

PATHETIC DECLINE IN OUR VALUES AND REMEDIAL STEPS

"I am the sky and you are the earth.

I am the giver of energy and you are the receiver.

I am the mind and you are the word.

I am the music and you are the song. You and I follow each other".

The above speech is not a dialogue from any movie, nor a quotation from Shakespeare or Kalidasa. This poetic expression of intense love is one of the Manthras in our marriages! Most of us, as the bridegroom, would have uttered it without any emotion, as a ritual to be completed in a few hours in front of Fire God without knowing the meaning. Some, in our anxiety to attend to our guests would have even kept silence, allowing the purohit to say them and he is obviously not the person intended to utter these words! If we care to go through the meaning of the various rituals performed and the Manthras recited during our marriages, we can realize the extent to which our rishis had been meticulous and methodical in all their directives. But, having got contaminated by western education we have lost all those precious pearls of wisdom presented to us. Just for example, here are a few more such statements depicting the care and concern of our rishis in providing for the couple a successful, meaningful married life:

QUOTE:

"O Lord Indra! May you bring together this newly married couple in the same manner as a pair of Chakravaka birds; let them enjoy marital bliss, and along with their progeny, live a full life.

In my duty, in my financial commitments, in my needs, I will not violate you. [Note: In essence, it means - In my duty, in my financial commitments, in my needs, I will consult you, will take your consent and act upon. The first oath is taken by the groom and the second by the groom respectively thrice.

I hold your hand so that we may have worthy children and may we be blessed to be inseparable. May the Gods Indra, Varuna and Savitru bless me to be an ideal householder with your kindly support. You have walked seven steps with me: be my friend.

We have walked seven steps together; let us be friends. Let me get your friendship. Let me not part from your friendship. May you not part from my friendship. [Note: This is recited by the groom after taking the seven steps around the altar.

I your husband, take your hand for perfect enjoyment with me; may you attain long life. Bhaaga, Aryamaa, Savita and Purnadhi have given you to me to be my home's mistress."

UNQUOTE.

Look at the beauty, intensity, intimacy, warmth, sincerity and fervor of these dialogues. Are they not meaningful expressions befitting the solemn occasion? But do we feel them during our weddings? Do the groom and bride experience the passion and ecstasy expressed in them? Who is at fault? Who is the loser? In fact, every Manthram, every aspect of our wedding ceremony is symbolic and significant in its import. They cover all the aspects of married life, duties of the spouses to each other, to their in-laws, to their relatives, to the society at large.

Unfortunately, nowadays, our weddings have become utterly meaningless charades. While gargantuan sums are wasted in pompous panoply, each one vying to outdo the previous ones, all the significant procedures have been thrown into thin air.

The very purpose of marriage has been devalued and degraded into a mere social contract between two adults to live together, procreate and enjoy life, analogous to animals. It is what the westerners adopt, and we ape them with all glee, glitter and glamour. The vital fact, that it is one of the 'Samskarams' ordained in our scriptures for the purpose of elevating the human being, so that the groom as well as the bride can practice 'Gruhastha Dharmam' and liberate themselves from the bondage of births and deaths, is altogether lost into oblivion. Instead, lot of empty and even erroneous events have evolved, and they take the center stage over a period of time, to such an extent that they are now being treated as essential parts of a wedding ceremony. Just for example, 'Oonjal' which is being performed in the morning of the wedding does not have any sanction, inasmuch as, face-to-face meeting between the bride and the groom is prohibited before the main function. But 'Oonjal' is now a regular feature in all conventional weddings and has been accepted as a perfectly authorized event. A similar erroneous event called 'Reception' which started as an item in the night of the wedding is now being advanced to the previous night itself to save the cost of rent of the marriage hall. One will not be surprised that if, by constant practice, it is conducted on a regular basis before the wedding day.

I have mentioned only two items. In fact, if we start listing the mistakes in our wedding functions, it will be quite a long one and be the subject of a separate article itself.

One thing we must understand: The basis and backbone of our Sanathana Dharma is not just in preaching its postulates, nor in simply professing that we, having been born in a particular lineage, claim to belong to the system. Far from it. It lies in actively practicing the tenets with all devotion and solemnity, in other

words called, 'Shraddha'. 'Shraddha' is not merely belief or faith. For instance, you do not just believe that the sun rises in the east. It is a fact that you accept ipso facto. You do not need any other proof for the same. Similarly, we should have such a fervent 'Shraddha' in all our Vedic statements.

There is no purpose in lamenting that everything has gone bad. If we want a change, we ourselves must be the architects of that change. To start with, each one of us can initiate the following steps:

1. Let us eschew all the ostentations and unnecessary spending in each wedding function. In fact, many marriages are getting delayed nowadays since the bride's father finds it a herculean task to procure colossal sums which will be squandered for a single day thamasha. Quite often ancestral properties are sold for this purpose. Is it not a criminal wastage of scarce resources? Is there going to be any material gain for the young couple? No. Then, why this senseless extravagance? Just to satisfy your false ego? At what cost? Is it worthwhile; is it warranted? Instead, the money can be usefully invested in the names of the couple, which will facilitate them to live a comfortable life.

2. Let us try to understand the meaning and purpose of the 'Samskaram' called 'Vivaham'. The quantum of 'Manthras' are not much. If we evince interest, we can learn it in no time. There are books like 'Vivaha Manthrartha Bhodhini' by famous publishers, providing the 'Manthras' with meanings and explaining the significance of each step of the wedding function. It will be quite interesting. If we can steal some time, we can learn the original 'Manthras' from a learned pundit and recite it daily. When we can find time to read newspapers, watch TV, browse the computer etc., we can easily find time for this most useful task. It all depends upon 'Shraddha'. Gradually, we can guide our children also in the right path. Once they come to realize the significance of each procedure, they will spontaneously start exhibiting interest. In fact, they will learn everything much faster than us. Nowadays, it is refreshing to note that our younger generation is evincing keen interest in learning about our glorious past.

3. It will be worthwhile, if, just a few weeks before the marriage function, the boy learns the proper recital of the 'Manthras' from the family purohit, so that, during the wedding, when the purohit chants them, he can also repeat them with meaningful understanding.

4. Actually, our wedding duration is four days. After the first day, the 'Oupaasana Agni' is brought home and is kept alive for three days in the house. 'Oupaasanam' is repeated for three days both in the morning and evening. During these days, the bride and the groom sleep separately on the floor, observing celibacy with a sandalwood log kept in between them, representing Viswavasnu Gandharva. On the fourth night only the ritual of 'Rithu Saanthi' is performed. At the outset this looks tedious, but it is not going to cost anything extra, since it is performed at home only and we derive a satisfaction that we have, to the extent of our ability

and resources, followed the tenets of our scriptures. Again, if we have 'Shraddha', while observing this procedure, we will be immensely blessed by our Veda Matha and Maha Periava. Being enlightened individuals with genuine belief in our values, why can't we take the first step towards the right direction?

[P.S. I have indicated only a few facts and procedures. There are many books and there are erudite scholars who will gladly provide further guidance in this regard. I am listing a few more of them hereunder:]

AVOIDABLE MISTAKES IN A WEDDING FUNCTION.

The basic blunder, which, of course, is the source of all other consequent faults, is to treat the wedding ceremony as a social function, wherein both the families invite all their relatives, neighbors, friends, including even remote acquaintances, engage a palatial marriage hall and indulge in all sorts of imaginable wasteful expenses. This corrupt practice has percolated so deep into our system that everyone vies with each other in adding senseless and spurious activities further and thus adding to the extravagance. As a consequential corollary, lot of other unwanted, unhealthy practices have crept into our society. Due to prohibitive cost, marriages could not be performed in time, women are forced to go in for jobs and earn the wherewithal for meeting the expenses. What initially started as necessary aberrations have now become a common way of life to the extent of being accepted as intrinsic norms. The irony is that womenfolk, instead of realizing that they are being exploited in the process, have started claiming employment as their right and as a sign of equality! The ramifications of the risks involved are too many to be described here. Suffice it to say that the focus and fulcrum of our Sanathana Dharma rests heavily on the sanctity, strength and salubrity of our womenfolk who function as the driving force in maintaining our ancient precepts and values. Is it not our bounden duty to assiduously protect them from the hazards of present corrupt environment? Wedding is not a social function at all, but a purely private, intimate, household event, involving just two families alone and nobody else. By indulging in unnecessary and erroneous activities we are prone to neglect vital factors that are germane to the occasion. Here I confine myself with some of the most obvious errors which can be avoided with a little or no effort, provided we are sincere in our approach. The list is only indicative and not exhaustive, inasmuch as 'To err' is not only human but also infinite! The wedding reaches its completion only after the performance of important events like Panigrahanam, Mangalya Dharanam, Homam, Saphathathi, Laaja Homam etc. before which the bride and groom should not sit together. Therefore, items like 'Oonjal' in the morning are prohibited per se. It goes without saying that the so called 'Reception' before the wedding day is not in the picture at all. In fact, it would be better if such occidental practices are altogether avoided or relegated after the fourth day, after the completion of 'Rithu santhi'. Some people, under a mistaken

notion that they are doing a yeoman service for the Vedas and Vedic scholars, arrange for a 'Sadas' on the previous evening wherein Vedic scholars chant Manthras and bless the bride and groom. In this event, both of them are made to sit together and receive the blessings. This is also equally wrong. It is imperative on the part of our learned purohiths and pundits to desist from such a practice and counsel the organizers accordingly. In order to make the function more focused and meaningful, it is better if the number of participants is restricted to the bare minimum. The ideal limit will be 20 persons, 10 from each family. In such a case we need not even engage any professional caterer/cook or go in for a spacious hall. If the house is big enough and can comfortably accommodate, it can be performed even in the house itself in which case, the womenfolk themselves can volunteer to prepare the food items. This is ideal and in fact, will facilitate closer rapport among them, a beneficial factor in the long run. The bride, groom and their parents should bestow their utmost attention to the important events like Panigrahanam, Maangalya Dhaaranam, Homam, Saptha Pathi etc. They should request the purohit to explain to them the import of each item, involve themselves emotionally and should not fritter away their concentration on other mundane affairs during such occasions. It is advisable to personally put some labor and procure things like bricks, 'Samith', puffed rice [nel pori] instead of delegating such tasks to others. Nowadays, most of the marriage halls have readymade 'Homa Kundam' consisting of concrete and steel rods. This is not suited for Homam. Only red bricks and sand should be used. The Details of such technical items needed may be obtained from the purohit and all of them can be got beforehand. Bricks are embossed with the initials of the manufacturer and they should be placed in such a manner that the initials are on the top. As regards the ghee, it is preferable to prepare pure ghee at home rather than purchasing it from the shop. Ensure that the puffed rice [nel pori] is free from husk. While doing 'Homam', ghee should be offered only after the completion of the word, 'Swaaha' and not simultaneously while chanting. These are all small things but are quite significant in a religious function. The manifest deity in the function is 'Agni Deva' through whom oblations are offered and during the time, absolute respect should be presented to Him. Avoid sitting on chairs before Him. Barring some few elders who cannot sit on the floor, others can, as far as possible, sit on the floor displaying devotion and obeisance to the deities. With the invocation of Agni, the entire place becomes a holy one like a temple and all the rules pertaining to a temple should be observed. For instance, footwear is strictly prohibited inside the hall. Irreverent acts like irrelevant gossiping should be eschewed and everyone should pay attention to the main event taking place. Avoid using shamiana at the premises, since it would have been used earlier for all inauspicious purposes also and would have never been washed. Also bursting of balloons at the time of 'Mangalya Dhaaranam' is wrong. It is disturbing and detrimental to the sanctity and solemnity of the occasion. Most of the 'Manthras' are statements in the first person meant to be articulated by the groom and so it is imperative that he listens to the purohit carefully and repeats each and every such 'Manthram' distinctly and with percipience. Otherwise, the purohit will become the 'de jure' husband as per the scriptures! Marriage is a 'once in a lifetime' event. Is it not therefore

imperative that the event is performed with utmost perfection? It will be quite sensible and salutary if the groom spends at least a week earlier, approaches the purohit or any qualified Veda exponent and learns all the Manthras with their meaning. The Manthras are simple, short, quite easy to learn and memorize. It will be a joyous experience and also immensely rewarding. When so much of time, money, energy and effort are expended for the most momentous event, spending a few days exclusively for its proper fruition is the most prudent and profitable exercise, is it not? The 'Laaja homam' is an event when puffed rice [nel pori] is placed by the brother of the bride in her hands which she offers to the Agni Bhagavan while the groom chants the Manthras. Here, only a brother who is born in the same womb of the mother is eligible to do this and not any stepbrother or anybody else. If the bride does not have such a brother, it is to be done by the bridegroom himself and no one else. It has become a practice, an abominable one, to get the services of some professional beautician and adorn the bride to present her more attractive. This is not only unwarranted, but it tarnishes the purity of the entire atmosphere. The bride is not going to contest in any beauty parade. When the religious activity is going on involving Homam, absolute purity and solemnity should be maintained. As a corollary, it goes without saying that women who are in their periods should not attend the function at all. It is a sad spectacle that such restrictions are not observed in many of the present-day weddings.

P.S. Everyone is pragmatic and practical enough to realize that all the above steps cannot be implemented smoothly at one stroke, since we had been misled with distorted western values for centuries which cannot be extirpated overnight. It is enough for the present if we, as the distinguished readers of 'Kamakoti Pradeepam', take the first step in the right direction and start slowly adopting the remedial measures one by one, keeping in mind how our Maha Periava would welcome each one of our moves and shower His blessings in our laudable endeavors.

Now, let us briefly discuss the significance of some of the procedures in a wedding.

ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF A WEDDING CEREMONY.

We have to always keep in mind that marriage is not just a social contract between a man and a girl as trivialized by western ethos. As per our Sanathana Dharma, it is one of the forty 'Samskarams' ordained by our prophetic and prescient Maharishis.

The word 'vivaaham' [also called 'udvaaham'] can be split as 'vi+vaaha' or 'ud+vaaha' meaning perfectly conducted, happily borne. what is being conducted? It is declared, 'Dharma Prajaartham Vruneemahe', meaning that the couple

undertake to live their life together practicing the ethical principles propounded by our scriptures and, for the purpose of preserving and pursuing them further, beget worthy progeny.

The objective of marriage is twofold and in fact, both of them are complementary to each other. One is for self-liberation and another is propagation of virtuous posterity. How much perceptive, prudent, pragmatic and down-to-earth practical our predecessors have been can be seen by analyzing the procedure they have prescribed for each 'Samskaram'. They have painstakingly taken into account every detail and every facet of our physical and psychological growth as well as needs and evolved a perfect system wherein our energies are channelized in a natural way, so that, while not an iota of the pleasure of living is compromised, steps to elevate ourselves for liberation are also simultaneously ensured. A cursory glance of the import of the Manthras would substantiate this.

Our wedding procedure has been formulated by Apasthamba Maharshi. He has culled out Manthras from the Vedas and framed a set called, 'Manthra Prasnam'. It contains those Veda mantras for performing the Smartha karmas of Gruhasthas, like Upanayanam, Vivaaham, Jathakarma etc. Manthra Prasnam is also called as Ekaagni Kaandam and learnt as a part of the main Vedic text in Patashalas.

Wedding consists of the following events: Vara Preshanam, Vaang Nischayam, Vratha Poorthi [Kaasi Yaathra], Vara Pooja [Kanyaa Dhaanam], Agni Prathishtaapanam, Madhuparka dhaanam, Devataa Praarthana, Vivaaha Sankalpam, Kanyaa Samskaaram, Wearing of Koorai saree and Alankaaram, Maangalya Dhaaranam, Agni Mukhaandam, Paani Grahanam, Saptha Pathi, Agni Pradakshinam, Asmaarohanam, Laaja Homam and Jayaathi Homam.

After completion of all the above, the bride is brought to the house of the groom and the following events are performed: Pravesa Homam, Drhuva Arundathi darsanam, Aagneya Sthaaleepaakam, Oupaasanam,

Still, the 'Vivaham' is not complete! The couple should continue the 'Oupaasanam' both in the morning and evening and keep the 'Agni' alive. For three days, they should observe celibacy, yes, make no mistake, strict celibacy!, consume Saathvic food [without salt, tamarind and chilies], sleep on the floor separately with a sandal stick in between them, on which Gandharva Raja Visvaavasu is invoked. On the fourth day, morning Visvaavasu is awakened, given farewell and the following are performed: Sesa Homam, Naandhi, Phala Dhaanam, Aaseervaatham.

Ruthu Saanthi [also called 'Santhi Muhurtham'], nowadays unceremoniously clubbed with the wedding function, is altogether a separate Vaidika event. There are separate set of Manthras for that also.

[1. It is a pity that our present-day wedding is curtailed, edited and shrunk in such a way that many of the vital steps are deleted and as a woeful consequence, the essence is altogether lost. By doing so, are we not making a mockery of the most important occasion in our life? Is it not a mindless cruelty and a permanent loss that we impose upon ourselves by our own sheer ignorance and indifference? Mind you, cost-wise, it is not going to burden us even a paisa more. All we need is a little bit of 'Shraddha'. That is all. When we are ready to prepare ourselves in life with all assiduity and attention for so many other events like examination, interview etc., can we not bestow the same care and concentration for the most crucial event in our life? At the end, who is the loser? Let us all ponder over this and start taking remedial steps.

2. Now, when confronted with such an issue, there is an immediate and impulsive propensity to put the entire blame on the purohit. But, if we analyze impartially, is it not a fact that we are more to blame than that poor purohit? After all, he gauges the extent of our earnestness and accordingly acts so that he is in unison with our values and needs. Otherwise, we tend to seek another pliable person as alternative. Incidentally, by cleverly cooperating with us, his job is also made easier; that is all.

3. But, of late, one more despicable development has crept in. Throwing all norms to the winds, a few purohits have started accepting the assignment, chanting the sacred Veda Manthras and performing the prescribed rituals at certain profane weddings involving inter-caste and even inter-faiths. While anyone has absolute liberty to display one's extent of 'progressive' ideas and pseudo-secular outlook by indulging in such sacrileges, the learned Vedic pundit should, in all fairness and deference to the Veda Matha, categorically shun those charades. The spectacle of a foreigner donning a temporary thread as 'Yagnopaveetham' for a few hours just to gain conjugal relationship with a Hindu brahmin girl is the most repulsive sight and let us not be a part of such atrocities.]

Let us now briefly look into each of the steps:

[For the sake of brevity, only a broad synopsis is given, omitting the 'nuts & bolts' details. Moreover, though the main procedure is the same, there may be slight variations according to local customs and traditions, in which only the 'family purohit' can provide guidance. It will be profitable if we approach him beforehand and seek from him details, significance, purport and rationale of each activity. By means of such exercises we gain valuable insight and the purohit will also be delighted at our earnestness and enthusiasm.]

[Just to indicate the perception and perspicacity of our sages who have presented us with such a splendid path, a brief gist of the meaning of a few of the Manthras is also given. If one looks at the contents in detail, apart from the substance, the poetic excellence, flow of fertile imagination of our rishis will be evident in every stanza. All our Manthras are rich in beauty, grace and elegance. If

only the bride and the groom care to learn all the Manthras and chant them with sincerity and involvement ['shraddha'], how much enjoyable and how much memorable would be the occasion and how much beneficial will it be for their entire life! By being lackadaisical and lethargic, are they not losing the most vital message? The younger generation should ponder over this and start sedulously studying the priceless boon bequeathed to us by our rishis.]

Nowadays, our weddings usually start with 'Janavasam' [welcoming the groom], 'Lagna Patrika', 'Nischayathartham' etc. The strange fact is that none of them have any scriptural significance. They are purely later 'Loukika' additions and have no religious value at all.

In fact, the day before the wedding, the would-be groom should do 'Samavarthanam'. He gets himself shaved after which he takes bath using aromatic powders, starts wearing 'Panchakacham, six threads of 'Poonool' footwear and holds umbrella. He gives up 'Brahmacharyam' and enters 'Gruhastasramam'. This is now being done crudely as 'Kasi yatra' as a token event on the morning of the wedding.

Any auspicious function like 'Chowlam', 'Upanayanam', 'Snaanam' [Samaavarthanam] and 'Vivaham' starts with 'Ankurarpanam' meaning sowing of five [or, in some tradition, nine] types of holy seeds in five earthen containers, called 'Paaligai'. [It is better to get the grains individually than to blindly accept anything the shop keeper provides as a package.] In each container, a few devatas are invoked. Every day till the completion of the function, water is poured in the 'Paaligai' to ensure luxurious sprouting signifying prosperous growth of the progeny of the couple. The center pot represents 'Brahma', East-Indra, South-Yama, West-Varuna and North-Soman. The 'Karta' recites the following prayer: 'I invoke Brahma and the deities of the four directions in these pots. I pray to them for their blessings for the successful completion of the task I am going to start and let them fulfil all my wishes'. The detailed procedure, preservation, significance and disposal of the 'Paaligai' can be learnt from the family purohit.

The next event is 'Pratisarabandham'. It means tying of holy thread over the right hand of the groom and left hand of the bride, after chanting of Manthras. This insulates both of them from any taint due to occurrence of any inauspicious event during the course of the ceremony.

While the above two are common for all auspicious functions, the wedding ceremony starts from here:

Vara Preshanam:

The groom requests elderly persons to go on his behalf and seek a suitable bride. He prays to devas like Indra, Aryama, Bhagan to ensure their safe passage and success in their endeavor.

Vaang Nischayam, vratha poorthi and Vara Pooja:

Accordingly, they approach the bride's father and request him to give his daughter for marriage to the groom to enable him to practice 'Gruhasta Dharmam.' He gladly agrees and declares so, whereupon they convey the happy message to the groom. The bride's father prepares for the wedding. He treats the groom as a manifestation of Maha Vishnu and washes his feet.

Agni Prathishtaapanam, Madhuparka dhaanam:

In the Homa Kundam, 'Agni Bhagavan' is invoked. The bride's father offers 'Madhuparkam' [curd mixed with honey] to the groom. During this occasion there is a dialogue of Manthras between the groom and the bride's father.

Devataa Praarthana, Vivaaha Sankalpam, Kanyaa Samskaaram:

The groom prays to devatas viz., Varuna, Indra and Bruhaspathi, soliciting their blessings and requests, 'Please remove congenital or behavioral defects if any from her; let her be cordial towards all my relatives.'

He then addresses the bride and requests her, 'Let your vision be benign; you shall be supportive to me in my prayers; you shall function for the benefit of our relatives and cattle. If there are any negative traces in you, I am removing all of them by this kusa grass.'

He asks her relatives not to shed tears at the separation of the girl but to pray for their long and happy married life.

He prays, 'Let holy water be brought for her bathing. Let Indra make her pure as he did for 'Abaalaa'. Let the holy water that flows through the hole in this yoke cleanse and bless you.'

Then 'Mangala Snaanam' is done to the bride through Manthras: Let this holy water born from the Sun God and Agni, which, by itself being pure also purifies everything else, as spotless as pure gold, purify this girl. Let the king of water, Varuna, who is an eternal witness of all our deeds, bless her with all the best, both in the earth and heaven. Let the water droplets, possessing the essence of ghee, which is sprinkled on her anoint her with all the good.

Wearing of Koorai-pudavai:

'Just as this saree wraps this girl, let my prayers encircle Indra and confer his blessings on us. Seeking progeny and protection from Agni, let me bind her with this holy grass [Dharbai thread] and lead her along to the holy fire god.'

[It is in fact koorai-naattu-pudavai, a type of cotton saree obtained from a place called kora-naadu in Tamilnadu known for expert weavers. Initially only cotton was woven and worn during marriages, a practice that still continues with other South Indian communities. Most communities in Tamilnadu still wear cotton saree only as muhoortha-p-pudavai. Only Brahmins seems to have changed to pattu-p-pudavai [silk saree]. Let us also bear in mind that our Maha Periyava does not approve of silk saree, since it involves killing of lot of bees.]

[Note: Apart from this mention of dress here, there is no reference to any other new dress to be gifted to anyone else. Whatever luxury we indulge in our wedding ceremonies towards purchase of exorbitantly expensive garments is of our own volition which factor unnecessarily inflates the expenditure. The agonizing fact is that while the affluent can easily afford such flamboyance, the not-so-fortunate, in order to match them, have to struggle hard for the resources.]

Mangalya Dharanam:

Although there is no Veda Manthram exclusively for Mangalya Dhaaranam, it is being observed as a traditional ceremony and has acquired great significance. For instance, Lalitha Sahasranamam describes one of the names of Ambal as,

'Kamesa badda mangalya sutra sobhita kandara'

[She whose neck is bedecked with the "Mangalya sutra" tied by Lord Kamesvara.]

The groom ties the first knot stating a Manthram which means: 'I tie this holy thread which is a symbol of my longevity and I bless you for a happy life of hundred years". He ties the first knot and his sister completes two more. This holy thread along with toe-ring and red vermillion on the head are all sacred symbols and should be permanently worn by married women. [Nowadays, women have developed, unmindful of the consequences, a loathsome habit of removing these symbols and wearing them only on festival days. Let Veda Maatha bless them with better sense and this vile habit is stopped forthwith.]

Panigrahanam:

Now the groom holds the right hand of the bride with his right hand.

'Let the devata 'Poosha' lead you to the God Agni. Let 'Asvini Devas' who grant good health bring you to our home. Let you be the dynamic force that drives me to my daily religious obligations.

The holy fire, a great protection against evil, is the messenger and mediator between God and human. This fire acts as an eternal witness to marriage. The bride and groom pledge and declare to all those present that they have accepted

one another voluntarily and follow the tenets of 'Gruhastasramam' with love and affection throughout their life even during senility. During 'Panigrahanam' the following deities are invoked for their benevolence to grant them variety of boons: Soman, Gandharvan, Agni, Bhagan, Aryamaa, Suryan, Indran, Saraswathi and Vaayu.

Sapthapathi:

Holding each other's hands, the couple takes seven steps, symbolic of the seven marital vows, around the sacred fire.

Together, we will have plenty of food items.

Together, we will have all other prosperities.

Together, we will perform all the 'Vrata' [religious tasks].

Together, we will have merriment and joy.

Together, we will rear lot of cattle.

Together, we will lead a peaceful and pleasant life during all the six seasons.

Together, we will conduct all the 'yagnas' with the benefaction of Maha Vishnu.

The groom now says, 'You have walked seven steps along with me. Hereafter you are my intimate companion. We are friends now. I shall not break this friendship; you also do not break. Let us live together for ever. We will conduct our affairs together, jointly in all matters. We will love each other; we will enjoy the fruits of our good deeds together; we will have identical views; we will do all our activities jointly.

You are the words of music; I am the music.

I am the horizon; You are the earth which touches the horizon.

I sow the seed; You bear the embryo.

I am the mind; You are the word.

Follow me. Let us live a life of bliss, plenty, progeny and prosperity.

Agni Homam:

The groom takes the bride, circumambulating the fire god, does Homam, soliciting various boons from Soman, Gandharvan, Agni, Inran, Suryan and Varunan.

Asmarohanam:

The groom places the right foot of the bride on a roller stone [ammi] chanting Manthram. He says, 'Let you be as solid and imperturbable as this rock through thick and thin to withstand all the vicissitudes of life.'

Laaja Homam:

The wife holds her palms together, Laja (puffed paddy) is placed in this and the husband offers Ahuti of this in the Agni with her hands. In some Sampradya, the wife's brother places Laja in her hands. It is to be noted that it is the groom alone who performs Homam here and the palms of the bride are being used as vessel from which the Dravya is offered into Agni.

“This woman is offering this Laja asking for hundred years of life for her husband. Let the deity Agni bless her with noble offspring. Let both of us live a life of cordiality. Let her get attached to my household. Let her be an active assistant in our pursuit of dharma.”

Pradakshinam of the Agni is performed chanting mantras as done before.

Jayaathi Homam:

This is the concluding Homam that is performed on all auspicious ceremonies where 'Ahuti' are offered to various deities indicating the successful culmination of the function. This Agni itself is the 'Aupasanagni' for the couple for the rest of their life. It is taken in a pot and carried without getting extinguished to the husband's home. As per scriptures, the couple is expected to perform Aupasanam every day in this Agni for the rest of their married life.

Gruhapravesam:

The groom brings the bride to his house. While getting into the vehicle and while entering the house, the groom blesses the bride to have a happy life and take over charge of the house and be an able administrator over everyone including her husband, in-laws and all other relatives. In fact, the Manthram states that she is the absolute boss of the house for all practical purposes. [This is the extent of recognition and respect that our rishis have bestowed on the bride.]

As mentioned earlier, the couple should observe celibacy for three days, doing 'Oupasanam' both in the morning and evening. On the fourth night, the couple receives blessings from brahmins, performs Daanam of fruits and does

Ganapathy puja. The husband performs Sankalpa proclaiming that I am sanctifying my wife by means of the samskara called 'Garbhadhanam'. [Note: A keen observer would have noted that the entire event involves mainly four persons; viz., the groom, the bride and her parents apart from the purohit. It is strange that the groom's parents are nowhere involved at all!!! Does it not indicate that wedding is a purely personal, private pursuit where there is no public parading of all and sundry is warranted and the presence of horde of irrelevant people is not only meaningless but it spoils the very soul, spirit and substance of the event?]

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