

Chapter IV

TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS

“I don't want to utter anything that I do not fully understand, appreciate and approve..” said the bride's father during initial discussions pertaining to an interfaith wedding.

I couldn't agree more. It makes sense as individuals, especially those with non-Hindu traditions, struggle to come to grips with their son's or daughter's decision to marry a Hindu.

When the spirit and content of the steps and procedures are explained, more often than not, they can be seen objectively and all is well. In fact during discussions with ministers or priests or rabbis we have found that certain steps in other traditions are so identical in spirit, intent and content that we have been able to substitute one or more steps with those of the other tradition without any loss to the continuity. Thus one could accomplish a seamless ceremony with some planning. A study of both traditions will establish the fact that ancestors around the world must have thought along the same lines to make sure the couple understood their responsibilities when they commit to each other for life. This is the interesting part of this beautiful process in which two people come together as husband and wife.

The ceremonial aspects of the Hindu wedding have evolved over centuries into a hundred or more varieties depending on regional and family traditions



and beliefs. Yet there is a central thread that ties the steps together with invocation of Agni, god of fire and preserver of the domestic hearth, implicit or explicit display of respect to deities and gurus venerated by the families, respect shown to elders in the two families and the officiating priest, and above all a commitment to dharma and friendship. The evolution has little intellectual basis, the overwhelming driver being mostly those traditions that may have been in vogue at the wedding of the parents themselves. Also the changes, on the whole, are minor and the basic procedures have remained unaffected by other cultures except perhaps the modern practice of exchanging rings. Additions of a social nature include the dinner and dance following a reception and the toasting and roasting common in Hindu weddings in North America these days. Our experience has been to note the strong desire evident on the part of Hindu families to see their sons and daughters observe the familiar customs and a similar desire on the part of the young couple to understand the procedure and the rituals.

It is quite natural to love one's own customs and thus it is important to listen and try to integrate the ideas of the families as far as possible. Preserving family traditions is as old as time and is independent of cultural background. Consider the conversation between Bhishma and Shalya when the former sought, in behalf of King Pandu, the hand of the latter's sister.



पूर्वेः प्रवर्तितं किञ्चित्कुले अस्मिन् नृपसत्तमै
साधु वा यदि वा साधु तन्नातिक्रान्तमुत्सहै

pūrvai: pravartitam kimcitkulē asmin nrpasattamai
sādhu vā yadi vā sādhu tannātikrāntumutsahē

Sambhava-ādi Parva,106-22



[Shalya:] "We have a custom that is strictly followed.
Call it good or bad, we happen to follow it."

Good or bad, this is our custom! That is the position of Shalya, brother of princess Madri whose hand was sought. In a subtle way the "custom" being discussed here was to give away the bride, not as a gift, but to expect something in return. Bhishma sensed this accurately when he proclaimed, "I am aware of this custom and I know that an observance honored by tradition has the approval of wise and virtuous men." That "something in return" ended up to be "vast treasures of pure gold, thousands of precious stones of all colors, elephants and horses and chariots, robes and ornaments, pearls and corals and other gems. Happy with the dowry, Shalya gave his sister to Bhishma, ..." (Lal, ibid, Sambhava (105-120), Adi Parva, Mahabharata)

Thus kula dharma (family tradition) may always be invoked and it is important to consider and retain as many of the family traditions/requirements as possible in planning modern weddings.

A review of publications in modern Indian languages confirms the extent of variations dictated by geography and changing times. The question then is which steps to consider when planning a particular modern Hindu wedding. Based on the Vedic sources and a desired framework of space and time, one may define the following basic steps as essential to satisfying most of the ritualistic needs of those raised in the Hindu faith. It is worth repeating that a final program may be developed around this suggested framework to suit individual family practices and desires. Again the words used below may sometimes be different to describe the same steps as will be evident later.



- ◉ Swagat or Swagatam/ Milni (The meeting/greeting of both families. Bride is not present)
- ◉ Vara Puja (Dialogue between bride's father and the groom)
- ◉ Jai Mala (Exchange of garlands)
- ◉ Pravara (Announcement of lineage)
- ◉ Kanyadanam (Giving away the bride)
- ◉ Mangalyadharanam (Tying the mangalasutra)
- ◉ Agni/Homas (Fire rituals)
- ◉ Mangal Phera (Circling the fire)
- ◉ Saptapadi (Seven steps)
- ◉ Ashirvadam (Blessings)

Hindu weddings, as we have seen, are based on the Vedas. In ancient India, and to some extent in modern times, each family has had allegiance to a particular Veda. That is why one hears about Rigvedis, Yajurvedis or even Trivedis and Chaturvedis, i.e. adherents to either three or all the four Vedas. As pointed out in Colebrooke's analysis the mantras chanted during a particular step in a wedding ceremony depended on the particular Vedic tradition inherited by the family. As discussed there the mantras used and their interpretation can be vastly different for the same step in the ceremony. As an example, recall the step in which the bridegroom was presented a cushion. The mantras uttered could either be in praise of Soma as the god of all plants including the kusha grass from which the cushion was made or could be the occasion to wish that the enemies of the groom be trampled as he steps (tramples) on the grass cushion. Clearly the intent and emphasis are quite different in different Vedas for the same ritualistic step.

