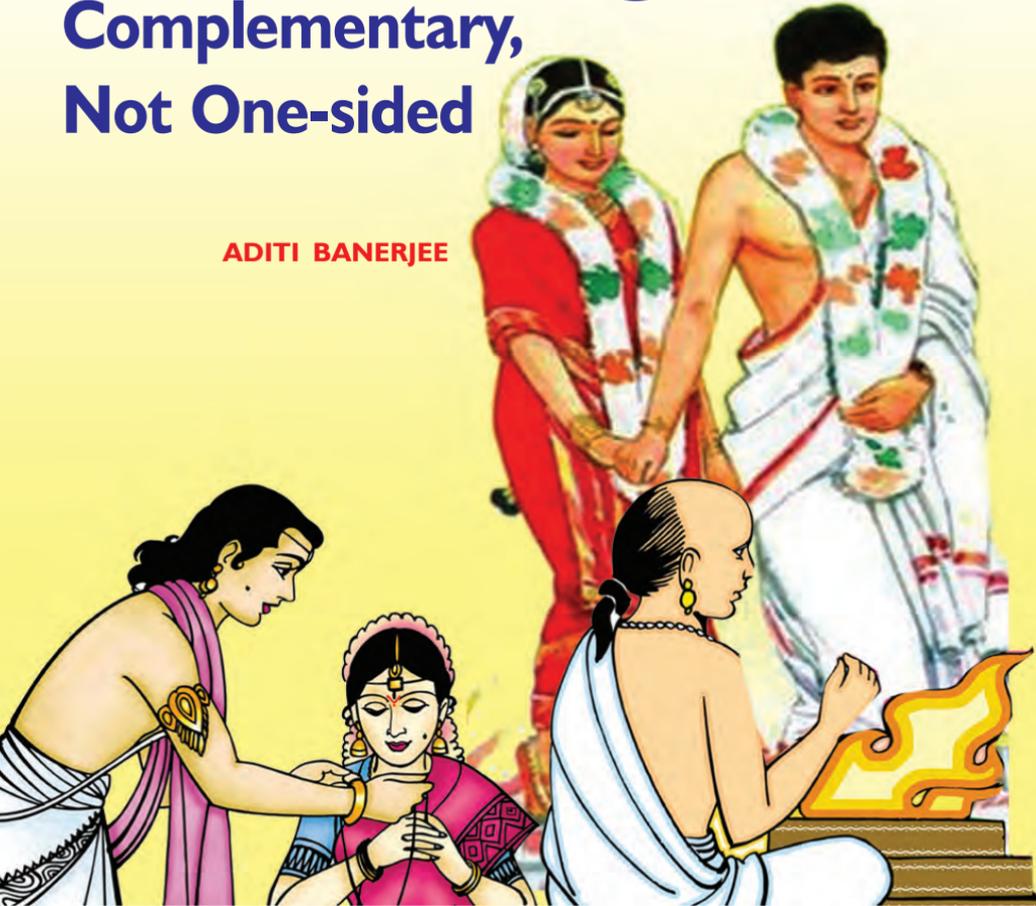


Hindu Marriage Vows: Complementary, Not One-sided

ADITI BANERJEE



The marriage vows are a commitment to observe together all the rites and sacrifices enjoined by the Vedas in the spirit of lokasangraha (wellbeing for the world/cosmos).

Should Hindu marriage vows be rewritten to suit the times? The answer is an emphatic

'No.' Swami Vivekananda quotes an interesting episode from the *Ramayana*.

Once Rama and Sita were visiting a woman sage in the forest during their *vanvaas*. Sita approached the sage and bowed down before her. The sage placed her hand on Sita's head and said: "It is a great blessing to possess a beautiful body; you have that. It is a greater blessing to have a noble husband; you have that. It is the greatest blessing to be perfectly obedient to such a husband; you are that. You must be happy."

Sita replied, "Mother, I am glad that God has given me a beautiful body and that I have so devoted a husband. But, regarding the third blessing, I do not know whether I obey him or he obeys me. One thing alone I remember, that when he took me by the hand before the sacrificial fire-- whether it was a reflection of the fire or whether God himself made it appear to me--I found that I was his and he was mine. And since then, I have found that I am the complement of his life, and he of mine.

Vedic Vow

A *sloka* from the *Rg Veda* is recited by the bride and groom during the marriage ceremony, which is translated as follows:

"I am the sky, you are the earth. I am a song of the

Sama Veda, you are a *rik*, a couplet, of the *Rg Veda*; I am thee and thou art me. We are married. Let us get virtuous progeny, who will be lovable, lustrous for us. Let us lead a long life in togetherness to enjoy one hundred autumnal seasons."

Saptapati Mantra

There is enormous intricacy and subtlety in the rites of Hindu marriages, and there is also significant variation across different regions, *sampradayas* (religious traditions), and *jatis* (clans/socio-economic groups).

The most important among them and common to all traditions is the *saptapadi mantra*, uttered during the seven rounds taken by the bride and groom around the consecrated fire.

The groom leads the bride around the fire for the first three rounds; the bride leads during the last four (which also shows their inherent equality in stature; sometimes the husband leads, sometimes the wife).

The vows uttered both by the bride and the groom, say: Let us walk together, hand in hand, the seven steps symbolic of the aspirations below:

May we take the first step together for *sap* (nourishment),

May we take the second step

together for vigour,

May we take the third step
together for thriving wealth,

May we take the fourth step
together for comfort,

May we take the fifth step
together for offspring,

May we take the sixth step
together for the various seasons,

May we take the seventh step
together for everlasting friendship.

You be my unswerving partner;
(let us have many auspicious progeny who shall see long life crossing 80 years).

These vows are extraordinarily rich and multifaceted, reflecting deep psychological and sociological insight into the various needs and phases that a married couple goes through.

Woman as *Grhini*

The Sanskrit term for a wife is *grhini*, which means the owner of the house, whereas the term for husband, *grhastha*, means a mere resident of the house. If the wife were to have the same status as the husband, she would be known as a *grhastha*. In Tamil, the wife is called *illaal*, one who owns the house, whereas the husband is *illarattaan*, one who performs the *dharmaic* rites in the house.

The conception of the wife as reigning over the household stems

from the *Vedas* themselves. In the *Rg Veda* (10.85.27), we find these beautiful quotations:

“Happy be you (as wife) and prosper with your children here (in the house): be vigilant to rule your household in this home (i.e. exercise your authority as the main figure in your home). Closely unite (be an active participant) in marriage with your husband. So shall you, full of years, address your company (i.e. have authority to speak over household matters).”

“O Bride! May your father-in-law treat you as a queen. May your mother-in-law treat you as a *Samrajni* (queen). May the sisters and brothers of your husband treat you as a queen.”(10.85.46).

Fourfold Role

In traditional Hinduism, the wife plays a fourfold role: she is *ardhangini* (the other half of her husband, metaphorically speaking); *sahadharmini* (partner in the fulfilment of human and divine goals--principally, the four *purusharthas*, or aims of human life): *dharma*, *artha* (accumulation of wealth through righteous means), *kama* (fulfilment of desire through appropriate means) and *moksha* (Self-realisation; liberation from the cycle of birth and death);

sahakarmini (partner in all acts and actions) and *sahayogini* (partner in all ventures).

In return for the indispensable help a *dharmapatni* renders to her husband in carrying out his *dharmā* and evolving spiritually, half of whatever *punya karma* (spiritual merit) the husband attains is transferred to her. On the other hand, none of the *papa karma* (spiritual demerit) of her husband inures to her, and none of the *punya karma* of the wife is transferred to the husband.

Role as Mother

Swami Vivekananda explains eloquently: “I know that before I was born, my mother would fast and pray and do hundreds of things which I could not even do for five minutes. She did that for two years. I believe that whatever religious culture I have, I owe to her. It was consciously that my mother brought me into the world to be what I am. Whatever good impulse I have was given to me by my mother--and consciously, not unconsciously”.

The marriage vows are not just the bride and groom promising fidelity to each other, but, at a deeper level, are a commitment



to being partners who will together care for their families, observe together all of the rites and sacrifices enjoined by the *Vedas* in the spirit of *lokasangraha* (wellbeing for the world/ cosmos).

There is a current of energy, of blessings and power in these *mantras* and rites, which transforms a marriage from a social contract and emotional bonding to a sacred covenant that is strong and lifelong (or, rather, seven lifetimes long).

Condensed from www.swarajyamag.com. Aditi Banerjee is a practising attorney in the USA. She is on the Board of Directors of the World Association for the Vedic Studies (WAVES)