

Importance and Significance of Hindu Rituals and Practices

Hinduism is not just a religion, it is a way of life. In Hinduism, rituals are performed to bring spirituality into human life and inculcate feelings of devotion and religiosity. Rituals are not only celebrated during life but continue after death, including burial and cremation practices. For Hindus, it is the Vedas - the oldest spiritual scriptures in the world - that have shaped and influenced their rituals. The Vedas are a collection of hymns and rituals that date back thousands of years. These priceless texts were passed on to several generations through oral narration.

Earlier, many Hindu rituals focused on the importance of performing the duties associated with one's stage of life. The four stages of life are as follows:

- Brahmacharya - Acquiring education and enhancing one's character
- Grihastha - Worldly pleasures and pursuits that include marriage and career
- Vanaprastha - Spirituality
- Sannyasa - The life of contemplation

There are many ancient rituals that are not performed today, as their meaning and practice have changed over the centuries. For example, during Vedic times, yajnas were related to Karma and Dharma but now they are associated with social activities.

A. Significance of Hindu Rituals

For Hindus, receiving the blessings of God is of principal importance when performing the rituals. They believe when God is pleased by their devotion, he bestows his blessings upon them. Most of the Hindu rituals are performed on holy sites such as temples or in nature, but some are performed in the home.

As a part of the household responsibilities, a devout Hindu is expected to perform certain rituals every day. The morning rituals may include taking a bath or physical self-purification, offering prayers to the Sun God, or Chanting the Gayatri Mantra. The most common rituals practiced in all Hindu households are puja, meditation, silent prayers, yoga, recitation of scriptures from Bhagavad Gita or bhajans, reading religious books, participating in Satsang (prayer meets), performing charitable work, visiting a temple, and chanting the name of their beloved God. It is through these rituals, prayers, and sacred ceremonies that Hindus pay their reverence to God.

Prayers or Pooja are an integral part of a Hindu devotee's life. They perform these prayers under the assistance or guidance of Hindu priests or Brahmins. After every pooja, a sacred offering (or Prasad) is made to God. Such offerings are meant to be made without claiming reciprocal advantages as a mark of service to God. Hindus believe that performing these rituals help in their spiritual betterment.

Rituals are some physical activities which help us either physically or mentally but mostly in an indirect way. There are many Indian traditional rituals among which the Hindu rituals gain higher importance because of the scientific reasons and the amount of discipline involved in them.

Rituals form a structure that makes life easier. Many have scientifically proven health benefits behind them. They have been followed through ages and passed on for generations. The rituals orient you as to where you are and what you should be doing. Most rituals are like an invisible watch, for example, if you are doing Surya Namaskar then it must be the time for Sunrise.

In Hinduism, rituals are meant to inculcate feelings of devotion and religiosity and thereby bring God and spirituality into the center of human life. As a part of his householders responsibilities, a devout Hindu is expected to perform certain rituals every day starting from morning till evening.

Some people do not like to use the word rituals to denote Vedic religious activities since the word ritual implies certain mechanical attitude and lack of serious involvement. Vedic sacrifices are integrated into human life and although they are meant to be performed with certain regularity, their ultimate purpose is not mere observance but transformation of the mind and body so that the person becomes a fit vehicle to manifest the intent and purpose of God in creation.

Rituals and ceremonies primarily involve offerings to gods, beings, departed souls, humans and other living beings. Offerings are made on a daily, weekly, monthly or annual basis. Some offerings are made on specific occasions that come only once in a lifetime. Such offerings are meant to be made without claiming reciprocal advantages as a service to God and his manifestations.

Devout Hindus perform daily rituals and make oblations or offerings of water to various deities at different times in the day. The morning sacrifices include bathing or physical self-purification, offering prayers to the Sun, chanting of the Gayatri mantra, applying certain specific religious marks on the body etc. The marks may differ from person to person depending upon his caste and sect affiliations. In addition, devotees may also observe rituals that are specific to the teacher traditions they follow. Such daily observances are especially meant for householders. Hindu ascetics (sanyasis) may also follow certain daily rituals and worship gods or their teachers, but they differ from those of the householders.

While it is true that most of these practices are obligatory for the upper castes and many still follow them, Hindus follow diverse rituals according to their beliefs, social status, availability of time, family traditions, and other factors. Many ancient rituals and practices, which were once obligatory are now discarded for various reasons. Some cannot be performed today since people live in cities and the conditions do not permit them to stick to the discipline prescribed in the scriptures to perform them.

Among the daily rituals that are currently practiced in many Hindu households, the most popular ones are puja, meditation, silent prayers, yoga, recitation of scriptures like the Bhagavad Gita or bhajans, reading religious books, participating in "satsang" or visiting the company of holy men, doing some charitable work, visiting temples and holy places, or chanting of some mantra or the name of a specific God.

B. Some Forms of Hindu Rituals

1. Performing Rituals at Sacred Sites

Hindu texts and holy scriptures have laid down various rituals that Hindu devotees must perform throughout their lifetime. The holy sites are of great importance when it comes to the Hindu rituals because these sites are considered as God's abodes. The holy scriptures have noted in great detail about the sanctity of holy sites where rituals are performed by the Brahmins. Hindus also pay homage to their ancestors at these sacred sites. Prayers are performed to bestow long-lasting peace and to help them unite with the Divine power.

2. Yajna

These are the outer forms of worship in Hinduism, reminders of its direct connection with the Vedic religion of the ancient past. During the performance of the yajnas, offerings are made to different deities in a prescribed and systematic manner by qualified priests to supplicate them, so that they would assist the worshipper in achieving certain results in life.

The chanting of mantras while performing the sacrifices is expected to ensure fulfillment of specific desires, the overall welfare of an individual, a group of people or the entire society.

The simplest form of yajna is the domestic ritual performed by the householder who would offer simple oblation into the sacred fire lit in his house. A more complicated version involves setting up of three to five fires and pouring offerings into them such as food grains, ghee or butter, and other vegetable substances by chosen and qualified priests, chanting mantras simultaneously, invoking various gods especially Agni, Indra, Varuna etc.

Some yajnas are performed on a large scale for the general welfare of the entire community, to increase fertility of soil, to invite rains, to welcome peace and wealth etc. Depending upon the degree of complexity, these yajnas may last from a few hours to several days. The number of priests participating and conducting the ceremony would depend upon the nature and objective for which it is performed.

It is a fact that the incidence of performing the yajnas and other forms of sacrifices is slowly coming down in modern Hinduism, primarily because of the influence of western education, the complexity involved in performing them and the decreasing number of qualified priests who can perform yajnas effectively according to the full Vedic injunctions.

While performing the yajna, offerings are made to different deities under the assistance of priests. A small sacred fire is lit and offerings such as food grains, ghee, and vegetable substances are present. Mantras are chanted simultaneously to invoke Gods like Agni, Indra, and Varuna. They are usually performed for the welfare of the family, to invite rains, and to welcome peace and prosperity. Some Yajnas are performed for a few hours while others last several weeks.

3. Japa - Japa means recitation of God's name, either silently or audibly. The ritual involves a continuous recitation of God's name to purify the mind and fill one's consciousness with spiritual energy. This regular chanting can create vibrations in the mind and body and can lead to a spiritual transformation. Japa should be done out of pure love for God and not with an expectation to get something in return.

Japa has become a very popular form of worship in modern day Hinduism. Especially with the rise of the bhakti movement and the popularity of many yogis and babas, japa has entered the hearts and minds of many devout and spiritually inclined Hindus. Japa means continuous recitation of God's name either silently in one's mind or aloud in a group. Continuous recitation of God's name is expected to purify the mind of the devotee and fill his consciousness with divine thoughts and vibrant spiritual energy. The regular chanting is expected to create certain vibrations in the body and mind which would facilitate the spiritual transformation of one's ordinary self.

In Hinduism, from earliest times, heavy emphasis has been laid on proper recitation of the Vedic mantras and slokas. Even today in the Vedic Schools, the students would spend hours, days and years trying to capture the subtle nuances of Sanskrit pronunciation. In japa, we do not come across any such rigidity. The individual has ample freedom to practice it according to his convenience and inner prompting. The practice of japa is therefore in line with this very ancient tradition, but devoid of the pedantic approach common to the chanting of the Vedic mantras.

However there are certain rules. One should practice japa either for one's own welfare or for the welfare of others, but never to harm or injure others. It is better if it is done out of pure love for God rather than for any selfish purpose. Thirdly, to be effective, the chanting should begin with the sacred syllable "AUM".

4. Sandhya Vandanam

A compulsory ritual recommended for a dwija is Sandhya Vandanam where the sun-god is offered water from a flowing source such as a river, in the early morning and evening times. It is during this time when the tender rays of the sun and the flowing water transfer high amounts of energy to a one who performs this task being there for 4-5 minutes reading the slokas.

5. Surya Namaskar

Surya Namaskar is a physical exercise performed early in the morning during sunrise under the open sky. This enhances the health of the person with ample amounts of vitamin D as well as stimulates the nervous system, improves the functioning of all the vital organs of our body and rejuvenates the physical and mental status of the person.

6. It is a tradition to say the AUM word loudly with an ascending and descending note that is taught to most Hindus from childhood. This sacred syllable has the ability to transform consciousness.

Reciting AUM has huge benefits for improving concentration, reducing stress and anxiety. It helps in the detoxification process of the body while improving the functioning of all the organs of the body and stimulating the functioning of hormones. It especially improves optimism and reduces negativity by making a person emotionally stable.

AUM is considered to be a very sacred word. It is Sabda Brahman, the very Brahman itself in the form of a word. It imparts divinity to everything it touches. So when it is joined with another word as prefix, the word becomes divine in nature and when it is uttered it creates certain vibrations which have the ability to transform the consciousness. Therefore in Hinduism all chanting is preceded by the use of this sacred syllable "AUM".

7. Puja

The Puja or Deepa Aradhana performed after having bath gives you the required mental peace and harmony to survive through a whole day filling in a sense of secured and optimistic feel, all day long.

There are such many traditional doings in Hinduism that enhance the way of living because it is ancient dharma which denotes that human life and nature are entangled and promotes mutual nourishment.

8. Some Daily Observances

In Hinduism, each day of the week is devoted to one or more of the faith's deities. Special rituals, including prayer and fasting, are performed to honor these gods and goddesses. Each day also is associated with a celestial body from Vedic astrology and has a corresponding gemstone and color.

There are two different types of fasting in Hinduism. Upvaas are fasts made to fulfill a vow, while vratas are fasts made to observe religious rituals. Devotees may engage in either kind of fast during the week, depending on their spiritual intent.

Ancient Hindu sages used observances like ritual fasts to spread the awareness of different gods. They believed abstaining from food and drink would pave the path of the divine for the devotees to realize God, which is understood to be the sole purpose of human existence.

In the Hindu calendar, days are named after the seven celestial bodies of the ancient solar system: the sun, moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn.

1. Monday (Somvar)

Monday is dedicated to Lord Shiva and his consort goddess Parvati. Lord Ganesha, their son, is venerated at the beginning of the worship. Devotees also listen to devotional songs called shiva bhajans on this day. Shiva is associated with Chandra, the moon. White is his color and pearl his gemstone.

The Somvar Vrat or Monday fast is observed from sunrise to sunset, broken after evening prayers. Hindus believe that, by fasting, they will be granted wisdom by Lord Shiva who will fulfill all their desires. In some places, unmarried women fast in order to attract their ideal husband.

2. Tuesday (Mangalvar)

Tuesday is dedicated to the deity Lord Hanuman and Mangal, the planet Mars. In southern India, the day is dedicated to the god Skanda. Devotees also listen to Hanuman Chalisa, songs dedicated to the simian deity, on this day. Hindu faithful fast to honor Hanuman and seek his help in warding off evil and overcoming obstacles placed in their way.

Fasting is also observed by couples who want to have a son. After sundown, the fast is typically broken by a meal consisting only of wheat and jaggery (cane sugar). People wear red-colored clothes on Tuesdays and offer red flowers to Lord Hanuman. Moonga (red coral) is the preferred gem of the day.

3. Wednesday (Budhvar)

Wednesday is dedicated to Lord Krishna and Lord Vithal, an incarnation of Krishna. The day is associated with Budh, the planet Mercury. In some places, Lord Vishnu is also worshipped. Devotees listen to Krishna Bhajans (songs) on this day. Green is the preferred color and onyx and emerald the preferred gems.

Hindu devotees who fast on Wednesdays take a single meal in the afternoon. Budhvar Upvaas (Wednesday fasts) are traditionally observed by couples seeking a peaceful family life and students who want academic success. People start a new business or enterprise on Wednesdays as the planet Mercury or Budh is believed to augment new projects.

4. Thursday (Guruvar or Vrihaspativar)

Thursday is dedicated to Lord Vishnu and Lord Brihaspati, the guru of gods. Vishnu's planet is Jupiter. Devotees listen to devotional songs, such as "Om Jai Jagadish Hare," and fast to obtain wealth, success, fame, and happiness.

Yellow is Vishnu's traditional color. When the fast is broken after sundown, the meal traditionally consists of yellow foods such as chana daal (Bengal Gram) and ghee (clarified butter). Hindus also don yellow clothing and offer yellow flowers and bananas to Vishnu.

5. Friday (Shukravar)

Friday is dedicated to Shakti, the mother goddess associated with the planet Venus; Goddesses Durga and Kali also are worshipped. Devotees perform the ceremonies of Durga Aarti, Kali Aarti, and Santoshi Mata Aarti on this day. Hindus seeking material wealth and happiness fast to honor Shakti, eating only a single meal after sunset.

Because white is the color most closely associated with Shakti, the evening meal typically consists of white foods such as kheer or payasam, a dessert made of milk and rice. Offerings of chana (Bengal gram) and gur (jaggery or solid molasses) are given to appeal to the goddess, and sour foods are to be avoided.

Other colors associated with Shakti include orange, violet, purple, and burgundy, and her gemstone is the diamond.

6. Saturday (Shanivar)

Saturday is dedicated to the fearful god Shani, who is associated with the planet Saturn. In Hindu mythology, Shani is a hunter who brings bad luck. Devotees fast from sunrise to sunset, seeking protection from Shani's ill will, illnesses, and other misfortunes. After sundown, Hindus break the fast by eating food prepared using black sesame oil or black gram (beans) and cooked without salt.

Devotees observing the fast usually visit Shani shrines and offer black-colored items like sesame oil, black clothes, and black beans. Some also worship the peepal (the holy Indian fig) and tie a thread around its bark, or offer prayers to Lord Hanuman seeking protection from Shani's wrath. Blue and black are Shani's colors. Blue gems, such as blue sapphire, and black iron rings made of horseshoes frequently are worn to ward off Shani.

7. Sunday (Ravivar)

Sunday is dedicated to Lord Surya or Suryanarayana, the sun god. Devotees fast seeking his help in fulfilling their wishes and curing skin diseases. Hindus begin the day with a ritual bath and a thorough house cleaning. They keep a fast throughout the day, eating only after sunset and avoiding salt, oil, and fried foods. Alms are also given on that day.

Surya is represented by rubies and the colors red and pink. To honor this deity, Hindus will wear red, apply a dot of red sandalwood paste on their forehead, and offer red flowers to statues and icons of the sun god.

