

The crow and the vow

Why did Ambedkar ask Buddhists to abandon *śrāddha*? A queer Buddhist reflects on his decision to forgo the ritual and how its ideas about ancestors, karma and patrilineal descent govern the lives of the living.

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Crows feasting on rice balls at Tirunettur Mahadeva Temple in Kochi, Kerala, on August 3, 2024, on the occasion of “karkidaka vavu bali”, when people make rice ball offerings to their ancestors as part of a death ritual. In Hindu tradition, crows represent the departed, and feeding them is akin to feeding the deceased ancestors. | Photo Credit: THULASI KAKKAT

Every year, in the fortnight before the new moon of Ashwin, [Hindu](#) families across the country perform *śrāddha*, the ritual offering of food to deceased ancestors. A common way to perform the ritual is to place the offering somewhere outside for crows to eat.

The historian David Knipe has written about another post-death ritual, known as *sapindikarana*, at the Ramakunda in Nashik, a special *śrāddha* site for western India, where the “sacrificer” lays out the offering and waits to see whether the first crow to approach eats it without hesitation. If the crow struts with disinterest, “the sacrificer and mourners understand that the deceased is declaring to them his dissatisfaction and they then must remember how and where they have failed him”.ⁱ While *sapindikarana* is different from *śrāddha*, both operate on a common belief: the crow’s response is read as the ancestor’s verdict.

My mother prepares the *śrāddha* offering and tells me to place the food outside. In the ritual's belief system, since ancestry runs through the male line, sons are preferred over daughters. I have stood over the offering more than once, watching for the crows. As the morsels sit there, and the crows don't come, I wonder whether the refusal is about me: about a life lived unmarried, queer, and without children. Have I failed my ancestors?

The question troubles me enough to pick a fight with my mother, without really telling her what troubles me. Returning home from the no-show of crows, I snap at her: "We have to stop doing this ritual because we're Buddhists." Calmly, she tells me: "Your [Buddhist](#) father did the *śrāddha* too."

What does Buddhism say?

In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (a collection of Buddhist scriptures), a Brahmin named Jāṇussoṇi asks the Buddha directly whether the offerings made in the *śrāddha* rite actually reach dead relatives. The Buddha's answer is yes, for those reborn in the realm of the departed, and he goes further: "It is proper to give gifts, it is proper to perform the *śrāddha* rite."

Later Buddhist literature, such as the *Petavatthu* (Ghost Stories), a Theravada Buddhist scripture, extend the same concern differently. The *Tirokuḍḍa Kaṇḍa* has hungry ancestral spirits relieved not by direct offerings but by gifts given to the Saṅgha, with the resulting merit dedicated to them. The historian Matthew Sayers traces this as a reworking of the Brahmanical rite.ⁱⁱ Ancient Buddhism appears to redirect the concern for the dead rather than refusing it.

This is the tradition B.R. Ambedkar inherited, but he seems to have gone against it. On October 14, 1956, at Deekshabhoomi in Nagpur, he prescribed 22 vows to the hundreds of thousands who embraced Buddhism alongside him. The sixth vow reads: *I shall not perform 'Śrāddha' nor shall I give 'pind-dan'*.ⁱⁱⁱ



A huge gathering on Vijayadashami day in 2018 at Deekshabhoomi in Nagpur, where Ambedkar and lakhs of followers embraced Buddhism on October 14, 1956. | Photo Credit: S. Sudarshan

The two rituals stage Hindu beliefs about death. According to these beliefs, the dead persist in some form; their existence is contingent on their own past conduct and the ritual diligence of the living. To refuse the rite is to refuse the metaphysics it depends on. The refusal must be read in Ambedkar's own words.

What does the sixth vow refuse and why? Ambedkar addresses this elsewhere, in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. In a chapter comparing what the Buddha accepted, modified, and rejected from the philosophical inheritance around him, Ambedkar draws a clear distinction. Belief in the soul (*Atman*) is placed under what the Buddha rejected outright: "The existence of the soul he [the Buddha] either ignored or denied."^{iv}

Karma is placed in a different category: "He [the Buddha] discarded the theory that all deeds committed in some former birth have the potency to produce suffering, making present activity impotent. He denied the fatalistic view of Karma. He replaced the view of Karma by a much more scientific view of Karma."^v

Elsewhere, Ambedkar is severe about what the fatalistic version of karma does socially, but the text does not abolish the causation aspects of karma, only the reading of the present as fixed payment for an unrecoverable past.

What makes *śrāddha* incoherent on Ambedkar's terms is not karma's disappearance but the absence of any persisting entity for the offering to reach. Ambedkar's doctrine of the soul is *anatta*, no-soul, and he argues it at length and directly: "Did the Buddha believe in the soul? No. He did not... his theory of the soul is called *anatta*, i.e., non-soul."^{vi}

Without a discrete self that survives death, there is no one there to be fed, sanctioned, or reincarnated into a crow. The ritual's entire grammar—that an ancestor exists somewhere, is nourished by an offering made in the right way, and communicates satisfaction or its absence through a bird's behaviour—presupposes precisely the entity that Ambedkar's Buddhism denies exists.

He is also explicit, in the same discussion, about what soul-belief does to power. Arguing against it, he writes that belief in the soul "gives the priesthood complete control over man from birth to death".^{vii} Disbelief in the soul is directly, textually tied to a critique of priestly authority over death.

Two deaths, one question

Two films stage the same metaphysical tension. Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati* and Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* each dramatise one half of Ambedkar's refusal: one insists on the fatalistic reading of karma while the other visualises the absence of a persisting self that *anatta* assumes.

The title of Ray's 1981 television film translates as "deliverance" or "a good death". Based on a short story by Munshi Premchand, published in 1931, it follows Dukhi, a poor "untouchable" Chamar labourer, who arrives at the house of a Brahmin priest named Ghasiram to have an auspicious date fixed for his daughter's wedding. Ghasiram works him through a series of arduous chores—sweeping, fetching, and finally splitting an enormous block of wood—while withholding food and rest from him. Already weakened by fever, Dukhi collapses and dies beside the block of wood.



A still from Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati*, featuring Smita Patil and Om Puri. | Photo Credit: THE HINDU ARCHIVES

What follows is the film's real subject. In a refusal to comply with the instructions of the Brahmin priest who caused the death, Dukhi's own community refuses to collect his body. His wife, Jhuria, goes to Ghasiram's house and curses him. Ghasiram himself will not touch the corpse, yet it must be disposed of somehow. He ties a rope to Dukhi's ankle and drags the body unceremoniously to a patch of waste ground, where it is left among the remains of dead cattle. A man's body is disposed of like carrion.

The title's irony works exactly along the line fatalistic karma draws. Dukhi dies in degrading obedience to caste order, but that obedience is precisely what the doctrine promises will be rewarded: a better rebirth, earned by sincere compliance in this one.

Even his disposal, however degrading, keeps him within the ritual economy a Brahmin priest administers rather than outside it. The worse the death looks, the more completely the title's irony depends on a belief the essay has already named: that present suffering is currency for a future the sufferer will never see and cannot verify.

Pa. Ranjith's 2018 film, Kaala, answers a structurally similar death in the opposite key. Its protagonist is killed in an act of caste-and-state violence, and the film's response is not pathos but multiplication: his death is followed by collective reassertion against caste oppression, staged visually as many bodies taking up his identity rather than one soul returning in a new one. A single resurrection would still assume a persisting self travelling

from one body to the next, the very premise *anatta* denies. What *Kaala* stages instead is dispersal, an identity that continues without needing any one continuous entity to carry it.

Where *Sadgati* stages caste death as the irony of a karmic promise, *Kaala* stages it as proof that no single self is needed to survive for the political meaning of that death to continue. Between the two runs the same distance the essay has been arguing throughout: between a world that requires an entity to receive its verdicts, and one that does not.

The male line

The refusal in Ambedkar's sixth vow is precise: no persisting self, therefore no one to whom an offering can be made. But *śrāddha*'s incoherence on these terms is not only metaphysical, it is also gendered. This is where the ritual's exclusion of a life like mine stops being incidental and starts being structural.

The ritual of *śrāddha* favours male descendants because Hindu kinship carries ancestry through the male line. The anthropologist Jonathan Parry, in his study of mortuary ritual in Banaras, records the logical extreme of this principle: no *sapindikarana*, the rite by which the deceased is finally merged into the ancestral line, is performed for an unmarried woman, because she has no lineage of her own, and her spirit is said simply to “disappear into the air”.^{viii}

Sapindikarana itself, Parry notes, might be rendered “making one flesh”; the *sapinda* relatives it defines (for inheritance, for marriage prohibition, for who mourns whom) are “an essentially agnatic unit”.^{ix} The ritual has no place for anyone outside the reproductive, patrilineal line it exists to secure.



Paying obeisance to ancestors, at Banganga tank in Mumbai in 2016. | Photo Credit: Vivek Bendre

Pind-dan and *śrāddha* are related but not identical. *Pind-dan*, the offering of the rice ball itself, is a rite performed soon after a death, and it is reserved for men. In the absence of a male heir, a widow may perform *śrāddha*, the broader act of ancestral offering. The sixth vow's pairing of the two terms, *pind-dan* and *śrāddha*, is therefore apt: it closes off both the narrower, exclusively male rite and the broader one that could otherwise pass to a woman when no son survives.

That precision reflects a shared assumption behind all 22 vows: that the new entrant into Buddhism arrives from within the Hindu fold. Therefore, the vows move through renunciations of Hindu belief and practice, and affirmations of Buddhist ones.

The historian Uma Chakravarti has argued that caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy in the Brahmanical social order are not parallel structures but a single one. Because caste is transmitted bilaterally, through both parents, effective control over women's sexuality becomes, in her words, "possibly the central factor" in maintaining caste continuity.

That control secures patrilineal succession, true of patriarchies generally, but it also secures something more specific. It secures caste purity itself, what she calls "the institution unique to Hindu society".^x

Women, in Turkish anthropologist Nur Yalman's formulation that Chakravarti draws on, are "gateways": the pivot on which the entire structure of land, lineage, and ritual purity all depend.^{xi}

If that is right, then the ritual eligibility *śrāddha* reserves for men is one of caste's own mechanisms of reproduction. A life as mine—unmarried, queer, and without children—lived outside the reproductive line the ritual was built to secure, unsettles the very premise the ritual assumes: that there will be a next male link to keep the chain going. This is a single disruption, not two placed side by side, because the "acceptable man" the ritual was built to reproduce was never gender-neutral, let alone sexuality-neutral.

Reckoning as renewal

The ancient Buddhist canon, the *Jāṇussoṇi Sutta*, and the *Tirokuḍḍa Kaṇḍa*, use the Pali word *saddha*, not the Hindu *śrāddha*. Sayers is clear that *saddha* is itself a Brahmanical

term the Buddhist canon absorbed, and the rite it names is recognisably related to the Hindu *śrāddha*.

Whatever accommodation the ancient canon reached, it reached with a rite under its own name, in its own time, addressed to its own believers. *Saddha* redirected the offering to the Saṅgha rather than refusing the sentiment behind it. It was perhaps an unreasoned concession, but it is understandable why that concession may have been allowed. Few things are harder to sit with than mortality, and fewer still than the end of a relationship that death does not actually end. Some way of continuing to be in relation with the dead is a reasonable thing for a tradition, or a person, to want.

But wanting is not the same as the thing wanted being innocent of other purposes. *Śrāddha* validates that want. It also, on Ambedkar's own analysis, does something else at the same time: it hands control of the living to a priesthood, and it sustains a promise, the fatalistic reading of karma, that present submission earns future reward, however degrading the submission and however unverifiable the reward. Once that is seen clearly, the sixth vow does not need defending.



Performing “pind dan” in Prayagraj, a file picture. | Photo Credit: AMAR DEEP/PTI

My father was an Ambedkarite Buddhist and performed *śrāddha* anyway. I do not and cannot know why. It may have been that the sixth vow, specifically, was never quite reckoned with, lost somewhere in the larger life experience of being the first in his biological family to have embraced Buddhism.

It may have been something closer to what the ancient canon itself conceded, an inability to refuse ancestors who never took the vow themselves, who cannot be asked now whether they would have wanted it refused on their behalf.

There is a real weight in denying a rite to the dead who cannot object to being denied it, and it is not stable ground to stand on. My own difficulty with this vow gives me some sense, however speculative, of what that difficulty might have cost my father. I may never know more than that.

What I have arrived at, this year, is a position: that I will not perform *śrāddha*. But I do not think this is a settlement reached once and then held forever. It is closer to a vow that has to be renewed, and the renewing may be the only form the vow can actually take. If that means returning to this argument, this material, this same conflict, each year around this time, then that is what it costs to hold the position, and it costs less than carrying the conflict unexamined.

The absence of crows used to make me wonder what I had done to deserve it, whether the life I had chosen was the reason my deceased ancestors were dissatisfied. That question is exactly what the ritual is built to produce. Answering it by trying to live differently, more conventionally, in the hope of satisfying the ancestors, is exactly the compliance the ritual is built to reward.

I do not have to keep asking the question. I do not have to treat my own life as a debt owed to the satisfaction of the dead. I will not perform *śrāddha*. That is where this reckoning, for now, ends.

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