Mantras Massacred?
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MY TURN

Mantras Massacred?

Saving the meaning of Hindu wedding rites!

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An estimated 1.2 million Indian immigrants currently live in the United States. Their children, although they look like Indians, are far more a product of American culture than could ever have been predicted by their startled parents. While some marriages are inter-ethnic, they overwhelmingly take place between people of Indian origin. Parents face the task of planning the wedding ceremonies for this group of Americanized Indian children who tend to be unfamiliar with Indian traditions. But we do not have an established role model.

The Hindu wedding, derived from a 5,000-year-old Vedic tradition, is very elaborate. Ritual invocations of preceding generations, genealogy recitals and the sacred vows are all imbedded in mystical mantras. The traditional wedding provided ample time for all this. But today we have only one or two hours for the entire ceremony. Still, parents feel that the nuptials of our assimilated offspring should somehow look "Indian." So they often opt for a conservative event.

Meanwhile, their children embrace the mass appeal movie-video inventions of the marriage ceremony with their immensely modified rendering of the same event. Is it any wonder the marriage ceremony of our Americanized children can become a battleground of different expectations resulting in disappointment?

Everybody agrees there should be at the very least a few mantras, to demonstrate to our Western guests and remind ourselves that we do have an established, deep-rooted tradition. In this web of realities the mantra undergoes the danger of being weakened and ultimately gets butchered. With no dedicated priest present, many weddings are done by totally inexperienced people. They may be competent scientists, doctors or engineers, but they are not qualified to perform a wedding ceremony.

It is not my intent to criticize, rather to call for solutions. It is said that mantras happened spontaneously, springing from the mind of ancient sages in absolute spiritual ecstasy. They were created by selfless people for the benefit of mankind. The mantra, in its original form, confers a very special and ancient blessing. To alter the form is fraught with danger. Modification may destroy the intended meaning. We must try hard to have qualified people deliver the marriage mantras in their intended form.

Plan ahead, understanding the tradition. Be realistic and do not be overly ambitious to incorporate every event in one or two hours. It may be useful to prepare a pamphlet explaining Vedic wedding chronology and the meanings of the rituals.

Explain the events that are going to be presented, the rest being done in private. The parents and bride and groom should communicate. Our young people should keep in mind that they have a real moral obligation to be familiar with the ceremony, to know the full extent of what they are doing. They should not do things merely to satisfy their parents nor be satisfied with a superficial understanding of the rituals. They may not realize that some of the chants contain blessings, by special people, on this, one of the most important days of their lives.

For example, the most significant part of the ceremony, taking seven steps around the fire, with a vow given for each step, has built into it everything needed for a successful marriage. No marriage counselor is needed if one knows and follows the meaning of these verses. Another example is the significance of the three knots of the sacred cord of commitment that the husband puts around his wife's neck, the mangala sutra or tali. There is one knot for each aspect of the body--the physical body, the astral essence and the incarnational soul. It also stands for the three aspects of commitment, manasa, vaaccha and karmena, "believing it, saying it and executing it." Is this not the type of commitment that is needed for marital success?

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