

Vivaha Samskara – The Marriage Rite

Introduction:

Vivaha refers to marriage within the Hindu tradition. Because of the great importance attached to married couples and their roles within society, *vivaha* is considered the most important *samskara* (life cycle rite) undertaken by individuals (Harman 126). Marriage and the ensuing *ghrashtra* (householder) stage is deemed crucial within Hindu society for a variety of reasons. During their marriage the couple is expected to cultivate three of the four goals of life. The first goal is *dharma* (duty), and is achieved through their joint performance of sacrificial offerings to the gods. The art of love, pleasure, and fulfillment of sexual desire is known as *kama* and facilitates procreation. This enables the couple to repay their debt to the ancestors. Finally, as householders they participate in the greater social order by pursuing *artha* (the pursuit of wealth and material possessions) (Sharma 75).

Importance & Symbolism of Marriage:

In many ways, marriage symbolizes the beginning of social life for both women and men. For women, it also enables their participation in religious matters. The *vivaha samskara* is akin to the *upanayana* (sacred thread) ceremony undergone by males during the *sisya* (student) stage (Harman 131-132). Thus, after marriage, a woman may fulfill her religious duties. The importance of marriage for women is paralleled in Hindu literature. Unmarried goddesses are often portrayed as dangerous and uncontrollable (as in the case of Mariyamman - the fever goddess), reinforcing beliefs surrounding the inauspiciousness of unmarried, divorced, or widowed women [See Harman (1989) for an interesting analysis of the symbolism and role of marriage within Hindu religious mythology]. Comparatively, in the epic, *Ramayana*, the hero Rama and his wife Sita represent an idealization of marriage that is upheld for Hindu couples to aspire to (Sharma 72).

Marriage is of near equal importance for men. Within the social realm, *vivaha* is especially

important for males of lower class *varnas*. It may be one of the few *samskaras* performed for lower class males or combined with several other life cycle rites to reduce the associated costs. With few exceptions, males cannot perform sacrificial offerings without a wife and marriage is seen as necessary to live in accordance with *dharma* (Harman 128-132; Sharma 75). This importance is likewise symbolized within Hindu religious mythology and unmarried gods may be depicted as powerless. For example, in one of the representations, the god Siva is a corpse until his marriage to Sakti animates him (Harman 9). Hence, *vivaha* serves both religious and societal functions within Hinduism that are mirrored within the religious literature itself.

Betrothal:

In India, arranged marriages are still the norm (Harman 126). Within the upper *varnas* (classes), it is traditionally the bride's family who initiates the search for an appropriate partner. Interclass marriage (unions between different *varnas*) is generally not tolerated. However, hypergamy, or marrying up for women within one's own *varna* is usually the goal of the bride's family (Sharma 73; Fowler 54). The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 made dowry (payment to the groom's family by the bride's family) illegal in India. Nevertheless, expensive gifts or other financial arrangements are still made (Fowler 54). Polygamy and caste restrictions in India were also abolished by the Hindu Marriage Act, along with child marriages and restrictions on divorce [See Sharma (1985) for a more detailed discussion of the Hindu Marriage Act]. Despite these legal amendments, many of these traditions are still observed in rural areas (Fowler 54).

Parental consent to marriage is important within Hindu society as marriage links not only individuals, but lineages as well (Harman 126). There are eight types of marriages recognized within the influential Dharma Sastras: *brahma*, *daiva*, *arsa*, *prajapatya*, *asura*, *gandharva*, *raksasa*, and *paisaca*. The first four are arranged with the approval of the bride's family and are considered the most

desirable (Harman 13). To illustrate, the marriage category of *brahma* is an arrangement where a father gives his daughter to a man who has studied the sacred literature. Typically, this type of marriage is the most highly regarded and would be preferable for individuals within the *brahmana* (priestly) class [See Harman (1989) and Rodrigues (2006) for further details pertaining to marriage types]. Within the remaining four types where consent is not always issued, *raksasa* refers to the abduction of a bride against her will and is considered suitable for *ksatriyas* (warrior classes), whereas *gandharva* describes a love match between the bride and groom and is generally thought to be inauspicious (Harman 13).

Auspiciousness is of great concern in Hindu society and marriages are no exception. Before a marriage can be arranged, the families involved must consult the astrological charts of both the bride and groom to determine the auspiciousness of the match, as well as to determine the best time for the ceremony to take place (Sharma 73). Great care is taken in determining auspiciousness and a union considered inauspicious is abandoned (Rodrigues 81). Once a suitable partner and time is found, preparations can be made for the ceremony itself.

Ceremony & Associated Rituals:

Weddings are lavish affairs, meant to display the families' social status within the community (Harman 127). The rituals associated with *vivaha* may carry on as long as twelve days, however, the wedding ceremony alone generally lasts only a few hours and traditionally should be performed at night. A great canopy is set up where the rituals and ceremony will take place and the canopy is elaborately decorated with lights and other ornaments (Fowler 52-4). Weddings are considered a time of great ritual purity. Persons deemed inauspicious or polluted (such as widows) are forbidden to attend. During this time the bride and groom are treated as if they were deities and are thought to be living embodiments of gods and goddesses. Their status is elevated to such a point it is said the couple receives the right of way over individuals who normally carry a higher status than themselves (Harman

128-31). The bride and groom are ritually bathed and anointed with oils. The bride will be dressed in her finest jewels and sari and will have her hands and feet colored with henna. A brahmin priest is contracted to preside over the rituals (Fowler 55-6).

The actual wedding ceremony varies considerably from place to place, however, Sharma (1985) outlines six rites commonly observed. The first is *madhuparka* in which the groom and his party arrive at the bride's house, traditionally on horseback. They are received by the bride's family and the groom is honored as a deity. The second element is that of *kanyadana*. This is where the father gives his daughter to the groom and the couple lights a fire in the sacrificial pit. During *panigrahana*, the groom takes the bride by the hand and presents her with a *mangalasutra*, or pendant, that is tied around her neck (73-5). [Rodrigues (2006) describes this pendant to be similar in nature to the *yajnopavita* (sacred thread) that is given to twice born males at their *upanayana* ceremony].

Following the ritual of *panigrahana*, the bride steps on the north stone by the sacrificial fire. This is known as *asmarohana* and symbolizes the couple's strength against their enemies. During *asmarohana*, the bride throws three oblations of rice into the fire (*lajahoma*). The final rite during the wedding ceremony is considered the most important and is what legally seals the marriage. Referred to as *saptapadi*, the bride and groom circle the sacred fire seven times with corners of their garments tied together. Also known as the seven steps, each step symbolizes a different aspect of the marriage such as friendship, wealth, and fertility. By taking the seventh and final step, the marriage is made official. After completion of the ceremonies, there is typically a celebration held that includes dancing, singing, and feasting. *Varaghraprasthana* marks the bride's departure from her family's home to her husband's, where she will remain during the course of her marriage under her in-laws care. Consummation of the marriage does not take place until 3 days after the marriage ceremony and is known as *caturthikarma* (Sharma 73-5).

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

Fowler, Jeaneane (1997) *Hinduism: Beliefs and practices*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press.

Harman, William P (1989) *Sacred Marriage of a Hindu Goddess*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Rodrigues, Hillary P (2006) *Introducing Hinduism*. New York: Routledge.

Sharma, Arvind (1985) Marriage in the Hindu religious tradition. *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*: 22(1): 69-80.

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