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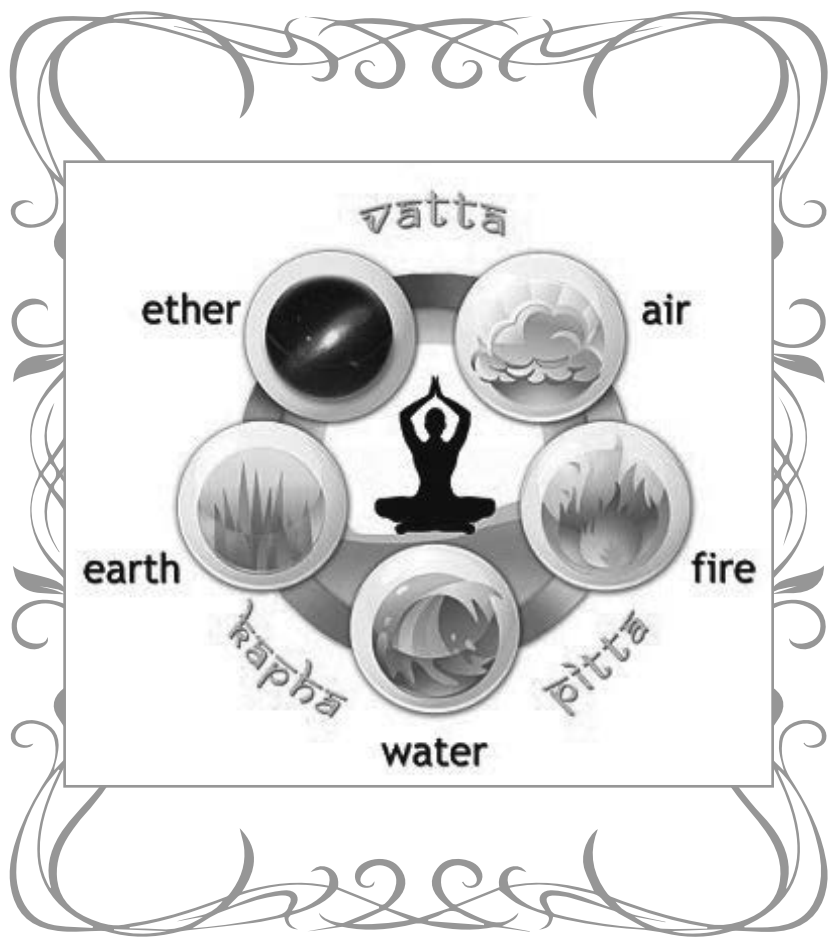
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Chapter 1

HINDU RITUALS

“Love is the very basis of Hinduism. If you know how to love, you are a Hindu. All great people have become great because of their love for others. They gained greatness because they learnt to love.”-Swami Chinmayananda.

In the Rig-Veda there is a mantra which translates: “The reality is one, but those who know, speak of it in different terms.” The truth, the absolute experience, can be described in many ways. Therefore, the Vedas have long been considered the fountain source of a people who believe the ways are many and the goal is one.¹

ORIGINS OF HINDU RITUALS:

According to Hindu faith, introduction and respect for the prescribed sacraments came in existence since over a thousand of years. Its tradition teaches us that we as human beings and the entire creation are formed by five primary elements such Prithvi (Earth), Jal (water), Agni (fire), Vayu (Wind) and Akash (Ether).

The birth of any creature which has *prana shakti* (Vital life force) emerges from the third central element called fire or Agni or Tej or Tejas.

¹ Source: Vedas by Swami Saraswati Satyananda Teacher training course in Monghyr October 1980)

When men and women copulate and at the moment of conception one male cell which is hot and always in liquid form joins with female embryo is formed and this denotes the beginning of pregnancy and life. The male cell is a direct formation of the fire element (Agni) and it is because of this primary element that growth takes place and the embryo will end only at the birth of the child. It is imperative that the element of fire exists in the embryo to continued growth and life. This element alone keeps us alive over the duration of our lives. As soon as Prana shakti which is in the form of Agni departs from the body, it is considered as a corpse.

This is the reason the followers of Sanatana Dharma give importance to this element in all Hindu rituals. According to the science of deities mentioned in the Rig Veda all deities and even Demi- Gods are a product of Agni.

Therefore, in Hinduism and human life the place of fire is considered as supreme and it forms the core of Hindu life that lies between birth and demise. The deity of fire is worshipped in all the rituals and prayers. The Importance of fire ritual commences before the birth and after the person passes through the transition. There are sixteen sacraments which Hindus are supposed to follow and each sacrament has a protocol of sixteen enactments as enumerated below for ease and its scientific significance.

PSYCHOLOGY OF RITUALS

Rituals are a set of actions with chants in varieties of ceremonies and are basically symbolic. Every symbolic expression has an underlying meaning and commitment. The purpose of elaborate movements, with sound articulation is to reinforce the commitment or the petition that we generally have in mind. Without the performances of rituals, the commitment of an individual in general, remains in a state of laxity or complacency. The rituals are designed to achieve emphasis on the subconscious mind and therefore the individuals performing the rituals become more aware and resolute in their promise and act in accordance with such vows or pledges taken.

THE PRESCRIBED & SCIENTIFIC PROCEDURE OF ANY HINDU RITUAL

1) First and foremost it is important to prepare a respectful seat for the statues of deities or their symbols in the form of coconut, beetle nuts etc.

The invoking of deities involved in any ritual or Pooja is:

1) Lord Ganesha, for the purpose of removing all impediments or obstacles in the performance of the prayerful sacrament.

2) Lord Shiva is invoked for the purpose of creating a pious ambience or atmosphere. The name Shankara which is another name of Lord Shiva and also referred as Mahadeva is the combination of the word Shank which means piousness and Kara means the one who does or makes: Therefore, the literal meaning of Shankara is “one who creates piousness”.

3) Mahavishnu or Hari is invoked for healthy sustenance of the spirit to be born from that particular embryo and its existence thereafter enduring.

4) The group of Surya or the Sun (Bhaskara) along with symbols of all the eight planets which totals nine along the sun who is considered the supreme leader of all the planets. Conducting a ceremony is called the Nava Graha pooja which is a mandatory pooja to be included in all kinds of poojas or sacraments. Without this sacrament no ritual can be considered as perfected. The purpose of invoking these deities of each planet is to safeguard our safe sojourn in our life with overall health and prosperity.

5) Goddess Jagdamba (Mother of the world) is the combination of three personalities such as Maha Kali for Shakti or strength 2) Mahalakshmi for prosperity and wealth and Maha- Saraswati for knowledge and wisdom. Jagadamba is a combination of Jagad which the world and Amba means mother the creative force of our existence. Other names of the primary mother of all existence are Narayani and Gauri. So by invoking all these formidable deities the prayer or the sacraments is to seek blessings, especially for the inward bound soul as a personality to free all miseries and as ordained by the law of karma.

It is extremely important to know that all such rituals must be performed with the highest devotion and faith so that all such astral Deities are venerated as if they were in material form and virtually present during the whole procedure of the pooja rites.

Before we take the explanation of the 16 Hindu sacraments (*Samskaras*) we will take up first the sixteen steps called (Upachara = steps or ways of worshipping) to make any or every pooja, a virtual affair of devotion and bestowal of supreme blessings.

These sixteen steps or protocols are enumerated as follows:-

1) Dhyanam:

In this context it means to focus devotional silence which is very important to call on or invite respectfully the particular deity for its participation and presence in the sacrament. Without this attribute of respectful invitation no deity would ever like to accept your sacred invitation.

The protocol of Dhyana according to Dharma Shastra (Science of Religion) should be first to sit in a comfortable posture and in preference to Padma Asana and close your eyes for the activation of the third eye which is considered as “Jyana Netra”. The purpose of activating the third eye is to give a free flow to your thoughts to reach any domain of the astral world or the material world.

2) Awhana meaning to invoke and welcome:

After we have completed our focus for inviting the deity the next step is to welcome its presence, by chanting the Awahan mantra.

3) Asanam:

Asanam means to respectfully offer the deity to be seated at the centre or Pitham (Sitting place)

4) Paadyam:

The ritual is to offer water for washing the feet of the deity.

5) Arghyam:

This is for offering water for washing the hands of the deity.

6) Achamaneeeyam:

This is pouring water as a mouth and face wash of the deity.

7) Snanam:

This is pouring water over the entire body or statue of the deity as a full bathing procedure.

8) Vastra:

This is the ritual of wearing apparel to the deity for the lower part of the body and also the upper part of the body called '*Upavastra*'. The female deities have to be adorned by some colorful apparel but the male deities "*Upavastra*" is in the form of Janeu (White thread). According to the Scriptures it is mandatory for any human being or Demi- God or any symbol of God to wear a janeu for claiming a right to perform or participate in any sacred ritual of Hindu culture. So in any Yagna or sacrament the two consequential elements are the presence of *Agni* (Fire) and the janeu for any male deity.

9) Chandana:

This ritual is concerned with the application of *tilak* of *chandan* paste on every deity -male and female to create a cooling and fragrant environment. For males, the most cherished and perfumed applications are combination of *chandan*, *sindhoor* and *kesar* etc., paste called *ashtagandha*. For female deities, a paste made of turmeric powder and *Kum kum* (Saffron) is applied.

10) Offerings:

These are generally adorning the deities by flowers and also offering the deities their favorite leaf; for example; for Lord Ganesha we must offer *druva* (Grass), for Lord Shiva have to offer *Billva* leaf and for Lord Vishnu and Goddess Jagdamba we have to offer *Tulsi*.

11) Dhoopam Samar Payami:

This is to offer a fragrant flower to make the ambience more receptive and sanctimonious to please the deities.

12) Nirajana:

This is to perform Mangal Aarti of any lamp or Diya or Deepa to honor and offer compliments to the deities.

13) Naivedya:

This means to symbolically offer food to the deities. This is done by offering morsels five times: Five times is very significant for the fact that we have 5 types of Prana in our body that needs to be energized. After it is considered that the meals have been assimilated in fulfillment, then we have to offer water three times as a symbolic gesture of washing the mouth, hands and feet of the deities. After offering 5 times to each deity present, the food is consecrated and consumed as *Prasad* or *Prasadam* amongst family and friends.

14) Chandan:

Put Chandan paste again on the forehead of deities as perfume and offer pan fruits or one coconut as an after dinner – dessert.

15) Mangal Aarti:

It is Singing Ganpati and Shiva Aarti and chanting Vishnu mantra, Surya mantra, Devi mantra and ending such invocations by putting *Kafur* (Camphor) in the fire.

16) Maha Pushpa and Pradakshina :

Offer of flowers and chant of specific mantra called Pushpa mantra and then later taking a round (Circumnavigation) around the sacred altar of the deities as a form of highest respect.

All these sixteen procedures are to be performed in sequence for each of the 16 sacraments involved in a Hindu's life time.

At the end of every Yagna or any ritual the ideal prayer is:-

“Oh God please take me away from this mortal coil and this earthly plane without any pain or any kind of material short coming or difficulties free of fear, sorrow and worry. Let my sojourn to arrive in your domain be smooth and harmonious”.

The Sanskrit prayer to be chanted is as follows:-

“Annayaasena maranam, vina dainyen jivanam, dehi me Bhagwan Krishna or ‘Shamboo or Devi’ Smaranam Te Nirantaram.”²

SAMSKARAS OR SACRAMENTS

SACRAMENT 1: GARBHA AADHANA

This is the first Samskar of the 16 Samskars or sacraments that are to be performed by a copulating couple for the congenial and safe birth of the child and its sustenance during the period of pregnancy.

SACRAMENT 2: PUNSAVANA

This Sacrament is for the purpose of invoking a healthy and pious, and noble progeny. The chanting of mantras is prescribed for inner purification to be performed during the third or fourth month of pregnancy and prior to the consciousness of the fetus.

SACRAMENT 3: SIMANTONNAYANA

After having performed the, ‘yagna’ as outlined in the first Sacrament, the pregnant woman has to comb her hair with a special kind of thorny comb. Since the nerves of the scalp are connected to the womb, the effect of combing this way periodically by the prospective mother, the embryo or the fetus or the child is energized so that the birth is flawless or without any handicap.

In continuation between the period of 7th and 8th month of pregnancy, the pregnant woman is considered to have two hearts at function in her body. One of her own and the other of the child (Fetus) and therefore, to satisfy her cravings or desires arising spontaneously and intensely; the mother is to be satisfied with all her likings and inclinations for edibles in a festive and ceremonial environment.

² Interview with Pundit Vasant- Anand Gadgil of Pune

In general, by performing this ceremony she is engaged in calm and satisfactory state of mind which is a most important condition for the child's mental and physical condition and its normal growth in the womb. Therefore, this sacrament is considered as one the most relevant rites for performed for the sanctity of the child to be born.

SACRAMENT 4: JATAKARMA

This is the most important ritual after the birth of the child. In this ritual the father is supposed to feed the new born child with its very first intake with a concoction of honey, cow ghee, and gold dust. The gold dust is normally grated by rubbing a gold ring on rough surface and the accumulated gold dust is to be mixed with honey and ghee. This mixture is to be rendered by placing a very small portion on the baby's tongue and at the same time specific mantras are to be chanted which normally denotes a petition to the Supreme Lord to bestow upon the child the attributes of sweetness as honey, brightness of gold and for friendliness and the ability to harmonize with people as ghee, and all three put together is for providing strength and immunity of the child.

SACRAMENT 5: NAMAKARAN OR NAMING CEREMONY

In general, the naming ceremony is performed either on the 12th or 13th day from the birth. This one is the most functional ceremony in which family and friends are invited for solicitation of blessings for the newly born family member.

The naming ritual has a certain protocol to be adhered to such as

- 1) The names should be related to some pious places or mountains, rivers, flowers and deities.
- 2) The given name should bear significance to planetary conjunction which means that every child is born in a certain position of the planets which are called *Nakshatras* which are 27 in number and each *Nakshatra* is divided into four quarters making a total of 108 quarters. It is interesting to note that every quarter has an alphabet and syllable allocation and based on the Nakshatra of the child, the choice of alphabet having a certain sound vibration is assigned for the child.

If the child's name is given contrary to the sound vibrations then the harmony of the child and its spiritual evolution

is deterred. Therefore, once one performs this sacrament or yagna³, one should ensure that the names should commence from the alphabet as represented by the particular *Nakshatra*.

SACRAMENT 6: DEVADARSHANA OR NISHKRAMANA

As a must, a child and the mother must not be allowed to go beyond the residential premise for at least one month after birth. So before one takes the child out to the outside environment, a pooja should be performed and then the mother and child should visit a temple or a holy spot for benediction and smooth entry into the society. This prayer is also performed to invoke the deities to protect the child from evil forces or negative vibrations.

SACRAMENT 7: ANNAPRASANA

This sacrament is performed to initiate a child to the intake of other kind of liquid and solid foods other than the mother's milk. The ceremonial intake for swallowing new food and suspending the intake of mother's milk is generally in the form of *kheer*. This is the first thing that a child should be offered and then gradually move into other foods as per the growth of the child.

SACRAMENT 8: CHOODA AND CHOOLA or MUNDAN

This is to protect the central part of the head, as the head is the most delicate and sensitive part of the human body. So the hair style is so structured so as to have hair as a central line covering the skull and the rest of the hair on the two sides is shaved. This retention of hair in the middle part (as peacock style) is for the protection of the softest point of the child's head. Alternatively a clean shave of the head by a specialized barber ensures the healthy growth of new hair on the clean head of the child.

This ceremony is generally performed with a lot of fanfare in a mood of celebrations. This get together with pooja ceremony also provides a splendid excuse for family reunions with mix and mingle overtones.

3 A Yajna or Yagna being performed. or Yajna) literally means "sacrifice, devotion, worship, offering", and refers in Hinduism to any ritual done in front of a sacred fire, often with mantras. Yajna has been a Vedic tradition, described in a layer of Vedic literature called Brahmanas, as well as Yajurveda. However Yagna is not restricted to simply chanting Mantras and igniting fire in the fire place or Agni Kund as done in a Havan but any form of charity, learning, feeding the birds- animals is also considered as Yagna.

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