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Identifying the dead in the early Shaiva Siddhaanta scriptures: the emergence of Shaiva cremation (antye.s.ti)

Death rites had only gradually been introduced into the Shaiva ritual repertoire when the religion increasingly penetrated mainstream society during the early medieval period and attempted to accommodate a wider audience, in particular members of the contemporaneous orthodox brahmanical religion. This is not surprising, since the performance of rites addressed at a post-mortem soul in its various stages - from hungry ghost to ancestor deity - are fundamentally incongruous with the core Shaiva doctrine that someone who has received the liberating initiation ritual (nirvaa.nadik.saa) attains ultimate liberation at the time of death. But as the Shaiva religion reached out to wider society, such fundamental ritual needs which arise when someone dies could not be ignored. Consequently, cremation in the manner of the brahmanical tradition had been adopted, but was soon transformed into a more powerful Shaiva version by introducing the rite of re-initiating the deceased's soul before incinerating the corpse. This elaborate form of Shaiva cremation was certainly fully developed by the 10th/11th century, when the earliest extant Shaiva Siddhaanta ritual manuals were composed, but predating instructions for cremation in some Shaiva Siddhaanta scriptures show a different picture regarding the initial stages of the rite's inclusion: here the rite is not unanimously established in its elaborate form, and instructions are often formulated rather ambiguously in what seems to be an attempt to obscure the exact scope of the rite's application, all of which indicates a greater awareness of doctrinal awkwardness. So in what form and for whom were these rites performed at this early stage of their introduction? Did any Shaiva initiate receive them or was their application in some way restricted? This paper attempts to answer these questions by identifying the social status of the deceased as he is ideally envisaged in these authoritative scriptural sources, consequently exploring the context in which these rites were performed.