

Customs and Rituals in Hindu Dharma

What is the definition of a Hindu : Aa sindho: sinduparyantham yasya bhaaratha bhoomikaa maathru bhoo: pithru bhoo (punya) schaiva sa vai Hindu iti smruthaa: whomsoever, is considering the land between the sapta sindu (Indus valley river) upto Indian ocean as the motherland/ fatherland and holy land, is known as Hindu. This land is known as Hindustanam which is defined as follows: Himaalayam samaarabhya yaavath hindu sarovaram tham deva nirmitham desam hindustaanam prachakshate. The land created by god himself and which is lying between Himalayas and Indian ocean is known as Hindustanam .

Unlike other religions, Hindu dharma has many specialties. This is not known as a religion, it is known as the dharma. Either Hindu dharma or sanaathana dharama. Sanaathana means according to bhagavath geetha, which cannot be destroyed by fire, weapons, water, air, and which is present in all living and non living being. Dharma means, the way of life which is the 'total of all aacharaasas or customs and rituals'. The aacharaas which are to be performed by the mother is known as mathru dharma, those of father is known as pitru dharma. Similarly there are putra dharma (dharma of son) aacharya dharma (dharma of teacher), as a continuation we can say bhraathru (brother) dharma, bhagini (sister) dharma, poura (citizen) dharma, raja (king) dharma and so on. All these dharmas have been described in detail giving the specific importance in the dharma saastra and smruthies. There is no specific English word for dharma, but it is the sum of the duties + responsibilities + privileges of that individual. Then what is the sanaathana/ Hindu dharma ? It is the total of mathru dharma + pitru dharma + putra dharma + putree dharma + acharya dharma + poura dharma + ...+...etc. Hence we say Hinduism is not a religion but the way of life.

One should always remember that in each and every aacharaas / dharma there will be a component of spirituality in it. Without spirituality, nothing exists in Hindu dharma. Almost everyone carries a wrong impression that this spirituality is religion. No ! spirituality is different in Hindu dharma, where the question a religion does not exist at all, because Hindu dharma was not created by one individual/prophet/incarnation/.... Hence it is not a religion. Spirituality is a part of every Hindu custom in the life of a Hindu.

What are the rules to be followed while practicing the Hindu customs and rituals (aacharaas) ?. This question has to be scientifically analyzed. Whatever may the aacharaas we are practicing in our life, it has been told that saakshaath anubhavairdhrushto na srutho na guru darsitha lokaanaam upakaaraaya ethath sarvam pradarsitham. Aacharaas are to be followed based on their merits available from the self experience, one need not blindly follow a teacher or someone who gives advise without reasoning. All these aacharaas are mentioned for the prosperity of the human beings and it should be the prime focus for practicing the Hindu aacharaas.

Aacharyaath paadam aadatthe paadam sishya swamedhayaa paadam sa brahmachaaribhya sesham kaala kramena cha is another important advice given in smruthies. It means one can get one quarter of the knowledge from the teacher, one quarter by analyzing oneself, one quarter by discussing with others and the last quarter one can get during the process of living by the method addition, deletion, correction and modification of already known aacharaas/ new aacharaas.

It is mentioned that we have to take one quarter from the teacher/ guru. Now, what is the definition of a guru or teacher. Aachinothi cha saastrarthaan sishyaan saadhayate sudhee swayam aacharti chaiva sa aacharya iti smruthaa: who is knowing the scientific meaning of the purpose of the aacharaas, who can teach the student very systematically and who is following (all what is taught to the students) in ones own life, that person is fit to be called as the teacher/guru. Here, one can see the qualification of a teacher who can define and explain about the aacharaas.

Can we practice the aacharaas at all times with the same level of devotion ? This is a common question asked. The answer is also given in our smruthies. Swagraame poornam aacharaasasm anya graame thadardhakam pattane tu thath paadam yaatre baalaad aacharaasastheth. In one's own village, practice all the aacharaas, in other villages (while travelling or staying) practice one half of the aacharaas, in the cities/ towns follow atleast a minimum of one quarter of them and while traveling, like a child one need not practice any of the aacharaas.

Should we practice the aacharaas blindly saying that those aacharaas were followed by my father or forefathers.? Thaathasya koopoyam iti bruvaana kaa purusha kshaarajalam pibathi. Saying that this well was dug by my father (and for showing respect to him) one need not drink the salt water (if it is present) in the well.

Aacharaas need not be the same in Kerala and Kashmir, similarly for a Hindu the same customs cannot be practiced in America and Rajasthan desert. Hence depending upon the place , time, season, age, availability of the materials, financial position of the individuals, the aacharaas can be duly modified.

The same principles one can see in bhagavath geetha also. Lord Krishna told Arjuna in the end of Bhagavath geetha, that vimrusya ethath aseshena yathaa icchasi thathaa kuru: Hey Arjuna all those whatever I have told you, critically analyze, and the option for accepting or rejecting is yours.

These are the rules one should follow while analyzing and practicing the aacharaas in Hindu dharma. There are many words of guidance given in dharma saastra book. Saastram pramaanam : scientific results are the first basis, aapta vaakyam pramaanam : guidance to be taken from the scholars is the (next) basis, prathyaksham pramaanam : the direct experience is the next basis, anumaanam pramaanam guessing the consequences/results, if none of the above parameters is available. These are the steps one should select for the analyses of the aacharaas.

What are the purposes of practicing the aacharaas ? It has been described in the smruthies (which are also known as dharmasastras) : aacharaath labhathehyaayu: aacharaath dhanamakshayam aacharaath labhathesuprajaa aacharo ahanthya lakshanam . By following the aacharaas one gets health and longevity, it leads to prosperity, it gives social relations and friends, and the followers of aacharas are considered as the embodiment of nobility. Aacharaa heenam na punanthu vedaa: The person who does not have the habit of practicing the good aacharaas, cannot even be purified by Vedas.

What are the aacharaas ? those customs and rituals which are irrelevant in the modern times are known as anaacharaas, those which leads to negatives/ non deleterious results are known as duraacharaas and those aacharaas which give very positive and useful results are known as sadaacharaas or generally known as aacharaas.

The sadaacharaas are followed for any one or more of the following purposes in the Hindu dharma. The aacharaas are those give psychological, physiological, family relation and bondage, social relations and bondage and national integration based positive results. Focusing on the above five points one can analyze very systematically all these aacharaas.

Psychologically beneficial aacharaas/ customs and rituals: Few examples are selected for explaining these type of aacharaas The morning and evening prayer, the positive songs and keerthans, the Vedic mantras which produce psycho linguistic and neuro linguistic effects, etc are psychologically useful aacharaas. They give extremely good response in the brain cells by way of producing curative hormones. The blessings of the elders and parents, the encouragement given to the children and also to those who are desperately struggling in the life, the words of consolation, the blessings like vijayee bhava, the aacharaas in social gathering and family functions, etc give psychologically positive results. (I wish you will remember that all these aacharaas are also spiritually connected, is the Hindu way)

More examples: Reading a puraana gives the messages of ups and downs/ failures and success/ pains and pleasures in the life. The stories of Sri

Rama in Ramayana and that of Pandavas in Mahabharatha inform us that there are sufferings in the life and everyone should face them boldly. Reading Bhagavath geetha is for mentally preparing to face any type of consequences and without failure practicing the swadharama (ones own duty). Through puranic story telling for the children , value based messages are given in the form of story capsules to remain in the memory for many years and to get the reminder whenever the abnormal pathway is opted to in their life. Visiting elders on festive occasions is for getting value and experience based advice from their life. Respecting teachers and elders, is for keeping the values in one's life and in society for the learned people who continue to guide the society. Auspicious time selection for visits and performing ceremonies, is to take extra mental precaution to see that everything is carefully / systematically programmed and planned . Consulting a good astrologer is to see that things are meticulously planned and the blessings of the Vedic devathas are assured for an optimism in ones endeavor (however this should not go to the level of superstition and should be carefully monitored). Performing pooja is mainly to see that good will come if good is practiced . And to give the feeling that rest is left to the divine mercy/ blessings. This blessing is directly assured (at least we feel so) by conducting poojas in presence of family and relatives (hence gives an opportunity for the family members to come together also). Worshiping the idols/ images having smiling faces (prasanna vadanam) gives a psychological positive feeling of confidence (avoid the worship of weeping/ bleeding/ cruel images as it gives a negative influence in the mind). Chant positive manthra/ keerthan/ bhajan for positive effect (neurolinguistic and psycholinguistic) and never chant crying or weeping songs which also influence the mind negatively

Physiologically beneficial customs and rituals. You can also analyze these customs and rituals yourself on the scientific base. The soorya namaskaara / sun salutation performed in the morning is a combination of 7 yogaasanaas practiced in ten steps, which give smooth exercise for all the movable skeletal joints in the body and hence this is also known as ' the king of the exercises'. Morning prayer karaagre vasathe lakshmi karamadhye saraswathi karamoole sthithaa gouri prabhaathe karadarsanam: Sitting in the same bed where you sleep everyday, without cleaning the teeth-face-body, why this manthra is chanted, because the body was horizontal for the whole night while sleeping and it is going to become vertical (suddenly) when you get up. In the vertical position of the body the force exerted by the heart for pumping the blood is more, hence the change of position of the body from horizontal to vertical level should be slow and steady. Hence we are instructed to sit on the bed for few seconds (it has been statistically estimated that 23% of the heart attack deaths take place in the heart patients when they suddenly get up and stand/walk from the lying position). Similarly with a mantra we touch the floor samudra vasane devi parvatha sthana mandale Vishnu patnee namasthubhyam paada sparsam kshamasva me. The bio static electricity in the body gets earthed through the fingers instead of the feet, reducing the chance of arthritis and many other nervous based disorders. Before taking the food, few second prayer is a Hindu aacharaas. during this prayer time and while looking to the food the flow of saliva in the mouth takes place and this liquid activates the generation of other digestive enzymes also, thus activating the process of digestion (a layer of saliva and digestive enzymes in the bottom of the stomach before the food comes to the stomach is a biochemistry). Fasting leads to cleaning of the intestine, certain fasting (partial) in which change of food is instructed in the custom, which leads to getting variety of micro nutrients from different types of food sources. Choodaakarna the ceremony connected with wearing of the ear ring is just like giving the first vaccination and annaprasana the first food giving ceremony is like the first inoculation to the baby through the hands of different people (the ear ring in the former and food in the latter carries little dirt/germs which leads to augmenting the immunity in the body of the baby). These are only very few among thousands of aacharaas practiced by Hindus, for physiological benefit

More examples: Do not keep the direction of the head towards north because the magnetic meridian of the earth retards the blood flow through brain capillaries and affect the functioning of brain cells. Avoid taking bed coffee to prevent the obnoxious decomposed materials generated by microorganism in the mouth (in the night) going to the stomach to avoid the chance of stomach cancer. Wake up early morning, because the brain is perfectly active during that time. Take a bath in the morning itself so that all the decomposed products/ salts/ urea etc present on the surface of the body gets cleaned which prevents the skin diseases significantly. The cold water/ hot water bath activates the biological process of the body cells to maintain the body temperature when cold/ hot water bath is taken. Dhyaana / meditation activates brain cells. Praanaayaama activates the lungs cells and functioning. Taking thulasi water/ theertha gives the medicinal property of the plant in it. Using sandal wood paste in the forehead gives the chance of absorbing the medicinal components in the chandan through the most sensitive part of the body. Visiting a temple (in Hindu worship, the temples are not merely prayer halls, they are quantum healing centers) gives energy to the body if pancha suddhee is maintained. Doing pradakshina to aswatha gives an atmosphere/ air through which traces of ozone produced by the tree goes to the lungs and purifies the lungs. Attending and participating temple festivals give the opportunity for leadership qualities, social gathering, entertainment and hence variety of merits including spiritual benefits.

Customs and rituals beneficial for strengthening the family bondage: When we look for integrated development of the society, the family relation becomes the first step in the social life. There are hundreds of aacharaas in the Hindu life which are exclusively aimed at strengthening the family relations and bondage. Every spiritual and family based customs are to be practiced by the wife and husband together, This strengthen the family relationship. The message that maathru devo bhava, pitru devo bhava : Let the mother and father be divine to me (gods to me) convey a strong relation thread between the children and parents. The death anniversary functions known as sraardha are mainly performed to give the demonstration of the relationship between the parents and children. The demonstration from generation after generations.

In all the rituals, the individual is expected to tell the gotra (clan) and sootra (thread of connection) which again show the connection with the forefathers. During festivals, the parents were saluted/prostrated as mathru/ pithru namaskaara, to get the feeling for the children that (whatever may be their age) their relationship, with the parents is not merely that of people living together in a house. This gives the message that in younger days children were looked after by the parents and in the old age, the parents should be looked after by the children with due respect and care. Similarly the relationship between the wife and husband is not merely the relation for sex, but for building a family with culture and values in the life. Through 16 sacraments known as samskaaraas (samskaara means refining or purification) the life of the baby is getting enriched by the values of the life. During the construction of the house the ground breaking , stone laying , the door fixing and house warming ceremonies are all connected with the star of birth of the wife, thus giving importance to the wife in the family. Without the husband or wife, the other (among the couple) alone cannot perform any of the household aacharas, which again makes it compulsory to build the strong family bondage. The marriage is performed by tying the thread- putting the garland- holding the right palm (paanigrahana)- presentation of the cloths or exchanging the rings- and by sirodhaara, these five rituals in presence of hundreds of invited guests/ and agni/fire give the feeling of strong wife – husband bondage. It is said that the marriage is conducted as agni saakshi. Thus one can analyze the customs to understand the impact of the family relations.

More examples: If properly performed matching a horoscope before marriage gives an opportunity for understanding the personality of the individuals who are getting married and suitable corrective measures can be adopted. Inviting relatives and guests for marriage gives an opportunity to share the joy among relatives and social and family relations get strengthened. After marriage ceremonies are aimed at getting a healthy baby and giving the feeling of love and affection among the couples. The jaatja karma of the baby is performed to record scientifically the position of the celestial body when the baby was born. It is the bound privilege of the parents to give the name for their baby and hence the name of their choice through naamakarana, is given as a part of the samskaaraas. Dhampati pooja/ couple pooja is performed by other family members to remind their respect and appreciation on strengthening the bondage between the couples. Birthday celebrations are conducted to inform the duty and responsibility of the individuals when they grow and to remind them that the society and relatives are with them for undertaking the responsibility. Celebration of the 60th birth anniversary (shashti poorti), to remind the time for doing more good for the society using the experience gained for the last 60 years of life, when the period of rest starts.

Customs and rituals beneficial for the social bondage: Inviting guests for family functions like birthday, marriage, during the death and after death rituals, getting together during the festival seasons like holi-deepavali-krishnaashtamai-ramanavami- celebrations etc. temple festivals, village festivals, are all aimed at building social bondage . Through these social relation building mechanisms the cultural relationship among Indians was built up for the last many millennia . Many spiritual and religious activities as samooha pooja, samooha bhajan, mantra aalapan etc are all done in

groups with the leadership of the common Hindus themselves, not through appointed priests , which lead to the cultural integration of the social bondage in the Hindu society.

More examples: Family visits during happy and unhappy occasion by relatives and friends (even without taking appointments) is to confirm the family members that during happy and unhappy incidents in ones life we , the relatives and friends will be with them. Get together during festival occasions is for strengthening social bondage among the society members. Kumbha mela, vaisaaki, and many other festival is for sharing the joy and forgetting the negatives of the past and to build better relations ship among the members in the society . Group pilgrimage to long distance is to share the joy and difficulties together in the spiritual way to strengthen social bondage..

Customs and rituals beneficial for national integration: There are many customs which are followed exclusively for getting the feeling of patriotism among the Indians. The morning prayer (praathasmarana) we chant the names of seven holy rivers from Indian continent ... gange cha yamune chaiva... and seven mountains.. mahendro malaya sahyo... the great women of India... ahalya droupadi seetha... the great men aswathaama bali vyaaso.... Seven major cities of India ayodhya mathuraa maaya... and so on. These stanzas were written three or four thousand years ago. This informs and reminds us that India was culturally one for the last many thousand years The pilgrimage to north India by the south Indians and to south India by the north Indians are fine example of national integration. The customs followed in the immersion of the ashes (obtained after cremation) in kaasi / varanaasi triveni sangam by the south Indians and in kanyakumari triveni sangam by the north Indians lead to this national integration through visits and experiences of direct contact among south and north Indians (where the languages/ food/ dressing/ cultural traits etc differ).

It is also important to note a very interesting fact, that for making any curries (food items) in south India , north Indian spices are required and for north Indian curries, south Indians spices are inevitable. Thus even in kitchen of Hindu family, the national integration can be seen. Learning of Sanskrit language, chanting of Vedas and related literature, the story of Ramayana and Mahabharatha are all finally aims at integrating the people of India and give the message of unity in diversity .

More examples: A deep analyses of the holy places, rivers, mountains and asramas given in Ramayana and Mahabharatha when Sri Rama (in Ramayana) and Pandavas (in Mahabharata) visited during vanavaasa , gives familiarity of the nation through itihisas and puraanaas. Puranic stories do influence the national integration. Pilgrimage to Asrams, Gangotri, Haridwaar, Kailash, Kanyakumari, etc integrates the mind of all Indians towards the nation. The concept of athithi devo bhava to serve the people who visits our home without taking appointment gives the opportunity to know and help others. During the age old customs anyone who is on pilgrimage has to depend for the food and shelter upon the unknown people . People traveling from north to south and south to north of India, for the pilgrimage could take the shelter in the athithi devo bhava concept. Bharath maatha (mother Bharath) concept of the nation gives the relation among Indians as the children of the country. In mahasankalpa names of different kshetra in India are given (as parasurama kshetra (Kerala) - Sri Rama kshetra (Tamil Nadu) - Sreenivasa kshetra (Andra) - Jagannatha kshetra (Orrissa) - Bhaskara kshetra (Karnataka) and so on, which informs us that we are part of the great nation Bharath. Like this there are hundreds of the aacharaas aimed at national integration.

Thus the aacharaas are directly connected with the day to day life of Hindus. Even the spiritual rituals also compels us to pray saha naa vavathu, saha now bhunakthu saha veeryam karavaavahe thejaswinaavadheethamstu maa vidvisha vahai aano bhadraa . Let us exist together, share the results of the work together, work together, thorough that path way let us enlighten ourselves, let us not have hatred towards anyone , let noble thoughts come from all over the world. Hindus always prayed lokaa: samasthaa: sukhino bhavanthu . let everyone become happy. Hindus never prayed haindavaa: samasthaa: sukhino bhavathu Let (only) Hindus become happy. Hindus never said their pathway is the only correct one for attaining god. They always allowed other thoughts also to penetrate/integrate into the minds of the people, if those pathways can also fetch good results. Hindus are the only people who prayed sarve bhavanthu sukhina: sarve santhu niraamaya sarve bhdraani pasyanthu maa kaschit dukhabaag bhveth. Let sarve- all become happy and glorious, free from pains and sorrow. Here too Hindus never said only let Hindus get all the benefit

Say that all Indians are proud Hindus whether they follow lord Siva, Krishna, Jesus Christ or Prophet Mohammed, if their blood is Hindu blood then they are Hindus. In India there are only two categories of people who are Hindus and who were Hindus. Those, who are following the sanathana dharama, even though born and brought up under different culture anywhere in the world, are also Hindus