

THE SCOPE AND SCALABILITY OF THE FUNERAL SERVICES INDUSTRY IN INDIA

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DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2022.v07i03.015 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2022.v07i03.015>

Received: 3 March 2022 / Accepted: 16 March 2022 / Published: 30 March 2022

ABSTRACT

This paper covers the intricacies and nuances of the funeral service management industry and the taboos surrounding it. It contextualises the service within the cultural framework of the Hindu community in India and the rituals that form it. It proceeds to then analyse the trends of the market and the scope that is present within the country to expand it. We conclude by noting that in spite of the taboo, the industry is a growing space and entrepreneurs would be mistaken to overlook its potential.

Keywords: Funeral Service Management, Scalability, New Market, Billion Dollar Industry.

Introduction

Philosophical arguments aside, death is the inevitable reality of existence - something that man has not been able to circumvent. The population of the world is 7.6 billion, with a mortality rate of 7.6 per 1000 according to the World Health Organisation. Nearly 55.3 million people die each year, 151,600 die each day, 6,316 each hour, 105 each minute, and 2 people each second in the world.

Death presents the living with emotional dilemmas but also logistical issues. In the aftermath of losing a loved one, the logistics of managing a funeral and keeping up with the last rites can be most overwhelming. This is where funeral management as a service steps in.

Funeral Management Services Industry can be said to include all activities to transportation (escorting mourners to the funeral chapel, transporting the casket from the service to cemetery, etc.), preparing (grooming and keeping the corpse for viewing, organising the after-service reception, and managing (interviewing relatives to discuss the style of the funeral tributes to the

deceased, producing administrative documents, etc.) the dead for burial or interment.

Given the endemic nature of death, funeral services should be among the leading services offered in any nation. However, this is not always the case. Funeral services are often laced in the social context and the cultural values shared by a people. This paper will explore the acceptability of these services in India, particularly within the Hindu population which comprises just under 80% of the population of the country.

In India, the funeral services industry is a tabooed one. It is avoided like services related to abortion, female hygiene and other services that are culturally tabooed. These services essentially touch upon issues that are delicate and sensitive with regards to what is considered moral or immoral by the society and therefore not appreciated by the public. For these reasons, it also becomes difficult for businesses to expand.

The US funeral care market is estimated to reach revenues of around \$68 billion by 2023, growing at a CAGR of over 4% during 2017-2023. While the Indian market stands at \$2.5 billion.

Background

According to Census 2011 Hindus constitute 79.8% of the Indian population. In Hinduism the dead body is cremated which is done using either of two methods—one is where the body is burnt with wood, and the relatively new method of using incinerators run on electricity or Compressed Natural Gas (CNG).

The traditional location on the banks of River Ganga plays a very predominant role in Hindu funeral practises. The family carries the body to the cremation site on the river banks for the final ceremonies, they believe that this location is key that allows their precious one to leave the cycle of birth and death in the attainment of enlightenment.

In the former method, the major expense is on the purchase of wood. For a body weighing nearly 80 kg, about 320 to 360 kg of wood is needed. Generally, the wood of sakauri, mango, eucalyptus, and other trees is used. Poor families invariably go for a mix of dry and wet wood. Rich families sometimes also prefer sandalwood. The cost of wood ranges from ₹6 to ₹14,000 per kg (making the aggregate cost vary from ₹2,160 to ₹50,40,000). depending on the type and quality.

Saamagri, a mixture of dried herbs and flammable materials (*chunri*, *saakla*, *guggul*, etc) are offered to the pyre. The cost of this varies from ₹200 to ₹50,000, based on quality and quantity

of materials. Ghee (clarified butter) is also required and is available with quality variations. The average expenditure is nearly ₹500 per kg. Another expense is on the holy fire (called *chita lagwaii*), where a burning stick is provided by a person who charges ₹300. For a fee of ₹200, this person also oversees and ensures complete burning of the body, which takes 2–4 hours.

On the day after the cremation, the bones and ashes of the deceased are collected and taken to Haridwar or a similar religious place to be immersed in a holy river like the Ganges. For every small or big ritual, the family has to pay the brahmin's fees that may range from ₹101 to several thousands.

Following this, Mahapatras (a sect of Brahmins) do pinda-daan or cremation puja, for which fees are charged in cash or kind depending upon the paying capacity of the family. Mahapatras may ask for commodities that were liked by the deceased or demand things like television sets, air conditioners, or even a piece of land, costing lakhs of rupees. Apart from this, there are several rituals—recitation of scriptures, installation of a mud bowl called ghanṭa by a barber, Ganesh puja on the twelfth day, and a grand feast for relatives and friends on the thirteenth day—each costing anywhere between a few hundred to several thousand rupees.

In the world where Covid - 19 exists, a dignified death has become rare. The ones who are in service day and night to the departed are the crematorium workers, known as the doms. These people are the keepers of the sacred fire, from which the funeral pyre must be ignited to free the soul of the dead from the death-rebirth cycle.

These crematorium workers have no relation with the deceased but still they will set the pyre with wood and stay till there is nothing but embers and ash. Death rituals are very religious in the Hindu community and require the presence of a pandit who oversees the ceremony. However, during covid the presence of a pandit has become a scarce ritual. Only the doms and Dalits work so the deceased can reach sadgati.

The work of a crematoria is strictly caste based. Only a very few people apart from the Dalits are in this occupation. For thousands of years it's the dalits and the lower caste who have been handling all the unsafe work in villages and towns. The only remuneration they would get was the dead person's clothes.

The doms are trusted with carrying out the final hindu ritual, yet they are considered “untouchable “ and upper caste men prefer not to stay close to them. Moreover, outside these practises they are looked down upon and ill-treated. The custom and rituals have made it difficult for them to look at other professions other than being an undertaker.

Nobody, not us or the government has spared a thought for these poor & helpless funeral workers. During covid, when family members of the dead are unable to attend the funerals, it is the doms who have lit the pyre for the dead. These people have been working without regular pay, food or water at the crematorium

The above nuances and discriminatory practices that are a part of the social fabric of the nation, have forbidden the growth of any monetary process to be taken up as a part of the funeral management services. The caste angle to the services provided makes the conduction of funeral services a tabooed topic - money sought by the dalit communities will not be appreciated by the upper caste communities for occupations 'traditionally rendered' and upper caste communities taking up this work will be termed 'beneath their dignity' and impure. The conundrum, thus created, prohibits progress of the sector.

Amid the COVID-19 crisis, the global market for Death Care Services estimated at US\$106.3 Billion in the year 2020, is projected to reach a revised size of US\$126.3 Billion by 2027, growing at a CAGR of 2.5% over the period 2020-2027. The Indian funeral market is worth \$2.5 billion in India, where about 8.5 million die every year.

Discussion

A funeral service business is a very emotionally stressful work for an entrepreneur who plans to do it. One must know that he is stepping in this line of business for the right reasons and not just for the monetary benefit. He/she should remember that they are there to support the grieving family in the time of the loss and should consider providing the process of help and support as rewarding. This very mindset would eventually help an entrepreneur to focus on the positive aspect rather than his mind being clustered by all the sadness which is the very part of this field of work .

Businesses are meant to generate profit and the funeral service business is no different. The funeral business has scalability because of the aforementioned statistics. However, just like other businesses one needs to fully scrutinise its scope.

The role of emotions in service management plays a very important role. In most services, front line employees are required to display positive emotions during service delivery through pleasant facial expressions and voice tones. Emotions displaying positive emotions can influence consumer's initial moods, making them more positive during or after service experience

In general, it is observed that the public prefers taboo or offensive advertising to be approached

in a straightforward manner rather than a “gimmicky” manner, and that there are variations in reception to offensive advertising and advertising strategies employed for offensive products or services by gender, nationality and cultural type. The literature largely classifies funeral service advertising as controversial advertising or advertising that can elicit reactions of embarrassment, distaste, disgust, offence or outrage from a segment of the population. This area of research has, in general, found that funeral service advertising ranks in the “second tier” of offensiveness along with cigarettes, gambling, political parties, and feminine hygiene advertising, meaning that funeral home advertising is considered offensive but not the most offensive.

It is seen that the marketing of unsought services is best accomplished through unobtrusive means such as digital marketing. Funeral homes turned to this medium to advertise their business by buying airtime to play organ music and indicating that the music was sponsored by a particular funeral home. Funeral homes have also historically operated ambulance services and have placed the name of their funeral home on the side of the emergency vehicle and parked this vehicle at football games to get their business’s name in the eyes of the public. In addition, advertisements also projected an image of professional staff that seeks to convey trust and respect in the funeral home. The best way to approach funeral service advertisement is to display it as a service that gives due dignity to the dead.

Conclusion

While research has focused on methods of advertising in the funeral industry, the question remains, how has and how is the funeral industry advertising and marketing themselves to the public to obtain business, particularly in light of changes within this industry over the past several decades that have led to a decline in profit margins. Since Funeral service management falls under the “second tier “ of offensiveness, it creates a lot of difficulties for it to be marketed. Managing the marketing of the funeral business therefore requires its handling with sensitivity.

Aforementioned arguments thus prove that while the funeral service industry is a lucrative sector, its scope is defined by culturally set norms. An entrepreneur in India will have to work doubly hard to secure profits but when they do, the margins will be immense and therefore the potential to explore the funeral management industry is immense.

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