
UNIT 1 SACRED KNOWLEDGE

Contents

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Theoretical Part of which the Ethnography *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* is an Example
- 1.3 Description of the Ethnography
 - 1.3.1 Intellectual Context
 - 1.3.2 Fieldwork
 - 1.3.3 Analysis of Data
 - 1.3.4 Conclusion
- 1.4 How does the Ethnography Advance our Understanding
- 1.5 Theoretical Part of which the Ethnography *Death in Banaras* is an Example
- 1.6 Description of the Ethnography
 - 1.6.1 Intellectual Context
 - 1.6.2 Fieldwork
 - 1.6.3 Analysis of Data
 - 1.6.4 Conclusion
- 1.7 How does the Ethnography Advance our Understanding
- 1.8 Summary
 - References
 - Sample Questions

Learning Objectives



After reading this unit, you will learn about:

- the various forms of religious practices in India;
- the relation between society and religion;
- the rites of passage;
- the priestly categories; and
- how 'sacred' is constructed in India.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

To understand the concept of sacred knowledge we will focus on the ethnographic works (a) *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* by M.N. Srinivas and (b) *Death in Banaras* by Jonathan P. Parry for the unit.

Coorg is a tiny, mountainous province in south India, bounded on the north and the east by Mysore state and on the west and south Canara and Malabar districts of Madras presidency. The isolation and the inaccessibility of Coorg, with its steep mountains, dense forests and heavy rainfall contributes to the maintenance and elaboration of the distinctive mode of life and culture of Coorgs. Under British rule the existing roads were improved and new ones were built. Nowadays buses run regularly on all the main roads connecting different parts of Coorg

with each other and Coorg with their neighbours. Yet even now no railway line passes through Coorg and this restricts the amount of contact it has with the rest of India.

Most people in Coorg live in villages, either themselves cultivating or supervising the cultivation of land. All the important languages spoken in Coorg are Dravidian with the exception of Hindusthani and English. Coorgs make use of the Kannada script on those occasions when they wish to reduce Kodagi into writing. Educated Coorgs are usually trilingual, knowing Kodagi, Kannada and English. Kodagi is used at home, Kannada in talking to most non-Coorgs excepting Malayalis and English in official matters and occasionally in conversation with strangers. English is popular with Coorgs and women (especially under thirty) have some acquaintance with it.

1.2 THEORETICAL PART OF WHICH THE ETHNOGRAPHY *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* IS AN EXAMPLE

Srinivas' work of 1952 is one of the best contributions to an understanding of how the structural-functional approach maybe used for understanding the ritual and social life of people. Incidentally, the data for this work was collected in the late 1930s and the early 1940s and on this Srinivas had already written a doctoral thesis. At Oxford, under the masterly supervision of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, the founder of the structural-functional approach, Srinivas reanalysed the Coorg data and prepared a piece of work which endeavoured to answer the questions: what does ritual do? What is the contribution of ritual to society? It was in this work that there occurred the concept of Sanskritisation; earlier the concept of Brahmanisation was replaced. Although in later writings, Srinivas elaborated upon the concept of Sankritisation, it was in this work the concept was given along with an elaboration upon the case of the upper mobility of Coorgs.

1.3 DESCRIPTION OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY

1.3.1 Intellectual Context

When Srinivas came to the scene, Indological studies and the studies of texts to understand India had precedence upon field based study. The detailed accounts of communities lacked theoretical sophistication. Srinivas' work was not only fieldwork based but was also an application of a theoretical approach for analysing data. The first work he did was submitted for a doctorate under the supervision of Prof. G. S. Ghurye, which was a fine combination of Indological and sociological approaches. Then, under the supervision of Prof. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, Srinivas reanalysed his data using the functional approach, and the result was this book.

1.3.2 Fieldwork

First hand fieldwork was carried out with the Coorgs using standard anthropological techniques and methods. Srinivas spent a long time with the Croogs to know their culture from inside. He combined the empirical data with the historical.

1.3.3 Analysis of Data

Social Structure

The existence of the sub-divisions among Coorgs does not prevent them from regarding themselves and from being regarded by others, as a single group. Coorgs consider themselves to be Kshatriyas who constitute the caste of rulers and soldiers in traditional hierarchy and rank next only to Brahmins, who are priests and scholars. Coorg formed a compact unit in relation to other castes. They possessed wealth and power, they like dancing and competitive games involving the exercise of skill and strength, hunting and soldiering. In the Vedic and classical caste system these virtues are attributed to Kshatriyas, the caste of warriors and kings who are next to Brahmin in hierarchy. The resemblances between the Coorgs and the Vedic Kshatriya are striking indeed in the matter of values and it is understandable that Coorg should regard themselves as Kshatriya. The classical Kshatriya, as one of the three 'twice born' castes were entitled to perform certain rituals at which sacred verses (*mantras*) from the Vedas were recited by the priests. But the Coorgs do not perform any of these rituals and Vedic *mantras* are not recited when a Coorg is given a name, or marries or dies.

Coorgs, like other caste Hindus, object very strongly to eating of beef, and the strength of their objection was early recognised by the British who banned all slaughter of cattle for the table in Coorg in 1835. But the Coorg dietary includes pork and liquor and this is occasionally singled out for comment by other castes. The co-relation between status and dietary practices is particularly strong in the interior of south India and the Coorg claim to be considered as Kshatriyas comes up against this fact. Coorgs rightly point out that the Rajputs of north India eat pork and this has not prevented them from being generally regarded as Kshatriyas. However, Rajputs eat only wild pig and not the domesticated one. There are mainly forty castes and tribes in Coorg. But Coorgs come into intimate contact with a few of them.

The nuclear unit of the Coorg society is the *okka* (or the patrilineal joint family) and only the male members of an *okka* have any rights in the ancestral estate. Women born in *okka* leave it on marriage while the women who come into it by marriage have extremely limited rights in the ancestral estate. No woman may be head of an *okka*. A Coorg proverb says 'a woman may not be the head of an *okka* and a bitch may not be given a share of the game it helps to kill in a hunt'.

Only sons can continue the *okka*. But when there are no sons, a daughter or a widow of a dead son is married in either the *okka pariye* or *makka pariye* any which has the effect of granting the children of either form of union membership of their mother's natal *okka*. If it is not possible to perpetuate the *okka* in either of these ways a boy from another *okka* is adopted. There is sexual division of labour, men generally doing the work outside the house while women do the work inside. The tasks done by men are in a vague way regarded as superior to those done by women. The men cultivate or supervise the cultivation of land by low castes labourers. However, agriculture is not and has never been their sole occupation. The army has always attracted Coorgs and nowadays educated Coorgs are to be found in every profession. Coorg women's activities are on the whole confined to the house. They cook food for the twenty or thirty members of the *okka*. They look after children and servants, the storing of food, the raising of pigs and fowls and so on. The younger women have to bring water from the domestic pond or well and carry manure in reed baskets to the fields.

Women are expected to observe a stricter code of conduct than men. Different ideals are held up for men and women. Strength, skill in fighting and hunting and courage are admired in a man. A proverb states 'men should die on the battlefield and women should die in child-bed'. The killer of a tiger or panther and mother of ten children were both accorded the honour of a *mangala* ceremony.

But nowadays under the influence of the western ideas the Coorg women are once again coming to the fore. Education is more widely spread among Coorg women than among the women of other castes, including Brahmins. They are nurses, teachers, and doctors and do not hesitate to live outside Coorg. The economic position of Coorgs and the fact that they marry comparatively late are some of the factors responsible for the greater spread of education among Coorg women.

Membership of the *okka* is extremely important and lack of membership in some *okka* or other tantamounts to social extinction. Elders consequently try hard to see that the children of extramarital alliances get berthed somewhere. It is right and proper that the father of the children should secure them membership of his *okka*, but if for some reason or the other he cannot be persuaded to do so the children are made members of their mother's *okka*. A *nad* is a bigger unit than a village and it is usually more homogenous culturally than a larger area which includes it and few other *nads*. A *nad* might differ from other *nads* in the matter of the date of observance of important festivals such as the harvest festival, and the festival of arms. The articles used in the harvest festival ritual might also vary in different *nads* and this is due to the fact that in each area the plants locally prolific are chosen to express a wish for growth.

THE RITUAL IDIOM OF COORGS

The Ritual Complex of Mangala

Formerly *mangala* was performed to mark the attainment of social adulthood by a boy when his ears were ritually bored by the goldsmith. This *mangala*, the first to be performed for a boy, was called *kemmi kutti mangala* or the *mangala* at which the ears are bored. The wearing of the ear rings was symbolical of the attainment of the social adulthood. One who was physiologically an adult but who had not undergone the ear boring *mangala* did not count as adult for ritual and social purposes. The counterpart of ear boring *mangala* for a girl was the *mangala* performed when she attained puberty. This was called *pole kanda mangala* or *mangala* performed on the sighting of defilement. The menstrual flow was regarded as defiling and formerly a woman observed seclusion for three days during her periods. *Mangala* was also performed when a woman became pregnant for the first time. A woman who had given birth to ten children all of whom were alive was entitled to a form of *mangala* known as *paitandek alapa*.

A man who killed a panther or tiger had the right to *nari mangala* or *tiger mangala* being performed in his honour. Marriage increased a man's status and a bachelor was regarded as socially and ritually inferior to a married man. *Mangala* was performed to a bachelor's corpse before burying or cremating it presumably in order to raise the status of the soul of the dead bachelor. A man who had lost two wives in succession was ritually married to a plaintain tree before marrying his third wife. The marriage to the plaintain tree was called *balek mangala* or plaintain

mangala and the tree was cut down soon after the mangala. Formerly when a man built a new house he performed *mane mangala* or house *mangala*. Mangala was performed for the head of the house on this occasion. Another form of mangala which has entirely disappeared now is *ettu mangala* or ox mangal. The ideal and usual marriage in Coorg is for a virgin to marry a bachelor and this is called *kanni mangal* or virgin *mangala*.

The astrologer selects an auspicious day for the performance of *mangal* and an even more auspicious part of the day for the performance of *murta* which is the most important part of the *mangala*. Four Coorgs beat the small Coorg drum called *dudi* and some traditional songs are sung at various points during *mangala*. These songs give an account of the ritual that is being performed. The singers also sing the road song while the subject of *mangala* is taken from from one part of the house to another and the road song gives a traditionally exaggerated account for everything that is found en route.

Mangala indicated the movement of the subject from one position in the social structure to another, marking a change in his social personality. *Murta* ritual is the most important part of *mangala* and consequently it is performed during the most auspicious part of the auspicious day and the subject undergoes a series of preparatory and purificatory rites before sitting down for the *murta*. The subject of *mangala* (if male) is ritually shaved by the barber after which he is given a bath by three women relatives whose husbands are alive.

The ancestral estate the most valuable part of which is the rice field is regarded as sacred. A Coorg is not allowed to walk in it wearing his sandals just as he is not allowed to enter the inner parts of the ancestral house or a temple with his sandals on. He is not allowed to whistle or hold an umbrella over his head while walking in the ancestral estate: both these acts are not consistent with the ritual respect which the estate has to be accorded. The entire rice field is cut up into a number of small rectangular plots ridged up on all the four sides. Each plot is referred to by a distinct name and one of these plots is regarded as the main plot and it has the same name as the entire rice field. The traditional association between an *okka* and its ancestral estate is symbolised in the custom of burying the umbilical cord of the eldest son of the head of the *okka* in the main plot of the ancestral estate. The eldest is the one who is going to become the head of the *okka* he will have to look after the ancestral rice field. The main plot stands for the entire rice field and it is entirely proper that the umbilical cord of the future head of the *okka* should be buried in the main plot. Thus a Coorg continues to take an interest in the affairs of his *okka* even after his death, which means that he continues to care for the rice field on which the prosperity and happiness of the *okka* and thus indirectly of the total society depends.

The Kaveri festival includes a rite called *bottu* and this is intended to protect the growing crop in the woods on the estate and the domestic well. One of the most important calendar festivals of the Coorgs is the *putri* when the paddy sheaves are ritually cut.

The Concepts of Pole and Madi

The Kodagi term for ritual purity is *madi* and this term is found in all other Dravidian languages except Malyalam and *pole* which means ritual impurity is found in all Dravidian languages except Telugu. *Pole* is used in Kodagi in two

senses: one, in which it means ritual impurity generally and another in which it means certain specific forms of ritual impurity. In the latter cases it is usual to add the necessary prefixes, for instance *kurudu pole* (blind pollution) or *tinga pole* (monthly pollution) refers to the impurity of a woman in her periods and *petta pole* or *purudu pole* refers to birth pollution.

A man is in a condition of ritual impurity in relation to a member of a higher caste while he is in a condition of ritual purity towards a member of a lower caste. The concept of ritual purity and impurity systemise and maintains the structural distance between different castes. Caste hierarchy, on the other hand, makes these concepts relative, except with reference to castes at either extreme. Nail and hair parings are impure and they have to be thrown far away from the house. Poverty will result if they are scattered in the house. Birth and death both result in ritual impurity for the entire household for several days. This ritual impurity will not disappear even if the impure person has a dozen baths a day. But once the prescribed period is over the individual attains his normal ritual status after a bath.

If the crows perch on a roof and caws, the death of someone under that roof is presaged. A man who sees two crows mating will die soon after unless he sends a false message announcing his death to his kinsmen. The harvest festival and the 'festival of arms', are both significant in this connection. The Kaniya astrologer decides what periods of time are auspicious for worshipping weapons and for cutting branches of the tree. He also decides when the village (or *nad*) should have the collective hunt, in which direction the hunting party should go if they want the hunt to be successful and finally the man who should lead the hunt. The weapons are cleaned and kept either in the sacred central hall or in the south-western room. They are marked with sandal wood paste. The weapons are worshipped with flowers and a favourite flower used for worship on this occasion is *toku* which derives its name from the fact that it looks like a gun. Curried meat and cooked rice-flour are offered on plantain leaves to the weapon. All the adult males in every *okka* in the village or *nad* have to co-operate in the collective hunt that is held after the festival of arms. Each *okka* takes its dogs to the hunt. Every dog gets a portion of the meat of the animal killed. Every man taking part in the hunt gets a share and those who hit the game first and second get an extra share each. He who first hit the game is also entitled to the animal's head while the one who was the first to touch the killed animal's tail is given one of the front legs in addition to his ordinary share.

1.3.4 Conclusion

Srinivas' aim in this book is to show the interconnection of religion with society, and how religion contributes to an overall continuity of the social order. Among the Coorgs, Srinivas says that the patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal joint family is at the core of the system and its continuity is the most important aspect.

1.4 HOW DOES THE ETHNOGRAPHY ADVANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING

This ethnography is a salient contribution to the understanding of rituals from a functional perspective. The concept of Sanskritisation has also been given here, which means that a lowly placed caste or tribe tries to emulate the customs and

practices of the upper caste, with an aim to become its member in due course of time. Srinivas illustrated this process with the help of the Coorgs.

To make the concept more understandable we will now focus on the work of Jonathan P. Parry who gave a very lucid picture of rituals attached to death in the holy city of Banaras in his book *Death in Banaras* published by the Cambridge University Press.

1.5 THEORETICAL PART OF WHICH THE ETHNOGRAPHY *Death in Banaras* IS AN EXAMPLE

This book is an example of the interpretive approach in anthropology. Parry is concerned with finding out the meaning of rituals and how the ‘business of death’ is organised in Banaras.

1.6 DESCRIPTION OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY

This ethnography is a study of the death rituals as performed in the city of cosmogony, Banaras.

1.6.1 Intellectual Context

As pointed out earlier this book is a fine example of the interpretive approach. Among the social phenomena, death is one that has not been studied to the extent it should be, and from that perspective, it is a significant contribution.

1.6.2 Fieldwork

The author of this work has spent a long time in the city of Banaras, working on cross-section of populations, beginning with a study of a group of renouncers, known as Aghori. The chapters comprising this work were presented as Lewis Henry Morgan Memorial Lectures.

1.6.3 Analysis of Data

As a place to die, to dispose of the physical remains of the deceased and to perform the rites which ensure that the departed attains a ‘good state’ after death, the north Indian city of Banaras attracts pilgrims and mourners from all over the Hindu world. This book is primarily about the priests (and other kinds of ‘sacred specialists’) who serve them: about the way in which they organise their business, and about their representations of death and understanding of the rituals over which they preside.

Death and the City: Through Divine Eyes

This deals with Banaras’s association with death and its transcendence. This is looked from a religious perspective that Lord Vishnu created the cosmos tie by performing aesthetic austerities at what is now the city’s main cremation ground. Kashi is known as the ‘Great Cremation Ground’ because it is there that the five great elements which compose the world arrive as corpses. The gulf which divides the city from profane space is again underlined by the maxim that it stands apart from the three *loks*, the fourteen *bhuvans* and the nine *khands*. Kashi constitutes a tenth *khand*. But if Kashi is the cosmos it is also symbolically identified with

the human body. The five *ghats* which are visited in the course of the *panch-tirath* pilgrimage are sometimes explicitly equated with the five elements of which the body is composed.

Since cremation is a sacrifice, regenerating the cosmos, and since funeral pyres burn without interruption throughout the day and night at Manikarnika *ghat*, creation is here continually replayed. As a result it is always the *satya yug* in Kashi, the beginning of time when the world was new. That it is because of the city's sacredness that people come there to die and be cremated is an obvious truism. What is less obvious perhaps is that the ideology itself implies that Kashi is sacred precisely because they come for this purpose, for it is death and cremation that keep the city at the navel of the universe yet outside space and time. It is no accident, then, that the scene of cosmogony is also the site of unceasing cremation or that the especially important corpses should be burnt on that very spot where Vishnu sat for 50,000 years alight with the fire of the austerities by which he created the world.

A Profane Perspective

With its reputation for orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism and its ancient tradition of Sanskrit learning, it is the Brahmans who set the dominant religious tone of the city. Despite its relatively small population, Banaras now supports three universities, each of which prides itself on strength in Sanskrit studies and/or Hindu philosophy, as well as a host of *pathshalas* (traditional schools) devoted to transmitting under the tutelage of a Brahman *guru* a knowledge of the sacred scriptures and an ability to recite the vedic *mantras*.

At the level of popular religion there is at least a degree of 'syncretism'. Many lower castes Hindus go as supplicants to the shrine of the Muslim martyr, Bahadur Shahid, for the solution of problems caused by the malevolent ghosts of those who have died a bad death, many lower castes Muslims visit the *samadhi* (tomb) of a Hindu Aghori ascetic for the cure of barrenness. The pilgrims however have continued to arrive in ever increasing numbers though it is likely that a smaller proportion of them than formerly belong to the highest and the most affluent sections of the society, and that the 'index linked' value of the average priestly donation has declined. But this is almost certainly made up for by volume and turn over. More and more pilgrims come by rail and bus on 'package tours' of a number of sacred centres and fewer and fewer of them stay in Banaras for more than a couple of days. Perhaps a majority are there only for a few hours. Many are the first members of their family or village to have visited the city and do not therefore have a hereditary *panda*. Increasing number of corpses are also brought to the city for their last sacrifice and more people of rank aspire to cremate them on the footsteps of Vishnu.

Some of those outsiders who have cremated their corpses in Banaras stay on to perform the mortuary rituals of the first twelve days and some who have cremated elsewhere come to the city to perform these rites. At certain seasons large numbers of villagers from the surrounding countryside, accompanied by their exorcists, visit the sacred tank of *Pishach Mochan* to lay the spirits of the malevolent dead to rest. During *pitri paksh* (the fortnight of the ancestors) tens of thousands of pilgrims stop at Kashi to offer rice balls to their ancestors at *pishach mochan* or on the *ghats* before completing their pilgrimage to Gaya, where they perform rites for their final liberation. In one way or another then death in Banaras is an extremely big business.

Death as a Living: Shares and Chicanery

This chapter describes the division of mortuary labour between various groups of occupational specialists who earn a living in and around the burning *ghats*, a division of labour which is closely constrained by the ideology of caste. One type of caste specialist is, for example, required to handle the physical remains of the deceased another to deal with his marginal and malevolent ghost before its incorporation as an ancestor while a third type of specialist presides over rituals addressed to the essentially benevolent ancestor.

At death the soul becomes a disembodied ghost (or *prêt*), a hungry and malevolent state dangerous to the survivors. On the 12th day after death a rite is performed which enables the deceased to rejoin his ancestors and become an ancestor himself. The Mahabrahman (funeral-priest) presides over the rituals addressed to the ghost during the first eleven days after death, and accepts on behalf of the ghosts the gifts intended to it. A further set of gifts is made in the name of the newly incorporated ancestor on the 12th day and these are accepted by the deceased's hereditary household priest (*kul purohit*) in the case of outsiders who have stayed in Banaras to perform the mortuary rituals. The Brahman specialist stands in for the soul he serves (the impure funeral-priest for the ghost, the relatively pure pilgrimage-priest for the ancestor).

Mahabrahman means the 'great brahman'. The caste is alternatively known as Mahapatra, 'great vessels'. An actor is a *patra*, a vessel for the qualities of the character he plays. In the drama of death the funeral-priest is the vessel for the rancorous greed of the ghost. Worshipped as the deceased he is dressed in dead man's clothes, is made to wear his spectacles or clutch his walking stick and is fed his favourite foods. If the deceased were a woman, a female Mahabrahman is worshipped and presented with woman's clothing, cosmetics and jewellery. At a rite which marks the end of the period of the most intense pollution, the chief mourner, and then the other male mourners, are tonsured by the Barber. But before even the chief mourner, the Mahabrahman should be shaved – as the *prêt* itself- were the one most deeply polluted by the death.

Though unequivocally Brahman, Mahabrahmans are *prêt* Brahmans – ghost brahmans- who are in many contexts treated much like Untouchables and are described as *acchut* (not to be touched). No fastidious person or clean caste will dine with them. In theory, they should live outside the village and to the south of it (that is in the direction of death). Writing of the Banaras rural hinterland in the 1940s, Opler and Singh report they may not even enter the village to beg. With regard to such matters as the consumption of meat and alcohol and the incidence of widow remarriage and breaches of caste endogamy they could not be described as paragons of Brahmanical orthodoxy, but nor could many of the other Brahman communities who earn a living on *ghats*. The Mahabrahman's relative degradation is rather a consequence of the fact that they participate in the death pollution which afflicts their patrons. Since they have many *jajmans* they are (as it were) in a permanent state of impurity. Not only impure, the Mahabrahman is also highly inauspicious. Although physical contact with a sweeper woman would be unambiguously polluting, it is auspicious to see her face as one is embarking on a new enterprise. By contrast it is at any time inauspicious to set eyes on a Mahabrahman and if you chance to see one first thing in the morning then somebody in your house may die. You should not even utter his name in the

morning. Nor may a Mahabrahman come to your door. ‘Nobody’ as the proverb has it, should have the misfortune that a Mahabrahman cross his threshold. He is somebody to be kept at bay, somebody to whom- in the custom of certain localities- to throw stones as he departs at the end of the mortuary rituals least he be tempted to return. Salt should not be put in the food he is served, for salt sets up relationship with the eater and no relationship should be acknowledged with the ghost (*prêt*).

The Mahabrahman is regarded with a mixture of fear and contempt. He is regarded with ‘a gaze of hate’ (*hay drishti*), is known as the ‘bitter one’ (*katu*), is said to have no ‘lustre’ (*kanti*) on his face, and the stereotype contrasts his fabulous wealth with the squalor of his demeanour and life-style. He is treated with less respect and consideration than the meanest untouchable. One Mahabrahman friend resentfully recalls his teachers’ taunts that he should leave school to hang up water-pot dwellings for the ghosts; another tells of a Khatri woman throwing away all the chillies drying on her roof when he went to retrieve the kite which had landed on it.

Mahabrahman weddings and other life-cycle rituals are presided over by a ‘pure’ Brahman. One Mahabrahman sells *pan* (the betel-nut which many Banarasis chew addictively) in a quarter of the city where many people must be aware of his caste; while another runs a tea-shop on the main road which passes through his suburban village.

The rites of the first eleven days after death are conducted on the *ghats* (or on the bank of some sacred tank). The Mahabrahman who officiates at these rites will only come to the house of his *jajman* (patron) if he is summoned on the day of the cremation to preside over the offering of five rice-balls made between the door of the house and the funeral pyre. On the following day he directs the hanging of the water-pot which serves as the home for the *prêt* in the branches of sacred *pepal* (*Ficus religiosa*) tree; and he subsequently accompanies the *jajman* there on daily expeditions to offer ware and a lighted lamp. He also conducts the offering of one rice-ball each day, each of which creates a different part of a new body for the deceased. This body is completed on the tenth day. On The eleventh day it is fed and the *prêt* is now ready to become an ancestor. The Mahabrahman’s duties are at an end. He is worshipped, fed, given gifts and departs having mashed the water-pot dwelling of the *pret*.

If cremation is carried out in *panchak* – (a block of five consecutive lunar mansions (*nakshatras*) during which it is particularly inauspicious to burn a body) – the Mahabrahman presides over the rite of ‘pacifying the *panchak*’ (*panchak shanty*). In cases of ‘untimely death’ he superintends on the eleventh day the additional rite of *Narayani bali* which has the object of preventing the embittered soul from remaining in *prêt* form (*yoni*); and he also performs *putla vidhan*– at which an elaborate effigy of deceased is constructed and then cremated for those whose corpses were either lost or immersed in the Ganges. ‘Bad deaths’ generally represents good income for the funeral priest.

The inventory constitutes the maximum elaboration of the Mahabrahman’s duties. In most cases there is no question of *panchak shanty*, *Narayani bali* and *putla vidhan*. Of the standard repertoire, the Mahabrahman would only expect to perform the full complement for an important *jajman* from whom he expects a

munificent offering. For the majority his services are considerably attenuated, and often amount to no more than attending the rituals of the tenth and eleventh days, scrambling them through with much surreptitious editing when the financial pickings look slim, and accepting the gifts with more or less bad grace.

The Mahabrahman's presence is, however, essential. He confers salvation, and allows the soul to 'swim across' to the other world. For the successful conclusion of the rites he must be satisfied with the gifts offered. 'His belly must be full', though on such occasions he is seemingly insatiable. Without his blessing the deceased will remain in the limbo of *pret*-hood to plague his family with misfortune and further bereavement; with it their descent line can prosper and increase. His curse is greatly feared, a fact which the Mahabrahman often exploits with veiled threats designed to encourage a tight-fisted *jajman* to loosen his purse-strings. A separate caste—the *Mahabappas*—is funeral priests to the funeral-priests. *Mahabappa* settlements are small and scattered, and each serves the *Mahabrahman* communities of a considerable area. No matter on which *ghat* they are cremated (or immersed), the *Mahabrahman* who has *pari* (his 'turn' in the rota) on the day on which the corpse is brought to the *ghat* has the exclusive right to accept all gifts which will subsequently be made in the name of the ghost, the most valuable of which are generally offered at the rituals of the tenth or eleventh day.

In practice, the city *Mahabrahmans* are only likely to hear about, those who cremate in Banaras, or whose ashes are brought for immersion. The residue represents the least promising donors. In the past, four settlements of village funeral-priests were appointed by the city Mahabrahmans to watch over their rights, and inform them of any death in the vicinity. Today it is these local representatives who appropriate a large proportion of the offerings made by village *jajman* of the poorer sort. *Jajman* from outside the radius of *pachchh* do not fall within the scope of the Banaras funeral-priests unless they stay in the city to perform the tenth and eleventh day rituals, in which event they are claimed by the *pari*-holder. But even when this is not the case, he may still derive some income from them by presiding over the offerings made at the *ghat* on the day of cremation. In total, the *pari* owner may acquire ten or twelve *jajman* who will offer him *sajja dan* ten or eleven days later; and earn up to Rs. 150 from offerings made at the pyre.

The mechanics of the system are such that occasionally a *pari*-holder miscalculates, or more likely forgets to show up on the *ghat* on the day of his *pari* (though he will usually have realised his error by the time of crucial ten or eleventh day rituals). In such an eventuality, Bihari Maharaj – the richest and most powerful *pari*-holder whose servants remain on *Manikarnika ghat* 24 hours a day – takes charge of all *jajman*; and when the rightful owner eventually turns up reimburses him with a proportion of the takings. In the course of the year there are one or two *paris* which remain regularly unclaimed, and for all intents and purposes Bihari has made these his own. Within the *Mahabrahman* community *pari* rights are very unevenly distributed. Bihari Maharaj has rights to some seventy-five days a year, while his half-brother and another man between them account for a further fifty-five days. In other words, a third of the year is owned by just three individuals.

In both *pachchh* and *pari* the right-holder needs the help of several semi-permanent *karinda*-servants in order to attend to all his *jajman*, and to muster a suitably imposing backing at the time of negotiating the offerings. About twenty Mahabrahmans work more or less regularly as *karindas*, most of them for several different employers. On the day of *pari* one of them will remain throughout the twenty fours at *Harishchandra ghat*, and two or three at *Manikanika*, where they collect information about prospective *jajman* and preside over offerings at the pyre. The income from *pachchh* and *pari* is quite unpredictable. The profession, people say, is dependent of the sky (*akash-vritti*). Several turns running may yield only the most impoverished *jajman*. But there is always the chance that once in a while the *pari*-holder may enjoy the windfall of a Maharaja, or a Marwari business.

Other variants of *pari*

The untouchable Dom funeral-attendants labour at the pyres under a similarly infamous reputation for rapacity. The cremation ground Doms – who distinguish themselves as Gotakhor (driver) Doms – insists that they are an entirely separate sub-caste from the Sweeper Doms of Banaras and other north Indian cities, and from the Basket-maker Doms of the rural areas. They numbered around 670, and mainly reside in two neighbourhoods in the vicinity of the two burning *ghats*.

The family barber has already cropped up in association with the funeral-priests. He acts as a general factotum throughout the period of mourning; and would normally accompany the funeral procession to the cremation ground where he tonsures the chief mourner, sometimes all sons of the deceased, and sometimes the corpse itself. An experienced Barber will have come to the *ghat* before, may find himself directing many of the proceedings, and is usually expected to negotiate with the wood-seller (who pays him commission of 1 *anna* in the rupee) and with the shops which sell shrouds and other mortuary goods. Around 700 small crafts are licensed to work the river front. Most are owned and manned by *Mallahs*, a caste of fishermen and boatmen. Each boat may take passengers only from its own *ghat*, though the right to fish anywhere on the river is unrestricted. An important source of subsidiary earnings on several *ghats* is the right to dredge in the river mud for coins thrown into the Ganges by the pious pilgrims as *gupt dan* – a ‘secret’ and particularly meritorious gift.

The way in which passengers are allocated between the various right-holders of a single *ghat* is variable. Dashashvamedh is the most popular bathing *ghat* in the city. The boatmen all sit together on a wooden platform at the bottom of the long flight of stone steps that leads down to the river. As any potential passenger reaches the top of the steps one of the boatmen will stake a claim by calling out ‘the one with the spectacles’, the ‘bell-bottom pant *wallah*’, ‘the red monkey Englishman’. Whoever claimed the passenger takes him.

At Manikarnika ghat there are six established shops which specialise in the sale of what are collectively called ‘the goods of the skull-bearing’ (*kapal kriya saman*). These consist of shrouds, various offerings to the pyre, and the big water-pot (*gagra*) which the chief mourner throws over his left shoulder at the end of cremation to ‘cool’ the pyre. These shops also sell stone slabs for weighting down corpses immersed in river. Forty or fifty years ago a single individual had a monopoly on this business- which he reportedly enforced by smashing pots brought by the mourners from elsewhere.

By contrast with the *kapal kriya* trade, the wood businessman at Manikarnika is today a relatively 'free' market. Up until about 1910, however, a single shop owned and managed by a powerful Rajput family- had a complete monopoly over all wood sold on the *ghat*. This shop still exists and remains the exclusive supplier of wood to the Doms when they negotiate an 'all-in' price which includes the cost of materials. The reason is that the arcaded structure where the Doms sit to negotiate their 'tax', where they eat and store bamboo from the biers, is under this Rajput family's control, and the Doms use it only on their sufferance. The same shop is also the sole supplier of the five mounds of wood which the Municipal Council allows for the cremation of indigent corpses.

***Pandagiri* – the profession of pilgrimage-priest**

As we have seen, many mourners bring the ashes of a deceased kinspersons to Banaras to immerse in the Ganges, while the vast majority of pilgrims perform offerings to their ancestors during the course of their visit. It is in principle the pilgrimage-priest – the *panda* or *tirath-purohit* – who arranges, and may even preside, over these rituals. In the case of those outsiders who remain in, or come to the city to perform the post-cremation mortuary rites, it is he who stands in for, embodies and receives gifts in the name of the newly incorporated ancestor at the rituals of the twelfth day.

The *panda* puts the pilgrims up in his own house or in one of the numerous pilgrims' hostels, arranges their visits to the shops, temples and other sacred sites and for the rituals they perform, and accepts the gifts associated with them. He is, he says, 'a contractor of religion' (*dharma ka thekedar*)- a phrase which nicely captures his role as a general purpose 'fixer' for both this-and other-worldly comforts of his clients.

The Last Sacrifice: The Expression of Grief

At death it is men who give birth. In nearly all communities, women are regarded as too faint hearted to accompany the corpse to the burning *ghat* and it is exclusively men who assist cremation. Even in the absence of the son a man serves as *dagiya* (the one who gives fire) and performs the subsequent rites. What then is the role of women? The short answer is, to grieve.

The corpse are meticulously washed by women, wrap it in a white shroud and lay out on the bed with thirty seven other brightly coloured shrouds draped over it. When it is moved to one side for its bath, and when it is lifted onto the bed, the women burst out into a chorus of wails and have to be cajoled by men to relinquish it. More garlands and balloons are added to the bier, a golden sari is tied to a long bamboo pole, a red sari to another. These are to serve as standards which would lead to the funeral procession. *Abir* is rubbed on the face of the corpse. It is time to move but the women who surround the bed become reluctant to make away for the pall bearers. As they shoulder it the women cry out in anguish, the two bands play different tunes, the young boys also dance frenziedly, and most of the men raised a triumphant cry of *Har, Har, Mahadev* (a greeting appropriate to Lord Shiva). The women are allowed to accompany the procession only a short way.

The Good and Bad Death

A good death occurs at the right time and at the right place-ideally in Banaras on the banks of Ganges with the lower limbs in the water. Failing Banaras or some other place of pilgrimage one should die at home on purified ground and in open air, and not on a bed or under a roof. Even in Banaras there are good and the bad times to go. Death in *uttarayan*-the six months of the year that begin with the winter solstice (*maker sanskranti*)-is propitious for this is the day time of the gods. During *dakshinayan* (the other six months) they spend much of their time asleep and do not therefore take much notice of human affairs. But the ancestors are now wide awake so *dakshinayan* is auspicious for the performance of the *shraddh* rituals addressed to them and this is during this period that *pitr paksh*- the fortnight of the ancestors- is celebrated.

A bad death is one, then, in which the deceased has revealed no intention of sacrificing his body (e.g. the victim of violence or accident), or of renouncing its desires (e.g. suicide). Alternatively it is that of a person whose body does not constitute a fit sacrificial object.

Ghosts into Ancestors

In Banaras the post cremation mortuary rites describe the way to convert the marginal prēt-ghost into an ancestral-*pitr*, and to facilitate the arduous journey of the deceased to the adobe of the ancestors (*pitr lok*) where he arrives on the anniversary of his death. Rites addressed to the ghost are presided over by the Mahabrahman Funeral-priest, those addressed to the ancestors by the deceased's hereditary household – or pilgrimage – priest. In Banaras both sets of rituals are collectively known as *shraddh*. Etymologically *shraddh* is closely related to *shraddha* or faith, *shraddh* being popularly defined as that which is offered to the ancestors with faith. The offerings are of two kinds. The first is *pind dan* the gift of *pinds*- balls of rice, barley flour or *khoa* (a thick paste made by boiling milk). The second kind of offering is mediated by the Brahmins who are fed and offered gifts.

Panna Ojha

Those who die a good death are cremated. *Panna Ojha* is a man of commanding presence in his mid sixties. Despite his ochre renouncer's robe, *Panna* is a householder. By caste a potter, he lives in a village some five or six miles from the centre of the city. Most of his patients see him on the *verandah* of his house, on one side of which is a raised platform which contains a shrine of the goddesses *Durga* and *Sitala*, and a square sacrificial fire pit into the ash of which several ascetics' tongs and tridents are stuck. During his consultations *Panna* sits imposingly on the platform with his patients- generally in family groups- at his feet below him. His sessions begin with an elaborate act of worship for his tutelary deities and a lengthy reading from various sacred texts.

1.6.4 Conclusion

The book provides an account of the association of the city of Banaras with death rituals. It also gives a brief sketch of what is known about its history as a pilgrimage centre, and as a place to die and to dispose of the physical remains of the death.

1.7 HOW DOES THE ETHNOGRAPHY ADVANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING

Generally, in the study of death, the focus has been on rituals. By contrast, Parry's work is a thick description of what is called the 'business of death'. In addition to a symbolic analysis of rituals- their meaning and purpose- the work provides a detailed understanding of the 'ritual technicians' so to say, who are associated with the performance of death rituals. From the study of the microcosm- the Manikarnika ghat- Parry moves on to the understanding of Banaras as the 'city of cosmogony'.

1.8 SUMMARY

The study of religions can be approached in many ways and can present a number of different kinds of problems. For social anthropologists or for some of them one major problem is that of the social function of religion – how does religion contribute to the existence of society as an ordered and continuing system of relationships amongst human beings? In the first monograph on the Coorgs of South India, the author has presented that religion is a binding force amongst individuals. The scientific problem is how religion does this, how, in other words, it functions.

Parry's work focuses on the priests and other sacred specialists who serve the enormous numbers of mourners and pilgrims who are drawn to Banaras from throughout the Hindu world. A clear and coherent descriptive analysis of the rituals performed by these specialists and their ideas concerning death and of ways in which they organise their business, the book is at once a clear analysis of the rituals concerning death.

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Suggested Reading

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Sample Questions

- 1) Write an essay on the social structure of the Coorgs of South India?
- 2) Write in short on the ritual complex of Mangala of Coorgs.
- 3) Write briefly on the deaths as a living with special reference to shares and chicanery in Banaras.
- 4) What is *Pandagiri* in Banaras? Comment.

