

**Book Review of the Vedic wedding , “Origins , traditions and practice”
by Dr. A V Srinivasan.**

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Reviewed by Kosla Vepa Ph.D

On many an occasion, like other Americans of Indic origin I found myself in search of a text on the subject of Hindu weddings, which not only explained the various steps in the ceremony but gave the rationale in a clearly intelligible manner, for these steps in the marriage. I found the pickings slim especially when I was looking for a text which was tuned towards audiences in North America. But I am not the one to give up easily, I mentioned the fact that I was looking for such a text to Dr. A V Srinivasan who also happened to be the manager I reported to several years ago when I was working for Pratt and Whitney. It turned out that he had just completed the manuscript for a book on the topic and to cut a long story short I offered to review it in my website.

Needless to say, the effort has proved to be a delight. . It is quite obvious that the book is a labor of love, all the more so since the author has performed numerous Hindu weddings all across the United States.

The book is 227 pages long , and consists of 5 chapters, 6 appendices , a bibliography, a glossary of commonly used Sanskrit terms and a page describing the Devanagari alphabet with the associated transliteration scheme that is used in the book. The font size is easy on the eyes and the book is profusely illustrated both with photographs and artistically rendered illustrations on almost every page. The reference value of the book is immensely enhanced by including all the mantras used in a typical wedding, both in Devanagari (the customary script for the Sanskrit language , the language in which the mantras are chanted) . Of course the real value of the book lies in its semantic and literary content, and we therefore give a synopsis of these contents.

The introduction describes the personal viewpoint of the author regarding the concept of Wedding and marriage in a Hindu setting and stems from the numerous marriages he has performed over the years. He has been particularly successful in blending the requirements of both faiths when the husband and wife come from different religious backgrounds. The author emphasizes that the Hindu wife , who is usually referred to as a Dharmapatni (**meaning one who is strong in helping the husband uphold cultural, religious, and righteous principles which are the integral basis of a spiritually centred society.**) plays a special role , in a monogamous life long relationship. Such a role is far from the subservient one usually portrayed in the Western media and is exemplified by the blessing of the priest during the saptapadi

साम्राज्नी श्वशुरेभव । साम्राज्नी श्वश्रुवांभव ।

ननंदारि नामराज्नीभव । साम्राज्नी आदिदेवेषु ।

saamraajnl shvashurEbhava, saamraajnl shvashruvaaMbhava,
nanaMdaari naamraajnlbhava, saamraajnl adhidEvraShu

Be queenly with your father-in-law, Be queenly with your mother-in-law, Be queenly with his sisters, Be queenly with his brothers .

The Vedic emphasis on friendship, as explained by the author, recognizes that a sustained relationship in a marriage transcends and complements the sensual relationship.

In Chapter II , the author elaborates on the central theme of the Hindu marriage, namely that of friendship and of a harmonious companionship

The author describes the incident in the Yaksha Prasna () where the Yaksha asked Yudhishtira "*kimsvin mitram grihesatah?*" i.e. Who is the friend of a householder? To which the prince answered "*bhaaryaa mitram grihesatah*" i.e. the friend of a householder is his spouse. In another question the Yaksha asks Yudhishtira:

किंस्विद् दैव कुतः सख

kiMsvid daiva kRutaH sakhA

Who is man's god-given friend?

Yudhishtira's answer was:

भार्या दैव कुतः सख

bhaaryaa daivakRutaH sakhA

To repeat, the emphasis on friendship according to the author, fulfills a fundamental human need for companionship and intimacy. In fact, the defining moment of the Hindu wedding, the seventh step of the Saptapadi concludes appropriately with the following sloka, which merely emphasizes the central role of friendship in a DhArmic marriage.

सखासप्तपदि भव सख्यं ते गमेयळ

सख्यं ते मयोषः सख्यं ते मायोष्ठः

**sakhaa sapta padl bhava sakhyaM tE gamEyaM sakhyaM tE mAyOshaH
sakhyaM tE mAyOshTaH**

With these seven steps you have become my friend.

May I deserve your friendship,

May my friendship make me one with you.

I regard this chapter as key to the understanding of the basis of a Hindu marriage and should be prescribed reading for every couple embarking on the path of matrimony.

Chapter III is a fairly long chapter on the rituals and the Vedic Origins of the Hindu wedding and is extremely useful as a reference. It is astonishing that in such a vast area as the Indian subcontinent there should be such uniformity of practice despite differences in language geography and climate, and underscores the vast importance that Sanskrit plays in the lives of the ordinary Indic today. The Vedas remain the source of much of the ritual in practice today in India. This is all the more remarkable since the Vedas are at least 7000 years old if one dates back to an age where they were first composed orally by the great rishis of the ancient world. The transmission of these verses was part of the so called 'Srautic Parampara' a listening and chanting tradition, as opposed to a 'likhita Parampara' one based on a script which came much later around 1500BCE.

The Sutra (aphorism) was the common mode of literary transmission among the ancients and in this particular instance the rituals are described in the Ashvalayana Grihya Sutra. The use of Sutras was necessitated due to a lack of writing materials and possible absence of standardization of a script, during the millennia in question

The Ability to conceive and keep up with a technique of documentation called Sutras is surely a technological and linguistic marvel of high order. Sutras are compilation of major works where very few words are used. (If it's not readily interpreted without proper background needed for the subject, Sutras may seem confusing.) Some of the Famous

sutras are

- (*) Yoga Sutra - Patanjali.
- (*) Brahma Sutra - Baadaarayana.
- (*) Bhakti Sutra - Naradha.
- (*) Kama Sutra - Vatsyayana.
- (*) Neethi Sutras - Chanakya.
- (*) Sulva Sutras [Apastambha (among others)]

Here is the definition of a Sutra.

*alpaaksharam asandigdham saaravath vishvatho mukham,
asathobham anavadhyam cha sutram sutravidho viduh.*

Those who know the definition of a sutra define it as possessing the following qualities..

Alpa aksharam = With bare minimum (use of) alphabets.

Asannigdham = Free from doubts and ambiguities; clear and accurate.

Saravad = like the essence; devoid of unnecessary pulp.

Viswatho mukham = Universal; applicable anywhere and everywhere.

[Not limited by time, space, cultures etc.]

Asathobham = Shining, Illuminating, highlighting the point at hand, never diminishing in radiance/value.

Anavadyam = Without any bugs, errors, mistakes or shortcomings; perfect.

(I am indebted to my friend Sunder for the explanation above)

I will not go into the details of Chapter III (or even the subsequent chapters) except to say that this is a very comprehensive treatment of the topic.

Chapter IV discusses variations in the basic theme in different parts of the subcontinent. Again one is struck by the underlying unity of the central themes of the Hindu wedding among all the local variations.

Chapter V is the crux of the book and describes the actual wedding

ceremony in detail.

The Appendices contain much needed information and tools essential for the planning of any wedding.

Altogether this is a very comprehensive text on a subject of great interest to a lot of people who have little knowledge of the same. It has proven to be a very useful reference in our own personal situation, where many questions of substance and etiquette have arisen and continue to crop up during the planning process for the wedding.

I feel this book should be a part of the library of every family interested in Hindu customs and SamskAras.