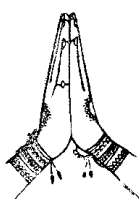


# TAMIL BRAHMIN WEDDING

## THE RITUALS AND THE RATIONALE



The Hindu Wedding Ceremony has a number of rituals and customs most of which are often felt as superstitious or a waste of time. It is believed to be nothing but rituals and more rituals. But actually what is a "Ritual"? A ritual begins as a creative rational action to express a sentiment or idea. – For example the lighting of a lamp to dispel darkness at twilight or folding of hands into a "Namaste" to greet an elder. As succeeding generations repeat the actions it becomes a convention – then a RITUAL. A ritual is thus an action on which time has set its seal of approval.

The Ritual of the Hindu Wedding too is thus each symbolic of beautiful and noble sentiments. Unfortunately today many perform them without an awareness of the rich meaning behind them.

*A modest attempt has therefore been made to briefly describe the meaning and significance of the rituals of a Tamil Brahmin Wedding after going through many articles in Internet and compiled them. For the elders, this information may be superfluous but it is hoped that the younger generations, especially those yet to be married, may find this useful.*

So let me take you on a tour . . . . .

### PANDHAL KAAL MUHURTHAM

A small ritual is performed a few days before or at least one day before the wedding to invoke the blessings of the family deity to ensure that the wedding preparations proceed smoothly. The family of the bride pray to the deity who is symbolically represented by a bamboo pole.



In olden days, in the absence of a mandapam, the entire street of a village is covered by Pandhal and since it has to withstand the wind and rain during the wedding, the first post was worshipped. The first pole is planted in front of the bride's house and is worshipped to ensure that the wedding preparations proceed smoothly.

### As you enter a Kalyana mandapam, you see . . .

Full-grown **plantain trees** tied to both the gateposts  
Festoons overhead **of mango leaves**, and **screw-pine petals**  
**Kolam** or Rangoli designs at the doorsteps  
At the entrance sprinklings of **rosewater**, **offerings of flower**, **sandal batter**, **sugar candy** (Kalkandu) and Hear Notes of the **Nadhaswaram**



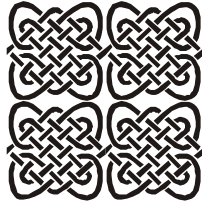
- Full-grown **plantain trees** tied to both the gateposts – plantain trees are considered to sacrifice everything to others – stem, flower, plantain dry and fruit are for food and leaf is used to eat on. The two trees symbolise the couple to be married who should sacrifice everything for the other. **Give and take is essential to keep the marriage a successful one. It is also one tree, which leaves a small plant before it dies – showing fertility.**

• Festoons overhead tied between the plantain trees are **of mango leaves**, and **screw-pine petals that never fade** - symbolising that such life with ``give and take`` **will last long**

- Notes of the Nadhaswaram, the South Indian Shehnai □ - a **mangala vaadhyam**



- Kolam or Rangoli designs at the doorsteps – **not just an artistic welcome** □.



- Kolam is the pride of Tamil Nadu, Andhra and Karnataka (although there may be some differences from area to area, they are essentially the same ). Basically they are line drawings, in geometric and symmetrical shapes, drawn with dry rice powder or with rice paste. Rice powder is used basically because it is white in colour and readily available. **Also, it serves to feed ants - to show one must take care of other forms of life too, to create a natural balance.** The dry, coarsely ground rice powder is placed between the thumb and forefinger and rubbed together and moved along a predetermined design by the drawer. At times The kolams are outlined in red with 'kavi' a red brick paste, to make it look grander and more beautiful

- Sprinklings of rosewater, offerings of flower, sandal batter, sugar candy □ ( Kalkandu) - a **scented, respectful and sweet reception**

## THE PREVIOUS DAY TO THE MARRIAGE DAY

### 'PAALIKAI' SEEDS SOWING

The family of the bride begins this ceremony a day before the wedding. This is a fertility rite. Paalikais are earthen pots prepared a day earlier – pots spread at the base with hariali grass and Vilvam leaves . **five / nine kinds of pre-soaked cereals are ceremoniously sown in these pots by Sumangalis.** After the marriage, the sprouted seedlings are released in a river or pool. This ritual invokes **the blessings of the eight-direction-quartered guardian angels, for a healthy life and progeny to the couple.** ( Five, if devathas– Brahma , Yama, Indra, Varuna and Soma are called. Nine if Nava dhanyams are used.)



### RECEIVING THE GROOM



When the groom and his family arrive at the wedding hall on the forenoon one day before the wedding, they are welcomed with a tray containing offerings of flowers, *vetrilai*, *pakku*, and fruits. *Panneer* (Rose water) is sprinkled on the groom. The bride's brother applies a *thilakam* of *Chandanam* (sandalwood paste) and *kungumam* on his forehead and garlands him. The bride's mother offers the groom's parents a sweet dish *Thirattipal* prepared from condensed milk. A senior female member of the bride's family or preferably the mother of the bride herself performs *aarthi* and welcomes them. It is also customary to break a coconut to the ground as this is believed to help to ward off evil spirits.

## VRATHAM



(*Vratham* may also be performed on the wedding day by the family of the bride as well as that of the groom if timing of *Muhurtham* is very late.) The marriage ceremonies begin with the *Vratham* performed separately by the bride and the groom. For the bride, it means the tying of the *KAPPU* – the holy thread on her wrist which is meant to ward off all evil spirits. It symbolises a kind of the protective armour for the bride.

For the groom, the various Gods – Indra, Soma, Chandra, Agni protect. From there on, the groom prepares himself for a new chapter in his life as a householder or *Grihasta*. The days of his bachelorhood or *brahmacharya* are now over and the acceptance of this is all what the *Vratham* is about.

In olden days as *Brahmachari*, the young boy is entrusted to a *Guru* in a *Gurukulam*. The student is not entitled to austerity. He has to be barefooted, sleep on floor, no shelter from rain or sun etc. But once he is pronounced graduated by his *Guru*, the parents go to fetch him back home –approximately 10 years later. Now that the boy is entitled, the parents take slippers, umbrella, bamboo, fan etc. for the boy.



## NAANDHI

This ceremony involves honouring a few Brahmins with gifts and sweets. The Brahmins are invited to represent the souls of the ancestors of the bride and the groom. The families seek their blessings before beginning the marriage proceedings.

## USHERING-IN OF THE BRIDEGROOM



On the evening prior to the wedding day, the bridegroom is to be brought in a procession from a temple in a flower decorated car. He is escorted by the bride's parents, and welcome at the marriage *mandapam*, which is the bride's abode. *Nadhaswaram* band leads the way along the streets, the flower decorated car jam-packed with children.

This is a social function, called *JAANA VAASAM* in South India ( equivalent to *BARAAT* in North India.)

Through such a parade, public approval is sought of the groom, chosen by the family. Sometimes there are also fireworks to celebrate the occasion. The girl's brother garlands the groom and receives him at the wedding hall. After reaching the marriage hall, there is a formal ceremony of betrothal called *Nichchiyadhartham*.



## NICHCHIYADHARTHAM

The bride's parents perform *Ganesh Pooja* in the presence of the officiating priest. The groom's side gives the bride a new *sari*. A *tilakam* of *chandanam* and *kungumam* is applied on her forehead, while the *mundhanai* or *pallav* of her *sari* is filled with fruits, *vetrilai*, *pakku*, *manjal* and *kungumam* and *thengai* (coconut). A garland of flowers is tied around her waist. *Aarti* is also performed for her.

## LAGNA PATHRIGAI

The priest formally reads out the wedding invitation. Detail on three generations of the lineage of the boy and the girl and other information on the *muhurtham* and venue is announced. This is followed by an elaborate dinner.



## ON THE WEDDING DAY

### MANGALA SNAANAM

The mangala snaanam is the auspicious and purifying bath that the bride and groom must have in their respective homes ( now in rooms ) on the dawn of their wedding day. Before the bath they are anointed with oil and a tilak of haldi-kumkum.

## THE PRELIMINARY INVOCATION

### GANAPATHI PUJA



As in an inauguration of any function so also in a marriage – Ganapathi, the God of Initiation is invoked, to keep away all impediments.

### NAVAGRAHA PUJA

This may be performed to propitiate the nine astral planets that rule over man's destiny.

### KASI YATRA

**(This may be taken as continuation to Vratham, in which the boy is returning from Basic Graduation)**

This is a very important part of the ceremony. Immediately after his student-life, the young bachelor has two alternatives before him – Married life ( Grihastha ) or Asceticism ( Sanyas ). Being by nature an escapist, he prefers the ascetic life to the tribulations of married life. He therefore 'makes his way' to Kasi (VARANASI), complete - with slippers, umbrella, bamboo, fan etc. On his way, the bride's father intervenes and advises him of the superiority of married life to ascetic life. He also promises to give him his daughter as companion to face the challenges of life.



However there are different points of view on this aspect which are given below:

- During the wedding ceremony the groom is welcomed as Mahavishnu Svarupaya varahaya ie maha vishnu himself (or the Siva the equivalent in the Adi Saiva tradition ) and the bride as Lakshmi. Thence, it is imperative he knows no sin, thence he needs to perform a yatra to kashi submerge in Ganges and comes and does the wedding purified. In the days of yore , when a man after education takes a yatra like this (it takes up some months, sometimes a year on foot) , he gets to see the world, which otherwise he would not have been exposed to , thence from Brahmacharya ,before moving to grihastha ashrama he comes experienced and purified, disciplined ( goal oriented) and fit to take up the challenges of married life.

- And in those days the groom would have been engaged (nichchiyadhartham), and proceeds on this yatra and is welcomed back after coming back from Kasi by the father in-law, with these words `Maha Vishnu Svarupaya`, and given the kanya dhanam.

### VAAKU NICHAYA MUHOORTHAM

At the marriage hall, the bride's father and the bridegroom's father facing each other, solemnise the final betrothal ceremony, the vedic priest chanting the relevant hymns-in which the names of the bride, the bridegroom, as well as the names of their three generations of ancestors, are cited in presence of friends, relatives, and invitees.

The manthras say : "O God Varuna, Be she harmless to my brothers and sisters □ Oh Brihaspathi □ May she no evil to her husband □ O Lord Indra □ Bless her to be a good guardian of her children □ O Surya □ Bless her with all wealth □ "

### EXCHANGE OF GARLANDS



(This ceremony is full of fun and gaiety. The bride and the groom exchange garlands thrice. They are teased by their relatives. For instance they pull the girl away when the boy reaches forward to be garlanded by her and vice versa. The bride and the groom's uncles have to hoist them)

The bride and the groom are lifted *on* the shoulders of their respective uncles (may be due to child marriage in olden days.) and in that position the two garland each other thrice for a complete union. **A garland worn by a person, should not be used by another**, ordain our shastras. **But here the exchange of garlands symbolises their unification – as one soul in two bodies.**

### OONJAL SWING, RIDE AND SINGING

Then, the marrying couple is seated on a swing (OONJAL); they rock forth and back (*not back and forth*), as the ladies around sing – LAALI, songs of praise to the couple. The chains of the swing signify the **eternal Karmic link with Almighty** above; the to-and-fro motion represents **the undulating sea-waves of life**; yet, in mind and body they shall **move in harmony unperturbed, steady and stable.**



### VARA PUJA

Married women from the families give spoonful of milk and banana pieces to the couple on oonjal..



They circle rice balls around the couple in circular motions in clockwise and anti-clockwise directions and fling them away in four different directions. This rite is believed to prevent evil forces from disrupting the wedding ceremony.

Another rite to perform for this involves the womenfolk going around the couple four times, holding in their hands a lamp or alternately, a container of water.

The feet of the bridegroom is washed in milk, and wiped off with silk.

## BEFORE KANYADHANAM



The bride's father welcomes the groom when he comes to the *mandapam* where the sacred fire around which the wedding ceremonies will be conducted. The bride's mother applies **Mai (kajal)** in the groom's eyes. The bride's father washes his son-in-law's feet. Through this gesture the father conveys that that the boy is an incarnation of Lord Vishnu and believes that he will support and take good care of his daughter. The bride sits on her father's lap with a coconut in her hands. The father and bride offer the coconut to the groom while the bride's mother pours water over the coconut thus symbolising the 'giving away of their daughter.' The groom's parents gift the bride a nine-yard sari (KOORAI) to be worn for the auspicious occasion of tying the thaali (*mangasultra*). The exclusive new **KOORAI Saree** is draped around her **by the sister of the bridegroom**. It is told that this is done by her to know if there is any deformity in the body of the bride – a last chance to know before the actual wedding.

## KANYA DHAANAM

As told, the bride is made to sit on her father's lap and is given away by him, to the bridegroom. On the girl's head, a ring made with Kusa, the sacred grass called DARBHA, is placed, and over it, is placed a yoke. The Gold Mangal Sutra ( or THAALI ) is placed right on the aperture of the yoke, and water is **poured through the aperture**.



The Mantras chanted at this time, say:

**"Let this gold multiply your wealth □ Let this water purify your married life, and may your prosperity increase. Offer yourself to your husband □ "**

The bride then is given an auspicious ablution, with an exclusive new **KOORAI Saree** is draped around her. To the bride a belt made of reed-grass is tied around the waist.

The manthras chant:

**"She standeth here, pure before the holy fire, as one blessed with boons of a good mind, a healthy body, life-long companionship of her husband (Sumangali Bhagyam) and children with long life. She standeth as one who is avowed to stand by her husband virtuously. Be she tied with this red-grass rope, to the sacrament of marriage □ "**

Thanks giving vedic hymns follow to the celestial caretakers of her childhood: the Deities of SOMA, GANDHARVA and AGNI. Having attained nobility, the girl is now free to be given over to the care of the human – her man.

The Vedic concepts underlying this ritual is figuratively this:

**that in her infant stage, SOMA had given her coolness of the moon, and strength; in the next stage, GANDHARVA had given her bodily beauty; and lastly AGNI gave her passions.**

The father of the bride, while offering his daughter chants: "I offer ye my daughter, a maiden virtuous, good-natured, very wise, decked with ornaments to the best of my ability-; **that she shall guard the Dharma, Wealth, and Love □**

## THE BRIDEGROOM'S ASSURANCE

Thus offering her daughter, her father gets a word of assurance three times that the bridegroom **shall remain for ever her companion in joy and sorrow – in this life, and after death too** □

## KANKANA DHARANAM

The bride ties a string fastened to a piece of turmeric, around the wrist of the bridegroom – to bind themselves by a religious vow. **It is only after tying the Kankanam that the bridegroom gets the right to touch the bride.** A little later, the bridegroom ties a Kankanam on the bride's wrist.



## MAANGALYA DHARANAM

Next, timed to exact auspicious hour, is the tying of the Mangala Sutra (Thaali). A sack of paddy is placed on the floor. The bride's father is seated on this and the bride sits on her father's lap. The sack of paddy symbolises good fortune and abundance in terms of material and spiritual wealth. The yoke of a farmer's plough is touched to the bride's forehead. This gesture carries the hope that the couple will always walk together, by each other's side to pull the plough of life.



The bride seated on father's lap, looking eastward, and the bridegroom facing westward, ties the gold Mangala Sutra around the neck of the bride. As he does so, the Nadhaswaram drums are beaten loud and fast, so as to muffle any inauspicious sounds at the critical hour. This is called Getti Melam; as it sounds, the Sumangali ladies sing "GOURI KALYANAME, □ "



Three knots are tied – the **first one by the bridegroom**, the **other two knots by his sister/s** to make the bride a part of the boy's family. The Vedic hymn recited by the bridegroom when he ties the knot, is: " Praying the Almighty that I be blessed with a long life, I tie this knot around your neck, oh sowbhaygavati, may providence bestow on you a fulfilling life of a 'Sumangalis' for a hundred years to come □ " The three knots symbolise the marriage of **the mind, the spirit and the body.**

## PAANI GRAHANAM

This means "holding hands". The groom holds the hand of the bride.

The Manthras say:

The Devas have offered you to me in order that I may live the life of a householder (GRIHASTA); we shall not part from each other even after we grow old □ " **The hands should never be parted till the entire manthra is completed.**



## SAPTHA PADHI

Holding the bride's hand, the bridegroom walks seven steps with her. This is the most important part of the marriage ceremony, and only when they walk seven steps together (i.e. perform SAPTHA PADHI) **is the marriage complete legally.**



The belief is that when one walks 7 steps with another, one becomes the *other's* friend. The manthras recited then, mean: "Ye who have walked seven steps with me, become my companion, where by I acquire your friendship. We shall remain together inseparable. Let us make a vow together; we shall share love, share the same food, and share the strength, the same tastes. We shall be of one mind, we shall observe the vow together. I shall be the SAMA, you the RIG: I shall be the Upper World, you the earth; I shall be the SUKHILAM, you the HOLDER – together we shall live, beget children, and other riches, come thou, O sweet-worded girl□

At each step, (*in the*) earlier days, **both ask** for blessings:

May the Lord lead us to sustenance

May the Lord lead us to strength

May the Lord lead us to prosperity

May the Lord lead us to the source of all bliss

May the Lord lead us to good progeny/children

May the Lord lead us to enjoy all seasons and longevity

May the Lord lead us to union, devotion and companionship.

The ceremony concludes with a prayer that the union is for life. At the end of this, they will be husband and wife.

The new husband then stands over the right shoulder and touch his wife's heart (Hradayaparsh) as he declares, "I hold your heart in serving fellowship, your mind follows my mind. In my word, you rejoice with all your heart. You are joined to me by the Lord of all creatures."

## THE MARRIAGE FIRE (AGHNI)

The marriage fire is representing the divine witness as well as sanctifying the ceremony.

## PRADHAANA HOMAM



A crucial part of the wedding is the homage paid by the couple to AGHNI, the fire- God. They circle around the fire, and feed it with ghee, and twigs of nine types of trees, as sacrificial fuel. The fumes that arise, are supposed to possess medicinal, curative and cleansing effects on the bodies of the couple.

AGHNI, the mightiest power in the cosmos, the sacred purifier, the all-round benefactor, is deemed as a witness to the marriage (AGHNI SAAKSHI )



## TREADING ON THE GRINDSTONE

Holding the bride's *toe on the* left foot, the bridegroom helps her tread on a grindstone kept on the right side of the fire.

The Manthras says: "Mount up this stone. **Let thy mind be rock firm unperturbed, by the trials and tribulations of life**□



## SHOWING HER THE "ARUNDHATI " STAR

Next he shows her the Star ARUNDHATI ( of the SAPTHA RISHI Constellation ), as also DHRUVA the polestar. Arundhati, the wife of VASISHTA Mahrishi, is exemplified as an ideal wife, the embodiment of chastity. DHRUVA is the one who attained immortality through single-minded devotion and perseverance – virtues to be emulated through out married life. **This is to take them as models in their life.**

## SAMMANDHI MARIYAADHAI

The families of the newly-weds exchange clothes and other gifts befitting their status during this ceremony.

## LAAJA HOMAM

This shall comprise the bride's own offering to the sacrificial fire. Her brother helps her. He gives her a handful of parched rice grains which she hands to the bridegroom who on her behalf, feeds it into the fire. Through this food offering, the bride seeks a long life for her husband, and propagation of the family. Participation of the bride's family members indicates **the continuance of links between the two families, even after marriage.** The couple circle around the fire, three times, and the feeding of the fire with parched rice, is repeated thrice.

## SHOWERING OF 'AKSHADAI'

**Correctly speaking, only now,** Akshadai, i.e. rice-grains coated with turmeric and saffron, are to be showered on the couple, by elders and invitees – as benediction. **And not after Maangalyadharanam.**

## PALADHAANAM

The bride and groom seek the blessings of the senior members of the family by prostrating in front of them. They also offer them a gift of fruits and a token rupee.

## GRIHA PRAVESAM



Taking with her, fire from the Laaja Homam, the bride takes leave of her home, and enters the new home of her in-laws. ( If he lives far from the venue, she is taken to the home of his nearest relative.) The vedic hymns now sound like the mother's words of advice to her daughter: "Be the queen of your husband's home. May your husband glorify your virtues; conduct yourself in such a way that you win your mother-in-law's love, and be in the good books of your sister's-in-law."

## **NALUNGU**

The afternoon of the marriage day is the time to relax and play. The newly wed wife calls her husband for play, inviting him through a song. Much to the merriment of one and all gathered, there follows list of playful items: the bride anointing the groom's feet with colour paste ; fanning him, showing him a mirror; breaking papads over each other's head; wrenching the betel pack from each other's hand; rolling the coconut from one to another as in ball-play; and so on. During these items, the ladies sing songs poking fun at the bride, groom and the in-laws.

**These events brings out many qualities of the bride and the groom – sporting spirit, kindness, strength, co-operative nature etc.**

## **RECEPTION**

After the series of religious ceremonies, the evening reception marks a tone of informality with the guests meeting the couple and conveying their best wishes to their families.



## **THE NIGHT TIME HOMAMS**

- THE JAYAATHI HOMAM – is performed to propitiate the Gandharvas and deities.
- PRAVESA HOMAM – is done to solemnise the bride's entry in to the husband's home. The sacrificial fire is brought along by the bride.
- SSHA HOMAM – is Fire oblation with the residual ghee, a little of which is sprinkled on the bride's head four times.

## **THAAMBOOLA CHARVANAM**

The girl's brother gives the ceremonial first betel to the couple to chew. Certain other gifts are made to bless the couple with children and long life.

## **MANGALA ARATHI**

A solution of lime and turmeric powder, and in colour, is prepared on a plate, and circled around, and thrown away to ward off evil eye. This is done a number of times during the entire wedding ceremony, and at the end.

## **SHANTI MUHOORTHAM**

The consummation of the marriage at night – the nuptials□

## **KATTU SAADHAM**

The next day after the two day affair, the boy's side leaves the marriage hall and proceeds to their respective homes. The bride's side provide them with all the condiments like rice, dal, tamarind, coffee powder, appalam, pickles etc. They also give packed cooked food which include coconut rice, lemon rice, tamarind rice and curd rice which can be used if they have to undertake a long travel. Or on reaching home they need not immediately cook.

*To the best of my ability, I have compiled from various inter-net sites purely for people to know of our heritage and not with any other interest. Hope this is of use to persons concerned.*