

Evolving Traditions: Daughters and Their Redefined Role in Hindu Antyesthi Rituals

Author- Rishit Bhuraria*

Affiliation -

The Sanskaar Valley School,
Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh,
India.

Contact No.-

+918815019229

Email Address-

rishitbhuraria08@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Hindu funeral rites (Antyeshti Sanskaar) have traditionally assigned sons the primary role in performing post-death rituals, while daughters were largely excluded. This study explores how these gendered expectations are being challenged in contemporary society, highlighting both inclusion and exclusion. Coming from a male perspective, this research also reflects on how evolving social values are reshaping understandings of duty, devotion, and ritual authority. Using qualitative interviews with women who have participated in, been denied, or redefined these rituals, the study examines how personal commitment, familial negotiation, and societal change interact.

Findings reveal that while some daughters successfully assert their role, others face resistance rooted in longstanding cultural norms. A personal observation further illustrates these tensions: a devoted daughter who cared for her parents throughout their lives was barred from performing their funeral rites, with elders remarking, "Betiyon aur Behnon ki parchai bhi nahi padti hai." Despite being the primary caregiver, she was excluded from essential rituals, which a male relative instead performed.

By analyzing such experiences, this study demonstrates how sacred traditions both constrain and adapt to evolving notions of gender equality and social responsibility.

Key Words – Antyeshti Sanskaar, Pind Daan, Daughters' participation, Ritual inclusion and exclusion, Emotional and familial relations, and Gender equality

Introduction

Funeral rituals in Hinduism, collectively known as *Antyeṣṭi Saṁskāra*, form one of the most significant rites of passage among the sixteen *saṁskāras*. These rituals—ranging from lighting the pyre to performing *pind daan*, collecting ashes, and immersing them in sacred waters—are believed to ensure the peaceful transition of the soul and restore ritual purity within the family. Traditionally, these responsibilities are entrusted to the eldest surviving son or another close male relative, reflecting long-standing patriarchal norms that structure kinship roles and ritual authority.

In recent years, however, these norms have begun to shift. Daughters in many Hindu families—especially where male relatives are absent, unwilling, or emotionally distant—have stepped forward to perform the final rites of their parents. Their participation challenges deep-rooted taboos and raises important questions about gender, duty, and religious legitimacy. At the same time, many daughters continue to face exclusion from these sacred practices due to social resistance, community expectations, or personal hesitation, revealing a complex negotiation between tradition and modernity.

This study examines the evolving role of daughters in performing Hindu funeral rites by analyzing their lived experiences of **inclusion, exclusion, and negotiation within the family and community**. Guided by the hypothesis that daughters' participation is believed to occur only in rare or high-profile cases, this research explores whether such assumptions hold true for ordinary families. It seeks to understand how familial support, emotional bonds, caregiving roles, and reinterpretations of tradition influence who is allowed to perform *Antyeṣṭi* rituals, offering a sociological insight into how sacred practices adapt in the context of contemporary gender norms.

Noteworthy Contributions

The existing literature on Hindu funeral rites consistently emphasizes how ritual authority has historically been shaped by patrilineal norms, assigning sons the primary responsibility for performing last rites. Earlier scholars such as Dumont and Karve highlight how these traditions stem from deeply rooted social structures rather than explicit religious injunctions. Certain instances reveal the evolving role of daughters in these rites.

1. *Cancelpatriarchy: Manmohan Singh's daughter lights funeral pyre (2024), The Times of India:*

A notable example relevant to this study is the role of former Prime Minister of India Manmohan Singh's daughters in his funeral rites. Singh was known to be emotionally close to his daughters, who cared for him during his final days. In December 2024, during his

state funeral at Nigambodh Ghat in Delhi, his eldest daughter, Upinder Singh, performed the act of lighting his funeral pyre. This event challenged long-standing cultural norms in many Hindu families, where traditionally only sons or male relatives perform such last rites.

The public and media response to this event was significant, with many framings it as a progressive step toward gender equality in Indian society. The Times of India had noted this as a “widely seen as a break from patriarchal traditions”, highlighting the increasing acceptance of daughters taking part in sacred familial duties. However, this acceptance occurred in a high-profile context, influenced by factors such as the family's social and political status and broader discussions about gender in rituals.

This case illustrates one of the central ideas of this study: while daughters performing Hindu funeral rites are increasingly visible in special or high-profile cases, many ordinary families still follow traditional norms and resist this practice. It also raises important questions about how public visibility and social status can encourage changes in ritual practices, and whether similar shifts are happening in everyday families across India.

Garima Chaudhary (2019):

In her essay “*On Death, Cremation and Daughters – Some Thoughts in the Indian Context*” (2019), Garima Chaudhry reflects on death, duty, and gender in Hindu traditions. Drawing from the *Bhagavad Gita* (Hinduism's most important philosophical and spiritual texts), she emphasizes that the body is “nothing but a garment for the atma (soul),” and that cremation symbolizes the soul's release and reunion with the five elements. She argues that performing funeral rites should be understood as an expression of love, responsibility, and spiritual continuity, rather than a matter of gender or hierarchy.

In the section titled “*Who should light the funeral pyre?*”, Chaudhry highlights that the ritual is traditionally assigned to the eldest son, or, in his absence, to another male relative. Only in rare cases may a daughter or wife perform the rite — a practice that remains socially questioned. She critiques this norm as a product of cultural preference and patriarchal conditioning, rather than religious mandate. By insisting that sons alone perform funeral rites, broader gender biases are reinforced, including the devaluation of daughters and persistent son preference.

Chaudhry ultimately asks a thought-provoking question: if a daughter, moved by affection and devotion, lights her parents' pyre, can that act of love ever diminish the purity of the ritual? Through this lens, she reimagines the role of daughters in the sacred cycle of life and death, offering a framework to

understand both inclusion and exclusion in contemporary practice.

3. ***Daughters Performing Funeral Rites in Everyday Families (India Today, 2022):***

In many middle-class and rural households, daughters performing funeral rites remains uncommon, yet there are notable instances that challenge traditional norms. One such case, reported in Puri, Odisha, in 2022, involved four married daughters who performed their mother's last rites after the sons failed to act due to absence or neglect. The daughters carried their mother's body over several kilometers to the cremation ground and completed the rituals, motivated by duty, love, and necessity rather than ritual prescription. This case highlights that while Hindu scriptures do not explicitly forbid daughters from performing last rites, social and cultural expectations strongly influence behavior. The community's response was mixed: some praised the daughters' devotion and responsibility, while others expressed discomfort, reflecting persistent social taboos. Such instances demonstrate that in everyday families, the restriction on daughters is often normative rather than scriptural.

Furthermore, these examples indicate a gradual evolution of practices, as daughters increasingly step into roles traditionally reserved for sons, particularly when sons are absent, unwilling, or incapable. Unlike high-profile or elite examples, this case shows that evolving practices are emerging in ordinary households, though some community members, due to rigid adherence to tradition, may still resist full acceptance of such changes.

4. ***"4 girls cremate their father, family ostracised in Rajasthan's Bundi (Times of India, 2018):"***

In July 2018, a significant case of community backlash occurred in Bundi district, Rajasthan, when four sisters carried their father's *arthi* and performed his cremation rites. Their father, Durgashankar Tailor, had no son, and his daughters chose to fulfil his last wish. Their act was met with strong resistance from the local *khap panchayat* (community council) of the Rager community.

The panchayat reportedly threatened the women and their family, demanding they not perform the rituals. After they went ahead with the rites, they were ostracised: they were denied access to the community bathing complex after the cremation, locked out, and not provided food, which is customarily given by neighbours during initial funeral rites.

Meena, the eldest of the sisters, recounted that community leaders asked her and her sisters — along with their grieving mother — to prostrate before them and seek forgiveness. The family claims that even after apologizing, the community remained unforgiving and insisted on punishing them for breaking with tradition.

This case powerfully illustrates how ritual inclusion for daughters is contested, especially in traditional, rural settings. It highlights the social cost of defying gendered norms: even when daughters act out of duty and love, they may face formal or informal sanctions from their community. Unlike high-profile examples, this is a case from an ordinary family — showing that while change is possible, resistance remains deeply entrenched.

"Weddings to funerals, meet 72-yo Pune priestess smashing stereotypes (The Better India, 2019):"

In recent years, a quiet but powerful transformation has been taking place in Hindu ritual practice, especially in urban centers like Pune and Varanasi, where women are increasingly entering priesthood and even conducting last rites. The Better India says, traditionally, the role of the *pandit* or officiant in Hindu funerals has been reserved for men, and cremation grounds have been regarded as male domains. However, that norm is being challenged by a growing number of women priests, who are redefining ritual authority and claiming space in areas once considered off-limits.

In Pune, for instance, organizations such as the Jnana Prabodhini have been training female priests for many years. These women perform a range of ceremonies — from pujas and marriage rituals to funeral rites. According to a report by *Women's eNews*, the Pune-based school Shankar Seva Samiti has enabled many women to become priests who are now participating in rites of passage and death rituals.

The *Hindustan Times* also describes how women priests are "setting new norms," not only in weddings and household rituals but more controversially, in death rites as well.

Meanwhile, in Varanasi, devotees report a growing faith in female priests. As one *Times of India* article highlights, some women from local Brahmin boatmen communities, trained in Vedic traditions, now perform temple rituals.

These developments are significant because they challenge entrenched gender hierarchies in religious practice. Women priests not only bring their spiritual training to these roles but also offer a different style: they often explain ritual meanings in simpler, more accessible language, nurturing a more inclusive and understanding space for devotees. Their emergence shows how sacred tradition can be reinterpreted — not just to make room for gender equality, but to transform how rituals are understood, performed, and emotionally experienced.

India TV, Sister Ties Rakhi on Funeral Pyre of Army Lieutenant In Udaipur" (2011):

In Udaipur, Rajasthan, a poignant example of a daughter's participation in last rites occurred in 2011,

when **Devyani Verdia** performed the cremation rites for her brother, Lieutenant Archit Verdia, who tragically lost his life while serving for his nation. His sudden death left the family in deep grief, and the emotional weight of the moment was compounded by the traditional expectation that such rituals be performed by male relatives. However, with her mother's insistence and blessing, Devyani stepped forward to carry out the final rites, demonstrating both familial devotion and courage in the face of societal norms.

At the cremation, she tied a rakhi to her brother's bier — a symbolic act reflecting love and protection— and then lit the funeral pyre herself, an act traditionally reserved for male family members. Her performance of the ritual was motivated not by formal religious prescription, but by emotional connection, sense of duty, and a desire to honor her brother's life. The local community observed her actions with solemn respect, and thousands attended the funeral, acknowledging both the officer's sacrifice and Devyani's role in ensuring the proper completion of sacred rituals.

This case exemplifies how daughters, even without ritual training, can assume roles historically restricted to men, particularly in extraordinary circumstances such as loss and national service. Devyani's actions reflect a gradual evolution in ritual authority, demonstrating that love, duty, and courage can redefine traditional boundaries in meaningful ways.

Objectives

1. Highlight both high-profile and everyday cases where daughters have undertaken rituals traditionally reserved for sons, including situations of acceptance, resistance, or social scrutiny.
2. To examine the connection between religious customs in present-day India and changes in gender roles, the and family relationships

Methods

Purpose and Approach of Research:

Research is usually distinguished by the purpose and approach used for the study. There are various methods used to describe the rationale for the application of specific procedures and techniques used to identify, select, and analyse information applied to understanding the research problem, thereby allowing the reader to critically evaluate a study's overall validity and reliability. This study adopted a **qualitative research approach** to examine the experiences of daughters performing Hindu funeral rites, with a focus on the intersection of tradition, gender roles, and emotional significance.

Review of Secondary Literature

The research was informed by a comprehensive review of literature, including academic articles, essays, and

media reports that discuss gendered participation in Hindu last rites and ritual authority. The literature review helped establish the context, identify recurring themes, and frame the key areas of inquiry for primary data collection.

Primary Data Collection

For the primary research, **in-depth structured interviews** were conducted with seven participants who had personally performed funeral rites for a parent, sibling, or close relative. While the sensitive and personal nature of the subject limited the number of available respondents, these interviews provided rich, detailed insights into lived experiences.

4. Sampling Strategy

The participants were selected based on accessibility and willingness to share their experiences, acknowledging that instances of daughters performing funeral rites remain socially rare and not always publicly documented.

5. Interview Dimensions

The interviews explored multiple dimensions of the participants' experiences, including:

- the circumstances surrounding the death,
- emotional connections with the deceased,
- the practical and ritual steps they undertook.

Participants were also asked whether their actions were socially sanctioned, how family or community members responded, and the challenges they encountered. Questions further delved into their motivations, the performance of specific rituals such as lighting the pyre and offering *pind daan*, and the broader implications of their actions on family dynamics and social norms.

6. Data Analysis

Data from the interviews were analyzed **thematically** to identify patterns, divergences, and broader sociological implications. Despite the relatively small sample, the study offers meaningful insights into how daughters navigate tradition, challenge patriarchal norms, and contribute to the evolving landscape of Hindu funeral practices. Detailed Analysis follows.

Analysis:

The interviews reveal nuanced insights into the evolving role of daughters in performing Hindu funeral rites. Some participants reported being allowed to conduct cremation rituals, signaling that daughters are increasingly recognized as capable and responsible actors in ceremonies historically reserved for sons. These instances suggest a gradual, though uneven, shift in family and community perceptions regarding gender and ritual authority.

A recurring theme across interviews was the significance of relational closeness. Daughters who had cared for or shared strong emotional bonds with their parents often felt a natural responsibility to perform the rites. Their sense of duty and love frequently outweighed traditional gendered expectations, indicating that emotional connection can sometimes supersede cultural prescription.

Family support emerged as another critical factor. Participants who received endorsement from mothers, siblings, and extended relatives, including in-laws, described feelings of empowerment and dignity, clearly showing the positive impact of social recognition on both the grieving process and ritual fulfillment. Conversely, respondents who were denied the opportunity to perform rites due to patriarchal norms, property disputes, or community pressure reported sadness, exclusion, and unresolved grief, demonstrating that structural and cultural barriers remain potent.

The interviews also underscore generational and contextual differences. Younger, urban, and more progressive families tended to exhibit greater acceptance of daughters' participation, whereas conservative or rural contexts maintained stronger adherence to traditional norms. Even when daughters had provided care or emotional support, some were still excluded from performing rituals, highlighting the tension between personal contribution and gendered ritual prescription.

One interviewee described a 12-year-old daughter who lit the pyre for a parent. Her family permitted this due to her emotional attachment and understanding of ritual duties, showing that age is not always a barrier when relational responsibility is strong. This case underscores how exceptions to patriarchal norms are sometimes allowed, particularly in extraordinary circumstances.

One of the most important findings of the interview is that family support plays a crucial role in enabling daughters to perform Hindu funeral rites. When relatives endorse their participation, emotional closure, and a sense of dignity, highlighting how social recognition can ease the tension between tradition and evolving gender roles.

In its essence, the interviews reflect an evolving understanding of funeral rites: that these ceremonies are fundamentally about love, duty, and relational bonds, rather than strictly adhering to son-centered norms. While resistance persists in some households, the narratives collectively illustrate a slow but

meaningful transformation in how daughters are recognized and valued in sacred family practices.

Results

The study finds that daughters who perform Hindu funeral rites actively challenge long-established gender norms by stepping into roles traditionally reserved for male relatives. Their participation is influenced not only by emotional closeness to the deceased but also by their long-term caregiving responsibilities, which naturally position them as primary decision-makers in moments of crisis. Many daughters described receiving support from immediate family members, particularly when male relatives were absent, unwilling, or emotionally detached.

Although the extent of acceptance varies considerably across families and communities, the narratives collectively point toward a **gradual social shift**. In several cases, resistance—whether from priests, extended relatives, or community elders—was present, but not always strong enough to prevent daughters from performing the rites. The results also show that daughters' involvement is increasingly understood as an expression of love, duty, and relational commitment rather than a violation of custom. Overall, despite persistent patriarchal barriers and uneven levels of acceptance, daughters' participation reflects an evolving understanding of ritual responsibility within contemporary Hindu families.

Discussion

The findings suggest that daughters' participation in Hindu funeral rites marks a significant step in the **renegotiation of gendered ritual authority** within modern Hindu households. Their involvement challenges the long-standing assumption that only sons or male relatives can fulfil these duties, demonstrating that emotional intimacy and caregiving often serve as more meaningful indicators of ritual responsibility than gender alone. This shift is particularly visible in families where daughters have been the primary caregivers or closest emotional companions of the deceased, making their participation both logical and deeply symbolic.

At the same time, the variation observed across families highlights the tension between tradition and evolving social values. While some communities are increasingly open to daughters performing these rites, others continue to adhere strictly to patriarchal customs, often citing social pressure, fear of community judgement, or priestly disapproval. These mixed responses reveal that social change is happening, but unevenly.

Considered as a unified whole, the discussion points to a larger cultural transformation: funeral rituals are gradually being interpreted through the lens of personal relationships rather than rigid gender roles. As society becomes more accepting of daughters' agency, these

practices illustrate how tradition can adapt, making space for emotional authenticity and equality within sacred rituals.

Conclusion

To summarize the paper, this study highlights that Hindu funeral rites, traditionally assigned to male heirs, are gradually being reconsidered in the context of daughters' participation. While high-profile cases and urban, progressive families show growing acceptance, ordinary households often maintain restrictive norms rooted in social taboos rather than religious injunctions; however, a sense of progress has been noticed. The interviews and case studies reveal that emotional closeness, personal conviction, and family support are crucial in enabling daughters to perform these rites, as underscored throughout this comprehensive research. In contrast, their absence can lead to exclusion and unresolved grief.

Furthermore, the research illustrates that the performance of funeral rites is not static but evolves in response to changing social values, education, and reinterpretation of religious texts like the Bhagavad Gita. Acts of daughters performing last rites challenge patriarchal traditions and expand the understanding of duty, devotion, and spiritual continuity in Hinduism. Ultimately, this study emphasizes that rituals, while sacred, are shaped as much by love, relational bonds, and societal change as by tradition, signaling a subtle but significant transformation in gendered practices surrounding death.

Despite these findings, the study encountered specific constraints. Secondary literature on daughters performing last rites was scarce, requiring extensive time to gather relevant material. Identifying participants proved difficult, as many were uncomfortable discussing parental loss, and recalling such events often triggered emotional distress. Wide variations in practices across regions and generations limited generalization, while personal biases—both from the researcher and respondents—may have influenced narratives. Reliance on qualitative data further restricted statistical representation, and cultural sensitivities sometimes prevented participants from openly discussing departures from tradition.

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