

SHRAADDHA

Aspiration, Conviction and Convention

contact : dr.m.narayana.bhat@gmail.com

dr. bhat is a udupi based thinker, researcher and teacher

Motivation: A perennial overflow of wholesome parental love and affection, nourishment, purposeful education, initiation into our treasured value systems and effective counselling is what transformed us into a matured, civilized citizen. Recounting, with reverence and a deep sense of gratitude, the memory of our parents (and all those others) who played such a pivotal role in our upbringing is a part of our illustrious ethos. It is a manifestation of the richness of our mind and spirit.

When they are with us, we can communicate these qualities of head and heart, derive supreme pleasure by touching their feet, waiting on them, fulfilling their desires and perhaps through several other ways. Alas, we cannot do any of these when they are not amongst us. But, we can certainly remember their death anniversaries, savour reminiscences of their admirable life, express our reverence and gratitude and experience a sense of fulfilment and delight. Here is a beautiful description of this emotive in a shloka recited in the course of a mahalaya shraaddha.

आ ब्रह्मणो ये पितृवंशजाताः । मातुस्तथा वंशभवा मदीयाः ॥
वर्गद्वयेऽस्मिन् मम दासभूताः । बृत्यास्तथा आश्रित सेवकाश्च ॥
मित्राणि सख्यः पशवश्च वृक्षाः । दृष्टाश्च स्पर्शाश्च कृतोपकारः ॥
जन्मान्तरे ये मम संगताश्च । तेभ्यः स्वधा पिण्डमहं ददामि ॥

Starting with Lord Brahma we are indebted to many : those who served as helpers, employees, labourers in our families (both on maternal and paternal side) ; supported us as our friends, associates ; lent a hand as our dependents and wards ; cows and other animals who provided nourishing, delicious milk ; bulls and horses that provided transportation ; domesticated cats, dogs etc. who kept company with us ; birds who gave us immense pleasure by their colourful appearance and chirps; plants and trees that produced shade, fruits, flowers and medicines ; those tall personalities whose mere presence and looks radiated liveliness, enthusiasm excitement and thrill ; those who encouraged us by pleasing words, offering helpful criticism / challenges and words of praise ; those others (whom we have never seen or touched and/or unlikely to see or touch in future) from whose largesse we have benefitted ; those in our family who died before taking birth ; unknown, unseen members of the family ; those jeevas in the three worlds who have no access to food or water and all those others still struggling to get liberation. We highly regard

immense pleasure derived in our current and /or many of our previous births. May offerings, affectionately and gratefully made this day, multiply several fold. This profusely exemplifies our sophistication, inner beauty, generosity and richness in spirits. This is a way of our life. This is a gateway of perpetual refinement.

Quintessence: Shraaddha is a wonderful mechanism beautifully crafted and gifted to us by men endowed with wisdom and divine experience. It enables us to orchestrate our performance. The ritual takes its' name from the word 'shraddha' which means conscientiousness and diligence. It calls for unflinching faith and resolve to perform a dutiful act, wholeheartedly, earnestly and with total devotion. This pious thought is 'shraddha'. An act of performing it truthfully is 'shraaddha'.

श्रद्धयाग्निः समिध्यते श्रद्धया हूयते हविः । श्रद्धां भगस्य मूर्धनि वचसा वेद यामसि ॥
प्रियं श्रद्धे ददतः प्रियं श्रद्धे दिदासतः । प्रियं भोजेषु यज्वस्विदं म उदितं कृधि ॥
यथा देवा असुरेषु श्रद्धामुग्गेषु चक्रिरे । प्रियं भोजेषु यज्वस्वस्माकमुदितं कृधि ॥
श्रद्धां देवा यजमाना वायुगोपा उपासते । श्रद्धां हृदययाकृत्या श्रद्धया विन्दते वसु ॥
श्रद्धां प्रातर्हवामहे श्रद्धां मध्यंदिनं परि । श्रद्धां सूर्यस्य निम्नुचि श्रद्धे श्रद्धापयेह नः ॥
(ऋग्वेद ८।८।९)

It is the dedication and commitment that makes fire blaze. It is with allegiance that the offerings are made into the fire in a yajna kaarya. It is only when a job is done dutifully with commitment believing it to be true (desirable, virtuous) that it will be well accomplished. Earning livelihood is possible when a job is accomplished faithfully and honestly. This is true in the performance of rituals as well. The aspirations embedded in these manthraas are: (a) may Shraddha Devi be compassionate to the performer of the yajna, the provider of the material required for the yajna and even those among their relatives who merely rejoice material riches and only wish to perform an yajna (b) bestow, the same degree of commitment and steadfastness as shown by the gods in defeating the demons, to me, those others who are engaged performance of yajna and even in those who do not conform. (c) Vaayu and all other gods and all human being (those performing diligently and others contemplating to do so) keenly strive to reach out Shraddhaa Devi at all times with complete allegiance and dedication. Shraddhaa makes it possible for them to attain their goals and acquire riches. (d) We invoke Shraddha Devi thrice a day (thrikaala) beseeching to inculcate dedication, commitment and resoluteness in us. (It is widely believed that a Shraddha and Medha form a very powerful combine. Imbibing ideologies enshrined in these two sookthas is a sure recipe for success)

Characteristics: Shraaddha is a very simple, inexpensive form of worship. A vedic ritual. A yajna as described by the Lord in Bhagadgeetha - 4-24.

ब्रह्मार्पणं ब्रह्म हविर्ब्रह्माग्नौ ब्रह्मणा हुतं । ब्रह्मैव तेन गन्तव्यं ब्रह्मकर्म समाधिना ॥

He represents yajna and envelops the entire universe – a product of yajna. It is He who creates the food. It is for His gratification that the food is being served. It is He who partakes the food. The food, the utensils, appliances, gadgets and the persons serving food are all His imageries. This is the emotive that drives the performer of yajna.

A copper pot, a lamp, a few flowers, sandal paste, bhasma and a few grains of rice, sesamum, beetle leaf and nut, bringaraja leaves, darbha i.e. kusha grass (poa cynosuroides) and water is all that is required. As a mark of renouncement, a meal and dakshina would only buttress the value of this yajna. Evidently this is a family affair and not a public function. Every member is devotedly committed to the process and hence will have little time to entertain other guests. Certainly there is no room for pomp or ostentation.

Rationale: Shraaddha touches our psyche i.e. emotions, feelings, beliefs, consciousness and awareness - as distinct from our physical existence reflected in traits like hunger, fear, sleep and reproduction common to all living beings. Equilibrium between these two facets is what enables us to keep pace with the changing times and render our lives complete and meaningful. This calls for a more radical shift in our thought process and approach to these rituals and sacraments :

(a) There are a number of stories, speculations, presumptions and conjectures – that manes enter the body of the braahmanaas or take the form of crows and partake the food ; that mother Seetha saw the reflection of king Dasharatha while serving food to braahmanaas ; that a group of students who stole their guru's cow and ate the meat were reborn several times as animals and birds could attain liberation thanks to shraaddha karmas they performed. Is there any truth in these? Should one believe these? Can these be proved? It would only be a misadventure to go into these and shake the foundations of deep rooted beliefs. A superior approach would be to envision that these were written out merely to arouse some interest in the subject. (b) Reminiscing the magnificent contributions which our parents made in our make-up, cherishing the supreme love and affection showered on us by them and revering these human gods whom we have seen earlier and whose blissful presence we have experienced would be more meaningful and simpler than spotting divinity in a photo, statue, idol, kalasha or a diagram i.e. mandala. (c) Dharma gurus, astrologers may often be tempted to warn us that failure to perform these rites may attract the wrath of the manes. The reality, however, is that we cannot offer anything material to those who are no more with us. We can only express our reverence and gratitude. The real threat to our civilisation arises only when we fail to imbibe these laudable attributes in our life and express them majestically. (d) Shraaddha 'sankalpa' often explicates that the ritual is performed for the welfare, progression and liberation of the departed, for begetting worthy children and for the wellbeing of the entire family. Perhaps, far more secular approach is to consider these as our well intended desires, wishes and prayers than as an offshoot

of the ritual. These are noble thoughts that build optimism and confidence in the future, enable us to visit lovely dreams, infuse passion and keep motivating us. Unmistakably, we are undertaking this yajna at our volition, for our own satisfaction and with a view to buttressing prized qualities of head & heart that we treasure. It is, perhaps, with this intent that the venerable sages carefully crafted the ritual and thoughtfully introducing several touching situations, manthras, epics, rhymes and couplets through the process. When we understand the import of each of these and perform in a chorus, we drift into an exotic world, enjoy the ecstasy and reach the zenith.

Our customs: These are practices diligently guarded over several centuries that help us to preserve the sanctity and unsullied format as also the effectiveness of the ritual. These are not unpalatable, rigid or harsh imposts. They support the intent and performance of a 'vratha' i.e. one voluntary undertaken to uphold and observe our religious duties. (a) The ritual is performed on the 'thithi' i.e. the anniversary day as per Indian calendar – an internal control system to avoid postponement on frivolous grounds. If there is an 'ashoucha' arising from birth/death in the family, it is performed at the end of such period (b) Of the two sets of brahmanaas venerated, 'vishwedeva' face east and akshatha, sandal paste, square diagram, clock-wise circulation, gold, even numbers are used for them. In the case those representing 'pitr' i.e. manes, they face north and odd numbers, bhasma, anticlockwise moves, round diagrams, silver and sesamum are used. These rules are framed to enable us to remember the distinction in the roles assigned to each of them through the ritual (c) To remain agile and alert, light and saathvik food is suggested from the previous day. For this reason, hospitality of others is not accepted on these days. A sumptuous meal is taken after the shraaddha and hence on that evening an elaborate meal is out of place. These norms are applicable to the invited brahmanaas as well. They adequately underscore the need to maintain both physical health and proper psyche (d) To remain focussed, contact with outside is avoided – lest passionate moments that disturb the mental peace may arise (e) Every member of the family gets engrossed in enhancing the value and appeal of the ritual - in collecting, with utmost care, fresh and wholesome articles required for the shraaddha ; catering to the needs of the braahmanas ; preparation of the meal with due regard to the health of everyone and the taste and fondness of the departed elders and braahmanas. At the end of the day, as the braahmanas depart after completing the ritual to the perfection, everyone enjoys a gratification out of a well accomplished task. What a magnificent feeling it is – very much like a devout painter, sculptor, carpenter, tailor or poet rejoicing a marvel, a product of his labour of love (f) The proceedings involve continuous dialogue between the performer and the braahmanas apparently unusual and unnatural. In fact, it is akin to a well orchestrated musical performance – the singer and accompanying artists continually communicate with the other i.e. encourage, motivate, approve, appreciate with a smile, throw challenges and correct. Through cohesion, they churn out a captivating, brilliant and memorable event. Likewise, in our context, the purpose of such

interaction is to sustain the interest of everyone till the very end and ensure that it is completed meticulously. The esteem for braamanas finds an expression in our seeking their approval at every stage.

Take-away: A certain spin-off from the ritual is a small step on our path of progression: (a) an excellent drill in 'aathithya' i.e. a demonstration, an experience of how to effectively play host in our day to day life (b) a glimpse of dedication and hard work that our own evolution demands (c) nurtures a desire up the scale, see fulfilment and contentment in life (d) one tends to see godhood in everything in our surrounding i.e. every human being (our own reflection) in the earth, firmament, water, light, air, trees and plants, animals, birds and many others, increasingly falls in love with the nature and consciously strive to protect all gifts of nature (e) to appreciate medicinal values of many materials use – water, thulasee and bringaraja leaves, sesame, darbha grass, ghee etc. (f) there is a lot of input in the form of prayers, dreams and desires that impacts our cerebral health and (g) there is a plethora of poetry, brilliant imagery, amazing metaphors, fantastic dreams for one with an aesthetic taste.