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EDITORIAL

Inauspicious or Not?

Anjali was pained and perplexed when her dad could not give her sister's hand in marriage

the Editor

Culturally clueless as you catch a flight to Calcutta for your first visit to India? Don't despair. This month our educational insight section focuses on cultural cues and clues for newcomers and travelers in India. While our staff originally developed these lists to help pilgrims avoid those mortifying protocol pratfalls, they have also proven helpful for many Hindus living in other nations and returning to their roots for the first time. Besides, it's fun reading.

But that doesn't mean it's all fun stuff. In fact, some of the issues surrounding traditional cultural etiquette are painful and perplexing to people, old-fashioned and worse. Sure, we can all understand that it's bad form to lick a stamp in India. Common sense tells us that hygiene is the reason. Not telling a mother how beautiful her new baby looks is harder to grapple with, but harmless enough. But what about not allowing women into temples during their period or the social rule that divorced and widows/widowers cannot participate in rites of passage, including the weddings of their own children? Those are hard ones to face. As if the Cosmos wanted us to know so, our publisher received a heart-rending electronic letter while we were working on the feature. It compellingly shows how painful such rules can be. Here it is:

Sivaya Namaha! Greetings, Swamiji:

I pray that you will be able to appease my heartbreak. My father is a widower. My mother died 24 years ago, leaving three children in the care of her responsible husband. Like a true Hindu, he raised us, sacrificing time, luxury and societal obligations to guide and educate us, so as to make us good and caring citizens of the world. He encouraged us to participate in our culture and be proud of it. We are now independent, young Hindu women with successful careers and an extremely rich cultural background. We owe what we are today to him. We are him.

My heartache arises from the fact that my father has been denied his right to give away his second daughter at her marriage ceremony due to his widower status. I cannot believe that in this day and age there are Hindus who believe that widows and widowers are harbingers of cruel luck and therefore inauspicious at weddings.

We have found that no where in the scriptures is it stated that a man or woman be denied the right to participate in ceremonies, such as weddings, because they are spouseless. This is ridiculous superstition, won't you say? According to the Narayanashmrithi text and also to the most revered Shri Jeyendra Saraswathy of the Shankaracarya Math in Kanchipuram, a father has every right to give his daughter away. Swamiji wrote us that "a grihastha (householder) who has lost his sahadharmini (wife) has the right to do the Kannika Dhanam (give away his daughter)." However, temple authorities have decided to play God and denied us the right to perform the wedding ceremony. They have actually threatened to stop the wedding. These people seem to have taken it upon themselves to dictate certain traditions, following them blindly without question, and thus giving Hinduism a bad name. Don't they realize that one day, they too will be perceived as inauspicious when their spouses leave the material world?

Swamiji, I beg you, help me to gently educate these blind followers of tradition. Help them see that God is in everything, even widows and widowers. I owe this to my father. He is godly to me. Yours sincerely,
Anjali [Not her real name]

We responded: Namaste, Anjali! Your e-mail touched our hearts. Sivaya Subramuniaswami asked me to share some insights with you. He hopes they help, though he also knows that you may not find all our thoughts consoling. As you know, we follow a strict and traditional monastic life here in Hawaii. So in asking our thoughts, you will naturally get a traditional view. Many would disagree.

Firstly, your father is obviously a worthy soul. Of that there can be no doubt. His sacrifice for his daughters is expressive of the best virtues of Indian spirituality, and your maturity is but a reflection of the light he has shed on you and thus the world. And who could wonder that he would yearn to give the hand of his daughter in marriage? Of course he would.

So, our heart must ache along with yours when we hear the story, especially knowing, as we do, that Hindu tradition is certain about its understanding in this matter. Any widow or widower is disallowed from participation in the sacred samskaras. It is not that they are impure, nor lesser beings or any such nonsense. No. Consider this: I am a sannyasin. But I am disallowed from attending that same wedding. This is for esoteric reasons, not personal or superstitious reasons, not dogmatic or creedal reasons, either. There are subtle spiritual laws at work in such matters. I spoke to the Sivacharya priests about your questions. They explained that the rishis of yore set certain rules in motion which reflected their spiritual insights into wisdom's way and how humankind can follow it.

I understand the law which excludes me. I am a renunciate monk, one who has surrendered the family life, thrown down the world and taken refuge in God wholly and irrevocably. My presence at a wedding would be like water mixing with oil. A young couple about to embark on their wedded life would be confronted with the other possibility, with the opposite value, in a sense. The bride might wonder, silently, whether her new groom would one day leave her to become a monk. By absenting myself, I give them their special celebration without thoughts of such things. They are embracing worldly life more powerfully than ever, and they don't need my contrary example to confound their step.

Like me, your father is counted differently. He has wed and lost his wife. It was a sad event for most, a tragedy for a few. His loss still registers as samskaras, subtle impressions in his heart of hearts. It vibrates in his nervous system. It will live with him until his Grand Departure. His bereavement, the sages knew, is a force and a presence that is not conducive to the Kannika Dhanam, though he can otherwise join the celebration of the new couple's VOWS.

The sages are concerned wholly with forging the purest and strongest marital bonds, which are a power binding man and wife, guiding the home and, by extension, the whole of the social matrix. So these bonds, these sacred blending of forces and energies, must be protected, fostered and nurtured to the best of our capability. The sages judged that having the relationships of all present to sanctify the marriage be exemplary was important. According to Swami Paramananda Bharati of Sringeri Mutt, India, our sacred texts, shastras, say that a man's wife is integral to the living out of his karmas. She is needed to make him complete, and in her absence there are karmas he cannot fulfill. This is one. Proof of this lies in the fact that if your father remarried, he would be permitted to give his daughter's hand. To have a divorced person present, for instance, would bring that vibration (you could call it that possibility or potentiality) of broken dreams and promises into the arena of the rite. People commonly say that the wedding would be "polluted." That is such a terrible and untrue expression, and it is not spoken of in our shastras. There is no pollution. However, there is an effect, an impact. Every person present will add an energy. Wanting the union to begin in a most ideal manner, they asked sannyasins, divorcees and widowers to stay apart from certain rites.

The priests you approached in the temples know the rules, but do not always have an esoteric understanding of the reasons behind them. They may therefore follow the principles a bit superstitiously. Still, the law itself has merit, remaining part of our heritage.

Not all follow these ideals. You yourself have found leaders who feel these customs are outmoded. We would disagree, but Hinduism is so broad, so compassionate, so all-embracing, we can have within our spiritual family both views and not feel threatened. What other faith can say that?

Gurudeva sends you his love and blessings for a long, rewarding life guided by God's love and light. Om shanti.