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## **Wedding custom of the month: July and August**

### **Some reflections on fire in Hindu and other wedding ceremonies, and on Agni Pradakshina, circling the fire**

Hindu wedding ceremonies take place before a sacred fire.<sup>1</sup> The fire is lit in the center of the wedding space, the whole of which is covered by a mandap, a vividly decorated canopy. Hindus consider the wedding fire, like other fires, to be a manifestation of Agni, the fire god.

One of Agni's roles is that of a messenger between humans and gods. Worshipers can offer gifts to a variety of gods by burning the offerings in Agni's sacred fire. Agni burns away the substance of these offerings, revealing the essence, which ascends in smoke to reach the intended god. Agni is considered the most important witness of a wedding. Perhaps this is partly because, through him, all gods might be made aware of the new union.

Almost all Hindu weddings include one or more sub-ceremony near the beginning of the wedding in which a priest lights the fire and invites Agni to witness the wedding, offering him prayers and gifts that might include grass, wood, clarified butter, and/or grains. The remainder of the wedding takes place before this sacred fire. Traditional Hindu wedding ceremonies vary greatly by region, but they are almost all tremendously intricate, and there might be several other sub-ceremonies in which the sacred fire takes the lead role in the wedding.

One such sub-ceremony common to most Hindu weddings is often called Agni Pradakshina ("fire circumambulation"). This ceremony requires that the partners walk clockwise all the way around the fire either four or seven times.<sup>2</sup> Usually the priest and the partners make offerings to Agni at several times during this ceremony, and usually the priest and/or a partner delivers a different prayer before or during each round. Often each round is devoted to a particular aspect of married life. In many regions, the bride's brother begins this ceremony by pouring rice into the bride's clasped hands, which she gives to the fire. Usually the couple sits down between rounds while the priest recites prayers. Often the bride leads the groom for the first three rounds and the groom leads the bride for the last four, and often the bride and groom each recite beautiful Vedic verses during this ceremony.

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<sup>1</sup> Jain weddings take place before a sacred fire as well, and the Hindu rituals discussed here are also typical of Jain weddings. But since I couldn't find much information on Jain weddings or the Jain concept of fire, I refer only to Hindu weddings.

<sup>2</sup>By the way, don't confuse Agni Pradakshina with the sub-ceremony that is usually considered the essence of the Hindu wedding: the Saptapadi or Seven Steps, when the partners take only seven steps forward, making a vow with each step.

## Fire in weddings

So what is a fire doing in the center of the Hindu wedding space? Of course no one can fully answer this question, and I am in no way qualified to answer it, but I will speculate about the affinities between marriage and the little I know about fire as it is understood in both the Hindu and western imaginations.

Agni is usually pictured with two faces. One represents his destructive personality, the other, his productive personality. We should not forget the many productive capabilities of fire. Agni is identified with earthly fire and also with the sun (as well as lightning). Nothing on earth is more productive than the sun, the source of all earth's life. And the taming of fire is identified in Hindu myths as in other myths with the dawn of civilization. Fire is associated with civilization, with orderly human society, because it allows us to master our surroundings in so many ways: it allows us to cook, to transform plants and animals into meals; it allows us to make advanced tools, weapons, and jewelry; it gives us the ability to live in cold climates; it gives us vision in darkness. Like fire, marriage has traditionally been considered an imposition of order on the chaos of human desires. And marriage has traditionally been considered the legitimate source, the civilized source, of children – those who carry human society into the future and those through whom we hope to overcome our mortality.

Domestic fire is productive, and our associations between fire and the home describe sustenance. Agni lives in the domestic hearth which is used to heat the house and sustain its residents with food. As many ancient peoples did, Hindus long considered the hearth the sacred center of the home. Of course, the home is difficult to separate emotionally and symbolically from the family it houses, and, in Hindu culture as in many cultures, that family has been based in large part on marriage. I associate the warmth of fire, the familiarity of home, and the nurturing of hearth and home with a sort of love that is particularly appropriate to marriage, although I don't know if these associations are typical of Hindu thought.

As we know, fire also destroys. Agni's destruction is not always harmful to human life, however. Sometimes Agni purifies people, burning away their lesser material, and revealing what is best in them. Agni transforms matter: just as he burns away the substance of offerings to the gods, according to ayurvedic philosophy, he digests our food, transforming its bulk to energy. Similarly, Hindus cremate the body after death, believing that the soul is superior to matter and is purified by this fire.

Purification has a place in weddings, and the fire might be used before or during the wedding as a symbol or means of purification. In most traditional societies, both partners went to great lengths to purify themselves before entering the sacred state of marriage, and the partners were kept as pure as possible during the wedding so that harmful influences did not enter their marriage. Also, some lovers experience love as a purifying force that makes them better people. And in most weddings I've attended, all performers idealize the couple's relationship. When they do this well, they honor and encourage the best features of the couple's actual relationship. Invoking such ideals could be considered a way of purifying the relationship, and this purification might be recognized with a ceremony that included fire.

In Hindu as in western thought, passion, desire and lust are associated with fire. In some versions of the story of Agni's birth, his parents are two sticks, and he consumes them as soon as they give him life. Passion, whether it's directed at another person or at computer games or at painting, can be glorious and it can also burn a person's life to ash. Lust and other desires are especially well known for their destructive capabilities. And stories tell us that intense love can turn to intense hate because there is a kinship between these fiery emotions. Two partners' love might be celebrated in their wedding as a fire that must be cared for, a fire that must be fed and maintained so that it thrives, but that must also be controlled so that it does not consume the two partners. If the couple has children or plans to have them, the life force of each child might be considered a similar fire, one that must be fueled and honored, but one that can turn destructive if it is mistreated.

### **Circumambulation in weddings**

Why might the Hindu couple walk around the sacred fire during their wedding? Why might any couple circle a sacred object? Walking all the way around a sacred object or site is a ritual common to many cultures and contexts. It is called circumambulation, it is almost always performed sunwise (better known as clockwise), and most often it is thought to bring good fortune or ward off evil. Circumambulation "is also sometimes regarded as a kind of cosmic magic to insure the continuation of the sun in its course and with it the benefits of the solar cycle: crops, animals, human progeny, warmth, life itself" (\*Dictionary of Folklore). While I have no evidence that this wish bears any relation to Agni Pradakshina, it would certainly be appropriate to a wedding to encourage the sun and the human life that depends on it.

Let me pose a narrower question, one I can begin to answer: what is particularly striking, intriguing, or beautiful about two partners circumambulating a sacred object during their wedding? In previous columns I've discussed acts of surrounding two partners during a wedding, say by tying their hands together (see \*Binding two partners together) or by setting them together under a single canopy (see \*The Huppah). In circumambulating the fire, the partners perform the opposite act – they surround an object by walking around it.

An object that surrounds the two partners unifies them by setting them apart from their guests and the world beyond. In contrast, their walking around an object does not set them apart from their guests, because their guests also stand outside that object. Still, the circling couple focuses on a single sacred object, not on their community or the wider world. I would like to see all the participants and guests at a wedding share this focus by circumambulating some object that had been dedicated to love or marriage. Perhaps they could circle the object in concentric circles, and only a select few initiates to marriage (such as the bridal couple or a couple they chose to honor) would use the innermost circle.

Another aspect of circumambulation I like is its requirement that both partners be active. This activeness sets circumambulation in contrast to the partners kneeling passively while they are joined by a lazo rosary and in contrast, too, to a Hindu or Christian bride's being given away by her father (traditions I also love, although the latter troubles me). Two partners'

circumambulation of a certain sacred object might celebrate their active choice to marry or their intention to actively work together, say, in raising children or in bettering their community.

Finally, circumambulation suggests to me an attempt to honor and at the same time master the object that is encircled. What, then, could be a better object to encircle during the wedding than the fire of love, that force that the couple attempts to stoke and to control, that force that has made a couple from two persons and that no couple can purposely create?

## **References**

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