## Vivaha Sanskara - Marriage

A traditional Hindu Wedding (Vivaha) is comprised of a series of religious ceremonies and rituals. Vivaha is one of the 16 sacraments (Sanskar) of Hindu life. It is meant to unite two persons so firmly that, although they retain two separate bodies, they become one in spirit. Vivaha is the sacred, spiritual partnership between two individuals in mind, body, spirit, and soul in this and their future lives.

No man or woman is so whole or fully rounded as to not need the other for completeness. Manu, The Great Sage and Lawmaker, gives expression of this idea.

Many of the rituals in the Hindu Wedding ceremony stem from the The Vedas, the oldest of Hindu Scriptures, and are chanted in Sanskrit. The ceremony takes place in the Mandap, a wedding pavilion (canopy built of four poles to represent the universe). Each of the five elements - fire, water, air, earth, and space - are represented within the Mandap. Agni (the Holy fire) exists as a divine witness to this sacred union and symbolizes the illumination of knowledge and happiness. Agni’s smoke, coupled with the recitation of Mantras, is believed to convey the message to God for a blessing of the spiritual union.

## Baraat Swagat and Dwar Puja (Welcoming the Groom)

The groom arrives with his family and friends (Baraat procession) and is warmly greeted by the bride’s family and friends. The bride’s mother welcomes the grpp, and asks him if he is prepared to make the commitment of marriage to her daughter. The bride’s mother places kumkum (red vermilion powder), signifying good luck, on the groom’s forehead and he is then asked to break the sampat (earthen pot) filled with ghee (melted butter) and cottonseeds. The pot represents the world; the contents within symbolize the different experiences the couple will encounter in their life-journey together. The groom is then escorted to the mandap where he awaits the bride’s arrival.

## Ganesh Puja and Var Pujan

At the mandap, the ceremony commences with a prayer to Lord Ganesh, who is the remover of obstacles and provider of good luck. He is also the symbol of peace, truth, friendship, brotherhood, and happiness. The groom, his parents, and the rest of his family are invited to participate in the prayer. The groom’s feet are cleansed with milk and water to purify him for a new life ahead.

## Antar Patt

The Antar Patt (veil) is placed in front of the groom, signifying the separate lives of the bride and groom, which will soon end with their union.

## Kanya Aagman

This is the time to welcome the Kanya (bride) to the mandap. The bride’s maternal uncles (Mamas), escort her to the mandap. While the priest recites verses to bless the bride and the groom, the Antar Patt is removed, signifying commencement of their lives as unified souls.

## Manglashtaka

Special prayers, Mangalashtaka, are recited at this time to wish the couple happiness, prosperity, and a peaceful marriage.

## Exchanging the Garlands

The bride and groom proclaim their mutual, love, respect, and acceptance of each other by bestowing a garland of fresh flowers on each other. The sweet scent of fresh flowers symbolizes happiness of married life.

## Kanyadaan

Kanayadaan (giving away the bride) is a very sacred step in the wedding ceremony to be performed by the bride’s parents. They summon the presence of God and give her hand in marriage to the groom. At this juncture, varmala - a loop of cotton thread wound 24 times signifying different characteristics and virtues of human life - is put around the shoulders of the bride and the groom, symbolizing the sacred union of the couple. The varmala does not contain a single knot to signify that there shall be no break in the union; it binds the two together to fulfill each other’s role sincerely.

## Hastamelap

Hastamelap, a physical joining of the bride’s and groom’s right palms, constitutes a very important aspect of the wedding ceremony. While chanting slokas (holy verses), the priest places sacred betel nut in the groom’s right palm, then places the bride’s right palm on top of the groom’s right palm, and finally covers the palms with a red cloth. The priest proclaims that the union has the approval of the families, and is conducted in the presence of family, friends and the community.

## Vivaha Havan

The wedding ceremony continues in the mandap around the Holy fire, Agni, an eternal witness to the marriage. Agni, lighted by the priest, is a symbol of purity and signifies the presence of God at the ceremony. All commitments made in the presence of Agni are thus made in the presence of God.

## Mangalphera

With Agni as a witness, the couple performs Mangalphera (walking around Agni) four times, which solidifies their marriage and makes them husband and wife. The four rounds symbolize their journey of life along the four paths of life:

* **Dharma (Obligations and Duty)** - Duty to each other, family, and society
* **Aartha (Wealth and Prosperity)** - Earning honorably and supporting each other
* **Karma (Deeds)** - Unconditional love
* **Moksha (Enlightenment)** - Eternally uniting with God through prayers and meditation.

At the onset of each round, the bride’s brother fills the couple’s palms with rice, oats, and green leaves, signifying great health and bountiful wealth, prosperity and happiness. The grains are offered to the fire as a sign of giving up worldly possessions in order to receive rewarding blessings. The groom leads the first three rounds and the bride leads the fourth round. After the final round, both will step on a stone and offer a prayer for their mutual love to be firm and steadfast like the stone. The priest asks the couple to sit down and whoever sits first is believed to rule the household.

## Saptapadi

The bride and groom perform the Saptapadi (seven sacred steps) near the fire representing the seven vows and promises they make to each other:

1. Together we shall nourish each other, avoid what is harmful to healthy living, and cherish each other in sickness and in health.
2. Together we shall develop physical, mental, and spiritual powers to attain peace, happiness, and spirituality.
3. Together we shall aim to increase our wealth by righteous means, prosper and share worldly goods, and conquer all obstacles that we may encounter.
4. Together we shall acquire knowledge, courage, strength, happiness, and live in harmony with mutual love and respect.
5. Together we shall be blessed with strong and virtuous children and share responsibilities of home and children.
6. Together we shall always be true to each other, work together for prosperity and happiness, and cherish this world.
7. Together we shall strive for longevity and remain life-long partners forever.

## Mangalsutra, Sindoor, Ring Exchange

The groom adorns the bride with a Mangalsutra, a necklace of gold and black beads, reflecting eternal respect and love for her. He then places sindoor (red vermilion powder) along the parting of the bride's hair. The red color symbolizes the dawn’s redness as this is the first day of their journey together as husband and wife. Both Mangalsutra and sindoor constitute traditional signs of a married woman. Also, the bride and groom exchange wedding rings as a symbol of eternal love for each other.

## Kansaar Feeding

The bride’s mother provides Kansaar (Indian sweets) for the newlyweds. The bride feeds the groom four times signifying that it is her duty to feed him and their family. Likewise, the groom feeds the bride four times indicating that he will fulfill his duty as a husband to provide for her and their family.

## Akhanda Shobhagyawati

Married women from both sides bless the newlywed couple for eternal married life (akhanda), health, wealth, prosperity, happiness, peace, and children.

## Jait-Chunri

A Chunri (sari or gharcholu) is draped on the bride’s head by elder members of the groom's family. The groom’s siblings shower the new bride with blessings and welcome her into her new family.