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Archana Kaushik

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BOOK REVIEW Edited by David E. Balk

Final departures: Reflecting on India's diverse funeral traditions

A review of *The Final Farewell – Understanding the Last Rites and Rituals of India's Major Faiths* by Minakshi Dewan. Gurugram, Haryana: HarperCollins Publishers, 2023. 316 pp. ISBN: 978-93-5699-478-2. 499INR.

Minakshi Dewan is an independent writer and researcher. She obtained her PhD and MPhil degrees in social medicine and community health from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and a master's degree in social work from TISS Mumbai. She has worked with grassroots and international development organizations in India. Her writings have appeared in leading Indian and international publications and address a range of issues, including health, human rights, the environment, and culture. She recently contributed a book chapter titled "Ethics, Morality, and Healing: A Bhil Perspective in Ethnomedicine and Tribal Healing Practices in India" to *Ethnomedicine and Tribal Healing Practices in India* (Reddy, Guite, & Subedi, 2023).

Archana Kaushik is a professor at the Department of Social Work, University of Delhi, Delhi, India. In almost two decades of her career, she has published more than one hundred papers in journals of national and international repute. She has written extensively on the diverse issues revolving around aging and death. Two of her publications are "Experiences, Coping, and Correlates of Encountering Death: Implications for Social Work Education and Practice" (Kaushik, 2020) and "Living Will: The Ultimate Right over One's Life" (Batra & Kaushik, 2021).

In the vast realm of human inquiry, few topics hold as much universal significance and intrigue as death. It is within this enigmatic terrain that *The Final Farewell* by Dr. Minakshi Dewan emerges as a captivating exploration, offering profound insights into the rituals and rites surrounding the inevitable passage from life to beyond. The title of the book encapsulates the poignant essence of the author's exploration into India's last rites and rituals. Evoking themes of closure and transition, the title aptly reflects the book's profound journey through the cultural and spiritual dimensions of bidding farewell to loved ones in diverse faith traditions. With personal experience as a chief mourner after the loss of her father, Dr. Dewan brings both academic rigor and empathetic understanding to this nonfiction work, offering readers a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of India's five major religions' understandings of the final journey.

Structured into 22 chapters, the book navigates through the intricacies of death rituals in Sikhism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Hinduism, shedding light on the theological underpinnings, ceremonial practices, and societal nuances that shape each tradition's approach to death and mourning. Dr. Dewan's narrative is both informative and engaging, weaving together scholarly analysis with poignant anecdotes and real-life observations. The book opens with Dr. Dewan's personal reflection on her father's passing away, setting the stage

for a deeply introspective journey into the cultural and spiritual significance of death rituals.

Death rites and rituals play a significant role in channelizing grief and bereavement and provides psycho-social support (Prasad, 1995). Each chapter delves into a specific religious tradition, offering readers a comprehensive overview of the beliefs, customs, and rituals associated with death and bereavement. From the solemnity of Sikh *antam sanskar* to the elaborate funeral rites of Zoroastrians, Dr. Dewan navigates through a rich tapestry of traditions with sensitivity and insight. The book also highlights the Islamic last rites and rituals, expression of mourning, post-burial interrogation of the corpus, judgment, and afterlife. It covers funerary customs among Christians— notifying the Church, body preparation, coffin preparation, burial, and memorial service. Chapter five elaborates on the *Antim Sanskar* in Hindus, notions on death and afterlife, rites of dying and good death, pre-cremation rituals, the funeral procession, collection and immersion of ashes, and memorial service. The final rites of the hermits (*sanyasi*) and babies are also mentioned.

One of the book's strengths lies in its interdisciplinary approach, drawing from religious studies, anthropology, and sociology to provide a holistic understanding of death rituals in India. Dr. Dewan's analysis goes beyond theological doctrines to explore the socio-cultural dynamics that influence the performance and evolution of funeral rites, including gender roles, caste discrimination, and the commodification of death.

The author explores the range of human resources such as cremation workers, mortuary staff, funeral priests, pilgrimage priests or *tirath purohits* keeping lineage records, barbers, and the Dom community handling corpses, involved in different types of funeral services and their differential status, position, and fees they charge. She also beautifully documents the professional funeral services in India contoured with business practices, professionalism, empathy, and client satisfaction.

Death comes with a huge cost, not only psychosocial but also financial. Death rituals reflect social and economic disparities, with richer individuals able to afford elaborate ceremonies while the poor struggle to conform (Kaushik, 2018). In the book, Dr. Dewan gives a candid view of financial expenses in the last rites and ritual performance in different religions, highlighting a few cases of impact of "death spending" on the families.

Chapter 12, titled "Varanasi: A Site of Death Tourism," offers a particularly fascinating exploration of the intersection between spirituality, tourism, and death in one of India's holiest cities. She gives a candid account of the famous Manikarnika Ghat of Varanasi, considered as a gateway to salvation (*Moksha*), *Bhasm Holi* implying celebrating death, Kashi Labh Mukti Bhawan where people await death, the *Aghori* tradition, that carry high value in the religious texts and traditional socio-cultural milieu of India. Dr. Dewan provides a nuanced examination of the ethical implications of death tourism, highlighting the complexities of commodifying sacred spaces while respecting cultural sensitivities. Moreover, Dr. Dewan does not shy away from addressing contentious issues such as caste discrimination in last rites and gender disparities in mourning practices. She highlights traditional practices of gendered mourning seen in the cases of *Rudaalis* of Rajasthan, *Mirasans* of Punjab, and Oppari from Tamil Nadu. It was heart-wrenching to see that mourning the death of female infants has not been "allowed" in some parts of India. Analyzing two movies in particular, *Pagglait* and *Ramprasad ki Tehrvi*, the author beautifully presents the grieving widows in Hindi Cinema.

Though death is a great equalizer, certain social groups face life-long discrimination that reaches into their death-related rituals (Iyengar, 2017; Laxmaiah, 2021). Chapter 15, titled "Caste Discrimination in Last Rites," and Chapter 16 on last rites among transgender groups, provides a sobering account of the systemic inequalities that pervade funeral rituals, underscoring the urgent need for social reform and inclusivity. The author also touches upon the funeral of unclaimed bodies in Chapter 21.

The environmental impact of traditional corpse disposal methods has been grim and a cause of concern for the environmentalists, social planners and social scientists across the world. Researchers are highlighting the environmental costs of different funeral methods and practices (Kaushik, 2018; Rogers, 2013; Rastogi, 2009) and are advocating for greener and more cost-effective approaches, given the urgency of handling the high death-rate (Ambrose, 2009; Knight, 2010). It was heartening to note that in addition to its scholarly depth, *The Final Farewell* also offers practical insights into the challenges and innovations shaping contemporary death care practices in India. From the emergence of professional funeral services to the environmental costs of traditional burial and cremation methods, Dr. Dewan navigates through the complexities of modernity while advocating for sustainable and compassionate approaches to death care. She presents greener funeral options initiated by a few NGOs like Mokshda. Quite known cremation and burial spaces in India such as Nigambodh ghat of Delhi having historical relevance and Vaikunta Mahaprasthanam, a world class and eco-friendly crematorium site at Hyderabad-Secunderabad, a CSR initiative, also find a mention in this book.

The book's exploration of death rituals during the COVID-19 pandemic adds a timely dimension to the

discussion, highlighting the unprecedented challenges faced by communities and funeral service providers in ensuring dignified farewells amidst public health crises.

Dr. Dewan's examination of online memorial platforms and virtual grieving rituals underscores the adaptive resilience of human communities in the face of adversity. A glossary given at the end of the book is quite handy for understanding the specific terms used in the book.

In conclusion, *The Final Farewell* is an important contribution to the field of death studies, offering readers a nuanced and empathetic exploration of the last rites and rituals of India's major faiths. Dr. Minakshi Dewan's blend of personal reflection, scholarly analysis, and social critique makes this book essential reading for anyone interested in understanding the cultural diversity of death and mourning practices in India.

Dr. Dewan's work highlights its potential to inspire dialogue and social change within academic and community settings alike. *The Final Farewell* stands as a testament to the lasting power of rituals in navigating the complexities of human existence, offering readers a profound meditation on life, death, and the sustained bonds of memory and tradition.

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Archana Kaushik

 archana.kaushik2003@gmail.com

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