

Cremation: History and Prevalence

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Abstract

Cremation is one of the popular methods of disposing dead human bodies followed at the present time. Some of the other customs that widely prevailed earlier and still prevails now are: 1. Burial in ground, 2. Immersion in water, 3. Mummification, 4. Placing the bodies atop a hill or high ground called Tower of silence, and 5. Leaving the dead on the ground where one dies. It is commonly believed that only Indians – Hindus, Jains, Sikhs and Buddhists practice the cremation while others resort to burial. However, cremation is not a modern day invention by Indians but in reality was practiced in olden times in many countries. Its history is at least 20,000 years old. And it is not confined to India alone but is widely practiced in as many as 128 countries including USA, UK, Russia, China, Japan and many other civilized lands.

Cremation is an integral part of modern Indian culture. We believe it is only the Hindus and people of the three other India-originated religions of Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism that cremate their dead while all other religious groups have different disposal methods such as burying in the earth, immersing in the water and so on. In fact, all Indians except Indian Muslims and Christians are known to burn the lifeless bodies of their dear ones after death. The Indian Muslims and the Christians bury the dead like they do everywhere on earth. But, as a matter of fact, all Hindus do not burn the dead bodies; some actually dispose of the dead in various other ways including burying and floating. Hindu infants are not cremated; burying is the rite prescribed for them. Some Hindu minor sects such as the Vaishnavas, too, bury their dead. There are in fact Hindu Burial Grounds in big cities for this purpose. In Sanskrit, there is an important phrase called *Gangaprapiti*, meaning 'identification with the river Ganges'. Sages and Rishis who lived and meditated in the Himalayas beside the Ganges had their bodies immersed by their disciples in the water of the sacred river. This method of disposing human bodies is also called *Salila Samadhi*, watery cemetery. There is clear indication in one couplet of the *Rig Veda* about this (the transliteration is done on popular format and not in scholarly style with extended Romans or IPA symbols):

Suryam caksurgacchatu batamatma dyam ca gaccha prithivim ca dharmana l
Apo va gaccha yadi tatra te hitamosadhisu prati tistha sariraih ll

-- 10:16:3

Translation: O the dead! Let your eye reach the sun, let your breath go to the air; you reach to the sky and earth with your act of piety. Or if it becomes gainful, then you go to water. Let all your physical limbs stay with the world of vegetation.

So, in ancient times Hindus disposed of the dead bodies in water. In the *Manasa* legend prevalent widely in Eastern India, the body of Lakhindar, who died of snake bite, instead of being cremated was floated on a banana-tree raft steered by his wife Behula. This may not be a cock and bull story out of idle man's imagination but has some background based on reality. The immersion practice is very much prevalent in these days also. The *rishis* and sages who practice meditation in the Himalayas also go for this *salil Samadhi* or *jal Samadhi*: their disciples meticulously immerse the dead bodies of their gurus by chanting prescribed mantras from the scriptures.

The Zoroastrians (commonly called Parshis – Persians) do not either cremate or bury the dead; instead what they do is place the bodies on their Tower of Silence, a barricaded high ground, to be consumed by flesh-eating birds. They were the Agni-worshippers, like the Vedic Aryans; the cult they followed is very much associated with fire. As per *Wikipedia*, the ancient Iranians knew and resorted to cremation[1] but the followers of Zoroaster refused to take the path of body burning and instead followed what is simply a new method by placing the body atop a secluded high ground – the Tower of Silence as they call it. They continue to follow this method even today everywhere.

Ancient Egyptians had a novel method of disposal called mummification. They embalmed the body after taking out the fluids and other easily perishables and, when dried, kept it in a vault under the ground. This is mummification. The Egyptians normally mummified the dead pharaohs and kept them inside secret chambers called Valley of Queens and Valley of Kings; they were also kept in such chambers inside the pyramids. Like the Egyptians, the ancient Libyans also did it; so did others in the neighborhood in Africa. The Aztecs and the Mayans in Central America also had a similar method of mummification; the Chinese, too, mummified their dead in ancient times. So mummification in early times was quite popular. But this method is out of use now.

Another way of disposal of the body is simply throwing it away nearby or at the same spot where the death occurred, the family relocating their residences elsewhere. Early humans, afraid of death, were used to this. As civilization progressed, the method of disposing the bodies started to change in more humane way.

The Oldest Method

Due to ignorance, early humans left their dead at the place where the death occurred. In course of time, when they started living in communities instead of scattered units of two or three persons, they buried the dead in the ground. But it took a long time – thousands of years – for them to be used to a community life. Accordingly, it is not known exactly when the civilized form of burial in early human communities took place: a definite date cannot be scientifically provided. However, what is certain is that, after the human civilization took root, burial became the most widely used practice for the disposal of the bodies everywhere. Burial pits and graves were discovered from almost all countries; bodies were buried singly as well as in groups of two, three or more en masse. Earliest date of burial goes to stone-age, i.e. a period one hundred fifty thousand years ago. The famous skeleton of Lucy, the mother of all modern humans, that dates back to one hundred and fifty thousand years ago, was discovered at a spot beside a dried river in East Africa but then the skeleton was not whole but a fragment in a single piece of jaw bone of the mouth. So it is not known if her body was buried or simply left away by her family members. Other skeletal remains of similarly paleo-anthropologically important persons in the hoary past were found in pieces and not wholes. Early Human skeletons dating between 150,000 and 100,000 years back were found at many places in Africa, Germany in Europe, Middle East, China and Indonesia. Recent discoveries claim Israel as the birth place of early humans where skeletal remains of 1.8-1.4 million years old were found by paleontologists[2]. Skeletal remains of almost the same age (1.4 million years old) were also found in the Hunsgi Valley in Karnataka state of India[3]. That was the age of the *Homo erectus*, predecessors of the *Homo sapiens*; from *Homo sapiens* evolved the modern man around 150,000 years ago (The cycle of human evolution: primate pre-8 million years > *Homo habilis* 8-2.4 million > *Homo erectus* 2.4-0.2 million > *Homo sapiens* 200,000-35,000 B.C.). It is doubtful if the kinsmen of the former buried them ceremoniously or had knowledge of burial. Burial was invented by considerably civilized society out of compulsion at a comparatively recent date.

The oldest method in the civilized world was, no doubt, inhumation or the burial. In almost all ancient civilizations, we found plenty of records about this system. The Sumerians had the oldest civilization, they inhabited in ancient Sumer, present Iraq, where the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers flowed. They built their civilization before 4000 B.C. They buried their dead in dug-up pits for common people: every middle-class household had a separate burial ground attached with the dwelling; for royalty, there was a royal burial[4].

When Pu-Abi, their queen, died c. 3000 B.C., her body was placed in a large royal chamber decorated with all kinds of gorgeous make-ups including jewelry of gold, silver and lapis lazuli, muslins, perfumes as also an array of a thousand attendants and performers. The attendants and performers, all living persons, were customarily given to drink their last ceremonial drink by the royal priest and within minutes they all fell dead because the drink was poisoned. Then the entrance was closed by the royal grave diggers/ masons with brick and mortar[5]. About over a dozen such royal graves were discovered in the city of Ur at the confluence of the Euphrates in the Persian Gulf[6]. For ordinary commoners, a simple pit was what they used to cover with earth. Although Sumerian literature was very rich, they did not describe any other means for the disposal of human body. However, there was reference to priests who used to chant mantras at funerals just as in our case.

In later civilizations of Europe and West Asia as also China, burial pits dating back to hoary past were discovered in large numbers. Whole skeletons were almost always found in them, sometimes also in groups, suggesting simple burial was practiced in those countries in ancient times. In almost every important locations of India too were discovered a large number of burial pits belonging to various pre-historic times. Early Indians or those living prior to the arrival of the Vedic Indians had no other way of disposal of their dead although traces of cremation were found from very early times. “The practice of cremation”, writes historian Ram Sharan Sharma, “is also associated with the Indo-Europeans. It was certainly typical of India and also prevailed in Lithuania, in the Donets area, in the lower Volga area in 2000-1800 B.C., in the Danube basin in Hungary around 1500 BC, in Italy during 1300-1100 BC and also in Greece. . . . The post-cremation burials found in Harappa and Mohenjodaro seem to be late Harappan and coincide with the advent of the Aryans”[7]. He also writes in the same paper that “However, post-cremation burial in Baluchistan appears in the chalcolithic culture in the 3rd -2nd millennia BC. . . . Post-cremation burials also occur in south Tazikstan” (sic) [8]. The post-cremation burial is a dual funeral of first cremation and then burial and so seems to be queer and out of proportion to our times. But, strangely, the custom is still in currency in Chotonagpur, Santal Pargana and Midnapore districts in eastern India among the Bhumij, a primitive tribe of Australoid origin, since very early times. Writes Ajanta Chakraborty, a field reporter: “The Bhumij’s unique burial system goes back to 1,000 B.C. For nearly 3,000 years, they have been cremating their dead, then burying them and finally covering the graves with huge stones” [8a]. The Greeks in prehistoric times are also believed to have had funerals exactly of this type. What is more, a similar type of dual funeral is now practiced by the Balinese Hindus in Bali and Java of Indonesia. There is, however, one little difference: they first bury the dead for some time extending to days, weeks or even months until an auspicious day when they take the body out and cremate it according to the rites sanctioned by Hindu scriptures[9].

Prehistoric India

It is wrong to think that there was no human habitation in India prior to the advent of the Aryans, or before them, the Indus people. On the contrary, long before the Harappans appeared in the Indus Valley, India was teeming with settlements of large community of people at very early times, about 50,000 to 70,000 years ago. A recent report in *The Times of India* puts the date even further up and states that “modern human – *homo sapiens* – arrived in India in another wave out of Africa at least 80,000 years ago”[10]. Interestingly, archaeologists have discovered the oldest tools found anywhere in India in a place in the East Coast belonging to a very old date of 1.5 million years, a time when only the *homo erectus* traversed the earth and the age of the *homo sapiens*, the ancestors of modern man, did not arrive. And if the finds of the Hunsgi Valley of Karnataka referred to in the above section are considered, then there is enough ground to believe that India, indeed, was one of the locations of the older hominid – *Homo erectus* who ruled between 2.4 and 0.2 million years B.C. Their descendants, the *Homo sapiens*, who spread to different places were not confined long to a single race but branched off to various genetic strata and settled at many places, not just within but outside India as well.

From the many important sites in quite a lot of places in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, U.P., Bihar and even Bengal, evidences of human settlements in groups or communities are discovered by a few anthropological research groups. Even burial pits were found belonging to as old as 50,000 years or earlier. Most of the discoveries are, however, made from human skull or skeletal remains, singly or in groups, in caves, open sites on river basin or flat lands. These skull and skeletal remains belonged to not one but many anthropomorphic races. Obviously, their identities are not established and no proof of cremation existing among them is expected as they were not sufficiently advanced in modern-day concept of civilization.

Indus Valley Culture

The Indus Valley civilization lasting from 3500 B.C. to 1600 B.C. is comparatively of a recent date; it was a contemporary to the civilizations in Mesopotamia and Egypt. And it was quite expansive, covering a very wide area with a number of populous cities some of which were much bigger than Athens in size and population; both Harappa and Mohenjo-daro were really the two big cities, bigger than many in the ancient world, having a population of 25,000 each compared to only 10,000 for Athens. There were many other similarly big cities discovered recently having close affinity with and accordingly grouped in the Indus corridor. This confirms that the Indus Valley was a very populous country in ancient times. To deal with this big population was a difficult task but they managed it well, as their archaeological remains show.

The town planning system of the Indus people was most scientific and modernist. For example, every household had, apart from sewage, a lavatory, which is unthinkable even in many Asian and African countries of our time. Yet, we do not find sufficient evidence about how they disposed of their dead – by burying or cremation. No doubt there were some burial pits but their number, to be sure, was fewer, which was a puzzle, a mismatch; equally, no clear cremation site or cemetery was discovered also. Skulls and skeletal remains were doubtless found but their quantity is small. In Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, the two most important sites of Indus Valley civilization, only a few burial pits were found. In other cities recently discovered such as Lothal and Dholavira, the picture is similar. In fact, despite being one of the earliest human civilizations, built up in close proximity of time with the Sumerians, the Indus Valley offers a very small number of human skulls and skeletons discovered in any burial pits or underground chambers as also in scattered open-ground sites – streets and lanes of the two cities. This is contradictory to its large population.

The Harappan culture – the Indus Valley civilization is sometimes known as such – was spread over a very large area covering more than 1,000,000 sqkm in at least seven states in two countries – Pakistan and India – from Lothal in Gujarat to Sinauli in U.P. to Dholavira in Gujarat to Lonavala in Maharashtra with about 40 very important settlements from very old dates. In geographic term, it is more than double the size of Sumer. This automatically raises the question of how did they dispose of their dead bodies. Although no typical grave or burial ground within or outside their settlements in walled cities (except for Sinauli in U.P. where a spacious burial pit is discovered recently) were unearthed in large numbers, both burial pits and cremation spots did exist there in scattered locations. It is presumed they practiced a dual disposal system – first cremation and then burial as many scholars pointed out; or maybe they were first used to some kind of burial in a haphazard way; at a later date they found it safe to cremate the body discarding the earlier custom of burial for good. It is precisely necessary to make it clear that they were not used to the burial as we understand it today. There is, in this case, one very important factor that scales heavy in respect of the cremation by the Indus people. One must not forget the historical truth that wood was available in plenty in the area surrounding their settlements, unlike in the region of Mesopotamia. They fire-burned the bricks with wood very much the way we do with coal, which is the only difference between them and us on this count. When so much wood was available, it is logically correct to say that they used to dispose of the dead bodies with this easily available burning material and not going for burial. The small number of burning evidence points to that.

There is no difference of opinion that the Indus people were highly advanced in civilization with a concept of very intricate town planning and subtle way of life as in a civilized society of our times. It is therefore quite natural that they would take sufficient care in handling their dead bodies. Thus, we can, for one, very reasonably say that they did not throw away the bodies of their dear and near ones on open places like the primitive people did as, evidently, no skeletons or skulls in good number were found in any spot. This presupposes that they did not bury their dead in great numbers. Therefore, the one possible alternative left in which we can give credence is that they invented the method of burning the bodies in some lonely or secluded place, specifically on the bank of a river. This is in fact the best assumption that comes to mind when we seek an answer and that leads reasonably to the probability of cremation. John Marshall, the discoverer of the Indus Valley civilization holds actually a similar view when he says “cremation was the fashion among the Indus people” although “he admits that there is no evidence about the disposal of the dead in the mature Harappa phase”[11]. Cremation does not leave anything but ashes which are washed away in rains or flood waters at the first instance, which we believe what had happened in case of the Indus Valley people. This is the reason why there is not much concrete proof about what the Indus people did with their dead. However, in the *Rig Veda* we find a couplet which confirms our hypothesis and offers the most telling solution to this mystery. The couplet, from Sukta No. 22 of 10th Book (mandala) says:

Akarma dasyurabhi no amanturanyabrato amanushah I
Tvam tasyamitra hanvadhadasasya dambhaya II
--10: 22: 8

Translation: There are the *dasyu* people (race) in all four sides of us, they have their own custom: they do not hold the ritual of oblation, they do not follow anything (of our custom); their activities are different, they cannot be considered culturally among us. Hey destroyer of the enemy! destroy them.

The phrase ‘they have their own custom’ is very significant. What is this custom, that is different ‘from ours’? It is not wise to answer this in one word. The Aryans have their principal activities such as holding of *yanja*, i.e. a sacrificial rite or oblation, recitation of mantra, worshipping the various gods and goddesses, singing of the *sama* music etc. These activities or ways of life of the Aryans are surely different from all others they came into contact with. But they were not mindful of what they themselves did; they were mindful of what others, in this case, this *dasyu* people, did. As a natural law, if anybody acts in a different way, that strikes the most to everybody. The cremation of the dead bodies to which the Aryans were not familiar with earlier may be one such activity. Nobody other than the Indus people who inhabited India prior to the Aryans was aware of this special act. Accordingly, our conjecture intensifies further that one of the activities of pre-Aryan settlers in India found to belong to this special case is cremation[12]. For more concrete signals, however, we must have to wait until the decipherment of the Indus scripts.

The Early Aryans

The Aryans, when they arrived in the Sindh basin in north-western India around 1500 B.C., did not know cremation but indulged in the prevalent burial like their forefathers and all others they were familiarized with while on way to India later. There is also enough evidence in the *Rig Veda* about this.

As the descendants of the parent Indo-European family, the Vedic Aryans were customarily used to burial only and so did not know anything about cremation of the dead bodies. This is not a fiction but an established fact. In the *Rig Veda* itself, there are some concrete descriptions of burial. The 10th book of it precisely gives this kind of description in almost a dozen couplets from the 18th sukta. Here are given the four most important of them, where one will find the intricate nature of how the early Aryans buried their near and dear ones when they died.

Upa sarpa mataram bhumimetamuruvychasam prithivim sushebam I
Urnarnada juvatirdakshinavata esha tva patu nirjhaterupasthat II
--10: 18: 10

Translation: O (dear) dead! You go to this expansive prithivi, i.e. the earth, (which) is like your mother, she is all-pervasive and her appearance is beautiful. Let her hold a soft sheep-woolen touch to you like a young wife. You have given the gift, meaning you have completed the oblation; let her rescue you from all adversities.

It is clearly indicated that somebody is buried in earth and one of his dear relatives invokes the earth to protect the dead at the time of the burial. In the next couplet of the same verse, the ritual of burial is more explicitly stated:

Ucchvanchasva prithivi ma ni vadhathah supayanasmai bhava supavanchana I
Mata putram yatha sichavyenam bhuma urnuhi II

--10:18:11

Translation: O earth! You lift this dead, do not give him any trouble. Give him all the best varieties of gifts, give him fair allurements. You give him affectionate cover as a mother covers her son with the end of her loin-cloth from all sides.

This is indeed a vivid description of earth burial. A similar description of burial activities is also found in the next couplet:

Ucchvanchamana prithivi su tisthatu sahasram mita upa hi srayantam I
Te grihaso ghritaschuto bhavantu viswahasmai saranah santvatra II

--10: 18: 12

Translation: (Let) the earth stay heaped upon (it, the dead) cordially. Let one thousand dusts lay heaped upon the dead. Let them behave like a house full of ghee to him; everyday they become the resting home of this person.

The same description is available in the next couplet too:

Utte stabhunami prithivim tvatparim logam nidadhanmo aham risham I
Etam sthunam pitaro dharayantu tetra yamah sadana te minetu II

--10: 18: 13

Translation: I keep the earth held upon you, I keep a piece of stone upon you so that the clay or dust would not be able to penetrate and destroy you. May this pole be held by your ancestors. Let Yama build here a dwelling for you.

So, it is amply clear that the Vedic Aryans in the beginning were used to the age-old practice of burial for disposal of dead bodies because they did not know any other means like their counterparts in their original homeland somewhere in Eurasian median. This seems to be puzzling insofar as the fact that many of their kinsmen in their previous settlements, especially in Greece, knew cremation and practiced the method quite frequently.

Earliest Records of Cremation

The earliest record of cremation is available from as early as 20,000 years back. "Cremation dates back to 20000 years ago in the archaeological records with the Mungo Lady, the remains of a partly cremated body was found at the Mungo Lake, Australia", writes the *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*[13]. However, this is a mere archaeological record; it is not known how this cremation took place and under which circumstances. We all know that cremation is associated with fire. The moot question is: when the fire was used first. It is hard to believe but true that the use of fire was first made by a member of the hominid as early as 1.4 million years ago. It is now acknowledged that the *Homo erectus* was the first hominid to discover the use of fire, as G.S. Mudur writes in his paper *Arms and those men*[14]. At two different places wide apart, one in Gesher Benot Ya'aqov in Israel and the other at Isampur in the Hunsgi Valley in Karnataka, evidence of human-made hearths with partly burnt fish and crab bones were found to have existed between 1.4 and 0.8 million years ago. It was the work of the species *Homo erectus* according to a report in *The Telegraph*[15]. The findings are startling insofar as our age-old belief goes that prior to 50000 B.C. man did not know the use of fire.

We believed the *Homo erectus* who lived before 200,000 years B.C. saw natural fire in the forest but was ignorant of its utility and that the *Homo sapiens* who evolved from them c. 200,000 B.C. was the first to see the utility of fire: they found forest fire burned animals whose flesh smelled attractive and tasted great. They became curious and that is how they learnt the use of fire for their own convenience. This was the starting point of human civilization. Much later, when they became more advanced and social, the fire changed their life drastically. Heating, lighting, cooking and industrial activities followed suit. After that came the issue for disposal of dead bodies by burning. But following the recent findings in the two different archaeological sites at two different countries in Israel and India, our notion needs to be changed a great deal.

There is, however, no record of cremation of human bodies many thousand years after the first recorded case in the Mungo lady referred to above until 8000 B.C. “There is evidence that people cremated bodies in China as early as 8000 B.C.”, writes Michelle Kim in her paper *How Cremation Works* [16]. During the Pharaoh Khufu of the early Egyptian kingdom (circa 3500 B.C.), an incident of a person being burnt by fire was recorded in a work available now in the “Early Literature of the East – Babylonia and Assyria” edited by Charles F. Horne. The wife of Uba-Ano, who was the royal priest and invoker of hymns (encomium) at the court, was found unfaithful to her husband. She was taken hostage by a royal order and killed as punishment and her body was thrown into a pre-arranged fire; her ashes were also sprinkled out in all important rivers and water bodies of the kingdom. The sprinkling of ashes of the dead is a popular ritual at the present time where cremation is customary. The Babylonian case registered 3500 years ago may be the first such instance and so has a historical value[17]. However, we find almost a similar case narrated by Syed Ameer Ali in his *The Spirit of Islam* that took place at comparatively a much later date: in Alexandria in Egypt around 300 A.D. a respectable and very learned lady teacher was returning home in her chariot after the day’s work from her academy when a crowd of fanatic Christians attacked her on the way and treated her with all kinds of barbarism including stripping of clothes. The marauders took her to the nearest church and killed her with animal ecstasy; they were enraged with her because she refused to accept Christianity shaking off her own religion so much that they tore her limbs into pieces; even then their rage, instead of mitigating, ran so high that they scraped her flesh from the bones with oyster shells which were thrown to a burning fire instantly arranged for the purpose[18]. The story may remind one about its present-day reflection on what is now a popular Bengali saying which reads ‘*har mas alga kore debo*’ ([I/we] will separate the flesh from the bone [of your person]). It is possible that the above saying has been built upon some historical events like the Alexandria incident.

In another case, a little earlier than the Alexandria event but comparatively recent considering the earliest one, a more or less similar event took place in Nineveh, the capital city of Ashurbanipal in Assyria in the 7th century B.C. It goes like this. There was a prophecy that no enemy can capture Nineveh as long as “the river (Tigris) shall become the city’s foe”. Suddenly, there were rains and storms causing the Tigris to swell as a result of which the fortification walls of the city broke down. The waiting Medes and the Babylonians stormed into it. The Babylonian chronicler has further written: “They made a great defeat of the chief people; they carried off the spoil of the city and temple; and they turned the city into a mound of rubble”[19]. The royal historian narrated the remaining story like this: “. . . preferring death to dishonorable captivity, he (the king) built a great pyre in his palace upon which he heaped up his gold, silver and robes of the state, and then consigned himself, the women of the harem, and the palace to the flames”[20]. This is very much in line with the honorable deaths by the royal ladies of the Rajput principalities when attacked by the Muslim hordes in medieval times of Indian history. The event was known as jawaharbrata all over India.

However, most scholars believe that cremation in modern sense began around 3000 B.C., most likely in Europe and Near East. “Cremation dates back to the late Stone Age (2500 B.C.) as evidenced by the finds of decorative pottery urns in Western Russia among Slavic peoples”, write Marsha A. Goetting and Claire DelGuerra in the paper *Cremation: History, Process, and Regulations*, January 2003, VOL. 8, No. 1 [21].

In the same breath *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, writes: “In the Middle East and Europe, both burial and cremation are evident in archaeological records in the Neolithic age” [22]. And it also adds later in the same section: “Phoenicians practiced both burial and cremation” [23]. It also mentions: “In Europe, there are traces of cremation dating back to Early Bronze Age (c. 2000 B.C.) [24].

There are more than a dozen references of cremation in the Old Testament, too. For example, Genesis 38:24 states: “And it came to pass about three months after, that it was told Judah, saying, Ta’-mar thy daughter in law hath played the harlot; and also, behold, she *is* with child by whoredom. And Judah said, Bring her forth, and let her be burnt”. Here the cremation suggested is not a normal burning of the body of a dead person but a pointer to punishment of the adultery practiced by the victim. Leviticus 20:14 is more categorical about the punishment of the concerned person for committing a crime: “And if a man take a wife and her mother, it *is* wickedness: they shall be burnt with fire, both he and they; that there be no wickedness among you”. Hebrew society was very conservative – and in fact no society permits mother and daughter married to the same person as husband of both – and so the punishment was severe. In Numbers 16:35, the ritual is explicit: “And there came out a fire from the LORD, and consumed the two hundred fifty men that offered incense”. Joshua 7:15 similarly justifies punishment for an offence: “And it shall be, *that* he that is taken with the accursed thing shall be burnt with fire, he and all that he hath: because he hath transgressed the covenant of the LORD, and because he hath wrought folly in Israel”. We believe these four cases will suffice to establish our point and need not include any more Biblical incidents here. It is however necessary to note that these books were products of different times, the oldest, Genesis, being written by Moses around 1500 B.C. Clearly, the Biblical cremation was primarily intended for punishment to the debased or law-breakers; yet we cannot deny its existence. So, from the authority of the *Bible*, it is a fact that cremation prevailed widely in ancient Israel and Palestine, if not elsewhere in other Biblical lands of West Asia.

In historical times, cremation was very popular in ancient Greece and Rome. Homer records three important cases of cremation in his immortal epic *Iliad*. In the last two Books of the poem, when the Greeks were at the final stage of the war with the Trojans in Troy, the three important heroes killed were Patroclus, cousin and friend of Achilles, Hector the prince of Troy and the Greek hero Achilles. Achilles prepared the pyre for Patroclus in the Greek war camp zone, put two coins on his eyes as the practice of the day and did the application of fire to the pyre. The body of Hector was brought home to the Trojan palace by his father from the camp of Achilles who after killing the former had taken the corpse there parading it throughout the war township (Achilles was kind enough to Priam to loan his cart on which to carry the corpse even though he was the latter’s sore enemy). In the palace courtyard a grand pyre was laid out and with all formalities and rituals befitting a famous royal house the body of Hector was put on it with two coins on his eyes. The pyre was lit up both by his father Priam and brother Paris. Achilles was killed inside the Trojan palace, which was almost burnt down completely; his corpse had not been brought home to the Greek camp side. The Greeks hurriedly arranged a tall pyre befitting his stature in the deserted palace ground where they burnt it in full martial cremation system of the day. All there are according to the Hollywood film *Troy* made in recent times. But Homer, indeed, gave in his story only one description of cremation in full, that of Hector, although he hinted a number of cremations and burial case incidents there. The story of *Iliad* dates back to 1200 B.C. and so we can safely say that the Greeks were accustomed to cremation as early as the 12th century B.C. In *Aeneid* of Virgil, similar instances of cremation are found. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “Virgil describes how during a 12 day truce reached so that both armies could cremate dead warriors, the Latins burned many without ritual or count and later heaped the bones together, covering them with a mound of earth . The Romans, on the other hand, observed all the proprieties.

They covered the pyre with leaves and fronted it with cypresses; after it was set ablaze, troops shouting war cries circled it and cast trophies taken from the slain Latins into the fire. . . . Cremation became such a status symbol in Rome that constructing and resting space in Columbaria (vaults or similar structures with niches in the walls to receive the ashes of the dead) became a profitable business”[25].

History of Cremation in India

In this situation, when their European kinsmen were accustomed to the practice of cremation, it surely remains an unresolved mystery that the Aryans themselves did not know it at their homestead and instead used to the practice of the burial like the ancient peoples in the Mediterranean kingdoms, as referred to above with a number of instances from the *Rig Veda*. Be that as it may, it is also a fact of matter that we find instances of cremation for the first time in Indian history through the same *Rig Veda* [26]. In the 10th book (*Mandala*) of it there are two suktas (verses), Nos. 16 and 18 where funeral rituals were especially dealt with. Both these suktas have 14 couplets or richs (or riks whence the word rig of the *Rig Veda*) each where clear cases of cremation were described in more than half the number of couplets with vivid details. Elsewhere in the same book, there are also scattered references to cremation. Thus, we find

Ye agnidagdha ye anagnidagdha madhye divah swadhaya madayante I
Tebhi swaralasu nitimetam yathavasam tanwam kalpayaswa II
--10:15:14

Translation: O self-revealing fire! Those of my forefathers who have been burnt by fire and those who have not been, those who enjoy the most fruitful gifts obtained from the heaven, on behalf of them you undertake this fresh body for fulfilling their and our wishes.

Here the two words *agnidagdha* and *anagnidagdha* are very significant: ‘those who were burnt’ and ‘those who were not burnt’ clearly state the status of the persons/bodies. This is in fact the first clear instance of cremating the body after death anywhere in Indian literature. In the *Agni Sukta* of the *Rig Veda*, which is in the 1st *Mandala*, everything is dedicated to the fire which also burns it. But never any dead person’s body is said to be put in it. However, in the two above-noted verses, burning of the body is explicitly and more vividly described. This is precisely what can be said about the following three couplets:

Yatte Krishnah sakuna atutoda pipilah sarpa uta va swapadah I
Agnistabdiswadagam krinotu somascha yo brahmanan avibesha II
--10:16:6

Translation: O dead person! The black colored bird i.e. the crow has inflicted pain to which part of your body or the ant or snake or ferocious animal has inflicted pain to which part of your body, let this all-devouring fire heal that part as also let Soma who has entered the bodies of the invokers heal it.

It is significant that some part of the body of the dead was either bitten by ants or a snake or inflicted injuries by some ferocious animal indicating an abnormal death; or, more likely, the body might have been lying on earth for some time before being brought to the pyre. Clearly, the hymn writer indicates by his wishes that the body of the dead person is burnt by fire. Similarly, in another couplet, the poet gives a very clear picture of fire burning the dead:

Mainamagne vi daho mabhi socho masya tvacham chiksipo ma sariram I
Yada sritam krinabo jatavedoh themenam pra hinutat pitribhyah II
--10:16:1

Translation: O Agni! Do not completely reduce the dead into ashes, do not give him pain, do not tear his skin or flesh. O Yataveda (one who knows the *Veda*, literally ‘born from the *Veda*’)! When the body of this person gets completely ripened (= reduced to ashes), then send him to the place of his forefathers, i.e. to the heaven. In this couplet, there is no ambiguity about the burning of dead body in fire.

It appears by the time this hymn was written (around 10th-9th century B.C.) the Vedic society was completely under the control of the ritual with cremation. In the next, which is the last couplet of this series, the poet does not keep any doubt about the convention of cremation in the Vedic society.

Sritam yada karasi jatavedahathemenam paridattatpitribhyah I
Yada gacchatyasunitimetamatha devanam vasanirbhavati II

--10:16:2

Translation: O Agni! When you will ripen the body of the person fully, please send him to the place of his forefathers. When the person resurrects into a fresh life, then (he) will become obedient to the gods.

In this couplet, there is no mention of Agni directly but there is enough indication indirectly to that effect. It may be carefully noted that this is in continuation of the couplet No. 1 of the series dedicated completely to the god Agni in Sukta No. 16.

So it is an established fact that by the 10-9th century B.C. when the last book of *Rig Vedic* hymns were composed, the cremation became a customary ritual for the Indian society, specifically at a date not later than 9th century B.C. It needs to be specially underlined in this connection that there was no class differentiation for cremation, all the four *varnas* being grouped under its fold. As already elaborately described, the Aryan society during the Vedic age was also used to widespread burial, and so cremation was not wholeheartedly accepted there initially, both running parallel for some time. But after the lapse of a few decades of hesitancy, they accepted the cremation universally by the end of 9th century B.C.[27]. The proof of this is found in one sloka of the *Ishopanishad*. This is

Vayurnilamamritamathedam bhasmantam sariram I

Translation: May the spirit (life breath of this life) enter the eternal (immortal) spirit and then this lifeless body be reduced to ashes.

Despite Upanishad being included in the Vedic literature, the date of *Isha Upanishad* is fixed roughly two centuries from the last book of the *Rig Veda* was composed. The Aryans used to bury their dead till about 10th century B.C.; afterwards, especially from the time of *Isha Upanishad*, they rigidly followed the newly acquired other way of disposal – the cremation. During the *Mahabharata* age the Aryan society knew only the custom of cremation for disposal of the dead: when Bhishma was laid in his *sarasajya* or bed of arrows, they waited until the onset of the summer solstice (*uttarayan*) for his funeral through cremation. This was described vividly in the *Anushasan Parva*: sandal wood was used for the pyre and perfumes were applied in the fire; and the ashes were sprinkled in the Ganges[28]. In the *Adiparva* of the epic, when Pandu died, his second wife Madri took to *sahamaran* which is choosing pyre with the dead husband[29], that is another kind of cremation. Interestingly, this is for the first time that we find an instance of wife choosing to sit on a funeral pyre with her dead husband. In the *Ramayana* innumerable deaths occurred and there are vivid descriptions of how the dead soldiers were put to rest. In the first case, for instance, when King Dasharath died hearing the news of sojourn to forest of Ram, Sita and Lakshman, his body was kept in a pot of oil for preservation as none of sons was present there at the time for doing the last rites. When Bharat and Satrughna, who were at their maternal uncle's house then, were brought back to Ayodhya, they lit the pyre that was arranged with *devdaru* wood on the bank of Saraju river[30]. Here the use of *devdaru* tree (deodar) is especially noticeable; in the pyre of Bhishma what was used is sandal wood. Sandal wood is favored in preparation of pyre for famous personalities in India; for ordinary persons, any wood is the prescribed material. But here we find use of deodar wood in preparation of a pyre because at that time the wood was hugely available all over the Himalayan Terai where Ayodhya belonged to. Anyway, as there was no mention of burial anywhere in the two great epics, it can be conclusively said that they cremated all their dead according to the prevalent practice except for Ram and Lakshman who gave up their ghosts on jumping on the Saraju river after Sita's *patal pravesh* or death in unnatural circumstances.

The *Ramayana* story was woven after the *Rig Vedic* age, which is circa 8th century B.C. but a little before the Mahabharata story. However, it must be borne in mind that both the epics were composed at a much later date, precisely between the 4th century B.C and 4th century A.D.

Popularity of Cremation World over

The most popular methods of disposing human bodies at later dates all over the world are undoubtedly the two – burial and cremation. “In the Middle East and Europe, both burial and cremation are evident in the archaeological records in the Neolithic (age)”, according to *Wikipedia*[31]. In earlier times also cremation was very much prevalent in these regions, as available literary references suggest. The *Wikipedia* adds: “Early Persians practiced cremation but this became prohibited during Zoroastrian period. . . .By 5th century the practice of cremation virtually disappeared from Europe (Wiki note 65). . . . But the cremation returned in Europe by 10th century (note 67) . . . in early Roman Britain cremation was usual but diminished by 4th century (note 67)”[32].

“In Sweden, the majority of funerals were cremations throughout the Iron Age and Viking Age, but stopped once Christianity was introduced (AD 1050)”, writes Michelle Kim in her paper *How Cremation Works*. She further adds: “In Asia, cremation became popular in areas of Buddhist influence under dynasties in China and Korea until 1300. The advent of Neo-Confucianism in the 14th century brought burials back to the forefront in parts of Asia”[33].

“The revival of interest in cremation in Europe and the United States of America began in 1874, when Queen Victoria’s surgeon, Sir Henry Thompson, published his influential book ‘Cremation: The Treatment of the Body After Death’. He also organized the Cremation Society of England in association with Anthony Trollope, Sir John Tenniel, the Dukes of Bedford and westernized and other articulate critics of burial practices . . .”[34]; . . . “The British Movement prompted action in the United States where the first crematorium was built in Washington, Pennsylvania, in 1876”[35].

Plague appeared as an epidemic in most parts of Europe in the 14th century for which almost one half of European population perished. In most cases bodies were burnt en masse. “In the year 1349, there occurred the greatest epidemic that ever happened. Death went from one end of the earth to the other, on that side and the side of the sea, and it was greater among the Saracens than among the Christians. In some lands everyone died so that no one was left . . . The Bishop of Marseilles and priests and monks and more than half of all the people there died with them. In no other kingdoms and cities so many people perished that it would be horrible to describe. . . . On Saturday – that was St. Valentine’s Day – they brought the Jews on a wooden platform in their cemetery”. This is a report from Fordham University, USA to support the fact that “Cremation is not condemned by Jehovah”[36].

The practice of cremation gained momentum from the beginning of the 18th century in the Western Christian world. Writes Michelle Kim: “During the French Revolution, groups such as the Freemasons, revolutionaries and anarchists promoted as a way of reducing the church’s role in the funeral process. Partly because of this opposition, the Roman Catholic Church opposed the use of cremation until the 20th century”[37]. However, the author continues with the same fervor: “Modern cremation began in the late 1800s with the invention of a practical cremation chamber by Professor Brunetti who presented it at the 1873 Vienna Exposition”[38].

According to *Wikipedia*, as many as 31 countries including China, Japan, United Kingdom, Scandinavia, Australia, New Zealand, United States, South American countries and so on practice cremation in greater proportion. The percentage of cremation in 2009 is 95 in Japan, 48.50 in China, 72 in U.K. (against 35% in 1960) and 33 in the U.S. as per the records of the International Cremation Statistics 2009, Great Britain[39].

It is noteworthy that India and Nepal where cremation is a most widely followed custom has not been included in the list. The popularity of cremation is rapidly increasing at the present times. Even in an African land like Ghana they now cremate the dead although the percentage is very small – barely 2%, the rest holding on to the old practice of inhumation or burial. But that is a beginning.

When in imperial times, China did not encourage cremation but once it freed itself from the clutches of old habits following Mao Zedong's Long March, cremation was encouraged. Zhou Enlai, Premier of China during Mao's time, was in favor of cremation. Dealing with the incident in Tiananmen Square in China in 1989, a *TIME* report wrote: "Zhou Enlai once said that China's greatest contribution to the world peace was simply feeding its own people. To keep doing it, we need land – all of it, every square meter. Earth burials are an incredible waste of space. Cremation is the future"[40]. Chinese do not abhor cremation any more but prefer it.

We know Ram Mohun Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore are the first two Indians to have visited England in the 1830-40s where both of them died. Their bodies were not brought back to India nor were they cremated there; but instead they were buried as there was no provision for cremation there at the time. Cremation was introduced in Britain in the 1870s. In recent times, many famous British personalities like George Bernard Shaw and Bertrand Russell were given cremation following their will. In the World War II, Hitler's army exterminated 6 million Jews, a sizable of who were put to gas chamber for combustion which is a kind of cremation. The famous Nuremburg trial court convicted 12 German (Nazi) Army officers for their war crime against the Jews during the WW II and put to cremation. In Japan, they prefer cremation and in fact they love it the most so that cremation occurs there in almost 99% cases, the highest in the world. When Subhas Chandra Bose allegedly died in a plane crash in Taihoku in 1945, Taiwan, the Japanese Army brought his body to Japan and cremated it like in India.

Christianity does not have any more inhibition for cremation, rather they have come to terms with it. The age-old burial system has one very negative effect: it pollutes the earth and water affecting life as a whole. The environment-conscious European population understands it well and so they have started accepting cremation. It has two more plus points over burial. It is less costly compared to burial and does not require any land – one should not forget that land space is extremely limited. Hence cremation is a better option as Zhou Enlai once opined. This is the reason why Christian countries outside Europe are going positive for cremation more and more. Almost all the Latin American countries fall to this category. The Buddhist nations of South East Asia that previously resorted to burial are similarly increasingly bending towards cremation. Writes Michelle Kim: "Cremation is the dominant form of final disposal in Switzerland (75 per cent), Hong Kong (83 per cent), the Czech Republic (77 per cent), Singapore (77 per cent) and United States of America (72 per cent). China and Netherlands cremate about half their dead. Argentina (14 per cent), Ireland (6 per cent), Italy (7 per cent) and South Africa (6 per cent) have very low rates of cremation"[41]. Only the Muslim countries find fault with cremation as Islam does not allow any other means of disposal of the dead other than inhumation. The non-Islamic nations have no such bindings. Cremation is now the favorite custom of as many as 128 countries. We can take note of the comparative rate of rising popularity of cremation in the following graph:

USA—3.56% in 1960 but 40.62% in 2010
 Canada – 5.89% in 1970 but 68.4% in 2009
 UK – 34.70% in 1960 but 72.44% in 2008
 Japan – less than 95% in 1960 but 99.85 % in 2008 (highest in the world)
 China – 48.50% in 2008 from less than 30% in 1930

These figures are taken from different authentic sources.

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