

As Toronto considers designating a specific spot for scattering funeral ashes in water, other GTA regions already have theirs,

Council considers issue as more people choose cremation over burial

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When it is finished later this year, the newest site in the GTA for scattering funeral ashes will be a unique blend of Sikh culture and Canadiana.

One hundred and 20 maple trees will line a walkway from the Ontario Khalsa Darbar temple in Mississauga down to Etobicoke Creek, where the growing number of people from all backgrounds choosing cremation over burial for their loved ones can scatter their ashes into fresh running water.

The site will include a gazebo, fountain and blue recycling bins for the cardboard boxes sometimes used to transport human ashes. White spruce trees already flank the steps leading down to the creek, deep in tall grass and busy with red winged blackbirds.

“People used to go to Lake Ontario and sneak in and do the job and they were always scared,” said Bhupinder Singh Bath, treasurer and board member at Ontario Khalsa Darbar, located on approximately 39 acres on Dixie Road.

“They’d go to bridges and throw it away and run. This will be intimate, and they do not have to be scared of anything.”

As Toronto city council considers whether to designate a specific spot in the city for scattering funeral ashes in water, the still-under-construction Kiratpur Park in Mississauga has seen 200 ceremonies in the past eight months, says Bath.

The demand for locations to host ceremonies is growing along with the rise in the number of cremations conducted in Canada — and not just among Sikhs and Hindus, for whom scattering the ashes on flowing water is a sacred ritual.

In 2000, less than half of all deaths in Canada were followed by cremation: 47 per cent, according to the Cremation Association of North America. In 2020, that figure stood at 73 per cent. It is projected to rise to 77 per cent by 2025.

Current rules around the practice of dispersing ashes vary between different levels of government and between cities. Unless otherwise specified, it is legal to dispose of funeral ashes on Crown land, which includes Lake Ontario and the Don and Humber rivers, according to the City of Toronto.

Dispersal is not permitted on city of Toronto or Toronto and Region Conservation Authority lands or waterways.

The issue isn’t just the ashes. It’s the objects, ornaments and food that can also be left behind after Hindu ceremonies, often referred to as pujas, according to Pandit Roopnauth Sharma, president of the Hindu Federation, which has issued guidelines for proper disposal of such things.

According to the Hindu Federation, the conservation authority raised concern about the disposition of “puja remnants” in bodies of water around the GTA and requested a meeting with the federation in late 2020. The meeting was deferred due to the impact of COVID-19.

“There are people wherever you go who will do what they are not supposed to do and the public will be annoyed,” Sharma said.

The Hindu Federation was instrumental in getting sites for dispersal of funeral ashes set up in Pickering, in Bronte Provincial Park in Oakville and McNab Park in Halton Hills, Sharma said.

In Pickering, city staff also worked with the Devi Mandir Hindu Temple to identify a site that offered some privacy and was close to parking. The site is closed temporarily for repair. The Hindu Federation is spending \$17,000 on the restoration of the shoreline in Pickering.

Toronto Coun. Gary Crawford (Ward 20, Scarborough Southwest) said that after seeing sites established in neighbouring municipalities, he felt it was time to look into better managing the practice in Toronto, providing more privacy to families who want to conduct the ritual, and also ensuring that nothing is left behind.

“We live in a very diverse city. I hope all councillors would support this,” said Crawford.

Crawford said public disposal of funeral ashes has been an issue in the city since he first ran for office in 2008. Lake Ontario off the Scarborough Bluffs, which is in his ward, is a popular location for dispersal of cremated remains.

Crawford said he often receives complaints from residents, who say that in some cases people also leave behind offerings of food and mementos, including pictures and plastic flowers.

Toronto city staff are recommending that a wide-ranging consultation be undertaken as part of the process, including with the conservation authority, other cities, faith groups, environmental experts and the general public, reporting back in early 2022.

“This is a sensitive issue for many stakeholders,” according to a staff report going to city council in June, after being endorsed Tuesday by the infrastructure and environment committee. “Utmost care must be taken as the city embarks on the consultation work to establish project terms of reference and principles that reflect the city’s commitments to anti-racism, diversity, equity and inclusion, and to the protection and stewardship of the natural environment and habitat.”

Fire and water are intrinsic to the Hindu death ritual, said Srilata Raman, professor of Hinduism at the University of Toronto.

“The body has to go back to the earth, it has to go back to the water and it has to go back to the sky,” said Raman, adding that such rituals are often especially important among the diaspora, both Hindu and Sikh.

“I think particularly the first generation immigrant community tends to be very concerned with passing on their religious cultural views to the next generation because there’s a lot of anxiety about the loss of that identity,” said Raman.

Sushital Choudhury, founder of the Toronto Durgabari Hindu Temple, said a growing number of people in the community believe that they should be able to have their ashes dispersed in the place where they lived and died instead of travelling back to the subcontinent, to the Ganges River, which is tradition.

“Most people cannot afford to go to India for this,” he said.

“People used to go to Lake Ontario and sneak in and do the job and they were always scared ... This will be intimate and they do not have to be scared of anything.”

BHUPINDER SINGH BATH ONTARIO KHALSA DARBAR