

**Pitru Paksha**  
**A season of Homage to ancestors**

August 2011

Ramamurthy N

According to *Chandramana* calendar coming month is *kanya* – month of *Mahalaya Paksha*. This is the fifth and dark lunar fortnight from the start of *Dakshinaayana*. It is a belief that our ancestors (*pitrus*), will be waiting in this world for their heirs to offer them food and water. Hence this *paksha* is apt to do *pitru karmas*.

Some significant aspects about *tarpana* – oblations to *pitrus* are discussed here.

Every individual owe some debts:

- Debts to *Devas* – *Deva runam*
- Debts to sages – *Rishi runam*
- Debts to ancestors – *Pitru runam*

Out of the above debts to ancestors takes priority. In accounting terminology we used to call subordinated debts – prioritising the debts in repayment. In this context, the debt to *Devas* is the subordinated one, i.e. given least priority and the debts to *pitrus* is the most prioritised. It can be noted that on the *pitru* days like *Amavasya*, *sraddham*, etc., the *pitru karma* is done first before even the daily routine *poogas*. That much importance is given to *pitrus*.

### **Ancestral Worship across the globe**

Such worship of ancestral or *pitrus* annually or otherwise is nothing specific to India or Hindus. For instance:

#### **Christianity**

The commemoration of all the faithful departed is celebrated by the Church on 2<sup>nd</sup> November, or, if this be a Sunday or a solemnity, on 3<sup>rd</sup> November every year. The Office of the Dead must be recited by the clergy and all the Masses are to be of Requiem, except one of the current feast, where this is of obligation. The family members assemble in the burial ground and provide their offerings to the departed souls in their family.

#### **China**

"The Chinese have always been interested in their past -- worship of ancestors is worship of origins." (Heinz 1999:225). Ancestor worship (also called as ancestor veneration) is a ritual practice that is based on the belief that deceased family members have a continued existence, take an interest in the affairs of the world, and possess the ability to influence the fortune of the living. Early forms of ancestor worship were deeply rooted and extensively developed by the Late Neolithic Period in China. The goal of ancestor worship is to ensure the ancestors' continued well-being and positive disposition towards the living and

sometimes to ask for special favors or assistance. The social or nonreligious function of ancestor worship is "to cultivate kinship values like filial piety, family loyalty, and continuity of the family lineage." (Yang 1957:278)

### ***Pitrus in Vedas.***

Father and mother are the direct Gods as far as this world is concerned. But once the God competes with the parents, they are to be left for the sake of God. The *Veda* says '*Maatru Devah Pitru Devah*' which mean that parents are the God as far as the world is concerned and God is the parent when God enters one's life. Thus the word in the *Veda* has two meanings accepted by grammar.

*Manu Dharma Shastra (Manu Smruthi, 12-94)* says :

*Pitru deva manushyaanam veda: chackshu sanaatanam  
Akshayam cha aprameyam cha Veda shastra miti sthithi:*

According to *Garuda Purana*:

The *Bhoo Loka* is subdivided into four sub-worlds and as we go up, the component of energy in the body increases gradually. The *Bhoo Loka* is the starting world, which is subdivided into *Martya Loka, Preta Loka, Naraka Loka* and *Pitru Loka*. The lowest *Martya Loka* is the region in which the human beings live with materialised human bodies. As we go up, the matter gets transformed into energy. In *Pitru Loka*, the body has a lot of energetic-phase and very little matter-phase. After *pitru loka*, the next *bhuva loka* starts in which all the bodies are of complete energy. The respiratory and digestive systems in the body become weaker and weaker as we go to *Pitru Loka*. The souls in *Pitru Loka*, take almost moonlight as their main food in which the concept of matter becomes almost negligible. The souls in the *Pitru Loka* or moon are almost having energetic bodies.

The *pitrus* in the *pitru loka* take three different forms called *Vasu, Rudra* and *Aaditya*. Immediately after departing from this world the soul reaches the *Vasu loka*. When the next kin from the same family departs from this world, he moves to *Rudra loka* and newly arrived soul takes his place in *Vasu loka*. Similarly when still next kin departs, the first *pitru* moves to *Aaditya loka*, the second moves to *Rudra loka* and newly arrived takes the place in *Vasu loka*. That is the reason normally we call *pitru* (father), *pitamaha* (grandfather) and *prapitamaha* (great grandfather) as *Vasu Rudra Aaditya swaroopa* (form). *Veda* says there are 8 *Vasus*, 11 *Rudras* and 12 *Aadityas*. Probably they are administering the concerned *lokas*. They also act as courier to deliver our offerings to our relevant fore-fathers. The *mantra 'Oorjam...'* explains.

Mahabharatha story goes - Karna, when he left the mortal coil, ascended to the higher worlds and the great charity he had done here was returned to him hundredfold. But, it was all gold and silver; there was no food, as he had not done any food-charity! He prayed to the god of death. So, he was sent back to earth for fourteen days, to make-up for this deficiency. For fourteen days, he fed Brahmins and the poor, and offered oblations of water. On his return to the higher regions, he had food in plenty. It is these fourteen days that are

commemorated in the Mahaalaya Paksha. Due to the grace of the god of death, it has been ordained that offerings made during this period benefit all the departed souls, whether they are connected to the offeror or not.

The performance of *Shraddha* during *Pitru Paksha* is regarded as a compulsory by Hindus, to ensure that the soul of the ancestor goes to *moksha*. In this context, *Garuda Purana* says, "there is no salvation for a man without a son". *Markandeya Purana* says that if the ancestors are content with the *shraddhas*, they will bestow health, wealth, knowledge and longevity, and ultimately heaven and salvation (*moksha*) upon the performer.

The performance of *Sarvapitru amaavasya* rites can also compensate a forgotten or neglected annual *shraddha* ceremony, which should ideally coincide with the death anniversary of the deceased. *Shraddha* involves oblations to three preceding generations—by reciting their names—as well as to the mythical lineage ancestor. A person thus gets to know the names of six generations (three preceding generation, his own and two succeeding generations—his sons and grandsons) in his life, reaffirming lineage ties. This relationship is called as *Sapindas/ Sauthakas* in *Manu Smruti* and the same jargons are used in our laws also. Anthropologist Usha Menon of Drexel University presents a similar idea—that *Pitru Paksha* emphasises the fact that the ancestors and the current generation and their next unborn generation are connected by blood ties. The current generation repays their debt to the ancestors in the *Pitru Paksha*. This debt is considered of utmost importance along with a person's debt to his gurus and his parents.

### **Tarpanam**

The word *Tarpanam* means “to satisfy”. They are satisfied by the offering of till and water. There are different types of *tarpanams*:

1. Daily *tarpanam* to *devas*, *devarishis* and *devarishi pitrus* during *Brahma yagnam*.
2. *Grahana tarpanam* done during solar and/ or lunar eclipse period
3. *Parehani Tarpanam* done on the next day of *sraddha* – nowadays it is done on the same day at the end of the *sraddha*. *Maathamaha varga* is not covered in this.
4. *Shannavathi Tarpanam* – *shannavathi* in Samskrit means the number 96. Every individual has to do 96 *tarpanams* in a calendar year (the details are given in a separate section). This count does not include the *tarpanams* 2 and 3 above.
5. *Tarpanams* done at places like Varanasi, Gaya, Allahabad, Rameshwaram, etc.
6. *Kunda Tarpanam* done by the heir during the first ten days of death - normally by sons only for the departed soul.
7. *Kunda Tarpanam* done by all the relatives (*daayaadees*) on the tenth day – only for the departed soul.

*Tarpana* has to be done only during second half of *maadhyaanika* time – i.e. between 10:30 a.m. and 12:00 noon. However, if time does not permit, at least, it can be done after 9:00 a.m. Worst cum worst, it can be done after sun-rise, but definitely not before.

Some *tarpana* process or method may vary between *Aashvalaayana sootra*, *Aabasthamba sootra*, *Bodhayana sootra*, *Traahyaayana sutra*, etc. However, the basic principles do not change.

### ***Shannavathi Tarpanam***

According to *shastras*, 96 (*shannavathi* in Samskrit means 96) *tarpanas* are to be offered every year. This is in addition to eclipses and *sraaddha tarpanas*. For want of space, the details of 96 *tarpanas* are given separately.

Since performing 96 *tarpanams* is not much in vogue, the count of 96 and the days on which it falls, etc., vary from school to school. The relevant almanac may be verified.

The above list means literally every third day; we need to do one *Tarpana*, which may be practically difficult in these days. However, whatever possible can be done and at least 3 years in a life time, one can attempt to do all the 96 *tarpanas*. Here it is attempted to explain the nuances of *pitrus* and *tarpanam* and not the *tarpana* mantra per se. It would be great if *tarpana* is done not as a ritual, but with interest, even with passion, its complete fruit can be attained and people can avoid the curses from *pitrus*. Astrology gives more importance to *pitru shaabha* (curse of ancestors), which even affects the child birth, growth of heirs, etc.

*Ramamurthy N, a banker cum IT professional, pursues research on hidden scientific treasures in Samskrit.*

\*\*\*\*\*