Hindu mobilities and cremation: minority, migrant and gendered dialogues and dialectics in English and Welsh towns

Chapter 2
Hindu Mobilities and Cremation: Minority, Migrant and Gendered Dialogues and Dialectics in English and Welsh Towns

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2.1 Introduction

> We had a priest come. Catering, all that sort of stuff. But everything else was kind of left to the funeral directors, they knew what they were doing. When we arrived at the crematorium that day, I hadn't even thought about anything. But they had a CD playing [….] the *aum nama shiva* […] They had the Hindu Ohm at the front. And one of the big things, they have got a Shiva *murti*, the god statue, which is all in place there. […] It is near the back, where it is meant to be. When everybody comes out of the crematorium, they are kind of meant to go and pray at the statue. […] But I think you don't get that everywhere […] In a lot of places, you have to take your own [statue], and again, that is not something that would have occurred to me, just like the mantra bit didn't occur. Just when I heard it when we arrived, I thought: 'Oh, good.' [...] On the funeral day in terms of the religious stuff, it is normally a male who does all the bits, but we asked whether I could do the funeral ceremony parts, the speeches, and at home, putting things in the mouth, putting things in the coffin, and prayers.

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> So we did it with the three of us. Me, my sister and my cousin. […] But there are some parts that only one person can do, and I did those bits. And I know that has been talked about. (Interview with Chetana, Northampton)[1]

This opening account, drawn from an interview with Chetana, a British-born Hindu woman describing her uncle's funeral at a municipal crematorium in Northamptonshire, sets the scene for some of the intersections between minority Hindu and majority cremation practices in England and Wales which we have researched as part of a broader project on the 'deathscape' needs and wishes of minority ethnic/faith and migrant communities.[2] Chetana's account, which threads through the chapter, exemplifies religious and cultural sensitivity on the part of majority funeral director and crematoria service providers, as well as the limitations of crematoria infrastructure. It also signals shifts in, and resistance to, change in gendered ritual roles within migrant or migrant-heritage Hindu faith communities. This meshing of changing ritual practices and conservative attitudes *within* Hindu communities, and tension *between* Hindu funerary needs and infrastructure shaped by majority cultural norms, provides a Hindu-centred perspective to research on the wider dialogues and dialectics within and between majority funerary infrastructure and services and multifaceted minority cultural groups.

This chapter outlines Hindu funerary practices and presents fine-grained research on evolving practices and the experience of crematoria and related provisions for migrant or migrant-heritage Hindu funerary practices in England and Wales. These practices are shaped by geographical mobility (Firth, 2001) and we deploy the concepts of mobilities and immobilities (Hannam et al., 2006), and diasporic (Brah, 1996) and post-diasporic (Scafe, 2019) identities as a framework to explore the movement of Hindu bodies, cremated remains and mourners; trends towards local disposition of the dead by established Hindu communities; associated negotiation of (post)diasporic Hindu identities; and the relationship between traditional and evolving cultural practices. The post-diasporic perspective emphasises not only the held-in-tension characteristics of dispersal and connectivity of diaspora, but also the hypermobility (Sassen, 2002) of some migrants/migrant-heritage networks, and the often complex, multifaceted and fluid nature of international and intranational communities and identities (Scafe & Dunn, 2020). The focus here is primarily on the intersecting mobilities of the deceased and their mourners: the meaningful movement of the material remains of the deceased, and the ability to fulfil varied required Hindu rituals in order to ensure favourable spiritual mobilities for the dead. These mobilities are highly emotional and are inscribed by religious and secular meaning-making as a form of "sacred mobilities" (Maddrell et al., 2015), as well as reflecting, and being shaped by, colonial legacies, transnational diasporic networks, sense of identity and heritage.

[1] For reasons of confidentiality, interviewees and other research participants have been given pseudonyms, unless there is a specific agreed reason to name a participant.

[2] *Deathscapes and Diversity*, Research Councils UK, Arts and Humanities Research Council and Research Councils UK, Economic and Social Research Council (AH/N010205/1).

Hinduism constitutes the third largest religion in England and Wales, representing circa one million citizens, 1.7% of the population (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2022). Hindu communities in Britain primarily originated in South Asia (Gujarat, Punjab and Sri Lanka), East Africa (Uganda and Kenya) and the Caribbean, with transnational migration being rooted in British colonial networks, economies and power relations, such as migration by Indian Hindus to East Africa to work on imperial infrastructure projects in the late nineteenth and to work in British textile industries in the twentieth century (see Beebeejaun et al. on Dundee, this volume). Colonial mindsets have also shaped attitudes to Hinduism (Zavos, 2012). Chain migration and the reunification of migrant families is reflected in regional and kinship networks and values being reconstituted in particular localities in Britain (ibid.). In common with other migrant and established minority groups, today, Hindus in Britain are overwhelmingly concentrated in large urban areas, primarily in London (e.g., Harrow: 25.8% Hindu) and the South East of England, with notable exceptions such as Leicester in the East Midlands where 17.9% of the population are Hindu (ONS, 2022). However, Hindus and other minority populations are increasingly present in smaller urban settlements, hence our choice of case studies.

In our study we examine the intersection of mobilities and British Hindu practices of cremation and the disposition of cremated remains, through the experience of those living in three case study towns in England and Wales: Newport, Northampton, and Swindon. These towns each have circa 8–15% of their populations identified as ethnic and/or religious minorities (ONS, 2012); and empirical material discussed here is drawn from field observations, fourteen focus groups with a total of 108 participants representing varied local faith communities, and 33 anonymised interviews with municipal cemetery-crematoria and funerary service users and providers, local government planners and other related stakeholders (all data gathered in 2017–2018). The focus groups and interviews with the public focused on experiences of funerals; visits to cemeteries or crematoria; particular ritual needs, customs or provisions; and specific religious-cultural issues; all set within the context of personal biographies and family migratory trajectories.

After giving an outline of *varied* Hindu beliefs, cremation, and other funerary-mourning practices, we will discuss our findings in relation to four themes that emerged during the analysis of the empirical material. These four themes are ritual practices, funerary infrastructure, the dispersal of cremated remains, and fixity and change in religious mobilities.

2.2 Hindu Funerary Practices

Hindu funerary practices are shaped by beliefs about the journey and the wellbeing of the dead, as well as reflecting social status, persistent elements of the caste system, and local culture. As Priya Uteng explains:

> The concept of death in Hinduism is fluid and meanders between the multiple lives assigned to a soul. Hindus firmly believe in a separate existence of the body and the soul where the body is *nashwar* (destructible) but the soul is beyond the realm of creation and destruction. (2021, n.p.)

While practices vary by region, social group, and allegiance to particular religious teachers, key funerary practices typically include a series of ritual stages, the associated mourning status of the bereaved, and cremation, commonly followed by the disposition of remains in water which runs to the sea, notably in the sacred river Ganges.

Hindu cremation practices are understood as a form of ritual purification, and for both spiritual and hygienic reasons ideally take place during daylight and within 24 hours after death (Firth, 2003; Laungani, 1996; Rugg & Parsons, 2018): "Expediting the process ensures lessening of pain for the deceased and for mourners" (Priya Uteng, 2021, n.p). Purification by fire is not deemed necessary for young children and religious ascetics (*sadhus* or *sanyasis*), who may be buried. Other rituals include washing the deceased, wearing white for mourning, processing to the cremation ground, prayers, gifting, and rice balls (*pindas*) offered to the planets in order to ensure the deceased is united with ancestors and ultimately attains the end of the rebirth cycle (*moksha*). Funerary and mourning rituals can constitute a nine-stage process over twelve days (which symbolise a year). These stages begin with preparation for death, followed by a series of ritualised practices for the corpse, during which time the status of the deceased *preta* is considered to be liminal and fluid (as are the mourners who are deemed to be polluted by association with death); ending with post-cremation *shraddha* rituals, including gift-giving to Brahmins as surrogates for the deceased, the scattering of remains in a river flowing to the sea, and feasting. This culminates in *sapinda karana*, the soul's newly embodied destination and elevated status (Firth, 2003) in *pitriloka*, the land of the ancestors.

Within Hinduism, cremation can be understood as a fire-sacrifice, a sacrificial offering of the body and self to the gods, including Agni the god of fire, through which the world and the deceased are reborn. Thus, cremation is an act of *creation* rather than destruction (Caixeiro, 2005; Firth, 2005). It is a spiritual transformation which is important for the living to oversee and to witness, which involves attending to the pyre or witnessing the charge of the cremator. Cremation practices represent a returning of the body and a payment of debt to the deities (Elmore, 2006), which serve "to free the soul of the deceased from the corpse, remove impurities to ensure auspicious rebirth, heed religious and social duties, such as that of the son towards his father, and duty towards ancestors" (Hadders, 2021, p. 33). After cremation in India, remaining bone fragments and ashes are collected from the pyre or crematorium, and the bones are commonly 'picked out' by family members in the presence of a priest, in order to look for signs of the fate of the deceased, a process called the "picking of the flowers" (Rani, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton). The disposal of cremated remains in moving water represents the most obvious and familiar image of post-mortal Hindu mobilities, particularly through ash dispersal in the sacred River Ganges. The Ganges is widely understood as the ideal site for Hindu disposition, but cremated remains may be divided and dispersed on the river

at the three sacred sites of Varanasi, Allahabad and Haridwar, or scattered in the nearest river (Firth, 2003). In India, these rites are generally performed by family members and priests, rather than professional funeral directors. Hindu cremation services are usually open events, both permitting and expecting anyone who is in any way associated with the deceased or the deceased's family to attend (Laungani, 1996; Rugg & Parsons, 2018). Community members also typically support the family of the deceased with food during their period of mourning when cooking is forbidden, and in preparing the feast which is held at the end of the *shraddha,* which completes the funerary rites (Firth, 2003).

While key elements of Hindu practice can be outlined, it is important to note that Hindu communities originating in different regions of India and from East Africa, as well as belonging to different sects and castes, hold different beliefs and vary in ritual requirements, i.e., there is "internal diversity" within Hinduism (Zavos, 2012, p. 124). Burial, which was common in pre-Vedic times is still practiced by some Hindus, such as the Virashaiva community of South India, who are buried in the *Dhyana mudra* yogic pose with the *Ishta linga* (symbol of Lord Shiva) in their left hand; and in Andhra Pradesh, rather than in moving water, Hindus place the cremated remains of family members in shrines at their homes (Priya Uteng, 2021). Orthodox Hindus believe the Vedic rite of outdoor cremation, known as *anthyesthi sanksara*, is vital to the successful cycle of birth and rebirth, but indoor electric cremators have been developed in urban areas in India since the 1980s (Caixeiro, 2005; Hadders, 2021). Traditionally there are strict gendered roles in Hindu funerary rituals (Firth, 2005): it is the eldest son's duty to initiate the cremation fire, and in some traditions to break the skull (*kapalakrya*) or turn the body in the fire to ensure full cremation and the release of the soul. Women's status as ritually polluted during menstruation is a barrier to ritual participation (see interview with Chetana below), hence, traditionally, women did not attend the *ghats*. However, as funerary practices evolve there are regional differences in gendered practices, for example, it is more common for Punjabi women to attend the cremation relative to more conservative Guajarati women (Firth, 2005).

Hindu funerary practices of cremation and the dispersal of cremated remains on water appear to mesh well with majority UK practices, given that 77% of funerary dispositions are cremations (Cremation Society of Great Britain, 2017) and the next of kin are legally permitted to collect the remains from the crematorium and to store, inter or scatter them as they choose. However, despite deep roots in Britain and its colonial past, it has been argued that twentieth century Hindu migrants to Britain experienced stark limitations to their traditional ways of dealing with death and bereavement, often necessitating significant compromises of ritual practices (Firth, 2003). The next section outlines some of the challenges identified in previous studies of Hindu practices in the UK, followed by a discussion of insights from this study.

2.3 Hindu Cremation and Funerary Practices in England, Wales and the Wider UK

Research on Hindu practices in Britain has identified a number of barriers to fulfilling ideal Hindu rituals in the context of the governance and practices of the funerary sector, such as an inability to hold cremation within 24 hours or to witness the cremation (Firth, 2003; Laungani, 1996). The compact and dispersible nature of cremated remains have the potential to be highly mobile, allowing dispersal at sites independent of the location of death or cremation, including the 'repatriation' of remains to the deceased's country of origin or heritage. Repatriation of the dead represents an important mobility of many deceased migrants or those of migrant heritage; and the repatriation of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim dead was the norm for South Asian migrant families living in the UK during the second half the twentieth century, facilitating religious practice and the renewal of place and kinship bonds (Firth, 1997; Hunter, 2016) and embodying the so-called "myth of return" (Anwar, 1979) through post-mortem funerary ritual choices.

Further, it has been argued that repatriation was *necessitated* by inadequate funerary services in the UK; and in these circumstances "mobility is a spatial tactic for negotiating dominant British necroregimes and attaining a culturally satisfactory funeral and disposal" (Jassal, 2015, p. 487). However, some Hindus believe it unnecessary to scatter the ashes in India *per se*, and that it is acceptable for ashes to be scattered in the ocean, on any large body of water, or in running water, such as a river or estuary which runs to the sea (Firth, 2003; Maddrell, 2011; Rugg & Parsons, 2018). Some think it is important to sanctify local rivers for this purpose (Firth, 1997). Rivers have been designated in the Netherlands (Swhajor et al., 2010) and in the UK (Maddrell, 2011), where the government Environment Agency, working with Hindu and Sikh groups, agreed on part of the River Soar in Leicestershire for Hindu and Sikh ash scattering in 2004 when the river was sanctified with water from the Ganges. Mourners expressed appreciation for the opportunity to fulfil their lifecycle rituals locally, and for the tranquil setting for this sacred ritual. Further, although these new arrangements were not without some local opposition, mourners from beyond the Hindu and Sikh faith communities started to use the local boat service established for the mobile practice of ash scattering rituals on the river (Maddrell, 2011). These innovations, and the resistance to them, are indicative of 'movements,' hybridity and fixity in evolving minority and majority funerary practices.

In recent decades, many European countries, including the UK, have witnessed a shift towards individualised funerary practices, whereby funeral preparations and rituals are no longer overseen solely by funeral professionals, but increasingly by the bereaved themselves. The combination of this widespread process of individualisation and the emergence of the DIY funeral (Holloway et al., 2013) within majority cultural practice, together with increased sensitivity to minority religious and cultural needs among local funeral directors and cemeteries-crematoria providers (including municipalities), means that there is some understanding of the wishes and needs of Hindu communities in Britain, such as close family members viewing

the charging of the cremator. A growing assertion of minority funerary rights is also evident in the campaign to legalise open air pyres in the UK, which can be seen as representing a sense of entitlement to ideal Hindu lifecycle rituals – "rights to rites" (Cumper & Lewis, 2010) – combined with a sense of an established religious minority being 'at home' in Britain (see Hunter, 2016; Maddrell et al., 2022). In 2010 the Court of Appeal found in favour of Hindu Davinder Ghai and against Newcastle City Council, shifting British cremation law to permit outdoor funeral pyres in agreed areas, and within a walled enclosure to avoid impact on non-participants. In contrast, some Hindus in Norway are opting for the interment of cremated remains, known as 'urn burials,' in designated areas of selected cemeteries (Hadders, 2021), echoing practices in the southern parts of the Indian subcontinent where a significant proportion of Norwegian Hindus have their ancestral roots.

The next section evaluates the adequacy of municipal crematoria service provision and governance and associated funeral services in England and Wales for Hindus, through a participant-centred examination of contemporary Hindu funerary-mourning practices and the associated mobilities of the living and the dead. This analysis is organised around four themes: (i) ritual practices; (ii) funerary infrastructure; (iii) the dispersal of cremated remains; and (iv) fixity and change.

2.4 Hindu Funerary Practices and Associated Mobilities

In common with other migrant and established minority groups in the wider study, Hindu participants spoke of facing challenges to completing their full death rituals in Britain, including pre-death rituals. Dying is a process, and Chetana recounted how a hospital consultant, highly insensitive to Hindu rituals, was reluctant to allow her uncle his wish to go home to die. The doctor also questioned her translations of his information to other family members, thereby causing offence and hurt at an already traumatic time for the family.

The ritual washing of the deceased or *milana,* immediately after death, is also an important aspect of personal and spiritual care for the deceased:

> [O]ne of the big things from the Hindu community is the washing facility. [….] I only witnessed it for the first time last year, when my father passed away [in India] […] for the three of us it was the first time that we witnessed that as close family and were part of the whole ritual ceremony. So it was very humbling, how the dead were treated with so much respect and dignity. (Interview with Rani, Northampton)

In Northampton, Rani reported that hospitals accommodated Hindu families' desire to perform washing rites for the dead, but for the families this was a compromise given the lack of suitable alternative venues for this ritual practice. While previous research reports that in the 1990s it was common to "bring the body of the deceased to the family home, where the lid of the coffin is opened, so that all the mourners can file past the body, have a last glimpse of the deceased and offer their individual prayers" (Laungani, 1996, p. 197), some participants in this study considered

community halls to be more suitable venues for paying respects to the dead and the mourning family (see discussion of gender below).

2.5 Funerary Infrastructure and Hindu Requirements

The issue of *timely* funerals was widely reported by Hindu participants in this study, including a lack of cultural awareness within the majority population that the Hindu ideal is for same day cremation. This was experienced as in stark contrast relative to widespread awareness of, and efforts to facilitate, Muslim requirements for prompt burial. In the UK, a two-week hiatus between death and funeral is common, and Hindu funerals seldom take place within 24 hours. Participants highlighted issues with crematoria services:

> Ideally, we would like to be cremated within 24 hours of the death. But it never happens like that. Partly because of the [process] involved in release [of] the body from the hospital and postmortem and finding a slot in the crematorium which is very difficult. (Interview with Raj, Swindon)

> One of the things which doesn't seem to be understood within the hierarchy is, that the Hindu funeral to happen on the same day is equally important [as prompt burial for Muslims]. (Rani, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton)

While these delays may be deemed unavoidable by service providers (e.g., in busy winter periods), deferred rituals can cause acute distress to the bereaved, especially if this breaks religious requirements (Laungani, 1996, p. 197; Maddrell et al., 2018, 2021).

The duration of funerals at crematoria was also an issue: "Hindu funerals […] are not organised around a rigid time-schedule. They are spontaneous, chaotic, and even quite flexible" (Laungani, 1996, p. 198). While some participants identified a 45 minutes allocation as acceptable for limited rituals done at the crematorium (interview with Raj, Swindon), the standard UK crematorium time allocation of thirty minutes, including entry and departure, was widely reported as problematic for religious practices, social customs and the large numbers of mourners typically attending Hindu funerals. This prompted familiar comments about crematorium being "conveyor belts." However, participants also spoke humorously and self-reflexively about relaxed attitudes to timing, with unpunctual mourners and priests who could be long-winded (multifaith women's focus group, Northampton). Our interviews with crematorium managers indicate that at some crematoria staff have responded to Hindu and other faith and ethnic group needs for longer services at least in part, through allocating extended time for funerals, or weekend dates to accommodate both flexible timings and maximum capacity for attendance. While 80% of crematoria report providing specific facilities for religious groups in 2021 (Cremation Society of Great Britain, 2021), it is important to note that appropriate arrangements for all minority faith groups are far from universal and may come at an extra cost.

Funeral directors and crematorium staff are crucial to funerary experience for most mourners in England and Wales. Participants praised those crematoria that accommodate different practices, for example: "Here also they allow we bring our own music. I think most crematoriums allow that" (interview with Raj, Swindon). Several participants expressed appreciation for funeral directors who had made an effort to learn about and tailor services to Hindu requirements, notably in Northampton where a local family firm of undertakers (described as "Irish") were credited with particularly good knowledge of, and sensitivity to, Hindu beliefs and practices:

> I think we are somewhat blessed in this town with the funeral directors. […] I was just so impressed by how comforting they were, how lovely they were […] [In addition to legal paperwork and arrangements] he asked: 'What do you want to do with the ashes?' We hadn't really thought about that. And the questions, the number of questions which come at you as a bereaved family is horrendous. But they are really gentle in their approach. (Rani, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton)

In a continuation of Chetana's description of the provision of Hindu statues and music that opened this chapter, organising a funeral for the first time, she reported additional aspects of flexibility and sensitivity on the part of funeral directors, such as allowing herself and her sister to walk with the hearse, and culturally-sensitive knowledge, such as de-thorning roses to avoid harm to the deceased:

> They were really good. I think they had done Hindu funerals before, and they were very accommodating. It was not that we wanted anything out of the ordinary, but […] with our funerals you are meant to put things in the mouth and like that, and they knew, so they were like, do you want us to leave the mouth slightly open […]? Whereas, when you are in that state, you don't think about those things. But they knew, so they could prompt that. So that was very, very helpful. (interview with Chetana, Northampton)

However, some participants also felt that it is important for service providers to understand the different funeral processes and ritual needs *within* different Hindu castes or regional communities, i.e., the "diversity-within-diversity" (Maddrell et al., 2018, p. 38) of Hindu funeral practices: "The South Indians and to some extent Sri Lankan Hindus they follow roughly the same procedure during death. Even within that, depending on the caste, it differs" (interview with Raj, Swindon).

2.6 Immobilising and Mobile Funerary Infrastructure

Funerary infrastructure includes the buildings, grounds, services and regulatory frameworks for cemeteries and crematoria. Inadequate funerary infrastructure and related services can be exclusionary for minorities and cause emotional-spiritual harm to the mourners and the deceased (Cumper & Lewis, 2010; Maddrell et al., 2018, 2021). Public services which are limited to majority normative scheduling systems and managed primarily as a functional process by providers, can be experienced as a traumatic constraint to fulfilling necessary rituals. One respondent

explained the necessity of the priest-led rituals on the eleventh or thirteenth day after death:

> That is very significant, […] in order for the soul to be free. The thirteenth or the eleventh is very, very important in the Hindu faith. And sometimes families are having to wait even more than thirteen days. It is very traumatic experience. [….] So last year, [X] dies, family was very, very anxious, that we need to get everything done before the thirteen days. And then it was Christmas holidays in between, and the doctor isn't there, the coroner isn't there. (Rani, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton)

Such delays due to extended mainstream holiday periods can cause anguish for mourners, regardless of culture, but this last point highlights the particular emotional and spiritual harm experienced by Hindus in this circumstance (Maddrell et al., 2018, 2021). While some participants expressed understanding that the requirement for same day cremation may have been motivated in part by reasons of hygiene in the past, they nonetheless stressed that the overriding reason was the spiritual need for cremation as a means for prompt release of the soul from the body. However, other participants were pragmatic, and considered a same day funeral as desirable, but also indicated that a delayed service could have benefits, such as allowing dispersed relatives to travel to attend the funeral, highlighting different responses to this constraint.

The size of crematoria ritual spaces was also reported as an issue for many Hindus, which was echoed by other faith groups for whom community attendance at funerals is the cultural norm. This often necessitated travelling further to facilities with greater capacity; but this resulted in extra travel for all involved, and using municipal facilities outside one's own local authority area can incur additional fees. Other structural issues include the practicalities of parking and public transport; widespread lack of washing facilities for preparing the dead at the crematorium; and the ability for family members to fulfil ritual obligations by witnessing or initiating the cremation process (Deepinder, Sikh man, mixed focus group, Newport). The question of what is in and out of sight is central to the form of European crematoria design, and is pertinent to this analysis. British crematoria are literally designed to conceal the act of cremation, with the last sight of the coffin typically occurring as curtains softly close over the catafalque, obscuring the machinery and reality of the cremation process hidden from public view. For reasons of efficiency and sustainability, this reality may include coffins being queued for the next firing of the cremator. By contrast, as noted above, witnessing the cremation is a crucial rite for Hindus, and a family member, traditionally the eldest son, has a ritual obligation to oversee proper cremation:

> The one thing we need to do is to light the flame, and actually ceremoniously start the cremation. Now it is done electronically in the furnace. The person who is the eldest son does this, the ceremonies. [….] Then the priest will recite some [*shlokas*] and he will place the [*kampha*] and place it on the coffin. Which is then pushed inside. So, in some [crematoria] they don't allow this. [….] But in Hendon 'cos they have a lot of Hindus they are very flexible. (Interview with Raj, Swindon)

Participants reported a growing number of crematoria which allow immediate family members to witness the charging of the cremator, but these arrangements are typically *ad hoc* and discretionary.

Crematoria in two case study towns had integrated viewing rooms in order to make provision for Hindus and Sikhs. One crematorium manager interviewee had used other necessary building work as an opportunity to create a small viewing room with safety glass to allow families to witness the committal of the deceased to the cremator (see Fig. 2.1).

However, while viewing arrangements such as these are increasing, there is cause to examine even these improvements. Namely, while the immediate mourners in this case can witness the charge from behind a glass window, they are still separated from the cremator and cannot assist in the actual cremation themselves through "lighting the fire." This can be problematic because pushing the coffin into and/or starting the cremator is often understood as a symbolic representation of igniting the funeral pyre which is traditionally lit by the nearest relative of the deceased (Laungani, 1996). Chetana explained that for her:

> It was quite surreal [emotional pause]. You see this box go into an oven. That's what it is. But, it was all quick. At that point in my head I knew, [….] we are burning him. […] But in my heart, it didn't feel like that was him. I felt quite detached in that sense. It is difficult to explain. […] You are not allowed to [do or touch anything]… there is a glass screen. You just stand behind the screen watching it go in. And that's it. It is quite impersonal to be honest. […] there was no button to press. We thought there would be, to kind of [start] the conveyer part. And when you [are in the chapel], you press the button there for the curtain

Fig. 2.1 Cremator viewing room, Kettering municipal crematoria. (Photograph by Avril Maddrell)

> to go around, but then in there, there is nothing to do. You just watch it. … you are behind a screen, to make it brutally honest, you are watching something go into like an oven. And then it just shuts off and then you are told it is done. […] I'd rather not have the screen, but if it is needed for health and safety purposes, I get that. Just to have that final touch of the coffin, it would have been nice. […] I know it sounds stupid, touching the coffin, but it is just that little… it would have been nice to have that opportunity. But it felt conveyer belt in that sense. It kind [of] came through, stopped for a second and went through. (Interview with Chetana, Northampton)

Not being able to perform required rituals such as this, may be understood as negatively affecting the status and wellbeing of both the mourners and the deceased (Maddrell et al., 2021; Nugteren, 2016), and may also be understood to have a negative impact upon the future welfare and prosperity of the family (Michaels, 2016). Cremation practices in the broader European context make it evident that more participatory approaches are possible and even common (see Mathijssen & Venhorst, 2019, on the Netherlands), which is indicative of much variation within the experience of the international Hindu diaspora (see Samarth, 2018, on Hindu cremation practices in Bali, Dallas, and Mauritius). However, for some Hindus the more regulated-industrial approach to cremation in the UK is welcomed as a break with certain Hindu practices such as watching the full cremation, breaking the deceased's skull, and turning the body in the flames (Firth, 2003).

Matters of familial and religious obligation can also arise when there are infrastructure failures, e.g., when the cremator breaks and there are delays to the cremation process. For one family, a faulty cremator caused delay, but they felt it was necessary to stay to complete their rites and obligation of care for the deceased. Here technical failure resulted in processual immobility: the immobility of the corpse, a hiatus in the spiritual process for the deceased, rendering the mourners immobile:

> Something went wrong with the machine. And there were people leaving their coffins on one side of the door. And I didn't want to go like that, I said [….] I'm not leaving like that. So we waited quite a while. Because you can't jump the queue. It is like a machine. So we just stood there on one side, and we said: 'No, we are not moving, until we see him cremated.' […]. And there was a coffin in a line, like that [gestures], on the floor. That is not the right way. (Saira, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton)

Another focus group participant highlighted the issue of fixed infrastructure features which are implicitly and explicitly culturally and symbolically Christian. This was experienced at best as a distraction, and at worst, upsetting: "You go there, and they have a cross. My focus is on the cross and it is … [inappropriate]" (Hindu woman, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton). Optional portable icons and curtains are an obvious solution (Maddrell et al., 2018) which have been adopted by some newer crematoria (see Fig. 2.2), but in several cases mourners had to provide their own statues, which is an additional thing to arrange and carry for the funeral: "They have recently installed an […] idol, lord Shiva, who is the important idol when people die. So, they have achieved that in Wellingborough. But in Northampton, people have to take theirs with them at the time of bereavement, the funeral" (Rani, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton).

Fig. 2.2 Portable Shiva statue, crematorium office, Northampton. (Photograph by Brenda Mathijssen)

Other aspects of the fabric and layout of buildings which are based on assumptions of majority practice can also reinforce majority norms, for example, pew-like benches which build in limitations of movement and mingling.

> The only comment I'd make is that when you enter [the municipal crematorium] you feel that it's like a church, Christian. […] Hendon put a curtain over the cross, and they put the Hindu symbol of ohm, which is in brass. [….] [describing his ideal crematorium] It won't look like a church. All the benches – they wouldn't be there. It would be a hall. Although for people who can't sit on the floor there would be chairs. People generally sit on the floor. (Interview with Raj, Swindon)

This highlights the drawbacks of materially embedding and fixing majority heritage beliefs, iconography and cultural norms within the architecture and fittings of municipal buildings which serve increasingly diverse local populations, including multiple faiths and secular residents.

One Hindu ritual which is difficult to practice in Britain is *phūl chānnā* or "picking the flowers," when the family pick over the cremated remains in the presence of a priest in order to find any visual signs in the remains of the deceased as to their fate in the afterlife, which are then taken with the ashes to the river. As Rani explained:

> In Hindu culture, we are not supposed to bring those ashes in [to the home] […] So there is that ritual that has to happen in my religion, which is called *phūl chānnā*, and what it means is that the family picks up the bones. Now, practically that is not possible here. (Rani, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton)

The standard crematorium practice of processing or cremulating cremated remains into fine grain fragments, as well as the lack of appropriate venues, represent barriers to the practice of *phūl chānnā* making this "not possible." However, *phūl chānnā* could be accommodated by firstly, making cremulation an option rather than assumed norm, and secondly, with the provision of a suitable bookable side room at the crematorium or in funeral homes, which could be used by Hindu families and their priests.

On a more prosaic level, the physical mobility of mourners, the getting to and from funerals, especially multi-staged events, can be an issue, as public transport links are often poor for suburban or out-of-town crematoria and cemeteries, where high levels of car ownership are assumed. This was reported as the case even for new and otherwise well-designed crematoria. One, which was praised for suiting Hindu needs in other respects, such as neutral and flexible ritual spaces and longer time allowed for ceremonies, required a fifteen-minute walk from the nearest bus stop, along a major road with inadequate pedestrian walkways (multifaith women's focus group, Swindon). This inadequate infrastructure excluded a significant number of elders from attending community funerals (Ghurkha focus group, Swindon). Taking taxis or hiring buses for communal transport for funerals is expensive, either for individuals or "another expense on the family, you know. Hiring a bus" (Dhriti and Mariam, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton). Such barriers to mobility highlight the need for diversity-sensitive planning and management of public services (Beebeejaun et al., 2021).

The next section turns to the practical material and more-than-representational spiritual mobilities of the deceased after cremation.

2.7 Dispersal of Cremated Remains, Spiritual Mobilities, and Gender

The dispersal of cremated remains in the Ganges is an iconic image of Hindu funerary practice, whereby the physical mobility of the ashes in the river travelling to join the unifying ocean is symbolic of the spiritual journey of the deceased. In keeping with the wider trend of declining repatriation from the UK to South Asia, participants reported both continuity of that practice and new places for, and ritual forms of, dispersal in England and Wales:

> It varies quite a lot [….] if the individual has not expressed a desire what they wish them to do with the ashes, then, different things happen. A dear friend just took it to a place in Coventry, where you are allowed to scatter the ashes. Sometimes, people go to India and take the ashes and do the ceremony. [….] There is no hard and fast rule about it. And the majority of families still, in my knowledge, take it to India. So they keep it in the garage or somewhere, [….] and they try to make that happen sooner than later and take the ashes to India, to the river Ganges. (Rani, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton)

One point of interest in this and other accounts such as Chetana's, is the tension between the need of the deceased for prompt cremation in the interests of spiritual

mobility and the commonly delayed material mobility of mourners and the remains of the deceased until they are able to travel from the UK to India for final disposition, leaving both the deceased and mourners in hiatus. In the case of the remains of the deceased, this liminal state is evident in their containment in places such a domestic garage, or, as reported in another interview, with specific undertakers who agree to store ashes for some months, in order to avoid ritual pollution to the Hindu home. For other participants, the UK is their preferred location for the disposition of cremated remains. Consequently, finding a suitable location for scattering ashes was seen as the biggest obstacle for funerary rituals for both Hindus and Sikhs.

Informal conversation at a women's focus group in England suggested clear gender differences in disposition preferences, evident in those Hindu women expressing a tactical approach (de Certeau, 1984) to their religious practice, preferring for their remains to be nearer to their children, rather than being taken to the Ganges, where their more traditionally observant husbands preferred to have their remains dispersed. Indeed, some women were complicit with their adult children in these arrangements. One woman stated with laughter that if she died first, her husband would take her remains to India, but that if she survived him, her adult children were to disperse her remains wherever suited them (focus group, Northampton). Another reported:

> The dispersal of ashes. We used to have the river Ganges, flowing water. Now my children have said, what are we going to do? I said, you know what, just do it down the stream at the back of the house. That will be fine for me. [….] You don't want to put too much pressure on the children, we need to simplify it. (Gita, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton)

She also considered the effort and expense of hiring a boat in Brighton or London for ash scattering to be an unnecessary burden on the next generation, favouring a pragmatic and nuclear family-place-attachment-centred choice for disposition.

Interestingly, few participants had heard of the consecrated and Environment Agency approved site for disposition of cremated remains on the River Soar, although many were aware of other informal sites and practices of dispersal, and some faith groups were lobbying for local designated sites for dispersing cremated remains on moving water near or leading to the sea. However, extended and concerted lobbying for a locally approved ritual dispersal site by joint Sikh and Hindu interest groups had caused much frustration for long time campaigners in Wales: "We want it here in Cardiff [slams his hand on the table] where the local community people can go to the place, and numbers are not a restriction" (Ajeet, Sikh focus group, Newport). At the time of data collection, progress had been achieved with a willing local authority, but developing an officially sanctioned site in South Wales had stalled; the site was finally opened in 2021 (BBC, 2021). Others reported that elsewhere the Environmental Agency had agreed *ad hoc* arrangements when pressed by visiting transnational mourners under the time pressure of return travel, visa restrictions etc., and that this site at the confluence of rivers near Luton was subsequently formalised as a designated zone for scattering cremated remains (Harpreet, Sikh focus group). Hindu and Sikh participants expressed a strong desire firstly for an agreed suitable fixed point for local disposition, what in mobilities studies is

referred to as a "mooring" for mobile practices (Hannam et al., 2006); and secondly, for the convenience and affordability of such local sites:

> I think that could simplify life for people and make it a lot easier. As long as that flowing water [….] [goes] into a river and then an ocean or something, then it will release people. […] So I think, if one looking at building such appropriate facilities [….] that would just complete the whole picture. And the whole process could be stress-free […] I think every city should have that facility. If families want to scatter the ashes, they should be able to do it. (Rani, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton)

Participants from this focus group have since initiated negotiations with local authorities for a designated local site for the dispersal of cremated remains.

2.8 Fixed, Evolving and Hybrid Spaces and Practices

The examples discussed above evidence both common sacred beliefs and practices and differences between varied Hindu geographical communities and faith traditions, as well as varying degrees of fixity, evolution and hybridity of both majority and Hindu infrastructures and practices. The change in practice away from the repatriation of cremated remains to India to local disposition echoes trends emerging during the fin de siècle with British Muslims moving towards the local disposition of the dead (Gardner, 1998; Jassal, 2015), a trend which has continued in the first two decades of the twenty first century (Maddrell et al., 2018), and which also has been observed elsewhere in Europe (Balkan & Masarwa, 2022; Kadrouch-Outmany, 2016). Yet some young British-born Hindus, such as Chetana, have made arrangements for their own disposition in India, illustrative of both the continuity and multiplicity of Hindu disposition practices in England and Wales.

Participants in this study also reported both the shortening of traditional rituals because of work obligations, or the time limits of mourners travelling from other parts of the UK only staying briefly for the funeral and immediate rituals; or due to clashes with other pre-existing life events such as long-scheduled weddings: "People are cutting it short, they are having a more practical approach. So they are not waiting for the eleventh or the thirteenth day, they do it like on the fifth day or the seventh day" (Rani, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton). They also described other aspects of hybridisation of cultural practices through the adoption of British practices such as giving eulogies at funerals: "Now that we are in the western world, people follow the western style and do speeches. In India they don't do speeches" (interview with Raj, Swindon). Other changes include the wider unpredictable ground of contemporary funeral dress codes, with some adhering to the strict Indian tradition of white clothing for mourning, others being more pragmatic. One participant noted: "It used to be white …. sometimes […] you come from work in the morning [so wear work clothes]. So I think we are moving all the time" (Gita, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton). The same participant planned to leave radical instructions for her own funeral, reflecting personal preferences and majority British trends away from uniform dress codes for funerals: "So

dress code, for myself, I'm going to do mine personal. Everybody to wear something red you know. Colourful. It is a personal choice" (Gita, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton). The women in this focus group were happy to be free of other traditions such as the *rudaalis,* professional ritual mourners who were paid to attend funerals in some parts of India, and who were discussed with a mixture of nostalgia and amusement.

The discussion amongst this group about ritual cleansing after the funeral and whether it was permissible to eat before bathing and changing clothes was less unanimous. One respondent described how she had faithfully refused to eat before bathing after a funeral, but had been surprised to discover at a funeral in India that this ritual was no longer the norm there and had been superseded by the washing of hands and a symbolic sprinkle of water. These changes are summed up well by the concluding remarks in a wider conversation on this topic by Hindu women at the multifaith women's focus group:

> Rani: I have now changed to a situation where after the funeral, I go back to the hall or the family home, and done the sprinkling of water, you know, quick rinsing of hands and things, and then [afterwards] I will go home and have a shower, wash my hair.
> Saire: [If] I don't do straight away [washing], I can't eat anything.
> Rani: Ah yes, I have started eating now. It moves on with time. (multifaith women's focus group, Northampton)

Others reflected on changes in the spatialities and temporalities of ritual, especially single day travel to distant funerals and a declining practice of having or handling the body in the home prior to cremation, as well as wider personal circumstances, as justification for changes to the requirements for ritual cleansing. However, some persistent sectarian and social divisions were transferred from South Asia to Britain (Zavos, 2012). For example, Arya Samajis include an additional fire ceremony after the cremation and have a shorter mourning period; however, this shorter mourning process is not necessarily deemed acceptable by all other Hindus (interview with Raj, Swindon).

Two further key shifts in ritual and social performances related to gendered and generational changes to Hindu funerary practices: "In India, ladies don't go to the crematorium. They send off the body and that's it. [….]. Here they will sit in the front row" (interview with Raj, Swindon). As Chetana articulated in the opening interview extract, the role of chief mourner in Hindu rituals is traditionally reserved for the eldest son. Shifts evidenced in women's attendance at funerals, and even more so in taking on ritual roles, represent symbolic and discursive movement – mobility – in the gendering of ritual practices. Although religiously conservative in some aspects of funerary rites, such as maintaining the ideal of the dispersal of cremated remains in the Ganges, as an educated and independent (single) woman, Chetana was empowered to challenge gendered norms shaped by traditional timeframes and assumptions about menstruation. For her, the reduction of the twelve-day mourning process to a concentrated timeframe centring on the cremation and a deferred trip to scatter ashes in the Ganges, meant that biologically-determined exclusions of women from ritual roles were redundant:

> The reason in the olden days that women didn't used to do this is because it used to be an eleven days period, sometimes longer, and in that period, in India in the olden days, there used to be a religious ceremony every day. But the same person has to do it [all]. Now a woman, if she comes on her period, she wouldn't be able to do it. […]. If you are on your period, you are not allowed to do religious stuff. So that's why women didn't use to do it, and why it was always very male dominated. Whereas in the UK, it is not, and even in India now, it is not done like that, with a religious ceremony every day as such. It is all accumulated on the eleventh day, when it is all done at once. So there is no reason why a daughter wouldn't be able to do it [….] because you are not meant to go to the Mandir and stuff [when menstruating]. You are not meant to stand before God for those three or four days. You are impure. I never understood it, because it is God who gives you this [bodily function] technically, so… God made you that way […] (Interview with Chetana, Northampton)

The women in our study also indicated that their children might not want to follow the traditional Hindu cremation practice of the ritual washing of the body. Attitudes to ritual washing were shaped by a lack of experience for the younger generation, and motherly concern to avoid over-burdening their children emotionally at what would already be an emotionally-laden time-space:

> It is a proper procedure, it is not just a bucket of water on them. [….] I don't want them to go through all that ….[…] Because… [… it's] too traumatic …[…] You don't want to add pressure on them. (Saira, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton)

Instead, the mature women in this group offered support to each other and had agreed to support the younger generation when one of their group passed away, each advising their children to refer to the group's leader who would guide and assist: "'[Rani] will be able to help you.' That's what I said to them, 'and she will arrange everything and will help you.' Because we are all mothers and all our children are very close" (multifaith women's focus group, Northampton). These women in the focus group also expressed their adult children's unfamiliarity with death rituals and preferences to break with traditions such as viewing the body in the coffin at home:

> At the moment they bring the body home, some are doing a little ceremony at home as well, but some do it at the crematorium. They open [the coffin to view] the body. My [daughter] said: 'Mom I don't want to bring you home.' I said: 'No problem' [all laugh]. I don't want to come home. (Gita, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton)
>
> Open one time, that's it. Not three times open the coffin, and the children have to go through again, and have to look at Mom's face and cry again. (Saira, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton)

Positive changes, such as better arrangements of and at crematoria, were really welcomed for the ease this brought to an already emotionally fraught time-space of mourning and funeral arrangements. Equally, immobility, in the case of persistent lack of change over decades was deeply disappointing and frustrating to those hoping for change, as well as hurtful, resulting in a sense of less than full citizenship:

> I haven't seen any changes in the last thirty years. Any changes. Every time I go I feel, not disgusted, but disappointed, thinking… We go to London quite a lot to do the funerals and I see the changes there every time. The cafes and the flowers and the bits and pieces. And to me, that [Ohm] symbol is very important, and I just think here, you go there, and they have

> a cross. My focus is on the cross and it is…[distracting]. So I haven't seen any changes in 30 years. (Gita, multifaith women's focus group, Northampton)

This persistent symbolic marginalisation of minorities within public spaces and services accumulates emotionally and politically and constitutes a form of slow harm (Maddrell et al., 2021) and exacerbate what Bhugra and Becker (2005) have described as a form of cultural bereavement.

2.9 Conclusion

Drawing on embodied, gendered, racialised and other meaning-centred approaches to understanding migration and mobilities (Kofman, 2004; Vacchelli, 2018), this empirical study has examined current Hindu cremation practices in England and Wales. It evidences trends away from repatriation by British families of South Asian origin or heritage resulting in increased demand for appropriate and timely cremation services that suit varied Hindu ritual needs. This fine-grained research has identified these needs as: prompt cremation; accommodating ritual requirements for witnessing the charging the cremator; appropriate religious iconography in municipal crematoria; the option for non-cremulated remains; agreed designated accessible sites and infrastructure for the disposition of cremated remains in local rivers; public transport connectivity; and long-term planning to meet the needs of changing demographics. Some communities would also welcome venues which can be made available at short notice for pre- and post-cremation rituals, and appropriate designated spaces for the bodily rituals of washing the deceased prior to cremation and "picking the flowers" post-cremation.

Personal mobility affords mourners from other areas the opportunity to witness different and better crematorium services and practices elsewhere, as is evident in participant references to crematoria in larger urban areas with concentrations of Hindu residents, such as Hendon (a North West London borough) and Luton, where ongoing negotiations of funerary needs and provision are typically more advanced. These crematoria serve as a benchmark for inclusive practices for wider Hindu communities, and awareness of better provision for Hindu rituals elsewhere heightens the sense of injustice in being subjected to lack of movement – progress – in inadequate funerary infrastructure and norms in smaller towns, which raises questions about what Modood (2010) describes as inclusive citizenship.

This study also evidences continuities and changing practices within Hindu rituals, witness Chetana, the young British-born Hindu woman whose words opened this chapter, and who both challenged gendered Hindu funerary ritual norms and expressed her commitment to having her cremated remains taken to the traditional sacred site of the Ganges. International mobilities also lead to evolving practices, seen in the case of migrants who made return visits to India were surprised to discover changes to practices in their country of origin compared to more conservative practices upheld by migrants in England and Wales. Participants also highlighted

the importance of networks of mutual emotional and practical bereavement support, notably within informal women's groups and more formal strategic alliances, such as those between Hindus and Sikhs in Wales co-lobbying local councils for the provision of a riverside site for the dispersal of cremated remains in the Newport-Cardiff area. However, while these negotiations reflect active "lived citizenship" (Kallio et al., 2020) and this designated area was agreed in principle, until 2021 funding had proved an infrastructural barrier to materialising this translocal and mobile practice which would allow residents to meet their lifecycle ritual needs within their municipality, i.e. the "mooring" of their home area and community.

Thus, death rituals and disposition preferences amongst migrant and established minority Hindu communities evidence diversity, conservatism, and hybridity with local culture in different ways and to varying degrees. At the same time, majority practice can also change to become more accommodating of diverse ritual needs, and may adopt elements of minority practices (Maddrell et al., 2018). Focusing on Hindu crematorium and funerary needs in England and Wales contributes to the call for attention to different kinds of mobilities and the significance of the migrant dead (Jassal, 2015). It also highlights the changing local-national-international mobilities of cremated remains and other varied and evolving practices and beliefs, as well as contributing to a reframing of (post)diasporic Hindu identity and belonging in Britain. This chapter has shown aspects of both diasporic and post-diasporic identity expressed and experienced through varied dialogic and dialectical corporeal, material, institutional and religious-emotional mobilities and immobilities which are shaping contemporary Hindu funerary practices, and experience of these, in English and Welsh towns.

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