

COMMENTARY ON DISPOSAL OF THE DEAD

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A discussion of various modes of disposal of the dead, available in North America: burial, cremation or dokhmenashini (by transporting the body to India); and a review of practices in Iran. In India, the preferred mode is dokhmenashini, which is discussed elsewhere in this issue.

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Dokhmenashini is the only way to avoid pollution to any element of nature – any other method for disposing the dead body invariably involves polluting at least one element of nature, which naturally forces us to resort to the lesser of the evils.

Burial. Burying a dead body has a double whammy, as it pollutes the earth and lets zillions of *Ahrimanic khrafastra* (worms) thrive on the body for decades, which has been known time and time again, to pollute nearby streams and water systems, resulting in serious epidemics.

Moreover, land belongs to the living in our religious tradition, and not to the dead. I was surprised to see how much of the land in Iran (Pars) is infertile, which makes it sinful to use it for the benefit of any one other than the living. No wonder, therefore, Vendidad exhorts us to dig up any dead body from a grave and expose it to the sun. If modern laws do not allow it, cremation should be the next alternative. Moreover, our scriptures advise us against making the expenditures for death wasteful in any way - we use the same iron bier for the corpse of a baronet or a beggar, the same dokhma and the same essential rituals.

Burial requires individual lots, individual coffins, individual decor and inscriptions and lifelong maintenance. This is not in keeping with the parsimony, simplicity and ecological economy advocated in death by our religion. In rare cases, it is not even possible to resort to burial, as in New Orleans, where the water table is close to the surface, and water contamination could become a serious hazard.

Cremation. While cremation may be viewed as polluting fire, it does not have the other disadvantages of burial, as outlined above. Moreover, our Indo-Aryan brethren always practiced cremation, and modern technology should enable us to have better and pollution-free crematoria in the future, such as the

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‘promatoruim’ described by *The Guardian* [UK, October 1, 2005].

Our aversion to cremation primarily ensues from thousands of years of conditioning for respecting fire as Ahura Mazda’s representation on earth and some medieval misperceptions about it, but cremation seems to be the second best alternative for us. If, however, burial is the only choice available in the absence of a crematorium, it is advisable to surround the grave with cement-concrete blocks on all sides, as they do in Iran, to reduce polluting land and water to some extent.

Fire is known to remove any impurities it touches. It is not surprising therefore, an Iranian mobed told me years ago that the Zarathushtis in Iran would have preferred cremation over burial when *dokhmenashini* was forced out by the Shah, if they really had the choice; but it is not acceptable in an Islamic country.

I have read about archeological evidence for cremation in very ancient Iran and we must have practiced cremation when Indo-Iranians lived together in the remote past. Even the Greek Aryans observed it.

The practice of burying cremated ashes, however, is a very un-Zarathushti practice. I have often suggested that each association maintain a small garden plot where the ashes of all the departed could be placed, even intermingled, so reminiscent of *dokhmenashini*.