Vaiṣṇava Śrāddha

Excerpted from Śrī Bhaktisiddhānta Vaibhava by H.H. Bhakti Vikasa Svāmī

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According to pan-India smārta belief, departed souls were prone to become pretas unless their descendants performed the elaborate series of observances constituting śrāddha, the central feature of which was to offer food to one’s progenitors. These rites were to be observed each month for a year following a person’s departure, a fixed number (specific to one’s caste) of days after the death, and thereafter annually, with the aim of elevating deceased forefathers to Pitṛloka, a higher planet suitable for material enjoyment. From the time of death until the performance of śrāddha, members of the family were deemed aśauca, ritually impure. During this period, they were prohibited from all religious acts such as entering temples or even performing arcana at home. They would exhibit signs of mourning, such as males shaving their heads and keeping their sikhās untied, and women opening their tresses.

Within Bengal, śrāddha undertaken according to Raghunandana’s smārta edicts included offering flesh to the ancestors and conducting śrāddha on Ekādaśī, in contravention to śāstrīya injunctions forbidding consumption of grains, even Viṣṇu prasāda, on that day. Hence all who participated in such śrāddhas simply created a hellish destination both for themselves and the previous generations they intended to benefit. Eager to be invited to śrāddhas to be well fed and to collect the stipulated monetary offerings thereat, smārta-brāhmaṇas had so successfully propagated the necessity of such śrāddha that even persons considering themselves orthodox Vaiṣṇavas were under the impression that they were bound to perform it.

Belief in preta-śrāddha was so deep that even certain claimed descendants of Śrī Advaita Ācārya would annually burn a straw effigy of Him, as if He, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, had to be delivered from ghostly birth. Fully committed to and contaminated by smārta-vāda, these professed descendants of Śrī Advaita Ācārya were mindlessly perpetrating such an appalling offense—all the more ironic because Śrī Advaita Ācārya was famed for having demonstrated the glory of Vaiṣṇavas over mundane brāhmaṇas by having given the śrāddha-patra (food offered to the forefathers) to Śrīla Haridāsa Ṭhākura.

Considering observance of śrāddha and other rituals according to the materialistic outlook of smārtas a major aberration in Vaiṣṇava society and a blockage to śuddha-bhakti, Śrīla Sarasvatī Ṭhākura felt keenly obliged to reestablish the original Vaiṣṇava observances in conformance with directions given in Sat-kriyā-sāra-dīpikā and Hari-bhakti-vilāsa, which gave extensive śāstrīya references probative that all other forms of worship are automatically effected by worship of Viṣṇu, that obligations to the forebears, demigods, and the rest are absolved for persons who have taken shelter of Viṣṇu, and that if not first offered to Viṣṇu, anything offered to one’s predecessors or anyone else cannot even slightly benefit them. In addition, he gave śāstrīya evidence delineating performance of obsequies by the Vaiṣṇava system, insisting that particularly those initiated as Vaiṣṇavas should simply concentrate on Viṣṇu worship and not deviate to demigod worship, karma-kāṇḍīya śrāddha, or any other activity not primarily focused on satisfying Lord Viṣṇu. He reminded devotees that their supposed bodily relationships with their supposed bodily relations were temporary and meaningless, being based on the illusory conception of identifying the body as the self, and that by the Lord’s mercy devotees’ ancestors do not become ghosts, nor are Vaiṣṇavas interested in dispatching their ancestors or anyone else to Pitṛloka, as their only goal is the spiritual world, the abode of Viṣṇu.

Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī asserted that for all these reasons śrāddha is unnecessary for Vaiṣṇavas, who after the death of a relative need not maintain signs of mourning or observe a period of aśauca. Yet he allowed gṛhastha disciples to perform obsequies according to the Vaiṣṇava system, as a token ceremony to pacify their relatives and neighbors who lacked faith that Kṛṣṇa protects His devotees. Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī explained:

Whether a gṛhastha or a renunciant, a Vaiṣṇava does not observe a

period of aśauca. Devotees should not independently perform rituals

such as śrāddha and oblations to the forefathers, for they are automatically

effected by performing Hari-seva. Nonetheless, in accordance with general

usages, gṛhastha devotees, who by chanting harināma are anyway pure,

may on the eleventh day after the relative’s death, or on any other day,

perform śrāddha with maha-prasāda. This is called Vaiṣṇava śrāddha.108

Vaiṣṇava śrāddha as ordained by Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī was devoid of smārta procedures, being much simplified observances comprised of core devotional activities: kirtana followed by Hari-kathā appropriate to the occasion (i.e., elucidating the philosophical understanding of a Vaiṣṇava’s passing, and glorifying the devotional activities of the departed devotee), offering a portion of maha-prasāda to benefit that soul, and finally distributing maha-prasāda (of the presiding deity of either the household or the local Gauḍīya Maṭha) to invited devotees rather than feeding smārta-brāhmaṇas as per the social norm. That esurient smārta-brāhmaṇas should not be fed at śrāddhas was upheld by the proscription in Viṣṇu Purāṇa (3.6.67) against calling professional brāhmaṇas—for instance, those who receive a fixed salary for teaching or worshiping deities or who make a point to get themselves invited to religious feasts.109 Thus Vaiṣṇava śrāddha differed significantly, both conceptually and in manner of performance, from the karma-kāṇḍīya version.

Prior to setting up base in Calcutta, Śrīla Sarasvatī Ṭhākura had but a few disciples, most of whom were youthful brahmacārīs. So not until November 1918, when under his direction the required rituals for the departed father of Śrī Vanamāli dāsa Adhikārī, a householder disciple of Śrīla Sarasvatī Ṭhākura, was performed by another disciple, did he have an opportunity to introduce Vaiṣṇava śrāddha. In the home of the deceased, he gave a potent speech stressing the need for devotees to observe such formalities by employing the transcendental system meant for satisfying Lord Viṣṇu, as described in Hari-bhakti-vilāsa and Sat-kriyā-sāra-dīpikā, and not according to the mundane usages of the smārtas. Thereafter, śrāddhas according to the Vaiṣṇava system, performed either in the local Maṭha or in homes of disciples whose relatives had deceased, became the standard among Śrīla Sarasvatī Ṭhākura’s followers. Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī delineated the process for performing śrāddha in a manner befitting Vaiṣṇavas:

“Your father has attained the eternal Jagannatha Purī. Jagannatha Purī is

directly Vaikuntha. Whoever quits the body while chanting the holy names

attains the eternal abode of the Lord. Anything done according to mundane considerations results in rebirth in the material world. The various Vedic rites

award material sense objects as karmic results. But devotees dedicated to

chanting the holy names should offer oblations to their deceased ancestors

with the Lord’s prasāda. To make oblations with any other kind of foodstuff

is not indicative of intelligence.

Fruitive rituals are an invitation to entanglement in the consequences of action. Persons who chant harināma do not consider enjoying such results. Yet their relatives are obliged to offer bhoga to the Lord and then make an oblation with the prasāda for the wellbeing of the departed soul. As part of the same procedure, they should invite Vaiṣṇavas and satisfy them with prasāda, and a harināmayajna (sacrifice of chanting the holy name) should be held. Our judgment is approved by the pure devotional scriptures. Those who deem mixed devotion best may have a different understanding according to their state of advancement, yet we cannot respect that.

An initiated devotee who has taken shelter of the holy name should offer oblations of maha-prasāda to his forefathers on the eleventh day after his forefather’s death. Thereafter he should feed pure devotee brāhmaṇas with maha-prasāda. It is good if this is done in the Maṭha. Those who are not initiated devotees and do not chant harināma, or who are unable to tolerate the arrowlike words of society, can offer oblations to their forefathers according to the prescribed smārta method. Nondevotees should, according to the prescriptions for śūdras, for thirty days exhibit the signs of mourning and eat only haviṣyānna once daily. But devotees in the shelter of the holy name need not worry about smārta-vidhi, and should honor maha-prasāda every day. Please rid yourself of the superstition that a Vaiṣṇava becomes a ghost after death and that his śrāddha should be performed with foods not first offered to the Lord.

The arrangements provided in the smārta system are established according to one’s position in society. Performing smārta śrāddha causes one to again enter a mother’s womb. The Lord’s devotees never accede to such a system, knowing it to be opposed to sastra. And smārtas cannot comprehend the understanding of liberated souls.”

Reintroducing Vaiṣṇava śrāddha would prove to be a protracted fray. It required great fealty for people to acknowledge the authority of Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī and break away from family customs and social norms. To follow him meant to join in defying the entire current of materialistic society and hence invite criticism, slander, even ostracism.

Nevertheless, by his conviction, sincerity, persistence, and robust arguments based on scriptural statements, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī was able to convince many to accept him in contradiction to the rest of the world. But this particular point of observing śrāddha with Vaiṣṇava procedures was a watershed test for his followers. Those lacking full faith worried about the future of their departed relatives and their own fate should they fail to execute conventional practices. However, each śrāddha and marriage performed according to the rites of Sat-kriyā-sāra-dīpikā added credence to Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī’s stance and helped others to gain confidence in this system, while undermining both the influence of the smārta priests and one of their traditional sources of income. Indeed, each śrāddha and marriage so executed was reported in the Gauḍīya as a victory for Vaiṣṇava smṛti.

[Note: to view all the footnotes please see the original book.]

References

\*Haviṣya, Volume 2, Page 92

Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī shed light on Purāṇic statement that eating fish in Purī is equivalent to taking Haviṣyānna, the purest sacrificial food \*

\*Haviṣya haviṣyānna – certain foods described by śāstra as fit for offering in sacrifice. In Bengal, generally this contributes boiled rice (of the “sunned,” not parboiled, variety most common in Bengal) with ghee but no salt, spices, or condiments, although, soaked (but not boiled) mung may also be taken with it. Smārtas consider haviṣya the purest food, to be taken daily only by persons observing religious vows following the death of a relative.

Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī’s commentary clarifies that, contrary to popular misinterpretation, this Purāṇic statement (reiterated in Caitanya-bhāgavata) is not meant to encourage people to eat fish, but rather extols Purī as so sacred that consuming even the worst food therein is as purifying as eating sacrificial offerings.

108 SPU96

109 Most of this section up to this point was gleaned from Gauḍīya 7.62-64

110 Letter (23 November 1933), Patrāvalī 3.10-11

111 Av 256-57; SPU 185