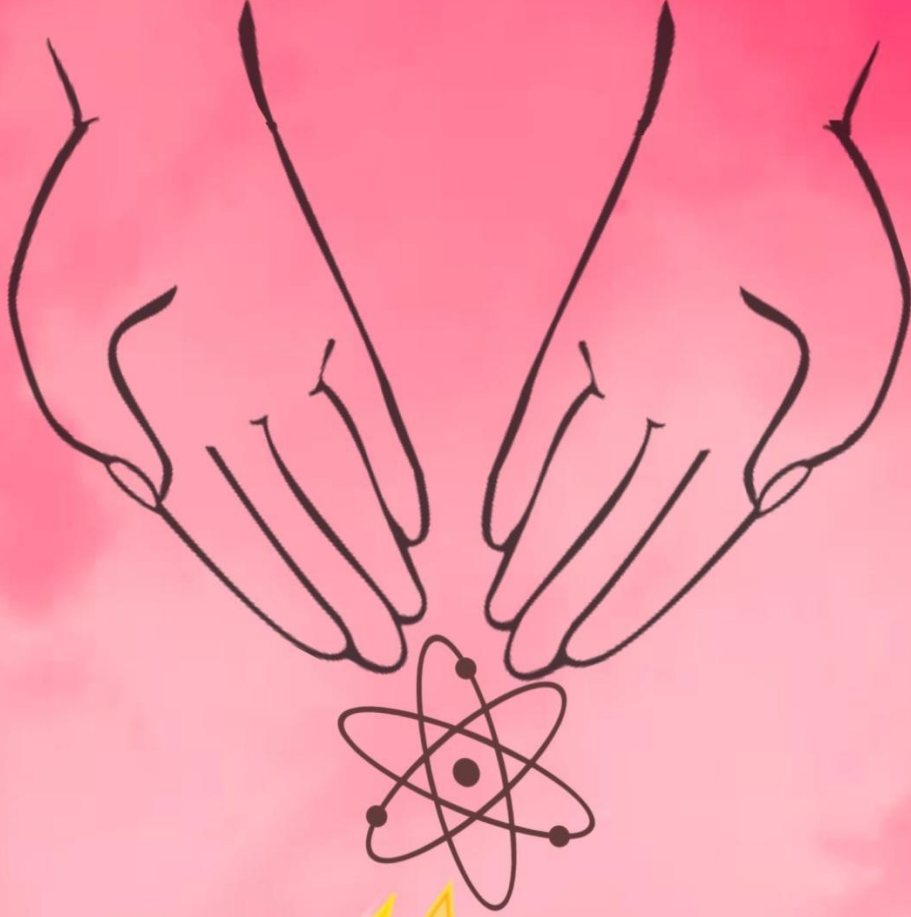




HINDU SEVIKA SAMITI (UK)

MAHILA SHIBIR 2020: NORTH LONDON VIBHAG



**SCIENTIFIC REASONS
BEHIND OUR
DHARMIC RITUALS**



INSPIRING AND UNPRECEDENTED INITIATIVE

In an era of mass consumerism - not only of material goods - but of information, where society continues to be led by dominant and parochial ideas, the struggle to make our stories heard, has been limited. But the tides are slowly turning and is being led by the collaborative strength of empowered Hindu women from within our community.

The Covid-19 pandemic has at once forced us to cancel our core programmes - which for decades had brought us together to pursue our mission to develop value-based leaders - but also allowed us the opportunity to collaborate in other, more innovative ways.

It gives me immense pride that Hindu Sevika Samiti (UK) have set a new precedent for the trajectory of our work. As a follow up to the successful Mahila Shibirs in 7 vibhags attended by over 500 participants, 342 Mahila sevikas came together to write 411 articles on seven different topics which will be presented in the form of 7 e-books. I am very delighted to launch this collection which explores topics such as: The uniqueness of Bharat, Ramayana, Pandemic and the Hindu way of life, and the contribution of Hindu women, amongst others. From writing to editing, content checking to proof reading, the entire operation was conducted by our Sevikas. This project has revealed hidden talents of many mahilas in writing essays and articles. We hope that these skills are further encouraged and nurtured to become good writers which our community badly lacks. I encourage all to read and share these works with their family and friends and hope our swayamsevaks and sevikas from across the world can take inspiration from this enormous initiative.

Mananeeya Dhirajji Shah

Sanghchalak, Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (UK)

I am delighted to know about the endeavour of Sevikas in the field of literature. I am very much impressed by the number of articles and the number of participants. The subjects are from different categories encompassing the Hindu epics, to Hindu way of life, to contemporary subject like COVID-19. This project has given an opportunity for Sevikas to use the period of lock down in developing their writing skills. I congratulate all the participants and the coordinators as well.

Wish UK Samiti will always come up with new ideas, new projects for the Karyakarta Vikas and enhance their level of commitment towards our ultimate goal of Vishwa Shanti.

Mananeeya Alakatai Inamdar

Sah Karyavahika, Rashtra Sevika Samiti



Review

Indian culture, our sanatan Sanskriti, is such a beautiful, most logical, historical, spiritual, and scientific culture. Mahatma Gandhiji said: *A nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people.* It's absolutely true because there are so many things or rituals we are following for hundreds of years. This e-book features in simple language, the various aspects of both beauty and depth in this culture.

This e-book is compiled with different topics and those questions that we may hear from this younger generation or we have asked in our young age. Each and every article written by sevikas is short but giving most important information. What I liked most is they have not just copied from internet but used their own experience and put it in own words. That gives more impact. I am sure this has given a good opportunity to those who love to write or to find the hidden writer in you. It has given a good inspiration and knowledge to all of us.

I hope to read more of such articles in future. Keep inspiring! Dhanyavaad.

Deepa Tade

Sah Karyavahika, Norway



Preface

As part of Mahila Shibir 2020, it was decided that we will host an e-Mahila Shibir and create an e-book. Deciding the theme was a bit tricky, but as a team of young mothers, we thought it would be good to address the “but why?” questions.

These days the younger generation are always challenging the reasons why we follow certain rituals and practices. Many times we don't know the answers. This led us to the theme of our topic of ***Scientific Reasons Behind our Dharmic Rituals.***

The criteria for the e-book was to write an essay of approximately 300 words giving insight into our dharmic rituals whilst backing our findings with scientific facts. We could express our own experiences, thoughts and opinions.

Many women from the age of 30 to 60+ have participated in this project. Although we may not be professional writers, many were excited to join this project and write about something. We hope you appreciate our efforts and forgive us any errors.

If you would like to tackle those challenging questions that we get asked about our religion, then this book is for you.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in the articles are the respective author's own and do not represent that of HSS (UK) or the author's places of work. While each author and HSS (UK) has made every effort to ensure that the information we are sharing is accurate, we welcome any comments, suggestions, or correction of errors. HSS (UK) is not responsible for any errors or omissions, or for the results obtained from the use of any information in the articles.



Contents

Introduction: Significance of Hindu Rituals.....	7
Worshipping Shri Ganesh First.....	8
Significance of Namaste	10
Importance of Waking Up Early.....	12
Scientific Reason for Offering Water to the Early Rising Sun.....	14
Scientific Reasons Behind Suryanamaskar	15
Significance of Performing Puja	18
The Significance of Lighting a Lamp.....	19
Reason for Using Murti for Worship.....	22
Explaining why we Offer Food to God	23
The Importance and Significance of Charnamrit/Panchamrit	24
Scientific Reasons Behind the Sandalwood Tilak.....	26
Significance of Offering Coconuts to God	27
Why Should we Pray before Eating	28
कलश पूजा का महत्व.....	29
Reasons for Conducting a Yagna	30
Why are our Gods Depicted in Blue?.....	32
Why are Plants and Trees Regarded as Sacred?	33
The Worship of Tulsi Plant.....	34
Why Cows are Considered Holy to Hindus	36
Reason for Applying Holy Ash.....	38
Significance of Attending Temple for Festivals	39
The Colourful Festival of Holi.....	40
Scientific Reason Behind Fasting.....	41
Insight into the Sixteen Samskaras.....	43
Rituals after Death as per Hinduism with Scientific Reasoning.....	45
The Importance of Daan in Hindu Culture	47
Reason We Do Not Touch Books With Our Feet	49
भारतीय भोजन पद्धति में भोजन का तीखे से आरम्भ एवं अंत मीठे से करने के वैज्ञानिक कारण	50
Why Should you not Sleep with your Head Towards the North	52



Significance of Throwing Coins into a River.....	54
Significance of Touching our Elders Feet.....	55
Significance of the Holy fire at the Hindu Wedding Ceremony.....	57
The Application of Haldi.....	59
Explaining the use of Mehndi.....	61
Why do Married Women Apply Sindoor?	63
The Importance of a Mangal Sutra.....	64
Reason Hindu Women Wear Bangles.....	65
Reason Behind Toran Decoration.....	66



Introduction: Significance of Hindu Rituals

A ritual is defined as a ceremony or action performed in a customary way.

Our religion is often called Sanatan Dharma. Sanatan meaning eternal and dharma meaning that which upholds. Some rituals, like Puja, remind us of god on a daily basis. Other rituals such as fasting, and meditation discipline our life for spiritual progress. Religious ceremonies or pilgrimages help us focus the mind on spiritual aspirations. Some ceremonies such as rites of passage bring family and community together. The discipline of regularly carrying out rituals encourages religious values and aspirations. In our multi faith environment this also brings the opportunity to learn about each other's faith.

Some rituals can become mechanical and meaningless thus becoming counterproductive. Hinduism offers freedom in the way rituals can be carried out, but this freedom could unfortunately be used as an excuse to abandon rituals as society becomes more superficial with rituals becoming commercialised or stifling. Some critics of religion may also argue that money and time could have been better spent in caring for the needy. Rituals are created with wisdom and may over time become corrupt and tools for exploitation. We must be able to eliminate corruption and adapt the technique which was developed by our ancient civilisation.

Sanatan Dharma has its foundation upon scientifically enquiring into matters of spirituality. Our ancient Vedic literature incorporates spirituality with science. It is in essence understanding the laws that govern everything. Rituals remind us of the spiritual dimension we possess. If rituals are not followed to some extent, then we may end up losing sight of the higher goals in life. Rituals and traditions also help us to feel connected to our families and past.

“Rituals are the kindergarten of religion. They are absolutely necessary for the world as it is now; only we shall have to give people newer and fresh rituals.”

– Swami Vivekananda.



Worshipping Shri Ganesh First

Lord Ganesh is the son of Lord Shiva and Mother Parvati. He is mighty and divine and has a mouse as his vehicle. He has an elephant head on a human body. Lord Ganesh's name is chanted across the world in the belief that he is the remover of obstacles.

We pray to Lord Ganesh before commencing any form of auspicious activity or occasion. Why do we do this, do you ask? Auspicious things are offered to Lord Ganesh's murti that possess medicinal properties which are absorbed by the clay crafted figurines. The murti can activate the human neural system, infusing a belief that whatever is asked for in the prayer, shall be showered upon by the Lord in abundance.



A very popular story in our Hindu Puranas explains the reasoning for this. Whilst Lord Shiva had gone to meditate, Parvati was lonely and had longed for a child. She often found that the Shivadutas (Shiva's devotees) were more loyal to Shiva than her and she could not get any privacy. So Parvati formed a paste of sandalwood, turmeric and her own dirt to mould a figurine of a boy, who she infused life into, and one day she instructed him to guard the entrance of her cave, strictly not to let anyone enter.

Lord Shiva had returned to Mount Kailash after many years of tapasya (meditation) and found a boy was refusing him entry into his own home! Lord Shiva began to get enraged after being refused entry, even after informing him that he was Parvati's husband. In his anger Shiva cut off the boy's head. On hearing this, Mother Parvati was disheartened and informed Shiva that he was actually their son.

Shiva then asked his Shivadutas to go and find the first living creature they could. They came back with an elephant's head and Shiva adorned the boy's torso with the elephant's head bringing him back to life. Thus, Ganesh was born.

This may seem like a child's story but there is symbolism behind the stories in our Puranas. Parvati formed the figurine from dirt which represents ignorance whilst Lord Shiva symbolises peace and knowledge. So, if Lord Shiva represents peace then why did he get angered and cut off the boy's head? The boy, symbolising ignorance (which is said to be an attribute of the mind/head), was not recognising and allowing the entry of knowledge (Lord Shiva). To develop spiritually and generally in life, ignorance is removed by allowing knowledge to enter, and so Lord Shiva chopped off the boy's head and replaced it with an elephant's head. The elephant head symbolises gyan (wisdom and knowledge) and karma shakti (strength in action). Like elephants are not stopped by obstacles, and effortlessly



remove any that come in their way, when we worship Lord Ganesh we are praying for him to imbibe us with these qualities, to be able to just as easily remove obstacles in our path.

From this day, the devas had declared that on all auspicious occasions, pujas, yagnas and when taking on new endeavours, praying to Lord Ganesh would bring prosperity and success as he would be the remover of obstacles, and thus this explains why Lord Ganesh is worshipped first.

We can see this when entering our mandirs (temples), where at the entrance a statue of Lord Ganesh can always be seen. He provides us with the knowledge of starting new things with a pure and selfless mind in achieving all our aspirations with utmost devotion.

Hiral Pindoria (Meerabai Shakha, Wembley)



Significance of Namaste

Namaste is a common form of greeting practiced in the Indian subcontinent. It is a gesture used to greet and before parting. We can see this gesture in many Indian classical dances, in everyday religious rituals and also yoga postures.

During COVID-19 times, the emphasis on Namaste was seen everywhere. All over the world, people started greeting each other with Namaste. Even the Japanese bow and hand wave is a popular non-contact way of greeting, but Namaste has a spiritual basis when done in the right way.

Namaste/ Namaskaar meaning

Namaste is derived from Sanskrit language. "Nama" means "bow", "as" means "I" and "te" means "you". This translates to "I bow to you". Namaskaar, similarly translates to "bow" and "doing" and describes the act of performing the greeting. That is why it is said Namaskaar has more sattvikta to it as compared to Namaste.

But again, according to many theories, Namaskaar is performed when greeting multiple people whereas Namaste is used widely as a personal greeting addressed to an individual.

How to perform Namaste

Bring your hands together with palms touching each other and fingers facing upwards. your hands should be close to your body in line with your heart level, then bow your head with closed eyes. It is a gesture conveying the deepest form of respect. When we bring our hands to heart level, it also signifies that we are interceding with the divine love from our heart. Also, it's quite important to not hold anything in our hands whilst bringing your hand together.

Bowing your head with closed eyes helps our mind to surrender to this divine love.

This mudra is also called Anjali mudra or Pranamasana (the prayer pose).



Namaste is a gesture we usually do when we greet others, or when taking leave (after finishing off a lesson to give respect to your teacher/ students/ colleagues). It helps for a spiritual connection between the teacher and students. Namaskaar is a great way of expressing your love, respect to the other person.



When it comes to worshipping Deity, it signifies greetings to God. It is also done when doing meditation which connects you to your inner self.

Namaste literally means 'the divine in me pays respect/ honours/ bows/ adores the divine in you'. Moreover, as according to the Spiritual Research Foundation, the lack of physical contact in Namaste substantially limits the negative entity of one person affecting the other person. If it is done in the right spiritual emotion of paying obeisance, it potentially eliminates the negative vibrations completely. Namaste is a gesture, a way of acknowledging and paying obeisance of one soul to another. It is the most Sattvik form of greeting.

Rajni Pillai (Jijabai Shakha, Queensbury)



Importance of Waking Up Early

“Early to bed, Early to rise, Makes one healthy, wealthy and wise.”

This is a common phrase in the Hindu culture, but what is so important about sleeping and waking early? Why are we told in Hinduism to wake up early?

In Sanskrit the daily routine is called Dinacharya. ‘Din’ meaning day and ‘acharya’ meaning to follow or close to. Dinacharya is the ideal daily schedule, taking into account the cycle of nature, and the routine followed in the early morning, which is instrumental in setting the tone of the day. Following a daily routine gives a person a sense of discipline and this is important for the efficient functioning of their body and mind.

The ideal Hindu ritual of waking up early starts in the Muhurat meaning auspicious time of the Brahmamuhurt, the creator's time. A person should wake up 1hr 36 minutes before sunrise so they can synchronise with the rhythm of the sun. At this point there is a shift in the energy in the atmosphere. Half an hour before sunrise there is another surge of positive energy moving into the atmosphere.

It is thought that in this period of time the Sattva intellect is pure and radiant and it is the best period for performing tasks related to the pursuits of dharma (righteousness) and artha (wealth) and for contemplating on Vedic principles and self analysis. Surrounding negative energy is also considered to reduce during this time. A person can meditate during this time and this will help in improving mental health and performance.

There are prayers cited in literature to perform on waking, but they are not discussed here as meditation can be in any form and can include prayers but are not necessary. Along with meditation, early morning exercise, (the suryanamaskar being a great example of an all-round exercise to perform), a cleansing bath/shower and a suitable breakfast are all activities to be followed daily during this time period.

The early morning rituals are cited in the Hindu texts and would be based in India where generally sunrise and sunset are constant. In the UK with the changing seasons the daylight timings vary, and it would be a challenge to adjust through the year but it is important to understand the significance of a constant early wake up time. Early risers often will try to go to bed early and will thus get the recommended 7-9 hours’ sleep. Sleeping the full amount regularly contributes to a healthy body and mind. Early risers may be less stressed and will have a more positive outlook in their lives.



Increased periods of rest lead to an energy boost and a better sleeping pattern will emerge, contributing to a more productive day. A restful sleep also contributes to a drop in blood pressure, relaxing of muscles and generally allows the body to rejuvenate overnight.

We tend to juggle with a lot of stressful situations in the mornings and many households are chaotic as various members set off to face their day. This means we can often be stressed before the working day starts, negatively impacting one's daily life.

Waking early and setting time aside for some meditation, exercise, bath/shower, a peaceful nutritious breakfast can profoundly affect someone's daily routine. It can lead to better performance, perhaps when working or studying and subconsciously creates a sense of calm in the body, which has been cleansed of fatigue, stress, and negativity.

In summary, although the Hindu texts cite prayers and rituals to perform on waking, the scientific reasoning behind them is for the person to start the day with clarity of thought, a peaceful mind and a clean and healthy body (through diet and exercise). These are universal principles for all to follow, whatever your faith.

Ushaben Patel (Jijabai Shakha, Queensbury)



Scientific Reason for Offering Water to the Early Rising Sun

It is a rare sight to witness the practice of Surya Arghya (offering of water to the sun). My memories of seeing this practice takes place whilst watching religious series such as the Ramayan and the Mahabharat and yes Bollywood movies too!



You should ideally conduct Surya Arghya within the first hour of sunrise, by first taking a bath and wearing fresh clothes, then going outside and pouring water from a Kalash (copper vessel) whilst facing the sun. If you cannot see the rising sun, then face the east direction while performing the puja.

The Kalash should be held in front of you, but above the forehead, so that when the water pours down, the sun rays reflecting through the water can be absorbed by the entire body including your head and face. Do not block your face/forehead with the Kalash.

You should gently pour the water from the Kalash, looking into the rays of the Sun through the water pouring down.

There are many great benefits to this practice backed up with scientific significance.

When the sunlight passes through water, it breaks down into seven rays of rainbow-like colours. This energy derived from these seven colours can be absorbed by the body in its maximum form. The seven colours formed by the rays are also aligned with the colours of the seven chakras in our body.



This energy can help to balance the three Dosha's in our body and prevent illnesses. On the health front this improves eyesight and mind power too.

This practice also helps to bring discipline into one's life, as it makes you rise before the sunrise allowing you to maximise the hours in the day.

Sun is the source of all energy. If the Sun rays do not fall on the planet, there will be no life. Hence the most beneficial time to absorb the sun rays is within the first hour of sunrise.

Kalpna Varsani (Meerabai Shakha, Wembley)



Scientific Reasons Behind Suryanamaskar

Suryanamaskar is a yogasan that many are familiar with. It harnesses our ability to pay homage to the Sun. The Sun: our life source of this planet, helps the birds, animals, plants, trees, humans, and everything around us. Its rays grace the landscape, and it is the warmth we feel as it touches our skin. By performing the Suryanamaskar yogasan, we are bowing down to the Sun: it is also known as the Sun Salutation.

Suryanamaskar combines yogasan with pranayama. It is usually done at sunrise or sunset, facing the sun. But what is so important about the sun? Sunlight triggers the release of certain hormones in the brain. With exposure to sunlight, the hormone serotonin is released. Serotonin is a natural mood stabiliser and works to:

- Reduce depression
- Regulate anxiety
- Maintain bone health
- Feel calm and focused

Vitamin D is made by the skin in response to sunlight. Being exposed to the sun is the best way to boost vitamin D levels. It is an important vitamin in regulating the absorption of calcium and phosphorus. In addition to this, it aids the immune system. Those that do not have enough vitamin D are at higher risk of developing soft and fragile bones.

Suryanamaskar are a series of 10 or 12 movements. Each movement is done with the regulation of breath. A mantra should be said before the yoga is performed. Chanting the mantra causes subtle vibrations in the body and mind, and brings harmony to the body, breath, and mind.

The 13 Suryanamaskar mantras with their associated meaning:

1. ॐ Mitraaya Namah - One who is friendly to all
2. ॐ Ravaye Namah - The shining or the radiant one
3. ॐ Suryaya Namah - The dispeller of darkness
4. ॐ Bhaanave Namah - One who illuminates or the bright one
5. ॐ Khagaya Namah - One who moves through the sky
6. ॐ Pooshne Namah - Giver of nourishment and fulfilment
7. ॐ Hiranya Garbhaya Namah - One who has a golden coloured brilliance
8. ॐ Mareechaye Namah - Giver of light with infinite rays
9. ॐ Aadityaaya Namah - The son of Aditi, the cosmic divine mother
10. ॐ Savitre Namah - One who is responsible for life
11. ॐ Arkaaya Namah - One who is worthy of praise and glory.



12. ॐ Bhaskaraya Namah - Giver of wisdom and cosmic illumination.

13. ॐ Shri Savitru Suryanarayanaaya Namah - The wise one.



Step 1: Hastauttanasana (Raised Arms Pose)

Stretches the chest and abdominal organs, expands the chest.

Step 2: Padahasthasana

Increases blood flow to the brain, increases digestion, stretches the spine, increases flexibility of the waist and spine.

Step 3: Ashwa Sanchalanasana (Equestrian Pose)

Strengthens the quadriceps and spine, stimulates the abdominal organs, increases flexibility of the spine and neck.

Step 4: Dandasana (Stick Pose)

Strengthens the arms and back, improves posture. Stretches the shoulders and chest.

Step 5: Ashtanga Namaskara (Salute with Eight Parts Pose)

Increases flexibility of the back and spine. Strengthens back and spine.

Step 6: Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose)

Relieves tension in the back and spine. Stimulates and expands the chest and abdominal organs.

Step 7: Parvatasana (Mountain Pose)

Strengthens the legs, arms, spine and calf muscles. Increases blood flow to the spinal region.

Step 8: Ashwa Sanchalanasana (Equestrian Pose)

Strengthens the quadriceps and spine, stimulates the abdominal organs, increases flexibility of the spine and neck.

Step 9: Padahasthasana

Increases blood flow to the brain, increases digestion, stretches the spine, increases flexibility of the waist and spine.



Step 10: Pranamasana (Prayer Pose)

Helps to relax and calm the body, mind, and nervous system. Helps maintain the balance of the body.

Kamini Mistry (Durga Shakha, South Harrow)



Significance of Performing Puja

What is Puja? The word Puja is a Sanskrit word which in English can be described as honour, worship, reverence, adoration, or homage. Put simply it is an offering to serve God, declare your devotion to him/her with love and without any expectations. By doing so you gain a sense of inner peace and happiness, which brings a mode of quietness to your mind and soul for that moment and allows you to reflect on various things.

Lakshmi Puja, Surya Puja, Ganesh Puja, and other forms of Puja can be performed at home or in temples. It is a form of blessing that is received by the divine powers. These prayers or rituals are often done in front of murtis or images of God for long life, good health, success of all human beings and for Peace.

As a family we conduct 'Arti' daily but Puja is only performed by me. Over a period of time, while listening to various lectures (known as Katha) on Hinduism and attending events led by Hindu organisations, an inner voice one day initiated me to do this Puja. Starting the day with a 'small' Puja gives me a positive start to the day reminding me of many disciplines that I should keep in mind and encourages me to focus on the important things. Being a follower of Swaminarayan Dharma, I perform the morning Puja as a devotee and a form of duty. My puja includes doing 'mala' of Tulsi and reading a verse or two from a scripture gives me the boost I need to start my day.

Seeing my parents doing this everyday gave me the inspiration of wanting to carry on this family ritual and tradition and I started doing this when I just turned 18. It is now become a part of my life and only feels right to do every morning. My endeavour is to encourage my children to see the benefits of all these rituals and experiences and try to incorporate spiritual values in their daily life.

Sharmee Shah (Jijabai Shakha, Queensbury)



The Significance of Lighting a Lamp

In almost all Hindu homes, a Diya, or clay lamps are lit daily, sometimes before an altar. In some houses, lamps or candles are lit at dawn and in other houses they are lit at both dawn and dusk. A few homes may also maintain lamps continuously.

A Diya is frequently used in majority of Hindu celebrations, events and festivals and forms an integral part of many social rites. It is a strong symbol of enlightenment, hope, and prosperity. Diwali is the festival of lights celebrated by followers of dharmic religions.

In its traditional and simplest form, the Diya is made from baked clay or terracotta and holds oil or ghee made from cow's milk that is lit via a cotton wick. The ghee purifies the air. The lamp also has significance in all the major religions of the world and has been used for many centuries.

In Bhaarateeya Samskaara (Hindu culture) lighting the lamp has great significance apart from just removing the darkness. For every auspicious occasion, the first thing we practice is lighting an oil lamp. It has been an age-old household practice to light a lamp in the morning/twilight time. We have many occasions and festivities to show the effect of lighting lamps, such as the inauguration of an event to symbolise an auspicious beginning.



When a ghee lamp is lit and kept nearby, it creates an aura of illumination. This radiance of the lamp sets forth electromagnetic waves that open up the mind and activate the sensory areas of the brain. During worship it enhances the performance of the individual allowing worship to the lord with all concentration and attention. Light signifies knowledge and positivity.

Oil lamps were a part of various traditions and cultures around the world, until electric lights became popular. The earliest known oil lamp can be dated back to the Chalcolithic Age, about 4500 to 3300 BC. Today, their use is limited to only a few homes, more often only for visual appeal.

Today you have electric lights so you may wonder why a lamp. But imagine just a few hundred years ago, there was no possibility of doing anything indoors without a lamp. Historically, the lamp was an essential part of our homes because of two



reasons. One, there were no electric lights. Two, homes were built from organic materials so people could not afford to open up huge windows. Generally, the houses in ancient times were dark inside. Even today, have you seen that old homes in villages and slums are generally dark? So a lamp was kept even during the day, and a place of worship was created around it.

It is a part of tradition that to create the right kind of atmosphere, the first thing that you do is light a lamp. You don't need to believe in any God. It need not even be dark, the lamp need not be a visual aid, but do you notice it makes some kind of a difference? This is because the moment you light a lamp, not the flame itself but around the flame a certain etheric sphere will naturally appear. Where there is an etheric sphere, communication will be better.

So, if you want to start anything, or you want to create a certain atmosphere, a lamp is lit. This comes from the understanding that when you light a lamp, apart from the visual aspect, it fills the whole place with a different kind of energy. Fire itself is a source of light and a source of life in many ways. Symbolically, we have always seen fire as the very source of life. In fact, your life itself is referred to as fire in many languages. 'The fires of life' within you keep you going. It also creates a field of energy around itself, and above all it creates the necessary atmosphere. So, when you light a lamp before you start your day, it is because you want to bring the same quality into yourself. It is symbolism; it is a way of invoking your own inner nature.

One of our great poet Shree Bhogilal Gandhi has written a beautiful poem regarding the significance of the lamp as below.

Tutaradil no divo tha ne, o re o re o bhaya!*
rakhekadituuchina leto, parka tej ne chaya;
e re uchinakhutijashe re, rahijashepadchaya. tutara*
kodyutarukachimatinu, tel-divetchupaya,
nani-shisaliadinaadi. pragatasherangmaya. tutara*
Aabh ma suraj, chandra ne tara, motamotatejraya,
aatama no taro divopetavava, tu vin sarvaparaya.. tutara*

તું તારા દિલનો દીવો થાને, ઓરે ઓરે ઓભાયા!*
રખેકદીતું ઉછીના લેતો, પારકા તેજને છાયા;
એરે ઉછીના ખૂટી જશેરે, રહી જશે પડછાયા.. તું તારા દિલનો*
કોડિયું તારું કાચી માટીનું, તેલ-દિવેટ છુપાયા,
નાની-શીસળી અડીના અડી. પ્રગટ શેરંગ માયા.. તું તારા દિલનો*
આભમાં સુરજ, ચંદ્રને તારા, મોટા મોટા તેજરાયા,
આતમનો તારો દીવો પેટાવવા, તું વિણ સર્વપરાયા.. તું તારા દિલનો*



भुवसरसप्रार्थना...

दिपितश्रीभोगीलालगांधी.

The summary of the poem:

Believe in yourself, you are like a clay lamp filled with oil means you have all the qualities within you and only need a light (guidance from your Guru or a teacher) to realise your potential.

It also mentions that although there are lots of resources in the world like the sun, stars etc but do not be dependent on them as once they have gone you would be left empty again. Instead work on your instincts and motivations to achieve your goals and dreams in your life.

Jayshreeben Popat (Durga Shakha, South Harrow)



Reason for Using Murti for Worship

Let us start by asking what is worship? For me worship is a deep trust for the 'Parmatma', which is a Sanskrit word meaning the absolute or supreme self. Now let us expand on why a large portion of Hindus worship Murtis?

In order to elevate ourselves through life, I firmly believe as humans we need a role model whom we can trust and respect. Moreover, a guide who can show us the path to live in accordance with our Dharma and help us strive towards the ultimate goal, 'Moksha'.

For years Hindu's have been vilified for idolatry and it is a common misperception amongst Hindus themselves that we worship "idols". In reality it is the opposite. The word "idol" describes the act of giving sacred status to objects. Hinduism has always worshipped the divine through a Pratima (an image) or Pratika (a symbol) of God, both words being derived from the Sanskrit word Prati, meaning going towards. So Pratima translates to an image that will lead us closer to God. So, you see, we do not worship the metal or stone as God, but we worship God through the Pratima, almost like a concentration aid to worship the infinite God. Similarly, we do not talk to the phone, but talk through the phone to contact people located elsewhere. As we live in a finite world, with finite mental capacity, Hinduism has welcomed the use of murtis/pratimas and pratikas (such as Aum) to represent God, who is beyond form, the infinite reality.

As humans are beings bestowed with finite sense organs, there is almost a need for some sort of physical form to initiate the connection with the supreme self. Placing a murti during puja helps to achieve a level of meditative state with relative ease. Since humans have a fundamental need to communicate, murtis bridge the gap and provide solace against various kinds of human sorrows. When the pratimas are decorated with beautiful robes, ornaments, and flowers, it creates a level of grandeur of the supreme self which some may equate to visualising the ultimate bliss and beauty.

Lastly, personally for me using a murti or pratima in my puja is an essential part of my life and it provides an unexplainable strength for living. Whenever I feel anxious, come across challenges, or feel joy I pray in front of it. Through a meditative glance, I do not feel or see it as a murti, but I feel that my Atma is connecting with the supreme self through the murtis beautiful eyes. This worship gives me comfort, strength, and guidance to fulfil the duties in my daily life and carry on the path of Dharma. It establishes a bridge between myself and the absolute self.

Ultimately, my mind, body and Atma senses unconditional love when I pray to God through my lovely murtis.

Hemali Shah (Meerabai Shakha, Wembley)



Explaining why we Offer Food to God

Hindu culture and tradition is built upon interconnections between devotion, emotions and scientific reasoning. Naivedyam is the word used to describe any food offered to God before consuming it. It is also known as Bhog or Thal.

For centuries, every food item cooked in a Hindu home was first offered to God in the family's own mandir before it was consumed by the people of the household. As time passed and lives became busy, we still intended to continue this ritual in our own modified ways. I remember my mother offering any special sweet or savories to the murti at home even before tasting it. Usually one of us siblings was asked to show Naivedyam to the God. The first laddoo or first chakari was placed in a small silver bowl with a Tulsi leaf, and a small cup of water was placed with it and put in front of our bright murtis of Lord Krishna, Lord Ganpati, Devi Laxmi and Devi Saraswati. We praise and pray to different 'gunas' or qualities of that particular God and try to inculcate those 'gunas' inside us. After a few minutes, the laddoo or chakali would become special and would turn into Prashad. Sometimes it would be gobbled up by the youngest member of the family but most of the time it would be shared equally to all the members of the family.

This simple act of offering food to god gives so much to each and every member of the family. It gave a feeling of oneness and instilled the need and desire for sharing. The importance of the tiniest speck of food gave the feeling of gratitude which was felt by all.

Our scriptures tell us that when we offer food to God, God consumes it through Vayu tatva (through air) and due to God's subtle touch, food becomes sacred. Purely blessed by God.

My experience tells me that this simple act of offering Naivedyam to God very easily creates a special bond between us and God. He becomes our friend when we eat our favourite Prashad happily and he becomes our Guru when we eat our least favourite food without hesitation just because it has been blessed.

The simple act of offering Naivedyam changes our attitude towards food and makes us understand what we eat must be shared equally amongst everyone before we consume it. It also teaches us to eat the food cheerfully and with the feeling of gratitude and may be that helps us to digest our food more effectively. It makes us realise that what we are eating today is because of the supreme existence of God.

Poonam Sheth (Durga Shakha, South Harrow)



The Importance and Significance of Charnamrit/Panchamrit

Panchamrit is a sweet concoction given as Prasad made up of five items. The name comes from the Sanskrit, panch, meaning “five,” and amrit, meaning “immortal” or “nectar of the gods.” Traditional recipes for Panchamrit consist of five ingredients: raw milk, curd (yogurt), honey, sugar, and ghee (clarified butter). Typically, Panchamrit is offered to the deity or deities and is consumed at the end of worship or after the puja.

Each of the traditional ingredients has symbolic significance:

Milk – piousness, purity, one’s life should be clean like milk.

Curd – prosperity, progeny, pure and adopt virtue and make others like us

Honey – unity, sweet speech, powerful

Sugar – bliss, sweetness, speaking and behaving sweetly

Ghee – victory, knowledge, symbol of affection has a loving relationship with everyone



Charnamrit has a special significance for Hindus. Charnamrit means the nectar water that is used to give the deities a bath which passes down to their lotus feet and collects in a brass or bronze pot. The copper pot is used so that the medicinal properties of copper itself also infuses into the Charnamrit. The Charnamrit contains basil leaf, seeds, and other medicinal elements. According to Ayurveda, copper can destroy many diseases.

In temples, Hindu Priests recite one special Mantra while dispersing Charnamrit/Panchamrit to the devotees. The special Mantra is as follows:

“Akalmrityuharanam Sarvadhivinasham, Vishnudodakam Pitva Purnajanam na Vidyate”.

Meaning: It is believed that whosoever takes Panchamrit will be blessed with the long life, divinity and attain salvation to get rid of the vicious circle of death and rebirth.



Panchamrit is offered to the deity in the temple or at home. When the prayers are completed, Panchamrit is shared to the devotees who receive it by cupping the palm of their right-hand supported by their left cupped palm underneath. Devotees take Panchamrit with full devotion and then place their moistened hand over the head to give respect to the importance of Panchamrit.

Ayurveda considers Charnamrit to be very good for your health. It is beneficial in increasing virility. Many diseases are cured by basil juice and the copper metal. Drinking Charnamrit provides peace and calmness to the mind. Along with the health benefits, Charnamrit is also effective in increasing memory

Like Charnamrit, taking Panchamrit is also thought to have health benefits such as improving brain function, nourishing the skin and alleviating diseases.

Heena Solanki (Pandav Shakha, Bushey)



Scientific Reasons Behind the Sandalwood Tilak

I am sure you are all familiar with Tilak. After years of attending mandir and performing religious ceremonies as many of us are, it's hard not to be. The mark is fluid in its shape, colour, and components. Whilst some people adorn themselves with a dry red powder, others prefer a pale-yellow liquid in a U-shape, and some express their belief with horizontal white stripes. Despite obvious distinctions between tilak styles, it always rests between the eyebrows and shows conformity to Sanatan Dharma. The practice has existed since ancient times and is now a signature part of Hindu culture. Sandalwood, or 'chandan' is a very common ingredient in tilak, and not just for what it represents for Hindus, but for its scientific properties as well.

You may have noticed, whilst applying sandalwood tilak, it has a cooling effect and pure aroma which can have massively beneficial effects on the brain. According to Chinese acupunctural sciences, the tilak is applied on the skin covering a convergence point of nerves. Here, the cooling properties come into their own by reducing headaches and calming the mind. Besides this, its aforementioned fragrance promotes purity and peace in the mind, so devotees can worship in tranquility.

Chakra is a Sanskrit term meaning wheel and according to ancient Hindu scriptures such as the Vedas there are seven of these energy channels located in the body. One, called 'ajna' or the third eye, is located between the eyebrows. This chakra is responsible for the mind's ability to concentrate and observe, so applying tilak on this area can activate the third eye and stimulate concentration.

In contrast, Ayurveda, an Indian healing system dating back thousands of years, describes Sandalwood as the ultimate sedative. Having problems with anxiety, insomnia, or nerve pain? Sandalwood can be used to soothe these maladies by applying its tilak on the forehead.

In conclusion, the Sandalwood Tilak is much more than just a religious emblem; it is a remedy for fatigue, stress, pain - the list goes on. So next time you apply tilak, think about how it can help you become a cooler, calmer person.

Manisha and Verona Shah (Pandav Shakha, Bushey)



Significance of Offering Coconuts to God

Growing up near the coast in India, I used to think we offered coconuts to God as it was commonly grown there. Every Tuesday and Friday we would go to the temple with coconuts, so one day I asked my grandmother why do we offer these to God? She told me that offering coconut to God ensures that he or she surrenders his ego to the deities before they begin the prayer. One can devote himself to God by understanding the underlying importance of offering coconut. Hindus believe that human ego is one of the biggest hurdles in the path of attaining Moksha; being relieved from the cycle of birth and death. Hindus also strongly believe that they can become a part of the Almighty who governs the entire universe only by throwing away our ego. Hence there are lots of ways by which one can diminish his ego to reach God and one such way is by the use of the coconut.

The question remains; why of all fruits available is the coconut considered so dear to God? It is described as *Shrifal* which means God's fruit. The coconut is the most *Satvic* fruit and the purest form of fruit. We call it Kalpvriksha; no part of the tree is thrown away as each part is useful. For this reason, the coconut plays a major role, not only as an offering to God but also it is a significant fruit in almost all religious festivals as Prashad. Coconuts are also used in welcoming guests at weddings.



Another explanation defined the outer shell of a coconut like the human being's large external physical body and the kernel inside a coconut represents the delicate internal body. The removal of the hard-outer cover of the coconut signifies that one should be totally devoid of desires to reach God. Since the best way to God is to be egoless and unattached to the physical body, breaking the coconut represents the shattering of our ego, which will then lead to the inner juice which is usually removed before offering to God and this shows the removal of the internal tendencies of our brain to be jealous, egoist and selfish humans. This leaves just the soft inner part of the fruit which is placed before God as a symbolic offering.

Suvarna Chandgadkar (Meerabai Shakha, Wembley)



Why Should we Pray before Eating?

When I was asked to write about this topic, I thought this is obvious, we are thanking God for the food on our plate. However, I realised that there is more to it than that. We need food to survive and the energy to carry on with our day. Food protects and repairs our body for days, weeks and years to come. Eating goes hand in hand with our mind, when we are hungry, we may lose concentration or lack energy. Chanting before eating gives us an opportunity to not only thank God but also gives us time to pause during different times of the day and re-set our minds. The combination of chanting and visual perception of food increases the flow of saliva activating digestive enzymes.

We also need to think about the journey our meals have gone through to end up on our plates. It is not just a case of going to the supermarket, picking up the ingredients and cooking a meal. Someone somewhere has grown the vegetables, picked the grains or milked a cow. This involves providing shelter, packing, and shipping etc. Ultimately the journey started with God, we should be thankful how easy it is to buy these ingredients and the variety available. By chanting it also removes all sins which have taken place along the journey. We should not take for granted what we have readily available, and by praying to God this shows integrity and an act of acknowledgement

Now how many of us take the time to chant before eating? In the world we live in today, where we are rushing to get dinner on the table or eating at our desk, with our stomach rumbling, we dive straight in. While out with friends some may feel embarrassed to pray before eating. Some may not have even heard of praying before eating and this is an alien concept to them. Taking a few minutes out before each meal could help, if you are out with friends explain why you are doing it. Generally, people tend to judge as they do not understand the reasons or background, you never know they might also join you next time.

In conclusion, we should pray to God to just thank him for what he gives us. So, it is just like praying in general, but also, we should thank God for easy ways to even get food because thanking God for the food is essential. Also, many people in third world countries have limited food and drinking water, we should be thankful for what we have and how readily available it is to us.

Do not forget to wash the dishes with a smile, this will remind you of the amazing meal you have just had!

Rina Arjan (Jijabai Shakha, Queensbury)



कलश पूजा का महत्व

पूर्ण कलश की पूजा एक देवी या देवता के रूप में सभी हिन्दू त्यौहार एवं विवाह और संतान से संबंधित विधि में होती है। इस सन्दर्भ में धातु का बर्तन या कलश भौतिक चीजों का प्रतिनिधित्व करता है। प्रजनन क्षमता का एक प्रतिक है जो पृथ्वी और गर्भ के समान जीवन का पोषण करता है।

स्वयं या किसी के परिवार के कल्याण के लिए विशिष्ट इच्छाओं की पूर्ति के लिए कलश पूजा एक प्राचीन भारतीय साधना है।

कलश को शरीरका प्रतिनिधित्व कहा जाता है। पंच इन्द्रियों और पानी पुजा विधि के समय जीवन शक्ति को अर्पित कर देता है। कलश प्रतीकात्मक तत्त्व से श्रुष्टी का प्रतिनिधित्व करता है। खाली कलश पृथ्वी का प्रतिक है और भरा हुआ पानी उस प्राथमिक जल का प्रतिक है जहां से पृथ्वी पर जीवन शुरू हुआ था।

किसी भी विशिष्ट पूजा के दौरान कलश को पानी से साफ करके हल्दी और कुम कुम से सजा जाता है। कलश में गंगा जल भरा जाता है और सूखे मेवे, अक्षत चावल और सिक्के अर्पित किये जाते हैं। कलश के मुख को आम के पत्तों से सजाया जाता है।

यहाँ श्रुष्टि की पुजा का महत्व है।

मंगल कलश देश के वैदिक इतिहास पर आधारित है।

रागिनी वि पाटिल (मीराबाई समिति, वेम्बले)

Ragini Patil (Meerabai Shakha, Wembley)



Reasons for Conducting a Yagna

Yagna is a ritual fire sacrifice made with specific objectives.

In Hinduism, yagna means.

"A Sacrifice, devotion, worship, and offering in front of a sacred fire with Sanskrit mantras".

Yagna is a Vedic tradition and has been a part of an individual or social ritual since the Vedic times. It has deep philosophical importance which has been forgotten by worshipers and is performed more out of belief than true understanding of its significance. Agni is the Hindu god of fire and also the messenger of the Devas (gods). A yagna traditionally requires wood or cow dung and ghee to maintain the flame. Milk, rice, grains, and fruits are called havan samagari and are offered as nourishment to the fire. By the act of invoking a fire, the offerings are believed to be carried by Agni to the Devas.

The yagna can only be performed by a Brahmin, who is suitably qualified as a priest. He or she will chant sanskrit prayers and instruct the participants of the yagna to offer samagari to the fire. This offering represents one's ego and desires and are surrendered to the Agni. The Devas in return for these offerings, bestow boons and



blessings upon the participants. Once the offerings have burnt away the ash, known in sanskrit as vibhuti, is applied to the seven chakras of the body. Many people often apply it to the forehead (agna chakra), to the throat (vishuddhi chakra) and at the centre of the chest near the heart (anahata chakra). It is said that applying the vibhuti to the chakras acts to purify the body.

Conducting a yagna is also thought to make the atmosphere pure and holy and therefore many people undertake yagnas within their homes.

There are many different reasons an individual may wish to conduct a yagna. Rajasuya yagna was performed as part of the ceremonies for the consecration of a King, Ashvamedh yagna was performed by Kings to expand their empire, Putrakameshthi yagna was performed by those who desired to have a child, and Vastu yagna for occupying a new house. There are many more types of yagnas to fulfill many of one's desires. Yagna continues to play an important role in many Hindu's rites of passage, such as weddings and funerals.



Our holy scriptures state that the Rajasuya yagna had been performed by Raja Harishchandra, Lord Ram, Dharmaraja and Yudhishtira, whilst the Putrakameshti yagna was performed by Rishyashringa with King Dashratha where on the final day of the event, Agnidev (the Lord of fire), appeared himself and gave a bowl of sweet kheer as Prasadam to King Dashratha. Who in turn gave the bowl to his three queens to consume; Kaushalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi in order to conceive his sons Sri Ram, Lakshman, Bharat and Shatrughna.

There are 12 types of yagnas explained by Lord Krishna in the Bhagvad Gita: Deva yagna, Brahma yagna, Indriya yagna, Mano yagna, Atma-samyama yagna, Dravya yagna, Tapo yagna, Yoga yagna, Swadhyaya yagna, Jnana yagna, Prana yagna and Deha yagna.

Yagna is a very symbolic ritual and its performance has many interpretations. It is mentioned in numerous Hindu scriptures and has been performed for centuries. Its enduring significance is a testimony to the strength and power of Hindu beliefs.

Manishaben Joshi (Mahila Milan, Edgware)



Why are our Gods Depicted in Blue?

Scientific reason for the body turning blue is the lack of oxygen in our blood. However, the topic of discussion today is, 'Why are our gods depicted in blue?'

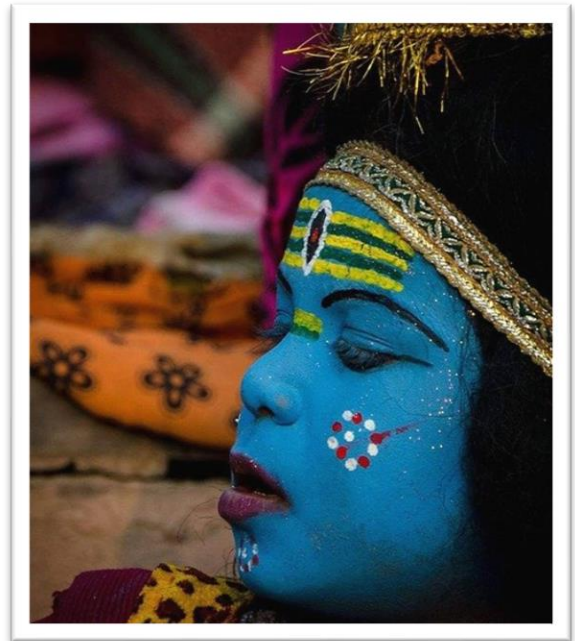
Sadguruji, of the Isha Foundation, explains the colour blue in an interesting way. He mentions that blue is the colour of all-inclusiveness and anything that is immense and unreachable is normally blue. For example, unreachable things like the full height of the sky and the depth of ocean are normally depicted blue, to signify its grandness.

Devotees with a pure mind and selfless service see their gods in blue. Hence it is believed that our gods did not have blue skin, it was their Aura that was blue.

Sadguruji explains aura as a field energy that is around every substance. Some part of the energy can be transformed into a physical form and the other part remains formless. The energy that is formless is called Aura.

People who were aware of Krishna, saw the blueness of his energy and described him as having blue skin. Krishna as an example attained his highest but chose to be active in the world therefore his aura was an electric blue. Anyone who is dynamic is depicted in the colour blue. It is this type of aura that allows us to function in the world in a way that other people think is superhuman.

Mythology also shows the colour of poison as blue that Lord Shiva drank to save the world at the start of the Samudra Manthan. The poison fed to Lord Krishna by Putna in the form of milk is also depicted as blue.



Neela Pota (Mahila Milan, Edgware)



Why are Plants and Trees Regarded as Sacred?

In Hinduism we always believe that God is everywhere, in every atom, in everything. No matter whether it is a book, the sun, the moon, the plants. We have rituals to worship trees & plants also. There are some scientific reasons behind this.

Trees and plants have always been a divine source for humankind. Our ancestors have recognized their sacredness and passed the notion down to every generation.

Some scholars believe that trees and nature in general were worshiped by early humans before that of Gods and Goddesses. This could be because certain trees had medicinal or held symbolic purposes.

Once such tree is the holy Peepal, which is the abode of ancestors and Lord Yama (Lord of Death). The Peepal tree is often planted outside the village near crematoriums and is one of the most worshipped trees in India. Also known as the Bodhi tree, the roots are said to represent Brahma, the trunk represents Vishnu and the leaves on the tree represent Shiva. Another example is the Ashoka tree which is associated with Kama Deva (God of Love) which is an evergreen that produces beautiful fragrant flowers.

Like the holy Peepal the Tulsi plant is also considered to be auspicious and its leaves are used for worshipping Lord Vishnu and his many avatars as well as medicinal properties for treating various ailments. For many generations Hindu households have been keeping a Tulsi plant in their households and often worship and care for it daily like they would a murti of God. Recent botanical research studies have uncovered that the Tulsi plant enriches the environment with oxygen for around 20hrs of a day and absorbs other pollutants from the atmosphere. Similarly, Neem leaves are also commonly used in Ayurvedic medicine for its healing properties.

The Banyan tree with its large and beautiful leaves is commonly recreated in rituals of worship. The Banyan Tree is mentioned in many ancient Indian texts and scriptures, representing the divine creator and symbolising longevity. As such, the tree and its leaves are never cut and only in the time of famine is it used for food.

Jagrutiben Patel (Meerabai Shakha, Wembley)

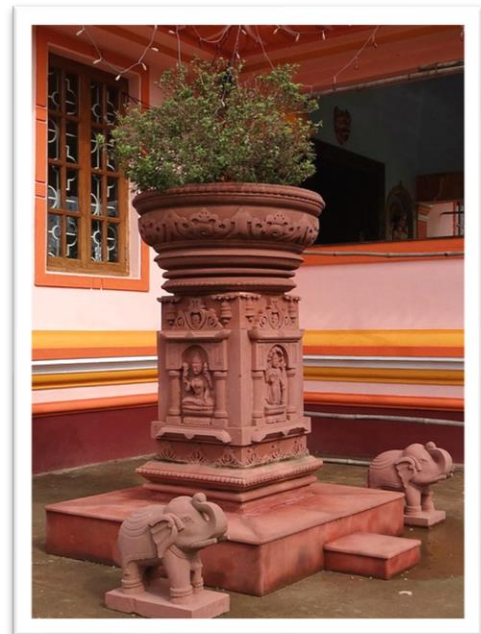


The Worship of Tulsi Plant

The Tulsi plant holds great significance within Hindu Dharma. Thought of as an Avatar of Lakshmi Mata, and also known as Vaishnavi, Tulsi is very dear to Lord Vishnu. She is the manifestation of the goddess on Earth in plant form and is considered as the holy plant for the Indian diaspora all over the world.

The name 'Tulsi' is derived from Tulasi Devi, who was an eternal consort of Shri Krishna. The plant symbolises purity, promotes longevity and happiness and hence is an integral part of almost all our Hindu ceremonies. A special Puja is performed after Diwali and Tulsi is adorned in the form of a goddess and decorated in the form of a bride.

Tulsi is rather extraordinary in comparison to just any other plant. Firstly, not all plants can be kept indoors, but Tulsi has a special place in the homes of many Hindus. The seeds, leaves, stem and even the roots and soil of the plant all have a beautiful scent. These are all considered to be holy and according to ancient beliefs, Tulsi is worshipped as the one who brings people closer to the divine form Krishna or Maha Vishnu. Using a single Tulsi leaf in the offerings to the Lord, sanctifies these offerings further. Such high value is given to the plant itself and it is even believed that placing Tulsi twigs in the funeral pyre helps the soul of the deceased attain Moksha.



Historically Hindu Dharma has held great significance for plants as they not only provide oxygen, food and shade or shelter, but medicine also. The Tulsi plant has many medicinal uses and Ayurveda recommends it for many ailments such as coughs, colds, and other viral infections, by eating a few leaves in the morning on an empty stomach.

The plant is inexpensive and humble and comes loaded with so many benefits. Not only does it retain antibiotic, anti-viral, anti-bacterial and anti-carcinogenic properties, but it is loaded with phytonutrients, essential oils, Vitamin A and C and therefore a great remedy for facilitating proper digestion and also relief from stress. From warding off some of the most common ailments, strengthening immunity, fighting bacterial & viral infections or combating and treating various hair and skin disorders, Tulsi possesses major Ayurvedic properties, adding to its numerous other attributes and values.

Hindu Dharma teaches us to see divinity in all, this includes forms of nature, whether it be mountains, rivers, or any animal down to the smallest of insects.



Plants in particular are revered as they are nature's largest processor of solar energy, and thus vital for our very existence. We worship all the elements of this nature as a matter of gratitude and are forever reminded that in their simplicity, there is divinity. Nothing in this world can exist without this energy or nature and so we must forever remain thankful to them. They are here, so we can be.

Reena Vekaria (Jijabai Shakha, Queensbury)



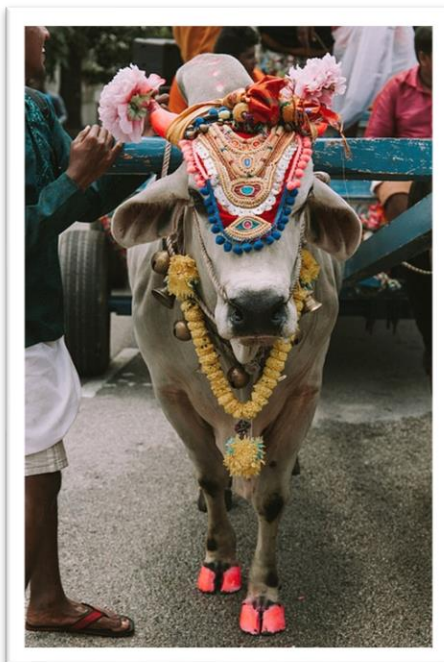
Why Cows are Considered Holy to Hindus?

In my Religious Education lessons in school I felt it really uncomfortable when we were taught Hinduism as the textbooks always depicted it as being strange and primitive, stating that Hindus pray to animals. Looking back, I have been asked this question repeatedly from the classroom, to the playground, through to college, university, the workplace, family and friends and even my own children!

I do not want my children, or any Hindu child for that matter, to go through the same feelings I went through of awkwardness, being embarrassed and ashamed because the school textbooks failed to give a satisfactory response. We should be unapologetic of our practices, as they are with deep meaning and actual scientific reasons.

In the west, the dog is considered as man's best friend. Just the thought of having to eat dog meat is inconceivable and would be considered atrocious. But on the other side of the world like China and Vietnam, eating dog meat is just as normal as eating any other form of meat. Hindus say that man's best friend is not the dog but the cow, below I outline the reasons why.

As hunter gatherers, humans used to forage and kill for food, constantly moving from one location to another to be able to secure a meal. Anthropologist state that this was the case until 10,000 years ago, thereafter the hunter gatherers had settled leading to a rise in agriculture. This change allowed humans to become civilised and society to develop and flourish to the cities we know today. One of the main contributing factor was due to the presence of the cow.



Archaeologists have discovered many primitive drawings of cows and bulls carved into stone walls and caves all over the world. Cows must have held a special place, almost revered by all of human society, for them to have been considered important enough to have their images engraved in stone.

Hinduism extends its reverence for life not just to humans, but also to the animal kingdom. The cow is revered due to her gentle nature, as unlike other animals they do not bite nor kill and she produces more milk than her calf needs, she is happy to share it with humans. For this reason they are elevated to the status of a mother, Gaumata, as we use her milk to sustain society by not only drinking it, but using it to produce yoghurt, cheese, butter, ghee, ice-cream, milk chocolate...and the list goes on.



During the winter months, she would be more than happy to feed on dry straw and still manage to produce milk.

The reverence for cows naturally developed into worship of cows during the Vedic eras, where the cows were an integral part of the ashrams and gurukuls, because her milk enabled them to produce the ghee and yoghurt which were required in day to day use for human consumption as well as for yagnas and puja. The cow dung was (and still is) used as manure to produce agricultural fertiliser, or dried to be used as fuel (even today it is used as a source of biogas to generate electricity and heat). Ayurveda has also utilised cow dung and cow urine for positive health, pharmaceutical processes and in therapeutics which has been in practice for centuries. Hindus therefore have further elevated Gaumata's status to that equal to the Divine Mother where she is depicted with different gods and goddesses residing at different parts of her body.

With science now showing the damaging effect to the planet's ecosystem with the increase in greenhouse effect, a direct cause of the industrialisation of the meat trade, and the cruelty of animals which is now prevalent in the diary trade many people have decided to become vegan.

Now armed with this knowledge, we can all do our own bit in eradicating the misconceptions that Hinduism is primitive in their reverence for the cow and realise how it is actually something to be proud about. The only drawback is that you cannot take the cow for a walk like you can a dog!

Anonymous



Reason for Applying Holy Ash

When visiting a temple, you may have seen the white ash, as three horizontal stripes, on the foreheads of priests or devotees. Or you will have seen pictures of Lord Shiva with ash on his forehead or all over his body. Have you ever wondered what this is? Or why it is done?

This ash is called *Vibhuti*, or *Bhasma*, or *Thiruneer*, but whatever name it is called, it signifies the same thing – sacred ash that is made of burnt dried wood, cow dung, milk, ghee, and other herbs. What remains after all the products have been burnt is the white, pure ash, with all the impurities burnt away. *Bhasma* means ‘that by which our sins are destroyed, and the Lord is remembered’, so the application of the ash signifies the removal of any bad or evil thoughts and the remembrance of the Lord.

One of the typical areas where the ash is applied is the forehead; the *agna* chakra (one of the seven chakras – meeting points of energy - within us). Applying the ash on one of the chakras makes them more sensitive. It is usually applied as three stripes between the eyebrows, behind which are located the pineal and pituitary glands in the brain. Applying energy to this spot can help to make you calmer and helps with beating anxiety.

Vibhuti means glory – it is believed that those who apply the ash can be protected from certain ailments, and therefore are given glory. The ash is considered to have medicinal value and can be found in many Ayurvedic medicines that help to absorb excess moisture from the body and that can help prevent colds and headaches. As such, applying the ash can increase your positive energy.

The holy ash should serve as a reminder to all Hindus of the temporary nature of our physical bodies and that the end goal is to reach spiritual attainment to bring us closer to God.

Archana Gudka (Jijabai Shakha, Queensbury)



Significance of Attending Temple for Festivals

Festivals which are celebrated at the Mandir bring the community together; an opportunity to dance, sing or partake in a pooja as one. For friends and family to meet, laugh, eat, and share stories of the ways they celebrate the said festival. All creating a light of energy and happiness on such special and meaningful days.

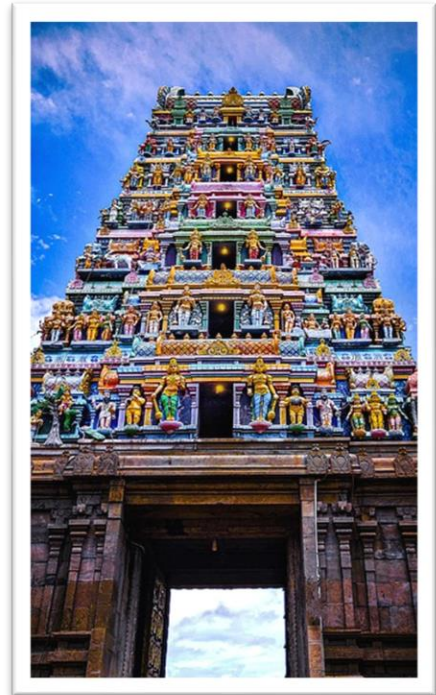
Celebrating festivals in the setting of a Mandir allows us to learn about the reason why the festival is celebrated as well as experiencing it.

Festivals act like stress relievers and help us balance our emotions and the positivity we have around us uplifts us and naturally lowers negativity. It also provides an opportunity to reduce friction and brings estranged friends and relatives together in a bond of love.

Celebrating festivals allows for elders to share stories and experiences and gives future generations the opportunity to learn, digest and continue family or religious traditions.

Those who go to the Mandir for festivals, whether for darshan or to partake in the festival activities, all leave with an overwhelming feeling of joy and bliss.

Sonya Kotecha (Jijabai Shakha, Queensbury)





The Colourful Festival of Holi

The festival of colours is celebrated in different corners of India on the full moon day in the month of Phalgun which is the month of March as per the Gregorian calendar. We may also be familiar with the legend of demon King Hiranyakashyap, his son Prahlad and sister Holika.

Have you ever thought that there could be any scientific reason behind the festivals we celebrate? Here, I intend to trace the science behind the festival of Holi.



Holi is played in the spring season which is a period between the end of winter and advent of summer. We normally go through the transition phase of winter and summer. The period induces the growth of bacteria in the atmosphere as well as in the body. When Holika is burnt, the temperature of the nearby area raises around 50-60 degrees celsius. Following the tradition when people perform Parikrama (go around the bonfire/pyre), the heat coming from the bonfire kills the bacteria in the body and cleanses it.

This is the time when people get the feeling of tardiness. This is due to the change in weather from cold to the hot in the atmosphere. To counter this laziness, people sing songs (Phag, Jogira etc.) with dhol, manjira and other traditional instruments. This helps in rejuvenating the human body.

Besides, the colours also have their own impact on the body. Biologists believe that rubbing colours on the body is a way of treating the body by colour therapy. It is said that the colour enters the pores and strengthens the ions in the body. This gives a beautiful glow to the skin. The colours used were traditionally made from natural sources like turmeric, neem, palash (tesu) etc.



So, when you next celebrate Holi, enjoy the festive spirit and the bright colours of life. Happy Holi!

Chandrikaben Gami (Mahila Milan, Edgware)



Scientific Reason Behind Fasting

Fasting is not an obligation but a moral and spiritual act where the aim is to purify the body and mind and acquire divine grace. Fasting in Hinduism is called "Upavas" (उपवास). "Upa" meaning "near" and "vas" meaning "to stay". Therefore, upvas translates to staying near to God. Fasting helps us to cultivate control over our senses and guide our minds to be poised and at peace, allowing us to focus on God. Modern science is now also beginning to understand the thousands of year-old practice of fasting and its incredible benefits for health. Hindus discovered and established the practice of fasting thousands of years ago as a way to maintain good health, lower bad cholesterol, prevent cardiovascular diseases, improve hormonal balance, alter predisposition to cancer, protect brain cells and in general increase life expectancy and quality of life.

Fasting leads to alteration in levels of certain metabolites leading to an environment that reduces the capacity of cancer cells to adopt and survive thus allowing cancer therapies to be more effective¹.

Fasting has health benefits as obesity is controlled. This in turn leads to lowering risks of diabetes and heart disease. Both Insulin levels and bad cholesterol levels can be controlled by supervised fasting.

Fasting can improve brain health. If undertaken with Pranayam (breathing exercise), it is thought to play a role in growth of new brain cells, metabolism control, weight loss and muscle strength.

Hinduism is marked by several periods of fasting. The process of detoxifying mind and body is central to the process of fasting. The most commonly observed fast is Ekadashi (11th day of lunar month) which comes twice a month on the eleventh day of each ascending and descending moon. People observing this form of fast do not eat rice, wheat, grains, and lentils on this day. Usually, fruits, milk, dairy products, and certain roots vegetables are consumed during this fast. This is also called Falahaar which means a diet of fruits.

Hindus also observe fasting in the month of Shravana, which usually falls every year in July/August. People normally eat once a day for the whole month and most of them adopt a vegetarian diet while fasting.

Fasting also has a direct effect on a person's spirituality. It relaxes the mind while cleansing the physical body. Fasting is a great time to remember the spiritual connection we have with our physical body. Without the toxins we put in our bodies, we not only give our bodies a break from the digestive process, but we also allow our spirit and soul to be detoxed. Because the body does not have to do the work of digestion, it has more energy to focus on the spiritual aspects.



As seen from the above scientific research, fasting helps prevent and cure such a diverse spectrum of conditions and the above-mentioned benefits of Hindu fasting are just some of the many that western researchers are beginning to discover. A complete analysis of modern-day research and comparison with the ancient Hindu discoveries of the health benefits of fasting might require a complete book. Suffice to say that more and more scientists are joining the research to further learn and rediscover what ancient Hindus had already learned and applied to their lives thousands of years ago.

1. Fasting and Cancer: Molecular Mechanism, Nature Review Cancer 2018 _ 18(11) 707-719

Parul Patel (Meerabai shakha, Wembley)



Insight into the Sixteen Samskaras

Samskaras are ceremonies carried out in a person's life to mark entry into different stages of life. They are carried out to purify, refine and develop the body, mind and intellect.

The sixteen samskaras are as follows:

1. Garbhadhana
2. Punasavana
3. Simantonnayana
4. Jatakarma
5. Namakaran
6. Nishkramana
7. Annaprashana
8. Choodakarma (Moondan)
9. Karnavedha
10. Upanayana
11. Vedarambha
12. Samavartana
13. Vivaah
14. Vanaprastha
15. Sanyasa
16. Antyeshti

As we all know Hinduism is a very adaptable religion and some of these samskaras are not practiced in this era. I will only be covering those that are celebrated commonly in current times.

Simantonnayana ceremony – This ceremony is carried out in the 6th or 8th month of pregnancy. Special emphasis is given on the healthy mental growth of the unborn child. This ceremony is also called Godbharai or Khoro.

Namkaran ceremony – This ceremony refers to the naming ceremony of a baby. We should take great care when naming a child so that the name will enhance both the baby's but also their parents spiritual progress. Such names could include an attribute or even a God's name. For example, calling your child Shanti may have a spiritual impact on your child to remain calm. Alternatively, by giving them a God's name, every time you call out their name you will indirectly be calling out God's name.

Choodakarma ceremony (Mundan) – This ceremony is performed at the age of either one or three years. This ceremony is related to the development of the brain. All the hair from the child's head is shaved for the first time. The significance of this is to remove bad thoughts but also has medical significance because it enables the scalp to be checked and the proper joining of the skull



bones to be seen. Modern science confirms that the skull is fully formed after three years.

Upnayana (Janai) ceremony - This is performed when the child reaches school-going age and is given three strings which are tied diagonally across his body from left shoulder. This signifies the three responsibilities that he now has, namely responsibility to his parents, responsibility to his teacher and responsibility to the higher being. In the ancient times this ceremony was carried out for both boys and girls but now it's only done for boys. So as mentioned earlier as we have an open system, we can adapt it to suit us.

Vivaah (marriage) ceremony – When we go to a Vivaah ceremony we often have no idea about the significance and meaning of what is happening, and that includes the bride and groom. We often concern ourselves more with the decorations and how we are going to dress up. During the Vivaah ceremony a fire is lit which is treated as an eternal witness to the ceremony. The four vows that we take are Dharma (being spiritual), Artha (earning a living to support the family), Kama (fulfilling legitimate desires in a controlled manner), and Moksha (search for a way out from life and death). A very good example for Artha would be how the Hindus who live in the UK have made a big contribution to the UK economy.

Anthyesthi (Death rites) – this is the last sacrament performed at death. The body is believed to be made of five physical elements, namely, earth, air, fire, water and space. Cremation returns the body to these elements.

There are 10 other samskaras mentioned in the Hindu scriptures but these have not been discussed here as they are not commonly practiced in the world today.

Anonymous



Rituals after Death as per Hinduism with Scientific Reasoning

Although there is diversity in practices, the essence of the practice of Hindu cremation is the same and constant:

- Cremation is common to the whole hindu community (cremation is less costly, quicker, environmentally friendly, takes up less land)
- All rituals are designed to help the journey of the eternal atman (commonly translated as soul). Our belief is that we are the eternal Atman. On death, it sheds the body and moves for a new journey. So our rituals are performed to help the Atman for its onward journey.
- We recognise the existence of phenomenal and cosmological forces that are important in facilitating the journey of the departing Atman.

We use a number of natural entities such as Tulsi, sandalwood, grains, herbs, flowers, water, fire and air as a means of offering to the Almighty who once resided in the body but has now left. These items are used to nullify the effects of Tamas and Rajas by means of inducing Sattva. This is accompanied by chanting mantras, using Ganga water, whilst the tejas effect of the lamp and the use of new clothes enhance the sattvic effect.

The Ashwalaayana Grihya Sutra outlines the following procedure for the final rites of cremation; the corpse is first bathed, then sandalwood paste is applied to it after which it is to be dressed in new clothes (which acts as protective sheath. This is all done with chanting of mantras, or God's name, which acts to nullify the rajas/tamas qualities of the dead body. Gangajal is poured into the mouth of the deceased after which a few tulsi leaves are placed into it. These nullify the toxins of the putrefying gases coming from the mouth.

An earthen lamp made of wheat flour with a single wick is placed with the flame facing south. Tejas waves are held for a longer time in this wheat flour lamp. It's likely that any individual entering this area will suffer distress. The tej flame of the lamp can help further restrict the rajo/ tamo predominant waves. The single lit wick is the symbol of the glow of the soul.

The two big toes are tied up-and the dead body lies supine. This is done to conjoin the left and right energy channels so as to lead the movement of residual subtle energy in the dead body and the putrefying gases can be let out through the mouth or ears. The pitcher (mud pot) is carried along with the corpse. Sound waves from the pot protects the dead body. Mantra chanting continues to aid the momentum of the soul's exit from the earthly plane.

Ten days after the funeral Pind-Dan (balls of cooked rice or wheat) is offered by the riverside near a Shiva temple. By the river bank the "Aap tatva" is at greater



intensity which is enjoyed by the soul. Aap tatva is also greater in a crow (Kakgati). The crow has an Aap sheath which joins and carries the soul and facilitates its re-entry back in the atmosphere of the earth.

The asthi (ashes) are traditionally collected on the third day after cremation once it has fully cooled down. The ashes are scattered in flowing water such as a river. Annual shraddha ceremony is performed by the surviving relatives. Mantras are recited and oblations offered to the priests, relations and friends who are invited for the feast of the wake.

There is nothing more to be done for the body on this earth, as after cremation it has become part of the great elements and the atma (soul) is without any body for a time before its rehoused into another form.

Bharati Pandit (Mahila Milan, Edgware)



The Importance of Daan in Hindu Culture

Daan is a Sanskrit word that is associated with an act of giving and is an important part of one's dharma.

It is said that the act of giving, sometimes commonly referred to as charity, should be done for the upliftment of humanity and as an expression of love for the Divine. We should be sensitive to human sufferings and social injustice and promote the benefits of social service, global togetherness, and natural respect for all humanity, irrespective of caste, creed, race, or religion; Vasudev Kutumbakam – the world is one big family.

In the Puranas, we hear stories of Karna, who is called daanveer, and we question why he has a tragic life despite being so charitable. This is because in daan, nothing is expected in return. When he donates his armour to Indra, he is left vulnerable. He does not earn merit; he earns nothing, yet he still does it. To practice daan, one has to be truly detached from possessions and have no expectation of gain from it.

The Rig Veda emphasises on the act of giving knowledge. Knowledge is something that is said to grow by sharing with others. Rig Veda says imparting knowledge is the best form of Daan.

The Bhagavad Gita urges people to act selflessly for the welfare of others: 'Strive constantly to serve the welfare of the world; by devotion to selfless work one attains to the supreme goal in life. Do your work with the welfare of others in mind' (Chapter 3. Verses 19-26).

Hindu Organisations such as HSS UK, Chinmaya Mission, ISKCON are actively involved in charitable work – amongst other daan, providing for knowledge in the form of training, talks for individual development leading to betterment of society. We see these organisations leading our local work in the current pandemic due to Covid-19 Coronavirus, there are many people going hungry, and some even lonesome. These people are going hungry because they cannot go out as they are vulnerable due to age, illnesses etc. There are also frontline workers who are at work but not able to get food as normal canteens are closed. These organisations specifically, Sewa UK have come together to cook and to deliver food to such people on a voluntary basis.

There are businesses such as restaurants and caterers, who are providing the use of their premises, donating raw materials to cook. There are people who are giving money towards buying the raw materials and then there are those who are not working currently as many workplaces are closed and they are giving their time to be part of the team that cooks the food, packs and delivers to the needy. Those lonely people who have the benefit of food delivered through this sewa also get the benefit of human interaction which is essential for their mental



wellbeing. Here you can see Daan in the form of wealth sharing in money and materials and in the form of giving your time to serve people's needs.

The very first layer of our body is the *Annamaya Kosha* (the outermost layer of the body nourished and sustained by food). Food affects the *praana* and our *praana* has an effect on our mind. The mind is the seat of knowledge and knowledge takes one to joy and bliss. So, food is responsible for our existence. Hence food is necessary for all living beings to nourish and protect the *praana*.

This is why donating food to those who do not have access to it is not just a noble deed, it is a necessity in society that won't have a return apart from the growth of all in society itself like the learning we take from the Mahabharata. Our culture recognises this and throughout generations and traditions has placed some simple guidelines to help us navigate how to donate. You can donate on your birthday, choose a day to donate food in the memory of your ancestors and many other personal ways to do this. On specific days in our Hindu calendar, we are reminded to donate food in the name of our ancestors and prepare good food and share it with everyone.

“Anna-daanam param daanam vidhya-daanam tat param”, which means that *imparting and giving knowledge to others is even higher than the act of donating food*. But at least to start with, one can always begin with donating food grains from time to time.

As we live in a progressive world where material and wealth are needed in society, we must start by protecting society to enable it to function. From my experience of Daan it must be done with a lot of love, warmth and affection with nothing expected in return. Examples in our own ancient history and today's world show that anyone can do Daan no matter what age, wealth, knowledge or location. It is our dharma to carry forward this meaning of giving.

Smita M Shah (Durga Shaka, South Harrow)



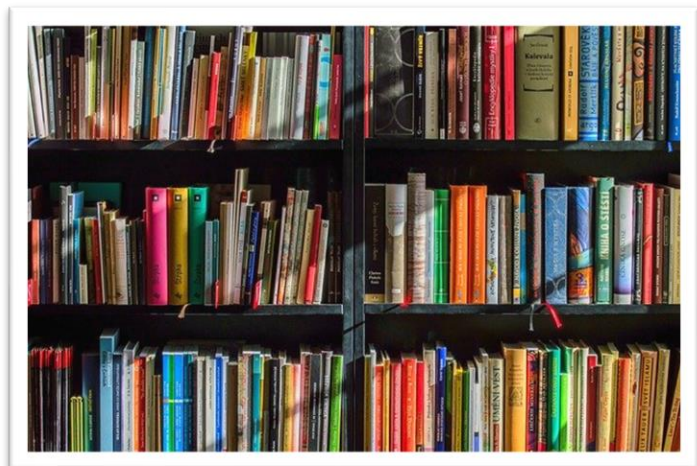
Reason We Do Not Touch Books with Our Feet

Our traditions and customs are not rocket science. They are based on simple facts. Some of which were experienced, some of which are just felt.

The Hindu culture has always regarded knowledge as sacred and divine and therefore must always be respected at all times. It is also wealth. Knowledge today is divided as sacred and secular. We get this knowledge from books. The ritual or custom of not touching any educational tools with our feet shows us the pedestal on which we put knowledge in the Indian culture. Thus, knowledge, knowledgeable people, learning tools and any source of knowledge are considered divine.

In ancient Bharat, every subject, academic or spiritual was considered divine and taught by a guru in a gurukul (school of those times). Hence a guru was considered as God and so not touched with your feet but instead a bow or a namaskar would be given.

Since our feet, though they are very important, are considered to be the dirtiest part of our body in regard to the fact that they come in contact with the ground first and so contact with dust is inevitable. The outdoors may not always be very clean as we would like it to be. Hence a great effort has to be made to avoid stepping over someone, any food, utensils, or books.



Anything that helps us live our life is considered as a deity according to the Hindu tradition and culture and we have always respected that.

A human is regarded as the most beautiful, living breathing temple of the Lord. Touching books or another human with your feet is considered the same as disrespecting the Lord within him or her. An immediate apology should be offered. Even when elders touch a younger person inadvertently with their feet, they immediately apologise. It is thus customary to refrain from touching books, papers, money, or people with your feet.

Kirti Vaidya (Durga Shakha, South Harrow)



भारतीय भोजन पद्धति में भोजन का तीखे से आरम्भ एवं अंत मीठे से करने के वैज्ञानिक कारण

प्राचीन काल से ही भारतीय भोजन पद्धति में भोजन का आरम्भ नमकीन स्वाद से तथा भोजन के पश्चात मीठा अवश्य रूप से ग्रहण करने की परम्परा रही है। घर में विशेष मिष्ठान्न न होने पर भी गुड़ आदि भोजन के साथ अवश्य परोसा जाता है। भारतीय अतिथी सेवा एक पुण्य कार्य समझा जाता है। आतिथ्य की एक मुख्य परम्परा में भोजन सर्वोपरी आता है हम अपने परिवारों में भोजन के अंत में अतिथी से मिष्ठान्न का विशेष आग्रह और मनुहार की परम्परा पिढीयों से देखते हुए आएँ हैं। हम सभी को विदित है हिंदु संस्कृति धार्मिक ही नहीं वैज्ञानिक भी है। हमारे धार्मिक नियम एवं परम्पराएँ एक वैज्ञानिक जीवन जीने का तरीका है। इसी शृंखला में भोजन का प्रारम्भ तीखे भोजन से एवं अंत मीठे से करने की परम्परा के वैज्ञानिक कारणों पर प्रकाश डालने एवं कारण और फायदे जानने का हम प्रयास करेंगे।



आयुर्वेद में इस पद्धति के सम्बंध में जो उल्लेख मिलते हैं उसके अनुसार शुरुआत में तीखा भोजन करने के बाद पेट में पाचन तत्व और अम्ल सक्रिय हो जाते हैं, जिससे पाचन तंत्र तेज हो जाता है। तीखा खाने से जठराग्नि बढ़ जाती है जिसके चलते अच्छी भूख लगती मीठे खाने में कार्बोहाइड्रेट की मात्रा ज्यादा होती है जो पाचन गति को कम कर देता है जिससे अम्ल की तीव्रता कम हो जाती है। इस वजह से पेट में जलन या एसिडिटी नहीं होती है। इसलिए पुरातन काल से ही यह प्रथा चली आ रही है, जिसे लोगों ने अपनी दिनचर्या में शामिल कर लिया है।



वहीं मीठे व्यंजन में कार्बोहाइड्रेट पाया जाता है जो पाचन प्रक्रिया को धीमी कर देता है मीठा खाने से सेरोटोनिन नाम के हॉर्मोन का स्तर बढ़ता है। हम स्वयं भी यह अनुभव करते हैं कि यदि हम तेज भूख में थोड़े मीठाई का सेवन कर ले तो हमारी भूख तुरंत समाप्त हो जाती है।

इसके अलावा यदि भारी खाना खाने के बाद आपको हाइपोग्लाइसीमिया की स्थिति से गुजरना पड़ता है तो इस स्थिति में ब्लड प्रेशर काफी कम हो जाता है। इस स्थिति से बचने के लिए खाने के बाद मीठा खाने की सलाह दी जाती है। आयुर्वेद के अनुसार खाने के बाद मीठा खाने से अम्ल की तीव्रता कम हो जाती है जिससे पेट में जलन या एसिडिटी नहीं होती है। इसलिए खाना खाने के बाद मीठा खाने से पाचन प्रक्रिया दुरुस्त रहती है।

एक अन्य महत्वपूर्ण बात यह है कि मीठे का सेवन करने से एमिनो एसिड ट्रिप्टोफैन के अवशोषण बढ़ता है। यह सेरोटोनिन लेवल बढ़ाने के लिए जाना जाता है। यह एक न्यूरोट्रांसमीटर है, जो प्रसन्नता की भावना से जुड़ा है, तत्पर्य मीठा खाने से खुशी मिलती है। यही कारण है मांगलिक प्रसन्नता के क्षणों में तथा विशेष पर्व-अवसरों पर मीठा अवश्य बनाया जाता है। पारम्परिक रूप से गुड़ की बनी हुई मिठाईयों एवं प्राकृतिक मीठे का उपयोग किया जाता है, जैसे- गुड़, मिश्री, गुलकंद। यहाँ ध्यान देने वाली बात है आयुर्वेद में कभी भी शक्कर की बनी मिठाईयों के सेवन का परामर्श नहीं दिया जाता। शक्कर सदैव स्वास्थ्य के लिये हानीकारक होती है।

अपनी परम्पराओं को गहराई से समझ हम हमारी हिंदू सभ्यता एवं संस्कृति को और भी सहजता से आत्मसात कर सकते हैं। क्योंकि हमारी परम्पराएँ एवं मान्यताएँ हमें जीवन को सही मायने एवं तरीके से जीना सिखाती है।

आईये इस परम्परा को यँ ही निभाया जाएँ, और हमेशा की तरह भोजन की हर अंतिम मनुहार में कहा जाए- “ कुछ मीठा हो जाए!”

-अंजली शर्मा तिवारी

Anjali Tiwari (Jijabai Shakha, Queensbury)



Why Should you not Sleep with your Head Towards the North?

The answer to this question lies in Vastu Shastra, an ancient Indian science of architecture. Vastu Shastra guides us using science and nature to create the optimum environment for us to live and work.

As the sun travels across the earth from east to west, it creates a constant current of thermal electricity and this magnetizes the earth. Vastu Shastra believes that our continuous contact with the Earth means we too have a magnetized body, with our legs gaining a south polarity and our heads gaining a north polarity. The magnetic north pole has a negative polarity and the basic law of magnets is that opposites attract. Therefore if we are sleeping with our heads towards the Earth's north magnetic pole then our bodies, in particular particles in our bodies, will be pulled by the Earth and this draw of energy can cause all sorts of ailments including disturbed sleep, nightmares and issues to the blood circulation to name a few.

If you are thinking about whether you sleep facing north or not, you should be aware that there are several different "north poles". Most of us will know of the geographical north pole, which is where earth's rotation axis intersects the surface. There is also a north magnetic pole which is where field lines are perpendicular to the surface and is currently located on Ellesmere Island in Northern Canada. It is the latter, the magnetic north pole, that your head should not sleep towards.

So which way should you sleep? The optimal position to sleep is with your head to the east. This is because the current of thermal electricity is constantly passing over the Earth's surface from east to west and therefore by aligning our bodies with this energy, it overpowers the inflammation in our bodies, particularly to the head.

A point to note, is that you should not sleep with your head facing North if you live in the northern hemisphere only. If you live in the southern hemisphere then you should not sleep with your head facing south.

An example of how strong the magnetic field is within nature, is bird migration. Birds migrate regularly covering thousands of kilometers, so have you ever wondered how they are repeating such long trips so accurately? They rely on the Earth's magnetic fields and scientists have found that the birds can sense the magnetic field like a compass as well as having cells in the birds' eyes that help them see the magnetic field. Bee, whales, and turtles also use the Earth's magnetic field to guide their behaviour. If the magnetic field plays such a strong part in an animal's life, then surely it can also affect the human body?

So, are there other schools of thought on sleeping directions? I read that American Indians also believed that you should not sleep facing north because they believe only the dead sleep facing north. Hindu's in Bali sleep with their



heads facing north but that is because they are situated in the southern hemisphere! Feng shui is a chinese practice and is more concerned with how your chi flows rather than the direction we sleep but it is said that feng shui prefers a southward energy.

Interestingly, whilst researching this topic, I learnt that the magnetic north pole is actually moving, and it is moving faster than it should be. The reason for its movement is the turbulence in the Earth's liquid outer core and scientists say that it will eventually flip, where the north and south poles change polarity. It has happened numerous times in Earth's past but has not happened in the last 780,000 years, so be prepared to move those beds!

Wishing you a good night's sleep!

Ahuti Shah (Jijabai Shakha, Queensbury)



Significance of Throwing Coins into a River

The practice of throwing coins into rivers exists within Hindu culture, but where does this tradition come from? I remember my first visit to India aged five, my grandmother would press a small coin into my hand and tell me to throw it into the river from the window of the car as we passed high above on a bridge. I recall asking why we do this and my grandmother said it was an offering to the river as it is considered holy.

Throwing coins into bodies of water such as wells, rivers and fountains is common in many cultures around the world and is still practiced today. Sometimes it is done to bring luck or make a wish come true and other times for love and health. There are many examples of this practice through history but is there a more scientific reason in our Hindu Dharma?

In ancient times settlements would need to be located near a water source. The water was life giving and was used for drinking as well as for providing fertile land for growing crops. Rivers are also considered as a physical manifestation of important female gods and many rivers are named after them. Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati are amongst the seven holy rivers of Hindu Dharma. They are worshiped as mata (mother); one who gives life and pujas are often undertaken at the banks of these holy rivers. So, throwing a coin into the river is akin to making daan or donation in a mandir.

A more scientific reason for this practice is that unlike modern coins of today being made of alloys, coins in past centuries were made of copper. Copper is said to purify water as it has antibacterial and antifungal properties so throwing coins in the river would help to clarify the water and make it safe for drinking.

In Ayurveda, water consumed from a copper vessel is considered good for health. It charges the water with positive ions and has the ability to balance the three doshas in our bodies (vata, kapha and pitta). Copper is an essential nutrient and together with other important nutrients such as iron ensures the correct function of the body, for example, allowing the formation of red blood cells and improving the immune system.

I find it very intriguing that this knowledge was part of our dharma before the advent of modern science and our detailed understanding of the human body. This vidya is extremely valuable and must not be lost to myth or associated with superstition. It is our responsibility to take it forward for many future generations to come.

Neelam Gandhi (Jijabai Shahka, Queensbury)



Significance of Touching our Elders Feet

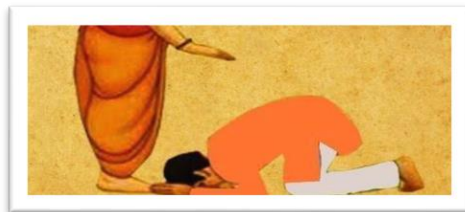
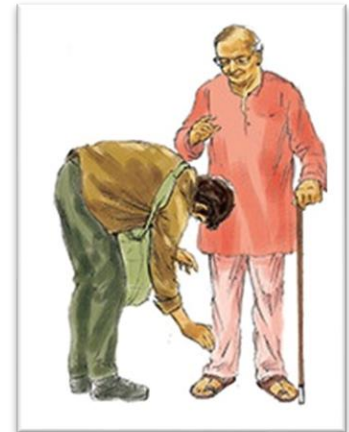
Many of our Hindu rituals are based on science. There are some scientific reasons behind touching the feet of our elders.

Our body is made up of positive energy and negative energy. The left side contains negative energy and the right side contains positive energy. When we touch our elder's feet, two halves complete a circuit of positive and negative energy.

As per science fingertips are good receivers and feet are givers. When we touch our elder's feet, we receive energy and wisdom from that person and our ego becomes suppressed. When you bow down or touch the feet of someone, that person's heart emits positive vibrations, which we receive through our hands. When we touch someone's feet cosmic energy releases, which connect each other's hearts and mind. Also, it increases our blood circulation, which is good for our health.

There are three methods of touching feet, which are also good exercise for our body.

- Leaning forward stretch your hands and touch the feet. This method stretches the waist and backbone.
- Sit on the knees & touch the feet. This method relieves the pain of knees.



- Lie down on your tummy and stretch your hands and legs. This is called Sashtang Namaskar. In this method we stretch our whole body, which cures body pain.





I am from Maharashtra in India. In Maharashtra there is a ritual that Mami (maternal uncle's wife) should touch her niece's feet even if she is older than her niece. When I was a child and going to my Mama's (maternal uncle) house, Mami was always touching my feet until I got a bit older and understood more about the ritual. I felt uncomfortable, as in my mind we should always touch our elder's feet for ashirvadh (blessings) and questioned why she did this. In India it is believed that a girl is the incarnation of a goddess. This is the reason behind this practice.

I hope the new generation will understand these reasons and carry forward all our rituals.

Neha Harpale (Meerabai Shakha, Wembley)



Significance of the Holy fire at the Hindu Wedding Ceremony

Marriage is a sacred ritual that no one tends to question. It is a harmonious bond that is made out of love, faith, and companionship. It is wise to remember the rituals one has to undertake in the Vivah (marriage) ceremony and understand their importance. Each region in India comes with its own set of local customs and each family prays to different gods or goddesses. The Hindu wedding is steeped in tradition and the rituals are important to the culture of the couples and their families. Weddings for Hindus in India are a set of complex customs and vary considerably from region to region. In most cultures a puja is held by both the bride and groom's families. The ceremony starts with Ganesh Puja. The families pray to Lord Ganesh by lighting a diya (small fire lamp) to remove obstacles from the couple's wedded life.

The need to create a sacred space has been cherished through the rites of Hindu customs. One way to honour that tradition is to have the ceremony under a four pillared canopy and a raised platform, called a mandap which represents a temple. The couple sits on thrones or pillows which are set up inside the mandap. The fire is kindled in the centre of the mandap as a witness to the sacrament. A key aspect of this Hindu ceremony is to light a sacred fire, usually created from ghee and wooden wicks to evoke the God, Agni (fire), to bear witness to the ceremony. The priest normally asks the father, brother, or uncle to create the sacred fire. This spirit of Agni is invoked to cleanse the union of all evil eyes and words and build it on purity and transparency. The fire is also regarded as a purifier and sustainer of life. It is also considered to be the prime witness of the marriage rituals.



Various ceremonies take place starting with Grahshanti, Kanyadan, Hasta Milap, exchange of garlands, wedding ceremony and finally Saptapadi. The first ceremony to take place by the sacred fire (Agni) is called Grahshanti, which is a ceremony to evoke the nine planets (Nav-graha) for peace which is performed by both families. During the wedding ceremony the bride and groom are seated next to each other in the front of the sacred fire. The priest recites various mantras from the holy scriptures. The bride and groom are joined together by tying a corner of their outer garments with a knot. It symbolises the bond of marriage. The ritual called Mangal Fera takes place when the bride and groom walk gently around the fire four times. Each fera represents four ashrams of life: praying and exchanging vows of duty, love, fidelity, and respect. The bride leads the groom around the fire three times and the groom leads the bride on the fourth round, but this varies depending on local traditions. She is now part of his life. During each



round, the couple join their hands, into which the bride's brothers pour some barley, which is offered to the fire.

This symbolises that the couple will jointly work for the welfare of the society. During this time the family and friends shower flower petals on the bride and groom.

This ceremony is then followed by Sindoor, Mangal Sutra and finally Saptapadi (seven sacred vows). The bride and groom take seven symbolic steps together while touching a stone or betel nut on the floor with their right foot. They reiterate the

aspirations of their married life as each step signifies a specific promise that the couple make to each other, which are as follows:

First step - To respect and honour each other.

Second step - To share each other's joy and sorrow.

Third step - To trust and be loyal to each other.

Fourth step - To cultivate appreciation for knowledge, values, sacrifice, and service.

Fifth step - To appreciate purity of emotions, love family duties and spiritual growth.

Sixth step - To follow principles of Dharma.

Seventh step - To nurture an eternal bond of friendship and love.

In some local customs this ceremony is also performed in front of the holy fire who acts as a witness to these vows. On completion of this ritual the marriage is concluded, and the couple seeks blessings from elders of the families.

Ranjanben Mistry (Mahila Milan, Edgware)



The Application of Haldi

24k Gold Vanilla Turmeric Latte! When I first heard this, I said “you mean haldiwala dudh, right”. But this is the western world, where, when people wake up to Eastern treasures, they prefer to give them a different format. So, what is the craze about this trendy pot of gold?

There are several scientific reasons behind the ritualistic application of haldi, a word derived from the Sanskrit word ‘haridra’. The name turmeric comes from the Latin word *terra merita* (meritorious earth, the colour resembling a mineral pigment).

India is the largest producer of this turmeric crop, the rhizomes of which are boiled/steamed and dried before any final processing for its various uses. The ground powder, haldi is used in most Indian cooking and of course at a wedding ritual too. The pre-wedding haldi ceremony (also known as pithi) is a ritual where the paste (made of haldi, water, oil/rose water/milk) is applied to both the bride and groom. Besides working as an effective exfoliating agent, leaving the skin fair and glowing, it also boosts the body’s immunity. From memory, I have only been to two ceremonies where I had to apply the paste to someone. It does not seem as popular here as in India.



The use of haldi dates back nearly 4000 years to the Vedic culture in India, where under the Ayurvedic system, it has a long history of medicinal use. The main component of the root is a volatile oil, containing turmerone and there are other colouring agents called curcuminoids, which consist of curcumin, demethoxycurcumin, methoxycurcumin, and dihydrocurcumin and(before you all fall asleep) so on and so forth. Its strong antioxidant properties can help control aging by protecting cells from damage and can calm the skin from acne scarring. I am sure a lot of Indian women use it as a face mask as do I, very irregularly though; so, my glowing skin only lasts for a day! Haldi is an anti-inflammatory powerhouse and a natural antiseptic. Topical application heals wounds, stops pain and swelling and treats many skin diseases. Its oil has external antibiotic properties to heal wound infections and its anti-fungal activity may be used orally or topically.



The anti-cancer activity of a turmeric extract may inhibit the rapid multiplication of cancer cells. In some studies, haldi has been reported to have protective qualities against the development of skin, breast, oral and stomach cancers. The anti-arthritic effects of haldi exhibited activity against joint inflammation. More research is needed to fully prove its benefits, but anecdotal evidence points toward positive outcomes in some cases.

Recently I was watching “Manacs in Mumbai” on TV and the three brothers featured attended a Golden Festival in Jejuri, outside of Mumbai. It was all to do with being blessed by haldi and showering each other with it, almost like Holi. If there is anyone out there with more knowledge about this, I for one, would love to hear about it.

I end with my final words “Who would not wish to have a bit of haldi in their lives?”.

Naina Shah (Jijabai Shakha, Queensbury)



Explaining the use of Mehndi

Mehndi (*Lawsonia inermis*) is a small tropical shrub, whose leaves when dried and ground into a paste, give out a rusty-red pigment suitable for making intricate designs on the palms and feet. The name is derived from the Sanskrit word *mendhika*. The dye has a cooling property and no side effects on the skin. Mehndi is extremely suitable for creating intricate patterns on various parts of the body, and a painless alternative to permanent tattoos. Mehndi is a paste associated with positive spirits and good luck.

The exact origin of Mehndi is generally unclear. As the use of Mehndi spread, its application methods and designs became more sophisticated. It is believed to have been in use as a cosmetic for the last 5000 years. In the 17th century in India, the barber's wife was usually employed for applying mehndi on women. Most women from that time in India are depicted with their hands and feet decorated with Mehndi, regardless of social class or marital status.

Mehndi also holds medicinal properties as per the Indian vedics. It is said that when Mehndi is applied to both the hands and the feet of brides, it will cool down their bodies, prevent the nerves from tensing up and help them to relieve the stress before the wedding day madness begins. This proves that the ritual of applying bridal mehndi before the wedding day holds a lot of significance as per the Indian culture.



The Mehndi ceremony holds a deep-rooted cultural significance in Indian Weddings. It is one of the oldest customs that take place at Indian weddings. The ritual of applying Mehndi on the hands of a bride-to-be is considered as *shagun* (a token of good luck) as per the Indian wedding culture. It is a common belief that an Indian bride's *shola-singhar* (16 bridal ornaments) is incomplete without applying Mehndi before her wedding day. Even as per some of the Asian wedding customs, grooms also need to apply mehndi on their hands for the wedding. The Mehndi ceremony is a way of wishing the bride good health and prosperity as she makes her journey on to marriage. In some instances, the ceremony is organised by the Bride's family bringing together the female components of each side. While Mehndi is mainly for females, male relatives are invited to join in on the party that comes after the Bride has completed her Mehndi.



After washing off the mehndi, the remaining colour should continue to darken which is why folklore dictates that it represents the deepening bond of love and affection between the bride and groom. Hence it is believed that the darker the Mehndi colour becomes, the more auspicious it is for the bride and groom. It is common practice for brides to hide their groom's names in between the Mehndi design, which develops into a fun traditional game where the groom finds their name hidden on the palms of their brides (it is said that the quicker they find the hidden name the more they will love their brides).

The Mehndi designs of the bride traditionally include aspects of the Indian wedding rituals such as the baraat with dhol and baja (arrival of the groom), the Varmala (bride's and groom's garlands), the palki/doli designs (arrival of bride) and more recently even the images of the bride and groom!

The application of Mehndi is not only limited to the wedding, married ladies also apply Mehndi at post-wedding festivals as well, such as karva chauth and teej. Along with the medicinal benefits of its application, Indian folklore considers it as a sign of positivity and the bringing of prosperity to the married couple's life, strengthening the bond between them.

Hinaben Thakrar (Shakti Shakha, Finchley)



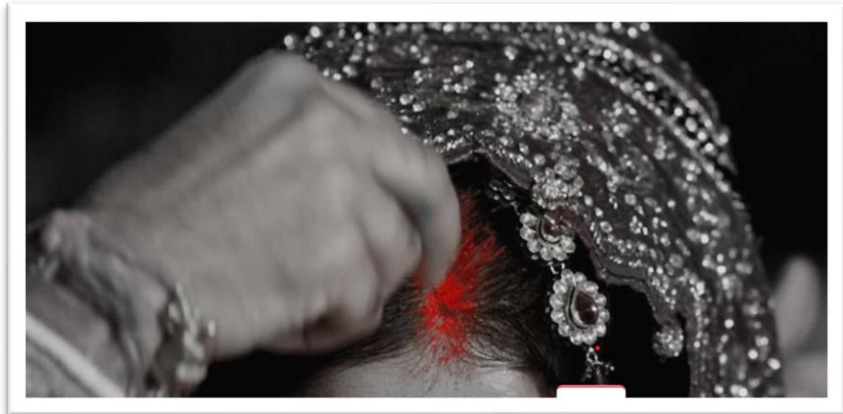
Why do Married Women Apply Sindoor?

Sindoor or Vermillion is a traditional red coloured cosmetic powder from the Indian subcontinent, usually worn by married women along the parting of their hair.

In Hindu communities the use of Sindoor indicates a woman is married. It is first put on a woman by her husband on the day of her wedding called the Sindoor Daanam ceremony and becomes a daily ritual for many thereafter. Sindoor is also made from red sandal powder, saffron etc. The colour red signifies strength, blood and fire.

The tradition of wearing Sindoor is more than 5,000 years old signifying a woman's desire for her husband's long life and prosperity. It is considered a sign of her never dying love and devotion towards her better half. Single women wear the Bindi in different colours but do not apply Sindoor in their parting of the hairline. Widows do not wear Sindoor, signifying that their husband is no longer alive. Sindoor is also

a symbol of the female energy of Pravati & Sati. Maa Parvati also applied Sindoor and shared her sacred sentiments on marriage and Sindoor with her women folks. Sita from Ramayan also used to apply Sindoor to please Lord Rama.



Women have adopted different ways of wearing Sindoor either at the beginning, along the parting line or as a red spot on the forehead. Recently, a triangle shape on the forehead pointing towards the nose, with a diamond Bindi for fashion, is being worn by younger women.

Sindoor is made of vermilion which is of a red-orange tint. Prior to this however, it was made using more natural resources like turmeric lime and mercury. Mercury controls blood pressure and relieves stress. A safer version of Sindoor which includes a mixture of turmeric powder, sandalwood powder and saffron is used today.

Jyotika (Jijabai Shakha, Queensbury)



The Importance of a Mangal Sutra

The word Mangal means auspicious and sutra means thread and together it means an auspicious thread uniting the souls. The groom ties the auspicious thread around the bride's neck on the day of their holy nuptial as significant that their relationship would be as auspicious as the thread. A typical mangalsutra has two strings of black beads and a pendant. The two black strings in the Mangalsutra symbolise Shakti and Shiva. Tradition says that it protects the marriage of the couple and gives immense power to a lady and repels the evil eye.



The origin of Mangalsutra as a sign of married women dates back to the 6th century A.D. The culture of significance of Mangalsutra is believed to have started in South India and was adopted by Northern States and gradually it also started to change in shape and pattern too, but gold has always been essential. This is because gold has a number of healing properties, the most being improved heart health. Ayurveda reveals that wearing a Mangalsutra close to your heart attracts cosmic waves from surroundings and aids heart functioning. It is also considered that these waves help in maintaining a healthy relationship between the husband and wife. Wearing a Mangalsutra helps in development of the immune system, regulates blood flow, and keeps her fresh and energetic and also regulates blood pressure.

Nowadays wearing Mangalsutra is not mandatory for many reasons. Some ladies choose to have big and heavy ones which are either not practical or not allowed to be worn at work. Some modern brides choose designer ones which go with their outfits, not very heavy yet concomitant with the event.

However, Mangalsutra is no way to guarantee a happy married life but we ladies have to be strong, intelligent and full of Shakti to carry our married lives for the betterment of us and the family and the society we live in.

Vijya Shah (Mahila Milan, Edgware)

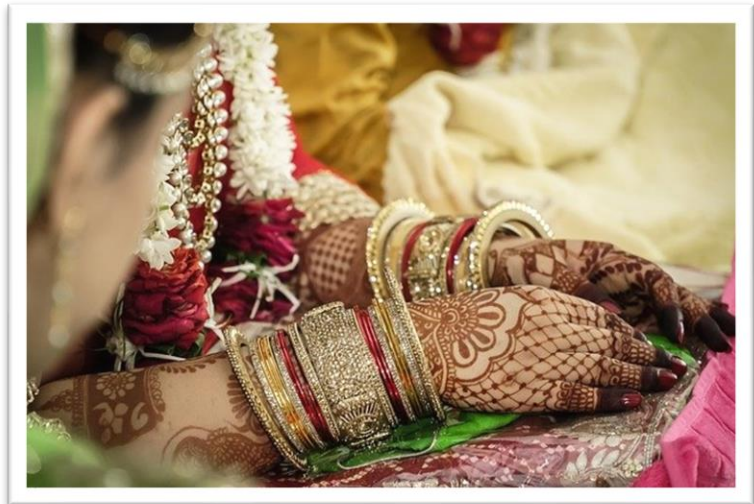


Reason Hindu Women Wear Bangles

A bangle is made from a range of materials such as gold, silver, copper, ivory, plastic, and glass, and traditionally worn on the wrists. There is no beginning or end to a bangle which represents eternity. Bangles are also a symbol of prosperity, health, and wealth. Bangles have an ancient history in the Hindu culture and can be seen on the arms of gods and goddesses such as Lakshmi, Sita and Parvati. Ancient examples of bangles have been uncovered throughout India highlighting the deep history. According to traditional ayurvedic belief, bangles have a health benefit in that they stimulate the nerves in your wrists which helps with blood circulation.

It is traditional and auspicious for married women to wear red and gold bangles and they form an important part of the bride's wedding attire. You will also see many unmarried women and girls wearing colourful bangles. Whilst bangles are symbolic and carry a lot of meaning, they are also considered to be a fun part of dressing up for special occasions such as weddings and festivals.

The different colours of bangles worn by women represent different things. Red signifies energy and prosperity, green represents luck and fertility, yellow for happiness, white for new beginnings and orange for success. Gold bangles symbolise fortune and prosperity and silver denote new beginnings.



Lata Bhudia (Jijabai Shakha, Queensbury)



Reason Behind Toran Decoration

Toran is an ornamental and decorative door hanging set at the entrance of a building. They are often used to decorate the main entrance of a home. Traditionally they are made of fresh green leaves which filter the air; mango leaves are believed to add more elegance to the decoration and marigold flowers act as a natural insect-repellent as its fragrance keeps mosquitoes and bugs away. Therefore, Toran made with mango leaves and marigold are tied on the entrance door as a part of traditional Hindu culture. The Toran also has other decorative features depending on the different regions of India.

Torans of today are available in lively colours, printed and dyed on fabrics, embroidery, beads work, Zardosi (metallic thread) work, Crystal work, Satin ribbon, woollen and tissue etc.



The word Toran stems from the Sanskrit word 'Torana' which loosely translates to 'pass'. The origin of Torans can be traced in Puranas. The earliest Torans were used in Buddhist architecture and refers to a sacred gateway. According to the Vedic text, the gateway of different forms was to adorn the entrance to a village or a palace.

According to a legend, there was a demon whose name was Toran, who stood at the gate of a city to guard it. He did not let Gods enter the city. He also put obstacles in marriages and other auspicious activities. Only after killing him, the Gods were able to enter the city easily. Since then the ritual known as "Toran Maarnaa" by the bride groom is symbolic of killing the demon Toran.

Toran Puja, which is popularly known as a 'Toran Maarnaa' is an important ritual of the Hindu marriage, particularly in Rajasthan and in some other adjoining states. The mother of the bride welcomes the bridegroom at the gate. Puja of the Toran is performed and after the puja the bridegroom touches the Toran with a stick or a sword.

Culturally, Torans are used to attract the Indian Goddess Lakshmi, (Goddess of wealth and money). Hence the decoration at the entrance of a home, which is called *dwaar*, is important in this regard. Torans are the first thing that welcomes guests as they step into a home. Therefore, the Torans not only enhance the charm of the main entrance but also gives a friendly welcome.

Anonymous



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