Opinion: Adi Saiva Priests and Funeral Rites
Category : October/November/December 2012
Published by dharmalingam on Aug. 31, 2012

Opinion

Adi Saiva Priests and Funeral Rites

Scriptural rules, reasons and exceptions examined and explained

The following analysis by Dr. Sabharathnam is drawn from four of the mula or root Agamas: Suprabhedagama, Analagama, Vijayagama and Sarvoktagama. It was prepared at our request in response to the issue of requiring all priests in Hindu temples in the West to perform funerals when they would not do so in India. Here he presents the view of the Adi Saiva priests, also known as Sivacharyars.

There are two classes of brahmins--adi saivas (siva vipras or Sivabrahmins) and the common brahmins (samanya vipras). Only the Sivabrahmins have been authorized to perform the temple rituals for the benefit of the world and for the welfare of the village or city. The chapter "Acharyasya Varjya-avarjya Kriyavalih" finds a place in many Saivagamas. The title may be translated as "List of activities which are to be avoided and those which are to be undertaken by the Adi Saiva priests." Funeral rites are included in the list of activities to be avoided.

Rituals are of two kinds--family-related and temple-related. Family-related rituals are based on the Vedic treatises such as the Apastambha, Bodhayana and others. These rituals are known as samskaras, sacramental activities. Such treatises have prescribed as many as 40 samskaras, such as the ceremonial naming the child (namakarana), tonsure (chudakarana) and so forth. The last samskara is antyeshti, the funeral rite. The number of samskaras varies according to each of the four castes. It is best that each caste have a priest hailing from its own lineage to perform these sacramental rituals. If not, the priest of the next higher caste could perform those rites to the families of his own caste and the next lower castes.

The Parameshvara Agama states: "Adi Saiva priest and the Adi Saivas should be concerned only with those activities which are related to Siva and the temples. They should always remain devoted to the six activities: systematic study of the Vedas

and the Agamas; teaching the Vedas and Agamas to competent disciples; performing the yajnas (sacrifices) related to Siva; training competent disciples in the performance of such Siva-related yajnas; giving donations to Siva-related events or activities; and accepting donations offered to them for the sake of Siva. They are entitled to perform the Vedic samskaras for the families of their own community. They have to desist from doing these for the families of other communities. They have to desist from performing the Vedic sacrifices such as ashvamedha, rajasuya (both for kings) and others and from taking part in these sacrifices. More specifically, they should never perform the funeral rites for families other than those of their own community."

The sages to whom Parameshvara Agama is being told raise a question: "Why are Adi Saivas prohibited from doing the funeral rites or other samskaras for the families of other communities? What is wrong, if they undertake such activities for others?"

Siva responded, "Since an Adi Saiva priest should remain always established in the consciousness of oneness with Siva through nyasa (invocation by mantra) and contemplation, mentally performing the worship of Siva even while he is out of the temple complex, he has to excuse himself from doing those rituals to be performed under the polluted context. If he performs those rituals, the vibrant presence of kala-mantras installed in his body through the highest kind of diksha would get nullified. Once it is nullified, it would be very difficult to regain that energetic presence of siva-kalas. But such nullity would not occur if he performs these rites for his own family or for the families of his own community, since the members of his community are Siva-related.

"But if the circumstance forces him to perform such rites due to the non-availability of a Vedic priest (common brahmin), then, for the goodness of the bereaved family, he can perform these rites. After performing these, he should purify himself and should not enter the temple for seven days. He should fast for seven days, engaging in the constant incantation of Aghora Astra mantra. On the seventh day, he should once again be anointed with specially consecrated water, as it was done to him on the occasion of the highest diksha. Only after such expiation should he enter the temple."

This is the position of Adi Saivas as far as the funeral and other household sacraments are concerned.

Dr. S. P. Sabharathnam Sivacharyar, of the Adi Saiva priest lineage, is an expert in ancient Tamil and Sanskrit, specializing in the Vedas, Agamas and Shilpa Shastras. This excerpt is from his recent translation of the Paushkara Agama.