

Friendship: The Vedic Prescription for Hindu Weddings

by

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The commitment to marry is perhaps the most important and most complex decision made by individuals irrespective of geography or cultural background. Imagine how much more complex and difficult it can be if you are an immigrant in a land whose traditions, culture and history are quite different from those in the land of your birth. Needless to say that the decision gets no less difficult if you are of a second generation. Such is the case with many Indians growing up in North America today.

Second generation Indians growing up here in North America are coming into their own and it is not easy for them. When they fall in love and decide to get married they are naturally apprehensive about traditions that they would like to follow even when their partner is Indian. Imagine their concerns when one of the partners has no Indian background. Growing up in a land where their neighbors, classmates and friends are not Indians, they are exposed to indigenous practices in weddings or bar-mitzvahs that bear little resemblance to what they have experienced in similar functions either within the Indian community here or when they visit their relatives in India. Their concerns are dual: first to make sure they design a ceremony that does justice to their own tradition (but largely that of their parents), and, second, to make sure that they and their friends somehow relate to it on their very special day. This is pressure. Young people find it hard to cope not only due to the many unknowns implicit in a wedding preparation but also the ceremony itself with Sanskrit mantras, procedures and steps that are not entirely clear to the couple. Justified or not, it is truly a burden felt by the youth.

This is precisely where a knowledge of the Vedas may go a long way to help the couple to (1) be aware of the fundamentals driving the ceremonies, (2) understand the spirit of the approach to performing such wedding rites and (3) appreciate the sheer beauty and depth involved in the procedures. If relevant sections of the Vedas are studied carefully by the families, considerable confusion may be cleared away leading to a more rational and calm approach to the planning stage. When the couple realizes that the core message in the Vedas is truly modern in that it insists on truth rather than belief, joy instead of fatalism, friendship and community along with duty, here; rather than hereafter, they are in for a pleasant surprise and can become brave souls ready to immerse themselves in this old nectar of a philosophy that refuses to yield to narrow outlook on life on this earth.

Popular misconceptions notwithstanding, a study of the Vedas reveals how practical the findings of the ancient sages can be. Vedic sages were positive in their acceptance of life and death, life's struggles and imperfections, positive in their acceptance of the ultimate values - of truth, goodness and beauty. Vedic sages loved life as well as God and every wish of theirs for the good things of the earth took the form of an ardent prayer. Such prayers are blended into the Vedic wedding ceremony.

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Consider the religious basis of these procedures. According to Abinash Chandra Bose (*The Call of the Vedas*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1970), “Veda places truth first and ritual last in religion.” This does not deny rituals but their due place is clear as “Ultimately, in religion, as understood in ancient India, it is not so much a question of theism and atheism as it is one of truth and untruth.”

The Vedas proclaim that the true goal of life is freedom and this freedom from attachment, freedom from our lower selves brings such joy that it is simply incomparable to the usual kinds of joy most recognize. Fulfillment in life is the focus in a conjugal union and is reached when one accomplishes *chaturvidha phala purushartha* i.e. four aspects of life known as *dharma*, *artha* and *kama* leading to the complete release of bondage and to total freedom known as *moksha*. *Dharma* truly forms the very core of Hindu philosophy. The inclusion of *artha* (financial aspect) and *kama* (aspects of love) in this series confirms the practicality of Vedic thought.

Dharma is built into Vedic theism and every mantra uttered in wedding ceremonies implies this subtle relationship. And “...joy of life is evident in the attitude of worship. The mood of worship in the Vedas is not a gloomy one. Worship, like song and poetry, is an overflow of the joy of the soul: ...” The insistence on celebrating life on this earth should be evident because, in the Vedas “... there is scanty reference to the world to come.” Here and now is the emphasis. “There is no waiting for a world to come; we must be “happy here (*iha*) and now (*adya* or *idAnIm*).” Bose quotes further from the Atharva Veda “This world is the most beloved of all; “*ayaM lokaH priyamataH*” (Ath. V. 30.17).

The priority of Hindu ancestors is clear and unambiguous. The marriage vows and hymns, according to Bose “give a most idyllic and romantic picture of the conjugal union.” Consider the “Loving Whisper” from the Rig Veda (R. VI. 75.3). “As if desirous of speaking, she presses close to the ear, holding her beloved friend in her embraces; Strained on the bow, she whispers like a young woman, -This Bow-string that preserves (the warrior) in the battle.” A beautiful analogy in which the sound of bowstring drawing an arrow close to one’s ear is compared to that of whispers of a lover. “Here the ideas of heroism of the Kshatriya and romanticism of the conjugal (*Grihastha*) are intermingled” giving full expression to both. If this isn’t love of life by the Vedic seers, what else can it be? Joy and strength in one beautiful passage of poetry!

The July 1989 issue of Readers Digest carried an article entitled "Surprising Key to the Happiest Couples" written by two psychologists who conclude that "Romance ‘talks’ about love but it is friendship that puts love to the ultimate test." They continue: " If there is one prevailing wish that husbands and wives have for their marriage, it is to be close companions for life. While many men and women know that love is essential for such a lifelong bond, they often don't realize that love without close friendship is only a hormonal illusion. One cannot desire another person over the long haul without really being best friends with that person." That this is not a newly discovered concept is evident when we examine the contents of a step essential in a Vedic Wedding ceremony known as *Saptapadi*. During *Saptapadi*, the bride and the groom hold hands and take

seven steps together as husband and wife as they walk around Agni, the God of fire, (the kindled fire symbolic of their new hearth) and pledge to each other their eternal friendship. What they say after they have taken those seven steps is unquestionably the foundation for a successful marriage. Together they chant:

sakhaa sapta padI bhava sakhyaM tE gamEyaM
sakhyaM tE mAyOshaH sakhyaM tE mAyOshTaH

सखा सप्त पदी भव सख्यं ते गमेयं

सख्यं ते मायोशः सख्यं ते मायोश्टः

With these seven steps you have become my friend.
May I deserve your friendship,
May my friendship make me one with you.
May your friendship make you one with me.”

Anyone who has any question about the role of a woman in Hindu marriage should pay special attention to the charge and blessing by the presiding priest at the end of sapta-padi. He recites:

साम्राज्नी श्वशुरेभव साम्राज्नी श्वश्रुवांभव ननंदारि साम्राज्नीभव साम्राज्नी अधिदेवृषु

saamraajniI shvashurEbhava, saamraajniI shvashruvaaMbhava, nanaMdaari
naamraajniIbhava, saamraajniI adhidEvraShu

Be queenly with your father-in-law, Be queenly with your mother-in-law, Be queenly
with his sisters, Be queenly with his brothers

Nothing short of the status of a queen is what the scriptures prescribe. Our ancestors went even further: they blessed the bride by saying;

मूर्धानं पत्युरारोह

mUrdhAnaM patyurArOha

“May your husband keep you on his head”

meaning "let him respect you."

And we have further confirmation of this essential commitment to friendship in the Mahabharata. In the Aranya Parva of that great epic of the Hindus known as the Mahabharata, one of the 120 questions (See my book: *Yaksha Prashna: A Hindu Primer*, Second Edition, Periplus Line LLC, 2002 released by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan) the Yaksha asked Yudhishtira was "*kimsvin mitram grihesatah?*" i.e. Who is the friend of a householder? To which the prince answered "*bhaaryaa mitram grihesatah*" i.e. the friend of a householder is his spouse. In another question the Yaksha asks Yudhishtira:

किंस्विद् दैव कृतः सखा
kiMsvid daiva kRutaH sakha
Who is man's god-given friend?

Yudhishtira's answer was:

भार्या दैवकृतः सखा
bhaaryaa daivakRutaH sakha

A man's God-given friend is his wife. Again the basis of friendship in marriage is emphasized. According to Hindus, therefore, the basis for marriage is friendship. According to Hindus, this friendship is the understanding, the promise and the commitment that unites a man and a woman. There is absolutely no question about the role of a woman, her importance, her position in this equation that binds them together. The answer by the hero crystallizes the Hindu belief that friendship between a couple is the true basis for the union.

In fulfilling the four aspects of life discussed above, the demands of artha and kama in the lives of married people are in apparent conflict with the dictates of dharma and moksha. How does the Hindu resolve this apparent contradiction? This in fact was another question asked of Yudhishtira by the Yaksha:

dharmashcaarthashca kaamashca paraspara virOdhinaH
EshaaM nitya viruddhaanaam kathamEkatra saMgamaH

धर्मश्चार्थश्च कामश्च परस्पर विरोधिनः

ऐशां नित्य विरुद्धानाम् कथमेकत्र संगमः

Dharma, artha and kama conflict with each other. How can these contraries be reconciled? How can a householder necessarily involved in the pursuit of the good life seeking artha and kama in raising a family and serving a community not find himself in conflict with dharma and how can he strive for moksha? Notice that artha and kama are safely sandwiched between dharma and moksha. If salvation is to be your goal, the ancient Hindus said, then by all means participate fully in the affairs of society, raise a family, enjoy the good life in a responsible way, serve the community- all within the framework of dharma.

How does a grhastha reconcile these contrary requirements? According to Yudhishtira, there is only one way and that is:

यदा धर्मश्च भार्याच परस्पर वशानुगौ

तदा धर्मार्थ कामनाम् त्रयाणामपि संगमः

yadaa dharmashca bhaaryaaca paraspara vashaanugau
tadaa dharmarthaa kaamanaam trayaaNaamapi saMgamaH

“When dharma and one's wife are in harmony,
then dharma, artha and kama are reconciled.”

In other words, a person, in order to keep that delicate balance among the attributes of artha and kama, has to have a spouse who is dharmic. It is that protection coming from such a spouse, that torchlight, that spirit of friendship and cooperation and sacrifice that gives a reasonable chance for a couple to succeed in meeting this challenge of conflicting attributes. This is precisely the reason that during the wedding *homas* in the ceremony, the couple go around the fire four times; the first three rounds led by the groom but the last one is led by the bride.

The basic purpose of a Vedic wedding ceremony is to help unite a couple in the Vedic tradition. Understanding each step and the various vows is essential irrespective of the ability to repeat the mantras. Each step in the ceremony conveys implicitly or explicitly an understanding between the two. The principals inherit the burden of providing the umbrella of dharma so that the family they are about to raise, their own family, would be a *dharmic* one. A Hindu wife plays a major role in this burden that some may consider unfair. But that IS the tradition and expectation. That is why a Hindu wife is not simply referred to as *patni* (wife) but she is a *dharmapatni*, a wife-in-dharma. This then is the reason for that very special, very unique, very necessary role a woman was called upon to play in the Hindu household.

About the author

Dr. Srinivasan currently serves as Adjunct Professor at the Asian American Studies Institute at the University of Connecticut. He was born in the village of Amruthur, Kunigal Taluk in the Karnataka State. He is the primary founder of the Connecticut Valley Hindu Temple Society (1979) and served as its first President. He functions as a Hindu Priest in Connecticut performing a wide variety of pujas, ceremonies, weddings, house-warming, and bhajans since 1971. He has developed a format for weddings of Hindu youngsters based on the Vedas. He delivered monthly lectures on the Bhagavadgita for over 9 years and monthly lectures on the Mahabharata to the Indian community for a period of 5 years. He has published a book entitled **Yaksha Prashna: A Hindu Primer**, the second edition of which was released by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in 2002. He choreographed and directed a play, "The Coronation of Ramachandra", which was performed by the children in the community in 1984 and 1985. He has published/presented over 100 papers on a variety of cultural, social and religious issues in the U.S. and India, the most recent contribution is a paper "**Dharmo Rakshati Rakshitaha**" that appeared in the June 2005 issue of the Bhavan's Journal. His recent book **Pada Yatra** was published in 2005 for and in behalf of the Connecticut Valley Hindu Temple Society. He serves as member, Interfaith Council, Glastonbury, CT. He was nominated to receive the Ellis Island Medal of Honor in 1993. He taught Epics of India in the History Department at University of Connecticut (1995) and taught Sanskrit to graduate students at Wesleyan University in 1985.