



| Estd. 1994 |

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20 October 2008

Dear Carol

Funeral Pyres Judicial Review

I refer to your letter of 23 September 2008 and as regards Mr Ghai's wish to be cremated in an open air facility we would like to advise the following:

Hindus deal with death in a very elaborate manner over 11 to 13 days depending on custom and there are several ceremonies over these days which are designed to help the grieving family to come to terms with their loss. All such ceremonies are significant; not only in terms of symbolism, but to actually make the grieved feel that the soul has actually gone to heaven and is peaceful.

First the prayers are performed at home and then the body is taken to the crematorium where it is returned to its elements through the use of fire. The soul would have left the body immediately on death but until all the 11 days ceremonies are completed the belief is that the soul may still have an attachment to the material world and remain in limbo. The ashes are in fact taken to rivers, if practicable the ones considered as holy waters, so that the ashes pass on to the ocean over time thereby no attachment remains to a place on mother earth.

The problem here we see is in the method the body must be cremated according to the current crematoria rules in the UK. The Vedas – the highest authority in Hindu scripture – require that at the time of cremation, prayers are read while Agni Dev (god of fire – a divine energy principle in the Hindu pantheon) is invited to consume the corporeal body and convey all its constituent elements, fire, water, air, earth and ether back to the elements thereby allowing the soul to be completely free in the celestial realm. Essentially we give thanks to these elements for having given their energies to allow the body to be enjoyed by the soul departed which we now on death offer their parts back to them. It is believed that the soul would not be at peace until this thanksgiving ceremony is properly done at the time of cremation.

After intense debate among our entire executive but to which Dr Raj Pandit Sharma and Mr Anant M Vyas gave significant contributions we would like to offer the following solution, please.

Hindu Council UK position remains against the idea of open air cremations in fields as we saw recently but we are of the opinion that the crematoria falls well short of accommodating Hindu sentiments for their cremations according to Hindu belief. We recommend that the following changes be allowed to cover all eventualities of an ancient faith which has always moved with the times.



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1. The Coffin should be allowed to be without lid. The body will be wrapped in a shroud with offerings placed in an open coffin but then apart from the face the body is covered in flowers; the face is being left uncovered. It would be up to the family whether they wish to cover the face with flowers also so that the entire coffin is seen from the top with a bed of flowers.
2. Prayers are read in the ceremonial hall and any words said by the family as is normally the case nowadays.
3. The body is moved to the retort area and there the priest and immediate family members are invited for a short ceremony – at the moment this part is missing and people are uncomfortable about it. The ceremony will be to ignite the fire in the coffin – a small fire – and the priest to conduct a small ceremony, max. 15 mins, to offer the body to the five elements. The priest may require that a window or door is open and may require then where the flowers covered also the face to simply move then aside from the face.
4. Once this is completed the coffin – without cover and with a small fire burning inside it – be moved into the retort. The small fire should comply with the safety regulations. [It is worthy to note here that for weddings some large international hotels tried to stop the Havan ceremony, which is a larger fire to the one envisaged for this solemn and sombre funeral ceremony, when safety regulations came but were not successful in implementing their objection and Havans do fit the criteria for safety regulation.]
5. The ashes are then of extreme value to the family. The retort should be thoroughly cleaned before the cremation and after the cremation the choice should be given to the family to come and supervise the collection and grinding of ashes and clean the retort for the next cremation.

Finally we would suggest that the above procedure should be optional and each family will decide whether to exercise their choice of an open air cremation as above with Vedic rites suited to the modern era.

May I also say that whilst we have not been able to do a larger survey due to a lack of admin resources the debate, within the fully representative HCUK executive covering all communities and theologies, the polarity of some of the opinions in which was extreme. I believe the survey may not give the right result as the people are usually not informed fully and even as I saw in our debate there was a lot of emotion which becomes the mainstay of ticking boxes in a survey. Therefore I feel that a more of a “Think Tank” approach by those who hold representative positions in HCUK gives a more reliable result which would satisfy the entire community. I have tried to formulate in the above procedure proposed a consensus of opinions which ultimately will prove to be satisfactory for the Hindu community here in the UK.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely

Anil Bhanot
General Secretary