

Rites of the Dead

ONCE there was an ahir (one who tended cows) who lived happily with his wife for many, many years. As they were growing old, they decided that the time had come for them to arrange the marriage of their only son. Although they were very poor, they invited all the people of the village to the wedding.

Soon the day of the wedding came and the villagers brought many gifts for the bride and groom. The ahir and his wife had prepared lots of food and drink for the guests. The pundit (priest) performed the ceremony, the sounds of the tassa drums could be heard throughout the village and there was much joy and merriment.

But this happiness was to soon change to sorrow. A few days after the wedding, the ahir's wife died.



All the villagers were saddened by this event. The ahir made all the plans to have the body of his wife burnt on the riverbank. The wood for the fire was gathered from the forest. The ghee (butter) and the incense were collected. The ahir saw to it that all the religious rites for the dead were carried out in the proper manner. And the village people came to witness the solemn ceremony.

The ahir felt the death of his wife very deeply. With his wife no longer at his side, he felt that his life was empty. He continued to mourn the death of his wife and nothing could remove the sadness from his heart. Finally, he was so overcome by grief that he also died.

On the day of his funeral, the villagers were most helpful. They had gathered the firewood. They had brought the ghee and incense and had done all they could to assist. It was now left for Mohan, the ahir's son to perform certain religious rites of the dead in honour of his father. But neither Mohan nor his wife knew about such things. The villagers advised Mohan to visit a pundit and seek his help.

The pundit agreed to assist Mohan in performing the religious ceremony.

"But Baba," said Mohan, "I know nothing about what I should do or what I should not do."

"There is no cause to be worried," replied the pundit. "During the ceremony you must watch me closely. You must do everything that I do, exactly as I do it and all will go smoothly."

Mohan and his wife were happy about this. They busily went ahead making preparations for the ceremony. As was the custom, they invited all the villagers to attend.

The day arrived. Everyone was gathered around the bedi (altar) which lay flat on the bare earth on the riverbank. The pundit came and stood on one side of the bedi. Mohan followed close behind. He stood on the same side of the bedi. The pundit sat down. Mohan sat down. The villagers sat down. The ceremony began.

The pundit closed his eyes and very softly recited a prayer. Mohan closed his eyes just like the pundit. He did not know the prayer but he kept moving his lips as if he too were saying the prayer. The pundit opened his eyes. Mohan did not see this. So, for quite a while, he remained in this manner with his eyes closed and his lips moving up and down.



People around began to notice and felt that Mohan was indeed praying for his dead father.

The pundit became a little concerned about what was taking place. He wondered what he should do to get Mohan's attention. He heard people whispering. One man said, "Oh, what a devoted son! He really loved his father!" Another said, "I never thought Mohan knew any prayers. It is a good thing to see him praying to God."

The pundit finally decided that this had gone far enough. He leaned over and touched Mohan's right hand and said, "Now take some ghee and put it in the fire."

Mohan opened his eyes and touched the pundit's right hand and said, "Now take some ghee and put it in the fire."

The pundit looked around at the puzzled faces of the villagers. Mohan looked around also.

"Just do as I say, don't repeat what I tell you," said the pundit.

"Just do as I say, don't repeat what I tell you," said Mohan.

"Just take the ghee like this," continued the pundit as he took some ghee, "and pour it like this

into the fire," and he poured the ghee into the fire to show Mohan what he should do.

"Just take the ghee like this and pour it like this into the fire," Mohan repeated, doing the same.

The pundit was beginning to lose his patience. After a few minutes of prayers, the pundit said, "Now take some flowers in your hands."

Mohan repeated, "Now take some flowers in your hands."

Mohan repeated these words with the same anger with which the pundit had spoken.

Mohan was indeed attentive and serious. He truly wanted to follow the pundit in every detail in order to perform the rites correctly. The pundit did not understand this. He thought that Mohan was making fun of him in the presence of all the villagers. This thought made the pundit even more angry.

Mohan continued repeating exactly what the pundit said. The pundit became more and more angry. Finally the pundit lost his patience completely and landed a firm slap across Mohan's left cheek. Mohan did the same thing to the pundit. The pundit struck at Mohan's right cheek. Mohan struck back as well. And so they went on, exchanging blow for blow,



blow for blow to the utter amazement of all present. The pundit stood up. Mohan stood up also, still exchanging blows.

It was about this time that the pundit seemed to realize what was really taking place. "Stop!" he shouted and he dropped his hands to his sides.

"Stop!" Mohan shouted as he also did the same.

"Ceremony finished!" shouted the pundit.

"Ceremony finished!" repeated Mohan.

"Everybody go home," the pundit told the crowd.

"Everybody go home," Mohan told the crowd

and he followed the pundit away from the bedi.

The pundit did not utter another word. Never in all his life had he been so humiliated. Without even waiting for payment, he left the riverbank and, very quickly, went home.

Mohan also made his way home. When he arrived, his wife rushed out to meet him.

"How was the ceremony?" she asked.

"It is a blessing that each person has only one time to die. To tell you the truth, dear wife, I could not perform two ceremonies like this one."

"What do you mean?" his wife asked.

"Too many slaps and lashes. Never me again!" Mohan replied.

"Are you saying the ceremony was not a success?" inquired the wife anxiously.

"No! No! Not at all! The ceremony was a great success. I did everything as the pundit wanted it," Mohan said.

"Then what is the problem?" persisted the wife.

"The problem is that I cannot see how the pundit can continue for long if people continue to die," Mohan said sadly.

Just then Mohan remembered that he did not

get the chance to pay the pundit for performing the ceremony. He turned to his wife and said, "The pundit is such a good man! He did not even wait for his payment!"

"What shall we do?" asked his wife.

"I know what You must prepare some good, tasty food and carry it to the pundit. He will see that we are grateful," Mohan said.

Mohan's wife prepared a hot, tasty meal. She packed it neatly and set out for the pundit's home.

The pundit lived alone in a little house on a hill. As Mohan's wife started to climb the winding path to the pundit's house, he saw her.

"Why is she coming here?" the pundit muttered to himself "Haven't they caused me enough pain and shame? I want to have nothing more to do with them! They are nothing but trouble!"

The pundit did not wait for Mohan's wife to get to his house. He rushed inside and took hold of a long lathi (stick). "I'll teach them a lesson! I'll teach them a lesson they will never forget!" he fumed. He ran down the hill like a wild beast attacking its prey. He grabbed hold of Mohan's wife and started beating her with the lathi, screaming and shouting

as he did so.

“Baba! Baba! Baba!” the poor woman cried out in pain as the lathi cracked across her back. The food was scattered over the ground but Mohan’s wife made no attempt to pick it up. She pulled away from the pundit and down the hill she ran, her long hair flying in the wind.

Limping, weary and in pain, she arrived home.

“Did the pundit like the food?” asked her husband.

“Like? Which food? You said that performing the religious rites was hard? Well, I tell you, paying for the ceremony is ten times harder!” she groaned.

