

## Salient Features of a Hindu Marriage Ceremony in Southern India

### Introduction

According to Hindu Philosophy, man is expected to pursue four goals in his life, *viz.* *Dharma* (righteous conduct), *Artha* (economic development), *Kama* (gratification of the senses) and *Moksha* (freedom from mortal ties). While he is expected to follow the righteous path throughout his life, it is inculcated in him during the first stage of his life, *brahmacharya*, which is devoted to education, discipline and celibacy. The second phase of his life, certainly the longest, is that of a householder (*grihastha*) when he pursues economic progress and indulges in the gratification of the senses. The third phase is that of retirement (*vanaprastha*, literally meaning moving into the forest, which the ancients, especially aged royalty, often did). The last phase is that of complete renunciation of all things material (*sanyasa*).

Thus, marriage is one of the most significant happenings in a man's life when he moves out of the first and into the second, and the most important, phase of his life.

Up to a century ago, the marriage ceremonies spanned a full five days, with a lot of entertainment thrown in for the benefit of the guests. But with the modern way of life, these have been compressed into something which takes a few hours.

The rituals can be classified into two kinds. First, the vedic rituals, performed by the priests according to the prescription of the scriptures and which are more or less common to all Hindus, irrespective of caste. The second, several lay practices, varying from community to community, and accomplished by the close relatives of the bride and groom. The sequence of events described below correspond to a Tamil Brahmin wedding but most of them occur, albeit with minor modifications, in all weddings of the region.

It will be useful to recall that till about the early half of the twentieth century, the bride and groom were children, with the groom barely being a teenager and the bride yet to attain puberty. Many of the lay customs reflect this fact. They have been adapted to modern times and often add some levity and fun to an otherwise very solemn ceremony. Various close kin are expected to perform pleasant 'duties', which integrates the extended families into the ceremonies.

**The marriage ceremonies** start with a certain number of preliminary rituals performed separately by the bride and the groom, along with their respective parents. The actual wedding commences with the

### Kasi yatra

*i.e.* the journey to Benares (= Kasi). The bridegroom 'decides' to undertake a journey, on foot, to the holy city of Benares for higher education. Dressed as a pilgrim, complete with an umbrella, a walking stick, a fan, a holy book, a bag of rice and a stout pair of sandals, he moves towards the entrance of the marriage hall, accompanied by his family. At the gate, he is intercepted by the father of the bride who counsels him to give up this arduous project and instead move on to the second stage of life, that of a householder. To this end, he offers his daughter's hand in marriage. The bridegroom accepts the proposition and turns back.

### The exchange of garlands

The bride, in all her finery, is escorted to the hall by her maternal uncle and aunt and the bride and groom exchange garlands. At this juncture, the more sturdy men of both sides attempt to lift the couple off their feet and hoist them high thus preventing the easy exchange of garlands. The bride and groom try to lasso each other with the garlands and this leads to a lot of fun and horseplay. This custom is surely a relic of the child marriage days when the bridal kids were carried into the hall on the shoulders of the uncles and garlands were exchanged at a height so that all present could see it freely.

### Oonjal

*i.e.* the swing. The bride and groom are then seated on a decorated swing. The women of both sides then feed them with spoonfuls of milk and bananas (perhaps to stave off the pangs of hunger, for they are not allowed to eat anything during the long ceremonies that follow?). Then, to ward off the 'evil-eyes', they encircle the heads of the couple with brightly coloured rice balls which are then thrown in the four cardinal directions. Five women, led by the mothers of the bridegroom and the bride, circle the swing for a ritual of purification and protection before the bridal couple is led on to the decorated dais. During *oonjal*, women of both sides sing a lot of songs. These include customized compositions made up specially for the occasion.

### Kanyadhanam

which literally means giving away the bride (*kanya* = young girl, *dhanam* = donation). After a preliminary set of rituals when the sacred fire is set up and *Ganesha*, the remover of all impediments, has been invoked, the bride is seated on her father's lap to be given away to the groom. (Again, this must be a custom dating from the child bride days.) The bride holds in her palms a sacred coconut along with betel leaves. The priests then recite the names of three generations of male ancestors (great-grandfather, grand-

father and father) of the bride and groom three times, so that the assembly clearly knows who is being married to whom. Then the father of the bride hands over his daughter to the bridegroom cautioning him to take great care of this precious gift that he has been given, and the bridegroom accepts the offering.

A man is not allowed to make a donation without his wife's assent. In this case, this assent takes the form of a stream of water that the mother of the bride pours on the coconut and betel leaves in the palms of her daughter. This stream of water is not only her signature to the act of donation but a symbolic gesture of renunciation of parental rights hereafter, on their daughter.

Having accepted the bride into its household, the groom's family then presents her with a new set of clothing to wear instead of those given by her parents and the groom's sister escorts the bride away from the dais to effect this change of clothes.

### **Mangalyadharanam**

When the bride returns dressed in her new clothes, a traditional nine yards' sari worn in the style of married Brahmin women, she resumes her seat on her father's lap. The groom, standing, faces her. A small model of a yoke is placed by him on the bride's head to indicate that the two will work in tandem to conduct the duties of their household like two bullocks that plough the land. After a recitation of several marriage vows by the bridegroom, he ties a sacred yellow thread with gold pendants (*mangalyam*) around the bride's neck as a sign of an everlasting bond. His sister assists him in this task. The assembly then showers flowers on them by way of blessings. This is the high point of the ceremony that everyone is waiting for, and can be compared to the exchange of rings in Christian marriages.

### **Saptapadi**

*i.e.* the seven steps. According to Hindu Law, this and not the *mangalyadharanam* described above, is the real completion of the marriage. The bridegroom holds the bride's hand in his left hand, bends down and, with his right hand, guides the right foot of the bride to take seven steps around the sacred fire, each step with a stated purpose:

- the first step is taken to nourish each other;
- the second, to grow together in strength;
- the third, to preserve their wealth;
- the fourth, to share their joys and sorrows;
- the fifth, to care for their children;
- the sixth, to be together forever;
- the seventh, to remain lifelong friends.

This culminates with the bridegroom placing her foot on a grinding stone signifying that their marriage is founded on a firm footing and promising steadfastness in their loyalty to each other.

The groom then encloses the bride's hand within his (*panigrahanam*, *pani* = hand, *grahanam* = assimilation) and the marriage is complete. This is then followed by a series of vedic rituals performed, for the first time, by the couple as man and wife. It begins by feeding the fire with puffed rice, and the bride's brother assists the couple in this.

The assembled gathering, meanwhile, blesses the couple, hands over the gifts and proceeds to lunch.

### **Nalangu**

This is held in the afternoon, after lunch, and is conducted in a relaxed ambience. In the days of arranged marriages, it was meant for the bride and groom to get to know each other. It had mock competitions between the two, like trying to locate a ring hidden in a pot of rice or water (thus permitting them to secretly hold hands in public) and gives ample room for fun and good natured ribbing. There is a lot of singing and laughter.