

## The Sacred Institution of Marriage - Vivaha (15th Samskara)

This is the most important of all the Hindu Samskaras. The Smritis laud the *gruhastha* (householder) ashram as the highest, for it is the central support of the other three ashrams.

Manu enjoins, "Having spent the first quarter of one's life in the guru's house, the second quarter in one's own house with the wife, and the third quarter in the forest, one should take *sannyas* in the fourth, casting away every worldly tie." (Manu Smruti IV.1). By marriage an individual is able to achieve the four *purusharthas* (endeavors) of life: *dharma* (righteousness), *artha* (wealth), *kama* (desire) and *moksha* (salvation). He is also able to pay off ancestral debt by having children. Procreation for children is also a primary purpose of marriage.

In addition to being a religious sacrament, Hindu marriage is also regarded as an important social institution. For developing a stable and ideal society, marriage has been regarded as an essential element in all cultures of the world. A society without loyal marital ties tends to degrade. It is said that promiscuity was one reason for the downfall of the Romans. By marriage, both an individual and society, while remaining within the moral norms, can progress together. Simultaneously it does not cause harm to others nor infringe upon one's independence. This *samskara* boosts cultural values and *dharma*. It upholds and promotes moral righteousness and self control.

### Types of Marriages

In the Hindu scriptures there are eight types mentioned. In the Manu Smruti (iii.21) they are divided into two groups: (i) the morally approved (*prashasta*) and (ii) the disapproved (*aprashasta*).

#### (i) Prashasta

(a) *Braahm*: This is the purest type. It was so called because it was thought fit for Brahmins. In this the girl is given by the father, with such ornaments that he can afford, to a man of character and learning, whom he has invited voluntarily and received respectfully, without taking anything in exchange (Manu Smruti, iii.17). The Smritis consider this type as the most honorable, as it is free from physical force, lust, imposition of conditions and lure of money. Social decency and religious considerations are fully taken into account.

(b) *Daiva*: This is the next type, inferior to the *Braahm*. In this, the girl is ornamented and given away by the father to a priest who officiates at a *yagna* (sacrifice). It is called *Daiva* since the gift is made on the occasion of a *Daiva yagna*. This method was prevalent among the first three Hindu classes. This type has faded, for it is considered improper to offer a girl to a priest.

(c) *Aarsh*: In this method the father of the bride received a pair or two of kine - a cow and an ox or two cows and two oxen - from the bridegroom for the purpose of a *yagna* which formed a part of a religious ritual. The pair of kine was not the bride's price. This method was known as *Aarsh* because it was prevalent among the priestly families. Nonetheless, according to the Manu Smruti (iii.53) accepting a gift, small or large, amounts to a sale.

(d) Prajapatya: This involves the father giving away his daughter to a suitor with the specific understanding that they both perform their civic and religious duties together. The name Prajapatya suggests that the couple enter the bond for discharging their duties to Prajapati i.e. for procreating and raising children.

From the Western point of view this type of marriage may be regarded satisfactory because the rights of the husband and wife are equally well secured. But from the view of the Hindu shastras, it is inferior to the first three. This is because the daughter is given subject to mundane conditions. Hence the 'gift' cannot truly be regarded as free.

As a point of interest, Kautilya in his Arthashastra prohibited divorce for the four Prashasta marriages.

Now we shall consider the four types of marriage which are not approved by the scriptures.

(ii) Aprashasta

(e) Asura: The Manu Smriti (iii.31) defines this as, "Where the husband having paid money to the relations of the bride and the bride herself, accepts her out of free will." The main consideration in this kind of marriage is money and it is, in reality, a purchase. Manu condemns it, "The learned father of the girl should not accept even the least amount of price. Accepting the price out of greed, he becomes the seller of children." (Manu Smriti, iii.51.) The Aitareya Brahmana (1.16) brands this type as pashuvivaha - animal marriage. Today this form of marriage is still prevalent in certain sections of Hindu society where a dowry is demanded by the bridegroom's father from the bride's father. Public opinion has begun to frown upon dowry. Religious and social leaders have been rallying against it. Pramukh Swami Maharaj has always condemned it. During the International Youth Festival at Vallabh Vidyanagar in 1990, he inspired 21,000 young men and women to take a vow of refusing dowry. To those who cannot afford the marriage costs, he arranges mass dowry-free marriages during grand festivals and yagnas.

(f) Gandharva: According to Manu, "Where the bride and bridegroom meet each other of their own accord and the union is consummated in passion, that form is called Gandharva." (Manu Smriti, iii.32.) The name Gandharva is derived from a tribe of that name living in the Himalayas, in which it was a common occurrence. It was more prevalent among the Kshatriyas as they represented the freest element in society. The majority of the lawgivers discouraged it on religious and moral grounds. It was regarded as inferior to the first five forms because it was performed without sacred rituals and it originated from passion, a factor which seemed to be tenuous.

(g) Rakshas: Manu says, "Capture of a girl by force while she is crying, having killed, scattered and injured her relatives, is called Rakshas Vivaha." (Manu Smriti, iii.21.) This usually occurred during war or political upheavals. The Kshatriyas usually practised this since they participated in war and obtained women as war booties. The word rakshas means demonic.

(h) Paishach: This is the least approved. Manu (iii.34) defines this as, "Cohabiting with a girl in loneliness when she is sleepy, mad or intoxicated." Obviously, this was the most uncivilized and barbaric method. Paishach means 'of witches'.

## **The Hindu Marriage - Beliefs and Sentiments**

The Hindu marriage system is described as a religious and social institution. More important is that it is a union of two spirits rather than just two individuals. To consider this metaphysically, an individual is made up of three bodies: physical - composed of matter (sthul), subtle - composed of mind (sukshma) and causal - composed of the jiva (karan). The Vedic marriage is a union between all the three - matter with matter, mind with mind and jiva with jiva. With its sacramental vows, the couple embark on a journey together to attain the four objectives (purusharths) of life. During this journey the couple satisfy their desires - to earn, to beget children, and to serve society. Added to this, they follow the path of bhakti (devotion) and discover the divinity within themselves, of Brahman and Parabrahman. This is reflected in one of the rites during the ceremony. Mantras are chanted to invoke Narayan in the bridegroom and Lakshmi in the bride. The parents, relatives and everyone present then bow to them. The union is between god and goddess, not two material bodies. The underlying injunction to the couple is, "You are not the body, but atma."

Regarding each other as the atma is the fundamental basis of a Vedic marriage. It is unique in all the world's cultures - which primarily observe the Gandharva system based on passion. This understanding is all the more important in marital discord.

At the root of any marital discord lies intolerance due to body consciousness and one's ego - the 'I' and 'mine'. If the couple is united by atma for a common, ultimate goal, moksha, then 'I' and 'you' cease to exist. This is because 'I' and 'you' are empirically atma. And when 'I' and 'you' are believed to be atma, where is the conflict that would otherwise arise from selfish motives and desires? Therefore, in a Hindu marriage when conflicts and differences arise, they can be easily resolved. The couple consider each other as the atma, for the atma is pure, genderless, ageless, and inherently divine. Vivaha itself means 'to lift, to support, to uphold, to sustain'. Admittedly, both spouses have to make sacrifices and efforts to imbibe this lofty philosophy. It is not an overnight process, more a lifelong, sacred commitment. It is this philosophy which has made the Vedic marriage a grand success for thousands of years. Only the recent rise in materialism, primarily based on superficial and mundane factors and body consciousness, have begun to ruin today's Hindu marriages.

The aforementioned sentiments, and a few others, are symbolically depicted and verbally emphasized by mantras chanted during the actual marriage ceremony, whose steps we consider next.

## **The Marriage Ceremony**

### **(i) Haridralepan**

On the day before the marriage, a creamy paste of turmeric and oil is smeared over the bride's body. This is known as pithi cholvi in Gujarati and haridralepan in Sanskrit. The symbolic sentiment is that if the bride is of a dark complexion, this cosmetic treatment will endow her a lighter hue.

Prior to the marriage ceremony, Ganapati (Ganesh) is worshipped at the bride's home as an auspicious beginning of the rituals, since Ganapati is the deity of auspiciousness.

### **(ii) Var Prekshan (Welcoming the bridegroom)**

The bridegroom is welcomed at the entrance of the bride's house or marriage hall. The bride and the bridegroom place garlands over each other under the marriage canopy (mandap).

A vow is then recited, "In following my duty, in our financial matters, in fulfilling my physical thirst, I will always consult you, take your consent and act upon it." This is known as the Pratijna Svikaar.

### **(iii) Madhu Parka (Offering honey)**

The bride welcomes the bridegroom and gives him honey, yoghurt and ghee (clarified butter), suggesting that she will always please him with the sweetness of her behavior. There is also a sour tinge to the mixture, which symbolises the bitterness that life can sometimes bring.

### **(iv) Pani Grahan (Proffering of the bride's hand)**

The parents of the bride proffer her hand to the bridegroom and request him to accept their daughter as his wife. The bridegroom accepts the bride as his wife and presents her with clothing and jewellery.

### **(v) Vaivahik Homa (Invoking the sacred fire)**

The sacred fire is invoked and offerings are poured into it. Agni (fire) represents the mouth of Lord Vishnu and symbolises illumination of the mind, knowledge and happiness and Lord Vishnu serves as a divine witness.

### **(vi) Shilarohan (Stepping on the stone)**

The bride places her right foot on a stone. The bridegroom tells her to be as firm as the stone in his house so that they are able to face problems with ease.

### **(vii) Laja Homa (Offering parched rice into sacred fire)**

Four offerings are made to the sacred fire. The brother of the bride places parched rice into the bride's hands, half of which is meant to fall into the bridegroom's hands. Mantras are chanted. The bride prays to Yama, the God of Death, that he grants long life, health, happiness and prosperity to the bridegroom.

### **(viii) Saptapadi (The seven steps)**

The bride and the bridegroom take seven steps around the sacred fire. At each step they invoke the blessings of God. As the couple walk the seven steps they pledge the following seven vows:

1. Let us take this first step towards food and the necessities of life.
2. Let us take this second step towards strength and vigor.
3. Let us take this third step towards wealth and prosperity.
4. Let us take this fourth step towards obtaining happiness around the household.
5. Let us take this fifth step for progeny.
6. Let us take this sixth step to act according to the six seasons and time.
7. Let us take this seventh step to believe in the same religion and lifelong friendship.

**(ix) Agni Parikrama (Circumambulation of sacred fire)**

The bride and the bridegroom move around the sacred fire four times. On the first three rounds the bride leads the bridegroom and on the fourth the bridegroom leads the bride. Before each round an offering is made. This part of the ceremony is known as the mangal phera in Gujarati.

**(x) Saubhagya Chinha (Blessing the bride)**

The bridegroom blesses the bride by putting kumkum (vermillion powder) or sindur at the parting of her hair or on her forehead and by giving her a mangalsutra (sacred necklace).

**(xi) Surya Darshan (Looking at the sun)**

The bridegroom accepts the bride as his wife in the presence of the sun deity. If the marriage is performed at night, he tells her to look at the Dhruva star (star of steadfastness) and at the star of Arundhati (star of devotion). The bridegroom tells her to be firm in her love and duty, and to be devoted to him like Arundhati was to Sage Vashishtha. The bride tells the bridegroom that she will follow their example and remain devoted.

**(xii) Hruday Sparsh (Touching of hearts)**

The bridegroom and bride touch each other's hearts. The bride tells the bridegroom, "I touch thy heart unto mine. God has given thee as my husband. May thy heart be mine now. When I talk to thee, please listen to me with perfect attention." The bridegroom repeats the vow to the bride.

**(xiii) Annaprashan (Feeding the bridegroom)**

The bride feeds the bridegroom and tells him, "By feeding you this sweet food (traditionally kansar - made of wheat flour, sugar and ghee) I shall bind thy heart with the thread of truth and sincerity and love. My heart will be thine and thy heart will be mine forever."

**(xiv) Purnahuti (Completion of ceremony)**

After the final offering is made to the sacred fire, the priest blesses the bride and bridegroom. Flower petals and rice are distributed to the guests, who shower the bride and the bridegroom. With their blessings the marriage ceremony is completed.

The bride and the bridegroom are no longer separate entities but an integrated personality who will share their lives in every way.