremation spot.



Ancestor veneration is shared to-date between the two ancient religions Hinduism and Buddhism that originated in India. Familial piety of descendants is extended to the ancestors by the

Buddhists in form of *ullambana* (Sanskrit, deliverance of pain) known variously as Urabon-e or Obon (Japan), Vu-lan (Vietnam), and Yu-lan-pen (China). Chinese worship ancestral tablets placed in small shrines at home. In Japan special “bodhi temples” or “bodaiji” are the sites for ancestor veneration where memorials may be constructed though real graves are often elsewhere.