

A Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu Wedding

A wedding is the union of not only the bride and groom but also their families and friends. Hindu wedding traditions are based on the sacred scriptures, The Vedas, which date back at least 4000 years, as well as on the local customs and traditions of the area and community. By this union the couple prepares to fulfill their physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social goals of righteousness, acquisition of wealth, fulfillment of desires and the salvation of the Soul. These ceremonies, rites and rituals are symbolic of great underlying truths and thus should not, because of our ignorance or incapacity to understand them, be rejected as meaningless performances. The rituals of the Hindu marriage ceremony highlight interdependence and the complementary nature of husband and wife relationship. The Maathorupahan or Arthanareeswarar, the half male and half female representation of Shiva and Shakthi, in the Hindu cosmogony emphasizes this ideal of man and women relationship in such union. We request you to bless the couple and participate in the process.

Melting of gold (Ponnurukku) A significant occasion a few days before the wedding is attended by parents and elders at which the groom presents a gold coin to the family goldsmith for its ritual melting down to fashion the thaali- the bridal pendent. The bride does not participate in this ceremony. and the bride and groom are not expected to meet each other from this day onwards until at the wedding altar. The preparation of oil cakes and sweet meats for the wedding also commences on this day.

Kanni kaal Planting-

On the same day an arasaani- a combination of cuttings from Bo Tree - Lord siva, Banyan Tree - Vishnu, Margosa Tree - shakthi are planted in the homes of the couple. The current substitute for this is a 3 feet cutting of Mulmurukku which is easy to propagate and signifies fertility and prosperity. Further The thorns signify the thousand spectacles, Indira, the king of heaven got as a curse for wrongfully courting with sage gauthama's wife ahalihai. This is a grim reminder of the price Indiran paid for his mistake of infidelity. Three manure pots of nine grains are also planted to be sprouted and be used on the day of the wedding. Om is the ancient syllable believed to be the first primordial sound, the basis of all sounds, and has important philosophical significance which has been dealt with extensively in the sacred scripture Upanishads. Om is uttered at the beginning and end of all prayers and mantras.

Agni-fire : In the Hindu theory of creation, Brahman (The Absolute Reality) visualizes or creates and latter 'resolves' the universe (relative reality) in an eternal cyclical process of manifest and unmanifest conditions, beginning with the manifestation of the five basic elements- Space, Air, Fire, Water and Earth. of these, the fire principle is the first element that is visible and tangible and which has the power to nurture as well as to destroy everything in its wake. Consequently, This mighty cosmic power is invoked as a representation of the ultimate divinity, as the sun at the macro level and as the sacred fire at the micro level. Agni is looked upon as the purifier, the benefactor, and witness to most ceremonies including marriage.

The marriage (Kalyanam) is performed in a auspiciously decorated canopy of wedding platform (Mantapam/Medai) with the participants around an invoked altar (Kalasam) a brass or silver pot (human body) filled with holy water, topped with a coconut (head) surrounded by 5 mango leaves (senses) and placed on a plantain leaf covered with raw rice or paddy. This Poorana kumbam depicts the control of the body, mind and the senses, which would lead to self realization. The pillars of the mantapam signify the parents who will continue their role as life guides to the newly weds. The decor with young coconut palms are cut and folded downwards to denote auspiciousness invoking the devas from their celestial abode to come to earth. The decor with mango leaves strung together takes away the higher concentration of carbon dioxide created by people gathering in one place through photo syntheses. They also act as disinfectants against possible germs in the air. The frontward fold of the leaf symbolizes a bow down welcoming the guests.

Plantain Tree heavy with ripening and tapering blossom at the tip are tied at either side of the embra symbolizing the success of future generations.

The Artistic design (Kolam) drawn on the floor with rice flour, saffron, coloured desiccated coconut and flowers is there to welcome guests, be food for ants and other tiny little insects. Saffron acts as a disinfectant against possible germs too.

By this formal ceremony the bride's father also hands over his daughter (Kanya) to the love and care of the groom. The father chants " I offer you my daughter, virtuous, good mannered, wise and decorated with ornaments, who will always uphold righteousness." The groom also assures the father that he will remain forever her companion like air without which they can't live - in joy and in sorrow. Both promise to remain eternally devoted to each other.

Venerated even as Shiva and Shakti, the bride and groom sit elevated in a space the priest sanctifies for divine intervention in the solemnisation. The priest and guests traditionally sit on the floor as equals with the idols of divinity.

Inviting the groom and his party (Maapillai azhaippu)

The best man (Tholan)– bride's brother, with three or five wedded couples set off for the groom's house. A senior member of the groom's family will place the Turban- thalapahai on the groom's head and garland him. The groom accompanied by his parents, siblings, relatives is escorted to wedding hall and two sumangalis (married women) will do an aarathi to ward off evil eye with a banana wick lit on a tray of oil, saffron and kumkumis respectfully garlanded by the father of the bride, while the best man sprinkles rosewater off of a bronze pot on the groom's feet as a gesture of affection and welcome and is presented with a gold ring by the groom for his good grace and honoured gesture. Two ladies representing the bride's side perform aarathi– the flame protection ritual . With the melodies of Nathaswaram (a wind instrument and Thavil (a percussion instrument) the best man and the bride's parents lead the groom to the manavara– flower festooned nuptial seat where the priest awaits to perform the ceremony.

The wedding commences with the arrival of the groom and his retinue at the wedding hall. The tholzi (bride's maid)– the groom's married sister, bears a tray with the bridal outfit, necklace and other gifts. Two other ladies will bear a tray each with coconuts on one and sweet meats and flowers on the other. At the entrance to the wedding hall which represents the bride's residence, her parents welcome the groom with a flower garland.

The priest does the following for the groom:

Sankalpam: The expression of the priest's purpose.

Vigneshwara Poojai

Like all ceremonies, the wedding ceremony also commences with prayers to Lord, Ganesha (the elephant faced deity) invoking his blessing who averts misfortunes and obstacles so that the ceremony may conclude without any unforeseen hindrance. The Nine planets (Navagraha) are called for peace and prosperity. The groom offers prayers for the internal tranquility necessary for the ceremony.

Puniyathanam: Purification of the groom by giving him a ring made of tharpai grass to be worn on his right ring finger.

Tying the charm (kaappu kattuthal) raksha bandhanam

A thread dipped in turmeric is made potent with prayers and then tied to the wrist of the groom Naren. The thread-bracelet encircling the wrist symbolizes the divine power invoked. This serves as a shield from harm and evil to one who wears it. A ring made of thepai grass is worn by the groom on his right ring finger as an indication of purity of mind. Theppei is a pure grass which has the capability of purifying water and metal giving the warmth and speed of fire. It is also appropriate for Devas and dead ancestors. It only grows in good land. It could be substituted for gold and silver wires in temples. It does not wither for drought and rot for flood. Even if it is dried it holds the same potential. The water sprinkled with this grass disinfects the area. Such characteristics make this grass very special and auspicious.

Planting the tree (panthakaal naduthal)

A young plant is secured to one of the corners of the wedding platform and is erected by married women as they pray for the wedded bliss of the bride and groom Gaya and Naren.

Growing the nine grains (Mulaipaalikai Naduthal)

Three married women representing the goddesses of knowledge and wisdom (Saraswathi), wealth, (Lakshmi) and courage and righteousness (Parwathi), the consorts respectively of the Hindu Trinity Gods Brahma, (creator) Vishnu, the preserver and Shiva the destroyer gather the nine kinds of traditional grains (green gram, black gram, wheat, rice, dhal, chick peas, sesame, flax, Mochchhi, acanth bean) together with milk and honey. The women, who symbolize divine witnesses, grant a fertile future to the couple Gaya and Naren. The groom then sits on a special seat by the side of the wedding platform.

Manamahala varukai – Entrance of the bride

The bride Gayathri is escorted by her bride's maid (Tholi) flower girls and her family to the ceremonial area where similar rituals are held to sanctify and protect her. However the said ring and cord are worn on the left ring finger and left wrist respectively. This is because the arthanareeswarar, the half male and half female image of the Hindu mythology has the female side on the left side and symbolises equality of man and women.

the groom then joins the bride at the manavarai and sits on the left and the main ceremony begins.

Shiva – paarwathi pooja symbolizes the enactment of the siva paarvathi wedding thirukalyanam the unmanifested absolute (shivam) and the manifested gross form (shakthi) which represent the groom and bride.

Navagraha poojai is the worship of the 9 planets which is represented by 9 pots with coconuts in front of the manavarai. The sacred fire (Omum) is lit invoking the deity agni to bear witness to marriage.

Acceptance of the Union and the gift of the bride (Nitchyatharthar, ahead of the wedding) and Kanya Dhanam) On the day of the wedding)

The families of Naren and Gaya are then united by this ceremony. Here Gayathri's parents and Naren's parents formally accept their union by ceremoniously exchanging the betel leaf and its complement arecanut with other gifts.

At the time of the offering of the bride (Kannikathanam) the priest calls upon the couples' ancestors (at least three generations living or dead) to witness this union and bestow their blessings to the couple. The parents of both parties stand witness at the time of the offering, facing the East which is symbolical of looking towards the light. For it is from the east that the sun rises. The bride holding a coconut and betel in her palms sits on her father's lap. The bride's father, places his daughter's hand in the groom's hand indicating that the groom accept, cherish and protect her all through his life. The groom then takes a hold of the bride's hand by placing his hands on hers. The bride's mother pours water from a pot indicating her consent and her father channels it down on the clasped palms of the couple. The father gives a gold coin to the groom symbolic of giving away the bride which the groom accepts and in turn gives it to his parents signifying acceptance. By this formal ceremony the bride's father also hands over his daughter (Kanya) to the love and care of the groom. The father chants " I offer you my daughter, virtuous, good mannered, wise and decorated with ornaments, who will always uphold righteousness." The groom also assures the father that he will remain forever her companion like air without which they cannot live in joy and in sorrow. Both promise to remain eternally devoted to each other.

This important ritual is best interpreted as the dissolving of the identities of Naren and Gayathri as man and women into a new identity of husband and wife whose life will, from now on, flow together. The groom then presents the Koorai and the thali, blessed by the priest and the congregation to the bride and welcomes her into his family.

Blessings of the Wedding necklace and outfit (Thali Koorai aasirvatham) page 121

The bridal necklace means "that which adorns the neck and protects, with its sacred power, the wearer's loved ones from harm through life", and is the most sacred symbol of marriage. The necklace (Thali), along with the flower garland and the bridal outfit (Koorai) given by the groom Naren, are offered for the blessings of the divine power. They are then presented to the guests for their blessings for a long and healthy

and successful marriage. Naren presents the blessed tray with these to his bride Gayathri and welcomes her into his family.

The bride then leaves for a dress change. The groom performs a goddess of prosperity and wealth prayer (Lakshmi Poojai) and welcomes the bride back as Lakshmi itself.

Tying the wedding necklace

The wedding necklace is made to a special design with 9 strands. The Gayathri mantra denotes the following for each strand:

1. To know life as real as it is.
2. Superior
3. Ability
4. Purity
5. Divine nature
6. Excellent habits
7. Differentiate between the good and the bad
8. Humble (thannadakkam)
9. Service

This is the most important aspect of the cultural ritual of the wedding ceremony comparable to the exchange of wedding rings in other societies. Upon arriving back to the altar the bride Gayathri garlands the groom Naren as her chosen man and sits on his left side symbolizing to be near to his heart. The groom stand facing west ties the first knot of the wedding necklace around the bride's neck while the priests chant and the black long flute-like instrument (Nathaswaram) resounds at a high pitch and crescendo to muffle all other sounds in the wedding hall. This act is timed precisely to the auspicious moment called the best specific time (Muhurtham), determined by the astrologers and priests. He also spots kumkum vermilion saffron powder on her forehead symbolizing that she is a married woman now. Simultaneously a shower of flowers blesses the couple. A married lady holds high a lit oil lamp symbolizing the divine witnessing the nuptial knot; a coconut cracked into two by a close member of the family symbolising a sacrifice of ego. The sweet coconut water signifying love, the white kernel - purity and broken shell shedding of selfishness. The wedded couple now exchange garlands and then the groom moves to accommodate the bride on his left and the left half of arthanareeswarar.

Those assembled shower sacred rice and flower petals upon the couple and declare that they are married. Two additional knots are tied by the groom's sisters and members of his family signifying the acceptance of the bride into their family.

Exchanging the garlands (Maalai Maatrutham) and milk and fruit sharing

In this ritual, Naren and Gayathri exchange garlands three times and then feed each other with milk and fruit symbolizing their promise of sweet and endless partnership for life of hope and love to be shared. From this moment onwards the bride becomes sahacharitha macharani or dharma pathini, an equal partner in the discharge of duties, upholding of righteousness and the attainment of their spiritual objectives.

Viewing of the cow

Cow being the symbol of wealth - the couple salute the cow and request the abundance and plentiful blessings of the wealth. The cow is believed to contain all the sacred rivers, oceans, elements, gods and goddesses, doctors, teachers, sun, moon, beautiful women, ancestors, sages, sacred professions, chaste women and so on the different parts of it.

holding of hands - paanikirahanam

The bride and groom hold hands with the promise of staying together till death.

Going around the fire - Akni pradakshinam - 7 steps of vows - sapthapathy

This is the next important ritual where the couple walks around the ceremonial area thrice accompanied by the best man and bride's maid. The bride and groom take their first steps as a man and wife to walk clockwise and pay their respect to Agni the fire.

They pay their reverence to Agni- the sacred fire, the symbol of light, warmth, power eternal cosmic energy and purification, and feeding it clarified butter (Ghee), puffed rice and twigs of nine types of trees, assisted by the bride's brother which reinforces the continuous link between the two families and the siblings. The fire acts as a universal witness to the ceremony and conveys all that is happening to the Gods. Since the flames always travel upwards and never return, once the message of the wedding reaches the Gods, it is considered eternal.

While different rituals are performed each time, the couple offer each other with pure minds and hearts to embody the virtues of married life and the following seven parts of the ceremony on going eternal, mutual commitment of nourishment, moral support and strength, chastity, happiness in parenthood, commitment, cherishment, friendship, respect and love.

1. With this first step we come together to provide for the household and we vow to be each other's companion for better or for worse. Together we resolve to love and respect one another.
2. With this second step we come together to develop and care for each other's physical, mental and spiritual strength and health: may our lives be filled with vitality and vibrant health.
3. With this third step we come together to help and serve others and pray that our lives be full of richness.
4. With this fourth step we come together to acquire knowledge, happiness and harmony by mutual love and trust and let us pray that our lives be full of joy.
5. With this fifth step we come together for progeny and let us pray that our lives are purposeful toward the welfare of all living beings.
6. With this sixth step we come together for observing social and religious rites and ceremonies and let us pray that our atmosphere is clean and pure.
7. With this seventh step we promise that we will be true companions and lifelong partners in this union and we resolve to be always true to each other while enjoying the world as lifelong partners and promote peace.

Treading the grind stone- ammi mithithal

The groom places the bride's right foot on the grindstone, which symbolizes firm chastity, fidelity as the solid foundation of their marriage and welcome her into his life as eternal partner and places the auspicious red saffron powder (KumKum) in the bride's forehead where the hair part. At this time the groom also places the silver toe ring- (minji or metti) on the first and second round on both right and left 2nd toe of the bride. This indicates she be as strong and steadfast as the stone with courage and faith in the face of adversity. (In the good old days when we walked bare footed or wore only sandals) - married men used to wear these toe rings to let the women who were walking head down to expose his marital status and the wedding necklace on the female to help the men who walked head up help them behave accordingly.)

The couple also view the star Arunthathi - wife of sage Vasshishtar, virtuous, chaste, and devoted was placed in the skies to be a model for all, both men and women to emulate and to mentor them. The Great Tamil Poet Bharathi put the responsibility of loyalty on both genders equally as opposed to the cultural tradition of burdening all the responsibilities only on women is worthy of note at this juncture.

Contest to find the treasure

In addition the bride and groom compete in a friendly game to pick first either a ring or conch placed in a pot of water which provides for a lighter and exciting giggles and chuckles as fingers play and flounder while finding the treasure in the privacy of the pot. This is also believed to predict the gender of their first child.

Pooranaahuthi

Next the couple perform the pooranaahuthi where offerings of grains, honey and fruits to the gods through their representative agni the fire, in attendance as the sacred fire, the prayer and offering imploring them to bless and render their wedlock holy. Fire protects the world, processes the food, and feeds all. It cannot be polluted, and bridges the gap between us and the lords. It also accepts and ends our lives. The creating log (mother) dissolves in its own creation. Agni is the form of purity and destroys all impurities. It also bestows all wealth and removes all sins.

Blessings Solicited

The priests chant verses from the scriptures seeking the blessings of the almighty for a happy, prosperous, healthy and loving marriage for the newly-weds and for those assembled. The couple prostrate first to their parents and then to the family members and friends seeking their blessings. A dish of turmeric and vermillion, rosewater coated rice and flower petals as symbols of happiness and prosperity are made available for blessing the couple as they greet the well wishers. This atchathai is showered with both hands on the shoulder, knee and feet, repeating the process three times on the bride and groom separately.

Completion of the ceremony

the ceremony is completed by the removal of the said ring and the cord of the bride and groom giving it to the priest along with their offerings to him. The wedding ceremony ends with an aarathi as the newlyweds stand at the manavarai. the couple will thereafter go to the temple for a poojai.

Poothaakalam

The bride and groom eat off the same plantain leaf and feed each other.

Benediction and Prayers

Om Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah

May all the people be happy

Sarve Santu Niramayah

May all beings be healthy

Sarve Bhadrani Pasyantu

May all enjoy prosperity

Ma kascid Dukhabhag Bhavet

May none face suffering

Om Shanthi Shanthi Shanthi

Om Peace, Peace, Peace through freedom
from personal, situational and environmental
obstacles

16 riches- Gf o; fyt p t yj k> nt wwp edkffs; nghd; ney; ey;Y}o; Efurrp mwpl> t hoehs;
moF> nghWi k> , si k> Jz p Nehardi k

Fame, knowledge, strength, victory, good progeny, gold – riches, paddy – food, good fortune, enjoyment, wisdom, longevity, beauty, patience, youthfulness, decisiveness, health

Virunthupasaram– the wedding feast

There is great rejoicing as a feast is spread to celebrate a momentous occasion. Mute blessings flow from guests honoured and entertained with a virunthu (meal) from a menu appealing to the arusuvai (six taste sweet, bitter, hot- pungent, sour, salt, astringent) that the human palette is said to be able to clearly discern.