

Fire and the Body: Ethnographic Perspectives on Cremation as Religious Practices of Mahato Community in Khirtala Village, Bangladesh

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Abstract: Cremation is a social practice with an in-depth historical perspective, which is difficult to define in a straightforward manner. However, this practice is a combination of fire and the body that takes place through a communal process. The term cremation can refer to the act of burning a corpse, and it has a wide range of applications in terms of geography, culture, social practice, and ritual. For a long time, individuals of diverse faiths and religious traditions have practiced cremation. In 2021, an ethnographic study was conducted on the Mahato people, a distinct ethnic group living in Bangladesh's plain region, in Khirtala village, Raiganj upazila, Sirajganj district, to observe their cremation rite. During the field survey in Khirtala village, a month-long intensive observation was performed to study and understand the cremation procedure of the Mahato community and try to appreciate its ritualistic aspects as a whole.

Keywords: *Cremation; Ethnography; Mahato Community; Society; Ritual.*

Introduction: Cremation is a widespread issue that deals with death, the body, and the social world by fragmenting a body and creating a new form of human remains. Besides that, cremations pose an inimitable set of social, economic, and archaeological facts that play a distinct role in theorization. Cremation methods include several topics, most notably locations, pathways of the body, different rituals and participants [1, 2]. In the sub-continental context, dead body burning has long existed as an ancient rite and practice, especially among Hinduism followers, Jains and Sikh religions who practice historically demarcate religious communities from Muslims and Christians. This cremation is usually done by placing a pyre made of wood in the open air within 24 hours of death [3, 4].

According to religious beliefs, this cremation method is applied to free the soul from the defunct body [4]. Cremation is thought to have spread through technological and cultural diffusion in South Asia and other parts of Eurasia [5]. Until 1870, the West described the cremation process as an inhumane and abhorrent process; it was even referred to as heathen ways and barbaric customs because cremation causes a nauseous and disgusting smell [6, 7]. For Hindu cremation, dead bodies were taken to rivers or seas and floated ashes in sacred water, particularly in Ganges. For Hindu cremation, funeral rites were socially presided over by Brahmin priests. Lots of fuel, expensive sandalwood and copious amounts of ghee and coconut oil are used to burn dead bodies. As a result, the smell of burning flesh generally reduces. However, cheap and simple firewood bundles, a cotton winding-sheet and some oil also use for the availability [6, 7].

From 2018 to 2021, ethnographic research in Khirtala village, Raiganj upazila, Sirajganj district, Bangladesh, discovered that the village is home to various ethnic groups. In addition, many archaeological relics may also be found in the settlement, indicating the importance of the site. The current research is based on an ethnographic study of the ethnic people of Khirtala village, particularly the Mahato people, who make up the majority of the hamlet's population. The primary purpose of this study was to examine the Mahato community's cremation procedure and try to correlate it with the cultural, ethnic, and religious aspects of society. The term 'ritual' is, in a sense, something from daily life that is formalized, contains rules and social conventions, reproduces and legitimizes social-structure from historical background and is connected with religious belief and supernatural aspects. Various types of theoretical analysis and interpretation have been discussed in the context of ritual. This study aims to learn about those norms and values and explore the essence of cosmological and social domains based on an ethnographic

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observation of the Mahato community living in Khirtala village. This study was conducted to intensely scrutinize the religious functions, especially the cremation ritual, of the Mahato community inhabited in Khirtala village in profundity.

Theoretical Framework: The study of human culture by sociologists adds a new dimension to anthropology called ethnography. Ethnography covers all aspects of human culture; however, it mainly focuses on human belief, social relations, rituals, customs, and performing arts. In this process, the context of a particular culture is observed by entering into a culture [8]. In this case, various aspects of that culture are presented in research through long term participants' observation in the society or community. However, theorists have raised many questions about ethnography from the postmodernist theoretical point of view. Notably, the impact of subjectivity on ethnography is undoubtedly much more remarkable [9, 10]. Later, although, the theorists accepted that there is no 'absolute truth' of interpretation but that it works as a plausible explanation of the collected field data. These ubiquities of ethnography appear to be a big challenge for the ethnographer. In the past, ethnographers speculated that ethnography could portray the truth of a culture [10]. But, even recent changes in theoretical concepts have emphasized self-reflexivity and an understanding of the researcher's subjectivity in the visual culture. On another side, ethnography has been widely used to study human culture [8, 11]. Usually, the researcher attempts to understand the phenomena of society by applying the ethnographic method. As a result, the ethnographic theory has been used in the present study from a position where authors believe there is no 'absolute truth'.

Methodology: The participants' observation method was followed as a research method, and the findings obtained were analyzed through both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Participants' observation was mainly focused on cremation related issues and had to stay in Khirtala village for a couple of months to observe the ceremonial functions of Mahato community. Also, Mahato people from 10 different professions who took part in the cremation were interviewed. Besides that, Key Informant Interview (KII) was conducted to comprehend the cremation method of Mahato community. As Key Informants, one university teacher; two NGO workers; and two senior Mahato people were interviewed to receive their feedback.

Socio-Cultural Context of the Mahato People Inhabit in Bangladesh: Arguably, the Mahato community lived on the Kudum, a River was a tributary of the Sindhu River [12]. The Mahato community later spread to other parts of Paschimbanga and Bangladesh besides this region. However, colonial set-up and policies may have led to cultural exchange between indigenous and peasants in the subcontinent [13]. Later, due to colonial provocation, peasants forced the tribal to convert to Sanskritization or tribal absorption in Hinduism. In Bangladesh, the word *adibashi* refers to those who are the oldest inhabitants or early settlers in Bangladesh, whose general meaning is *adibashi* and indigenous from an anthropological perspective [14, 15]. However, mainstream people of this country sometimes refer to the term *adibashi* as *Pahari*, *Janglee* or *Upajati* [16]. The term 'Tribal' was used in Act 12 and rules 6, 34, 45 & 50 of the CHT regulation 1900. Besides that, 'Aboriginal' term was also used in section 97 of the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950 [17].

Presently in Bangladesh Mahato community mainly lives in Dinajpur, Kurugram, Gaibandha, Bogura, Natore, Sirajganj, Pabna, Rajshahi, Naogaon, Chapainawabganj districts. Apart from this, some Mahato also works in tea gardens of the Sylhet district. Earlier, Mahato was referred to as Kurmi. It is believed that those who cleared the forest and made the land suitable for agriculture are known as Kurmi. The physical characteristics of Mahato are generally medium height; skin color is black and tan [14, 15].

In the present context, there are two clans of Mahato living in Bangladesh- Kurmi and Bediya. It is believed that the Bediya tribe followed the Bede of the Hindus. The Bediyas think that there was a king in their society, and they are the descendants of that king. It is to be noted that there is no custom of the marriage of Kurmi with Bediya. However, the Mahato social system is patriarchal. The daughter does not inherit the father's property. Children grow up as father's identity. In social terms, Mahato lives in a rural society, and farming is their principal occupation. Professionally, women also work in agricultural land alongside men. Besides agricultural occupation, men and women also are involved in livestock rearing. There is a village chief of in the Mahato community, known as Morol,

Mandol, Matobbor, Pramanik etc. The one who is faithful, honest and capable of administering justice is chosen as the community chief [14, 15].

The Mahatos of Bangladesh once had a lot of land for agriculture, but now they have lost their land due to land grabbing tendencies by the authoritarian power. As a result, many work as day laborers on other people's farmland. In this case, there is a proverb in the Mahato community, '*Noren Bigha Bujhe Nare, Acor Bujhe*' (Naren doesn't understand bigha; he understands acre). The gist of this proverb is that a Mahato named Noren once sold three bighas of land to a Bangali, but the cunning Bangali cheated with him and registered the land as an acre [14].

There are several sub-clans of Mahato inhabit in Bangladesh, including Pecha, Shuiya, Rukhi, Almon, Moyna, Kacchap, Shuri, Mohukal, Biha, and Kucha. Each of these groups has its taboo or religious discipline. In the Mahato community, marriage within the same tribe is prohibited. They consider the people belonging to the tribe to be blood relatives. Marriage is called Biha in the Mahato language. Usually, the marriage is solemnized with the consent of the bride and groom. However, the recent trend of love marriage and forced marriage is also noticeable in the Mahato community. Although widow marriage is prevalent in the Mahato society, widows do not usually remarry in the present context. However, the widower can marry at any time. Besides, the same man can live with multiple wives together [14]. According to religious rules, the Mahato community now follows the traditional Hindu system. In addition to worshipping various gods and goddesses, they believe in reincarnation. Their believing soul is immortal.

Study Area: The study area of this research is based on Khirtala village, located in Dhamainagar union of Raiganj upazila of Sirajganj district, which is mainly inhabited by ethnic people groups (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Geographic image of study area.

Among these groups, 835 Mahato family; 43 Shing family; 26 family of Murari or Pahan; 21 family of Turi or Mridha or Badyakar; 13 family Teli; 3 family Shil and 1 family of Santal community are inhabited in Khirtala village. Each family has an average of 4-6 members; about half of them are male and half of the others are female. Apart from Khirtala village in Dhamainagar union, ethnic people groups also live in nearby villages like Naopa, Barali, Kurcha, Golta, Shilpur etc. During the ethnographic survey, it was estimated that in a total around 4507 ethnic people groups including 4000 Mahato, 200 Shing; 120 Murari or Pahan; 90 Turi or Mridha or Badyakar; 78 Teli; 13 Shil and 6 people of Santal group live in Khirtala village (Table, 1). The Murari group sometimes claims themselves as Pahan, and the Turi group claims themselves as Mridha or Badyakar. These ethnic people groups

mostly make a living by cultivating on other people’s agricultural land. There are also very few people who get the opportunity to cultivate their agricultural land.

Table 1: Ethnic People Groups Inhabited in Khirtala Village.

Ethnic Groups	Households	Number
Mahato	835	4000
Shing	43	200
Murari or Pahan	26	120
Turi or Mridha or Badyakar	21	90
Teli	13	78
Shil	3	13
Santal	1	6

Funeral Rites for the Cremation of the Deceased: The So far no census has been conducted to calculate the exact number of Mahato living in Bangladesh [16]. However, Mahato community can be noticed in several parts of Raiganj upazila of Sirajganj district. Majority Mahato live in Khirtala village of Raiganj upazila. The ethnographic survey estimates that there are about 4000 Mahato people inhabit in Khirtala village; most of them are engaged in agriculture. In the Mahato community, *Ainash*, the religious text of the Mahato, is recited for the wellbeing of a sick person in case of death or a state of death. Later, in case of death, the funeral is performed according to different rituals. Although many think that the ethnic people groups follow traditional Hinduism, they follow Hinduism, but they have their religious texts, known as *Ainash*. The dead person, discuss in this study is a male and recited *Ainash* while he was alive. From a religious point of view, this person was referred to as *Santaguru* by the Mahato community. *Santaguru* is the spiritual leader of the Mahatos, who teaches people to recite the religious text *Ainash*. In this case, ethnic people groups respected him more as *Santaguru* of their community. The deceased’s name is Premananda Mahato, and it is estimated that he was above the 70s and died for old age.



Fig. 2: Funeral Rites for the Cremation of the Deceased.

There are many customs performed in the Mahato community for the funeral of a deceased (Fig. 2). Those are presented by observing their traditions and rituals:

Dead Body Heading North: Usually the head of the dead person is laid facing north at the base of the basil tree (Fig. 3). Neighbors were called for the funeral of the deceased. At this time, the child of the deceased or a close relative reads the religious book *Ainash* and listens to everyone. As a religious provision, the Mahato community believes that placing the head of the corpse on the north side will bring peace to the soul of the deceased. Besides, they believe in reincarnation, and the soul is immortal, the body is mortal. If anyone does terrible deeds in this world, then in the hereafter, that soul will be reborn as a dog.



Fig. 3: Image of Laid Dead Body Facing North. Source: Authors.

Bathing the Dead Body: In the context of death in Mahato community, the dead body first washes with aromatic soap. Then the body covered with a ten-hand-long pale-white cloth. If the deceased is married, five turmeric and vermilion pieces are taken down from head to toe for five times. The dead person is bathed for the last time to purify the body.

Place to Keep the Dead Body: The place where the dead body kept in the house's yard has to be sanctified by sprinkling rose water first (Fig. 4). Bed made of bamboo used to hold dead bodies (Fig. 5). Besides that, banana trees placed in the corpse bed. On the hand, a cloth is kept near the corpse to donate money for the deceased. The cloth is gently rounded a little, though not perfectly rounded. Incoming neighbors and relatives deposit money in that cloth according to their ability. In this case, first, the women deposit money, then the men donate money to that cloth. The money generally spends on snacks to those participants present during cremation.



Fig. 4: Image of Yard is Sanctified by Sprinkling Rose Water. Source: Authors.



Fig. 5: Image of Dead Body on Bamboo Bed. Source: Authors.

Kirtan Song: *Kirtan* is performed in the yard with harmonium, shell and other musical instruments beside the dead body. *Kirtan* is sung several times around the dead body as a ritual of Mahato community (Fig. 6). The community performs solo or group dances with traditional musical instruments at any family, social, cultural, and a religious festival is known as *Kirtan*.



Fig. 6: Image of Performing Kirtan. Source: Authors.

Sacred Flower and Ornaments: The Basil leaves are placed near the head of the dead body. For the male dead body, a Marigold flower and red Jaba flower keep on the head's west side (Fig. 7). Also, bangles, branches, kharu, vermilion etc. of his living wife are kept in the west side of the corpse if he dies while married.



Fig. 7: Image of Sacred Flower beside the Head of the Dead Body. Source: Authors.

Corpse Bed Decoration and Sprinkle Holy Water: Colored clothes, *agarbati* are used for corpse bed decoration to keep the dead body. Besides, a garland of flowers is placed on the head of the dead body. Soak a piece of sandalwood in a container filled with water and sprinkle the water on different parts of the bed and the dead body's head. The pot of water is then placed on the east side of the head. Then the Holy sentences are recited from the *Ainash* for wishing peace to the dead soul. The Holy sentences recite standing at the feet of the dead body.

Journey to Crematorium: The deceased was carried to the corpse bed, and four close relatives, including an elder son, carried the body on their necks (Fig. 8). Remembering the Lord's name and sprinkling mustard on the way, everyone behind the four goes to the crematorium. The reason for sprinkling mustard is that the soul of the dead may never return home. The dead body is placed on the north side in any secluded place on the way at some point along the road, and a lump of soil is taken from the ground with a spade, and then the soil is thrown away. After that, the journey starts again for cremation.

Crematorium: After the body was taken to the crematorium, it kept facing north. Wood, oil, ghee etc. are provided for cremation. People who brought corpses started to recite the religious text *Ainash*. The elder son of the deceased usually sets fire to the corpse's face. Before placing the fire, the elder son has to walk around the corpse five times (Fig. 9). Everyone has to stay barefoot while cremating corpses and gives chalk on the body during cremation.



Fig. 8: Image of Walk Around the Corpse. Source: Authors.

It usually takes approximately 3-4 hours to cremate a corpse (Fig. 10). When the corpse is cremated, the ashes are filled in a pitcher and buried in the pit. First, the elder son gave soil; then everyone started giving soil. Atap rice, bananas, milk etc. are offered to the deceased. The son invited everyone for a ritual called *Tinek Bhojua* in their house. An earthen jar filled with water was then placed near the dead body's head and smashed with a peg. Then, without looking back, they all set out to become holy. Two types of methods are commonly used after cremation a body; the ashes generally buried into the pit; on the other hand, everything, including ashes, is thrown into the pond. However, after the funeral, the whole part is cleaned with water—nothing to keep for the next day.



Fig. 9: Image of Cremating a Corpse. Source: Authors.

Journey for Sanctification: After cremation, everyone leaves the place for their own home to be sanctified themselves (Fig. 11). Subsequent to the funeral, all participants bathed and hugged the red palm tree before entering their houses. Since the palm tree lives a long time, that tree is embraced as a witness to the burial of the body. Then the mustard is burnt with fire, and it is taken in a pot. The pot is turned three times under the feet, and then the participants wash their feet. After that cleans their place by sprinkling water of the basil leaves and enters their room.



Fig. 10: Image of Journey for Sanctification. Source: Authors.

Food after the Cremation: When the married man dies, the participants are given a meal called *Dudhmuha*, made with milk and rice. In the case of married women dead, this food is prepared without milk. Jute stick is used as fuel in cooking. When the meal is over, the rest of the meal and bowls are thrown into the pond. Only fruits and rice husks allowed eating during the day time for three days. However, the child who set fire to the dead man's face remained in a five-handed white cloth for ten days.

Three Days of Mourning: The ritual that is observed for three days after death is called *Tinek Bhojua* by the Mahato community. During these three days, the neighbors came to the house of the deceased with rice husk. Everyone ate the food together and wished peace to the soul of the dead.

Ten Days of Mourning: People attending the funeral of a deceased person cannot cut their hair or beard for ten days. After ten days, the barber cut everyone's hair and beard. The priest stays with the *ghatpindi*. This ten-day

mourning is called *Dashek Bhojua* in Mahato community. On this day, the neighbors bring Chira, Muri, Yoghurt, sweets and serve them to everyone.

Twelve Days Mourning: On the 12th day of the deceased's funeral, everyone was fed protein as much as possible. Shiva is worshipped at night, and *Ainash* is recited throughout the night. Mahato community calls this day as *Barhoya Bhojua*. Mourning of a funeral is generally completed through these ceremonial activities.

Social Status and Gender: Power and money are related to the rituals that are performed for funerals in different community. Not all people in society are able to perform the same kind of ritual due to social status and hierarchy [18]. According to a school teacher in the Mahato community of Khirtala village, cremation is a costly ceremony that requires a lot of money to maintain the ritual (Table 2). Due to the inability of the poor Mahato people, they usually bury the dead body without cremation. The funeral system in the Mahato community is currently dependent on social status, money and power. Previously, however, corpses were only buried. Later, due to following traditional Hinduism, cremation has been incorporated as a ritual in their society. As cremation requires a lot of money, therefore everyone cannot afford this ritual. Consequently, impoverished Mahato people usually bury the dead.

Table 2: Materials Required for Funeral.

Items	Amount
Aromatic Soap	1
Pale White Cloth	2 Pieces
Rose Water	1 Bottle
Basil Leaf	One Bunch
Bell Leaf	15-20 Pieces
Turmeric	100 Gram
Marigold	1 Piece, 1 Garland
Red Rose	1 Piece
Sandalwood	1 Piece
Vermilion	50 Gram
Mustard	500 Gram
Banana Tress	2
Bamboo Made Bed	1
Harmonium	1
Shell	1
Jute Sticks	4-5 KG
Mango Wood	120-160 KG
Ghee	300-400 Gram
Coconut Oil	1 Liter

A patriarchal society mainly governs the Mahato community. However, in the past, men were more compassionate to women, but the patriarchal social order dominates women in the existing context. According to some senior Mahato people, long ago in the Mahato community, the groom used to give Konepon to the bride in the marriage ritual. Conversely, at present, the bride pays a large amount of money along with furniture and ornaments as dowry for marriage. As a result, during the marriage of the bride, her parents suffer a lot both financially and psychologically.

In addition to marital rituals, patriarchal authoritarian attitude towards women is also noticeable at funerals. Besides, there are some differences based on gender; different rituals are maintained for male and female dead bodies. After the female dead body cremation, the food provided by the Mahato community, called Dudmuha, special food is cooked and served without milk. On the other hand, after the male dead body cremation, Dudhmuha mixed with milk and serve to the accomplice.

Conclusion: As a complex cultural, ethnic, and religious backdrop, cremation has evolved into a heterogeneous process. In many regions, cremation is practiced as a traditional religious belief. In Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism, cremation is believed to be the path to the release of the soul, which assists the spirit on its eternal journey. The cremation action in the South Asian context is considered a cycle of death and a relationship with God. On the other hand, this relationship includes physical and psychological endurance, ceremonies, rituals, cosmology, and myth. In Bangladesh's context, mythological motifs, archaeological findings, and images also indicate contacts and cultural expansion since a long-term perspective that was not stable or uniformed. And the pattern of ritualistic approaches has been changed over time through individual beliefs, myths, and ritual phenomena. The present study revealed that the Mahato community's cremation practice has a complex link between the dead, the living and the material culture. In addition, this practice can be used for comparison while evaluating social connections within and outside the community. The issue of social hierarchy and gender is also significant along with the funeral of the deceased. Ethnographic observation also revealed that there are gender-based differences in funerals. Additionally, those who are financially indigent cannot follow cremation rituals, so they bury the dead. However, the cremation is a combination of fire and the body, taking place through a social, religious, and traditional process. Although there have been several transformations in the cremation process over time, this process is still practiced in the Mahato community.

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