Sacred Bonds

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The newly wedded couple playfully immerse their hands in a pot of turmeric water to fish out items in a symbolic enactment of joyous cooperation through life

For Hindu Tamils, marriage is a holy event to be celebrated with glory and distinction.

Words Daleena Samara **Photographs** Rasika Surasena and Aravinda Chandrapadma

Of the many ways to get married, the Tamil Hindu wedding is undoubtedly one of the most elaborate and meaningful. This intricate tapestry of rites and rituals places a divine stamp on the decision of two individuals to form a unit for life. The ceremony signifies not just the marriage of two people, but the coming together of families.

This important occasion is celebrated with a dizzying sensory extravaganza of colour, fragrance, sights, sounds and tastes, woven around a spiritual core of divine blessings. The event is spread across three to five days although the wedding ceremony may take just a few hours. Though short, the latter is so multi-layered, it would take thousands of words to describe and explain, and so here are some highlights that encapsulate the essence of the event.

Planetary influences are significant, and so astrologers are sought to confirm not just the compatibility of the couple, but the auspicious times to conduct important rituals. Homes are spruced up, beautified with splendid decorations, made fragrant with incense, and auspicious foods are prepared to demonstrate joy and abundance. The bride takes special beauty treatments so that she looks her best on her big day. Her hands and feet are decorated with mehendi, intricate patterns created with henna, a herbal dye that fades over time.

On the day of the wedding, it is customary for the bride’s family to collect and escort the groom to the wedding venue, usually the bride’s home, a reception hall or the temple. Maapillai azhaippu is the ritual invitation of the groom to the mandapam, the wedding hall, usually by the tholan, a younger male, most often the brother or nephew of the bride, wearing clothes almost identical to that of the

groom. The tholan, along with two or three married couples who are also her relatives, arrive at the groom's home bearing palankums (large trays) laden with fruits and coconuts. Among the many rituals performed here is the holy bath where the tholan ritually anoints the groom with milk and arugampul (grass said to be the favourite of God Ganesha).

A senior member of the family places the thalapahai (turban) on his head. The aaraththi, the rotation of three banana wick lamps placed on a tray full of oil by two married women, is performed at the doorway to ward off the effects of the evil eye, before the groom, accompanied by the tholan, set off to the wedding hall. A similar procedure, the manapenn azhaippu, is held for the bride at her home, by three relatives of the groom.

The bride's parents and other relatives welcome the group at the entrance of the mandapam. Once again, the aaraththi is performed. The best-man sprinkles rosewater on the groom's feet in a gesture of respect, and the groom reciprocates by presenting him with a gold ring. The bride's father garlands the groom and her mother applies auspicious saffron paste on his forehead. Next, the sound of the nadhaswaram (flute) and the thavil (barrel-shaped drum) resound as he is escorted by the tholan and the bride's parents to the manavarai (wedding dais). Behind them trail his relatives, including the thozhi, usually a married sister, bearing a tray containing the koorai saree (a traditional saree to be worn later on in the ceremony), the thaali (the wedding necklace made of gold) and other gifts. Two married women each bear a tray, one with a coconut and the other with fruit and flowers.

When the groom takes his seat on the manavarai, his bestman sits beside him to his left. Before them on the ground sit the priests and a colourful altar. The higher elevation of the manavarai establishes the divine status of the union, for the bride and groom are representatives of the divine couple Goddess Parvati and Lord Siva. Later, the bride will occupy the space occupied by the tholan.

The Vickneshwara ceremony is a series of religious rituals invoking the blessings of the gods, the sacred fire Agni, and the ancestors. A ring of thetpai grass signifying purity of mind is slipped onto the ring finger of the groom's right hand, and the turmeric infused thread is tied around his right wrist. In the 'growing the nine grains' ritual, a group of married women, representing the goddesses of knowledge, wealth, courage and wisdom gather navathaaniam, nine varieties of grain, and milk and honey to signify abundance for the couple.

The bride, her face hidden in a veil, arrives with the thozhi. The priest performs similar purification and protection rites for her. The thetpai ring and the tumeric thread are tied on her left hand.

The main ceremony begins thereafter, with the Siva-Parvathi pooja and the navagraha pooja—the worship of the nine planets, represented by nine pots, each bearing a coconut, placed in front of the manavarai. The sacred Agni fire pooja is also carried out at this point, Agni being the eternal fire that will witness their marriage.

Ancestral blessings are sought, and the priest ceremoniously bonds the parents of both sides. In the varan pooja, the bride’s father pours water over the groom’s feet in a mark of respect, a quality the groom is expected to demonstrate towards his bride throughout his life.

The kannikathaanam is a beautiful ceremony signifying the transfer of care and responsibility of the bride to the groom: the bride’s father sits to the right of his daughter and his wife stands behind him. He clasp’s his daughter’s hands, which hold a betel leaf bearing an areca-nut, a lime, a banana and a gold coin. The priest then invokes three generations of male ancestors on both sides, and invites the high caste members, Agni, and the congregation to witness and bless the marriage. The bride’s father blesses both families, and the bride’s mother performs the tharai varthal, pouring water over the hands of her husband and daughter to indicate consent. Her father then places his daughter’s hands in the hands of the groom. The groom affirms his acceptance by accepting the betel leaf and its contents, and presenting them to his parents. A coconut is cracked open and the music begins once again.

The tray containing the koorai saree and other items is passed around married members of the congregation for their blessings. It is then presented to the bride and she leaves for a change of clothes.

Even more rituals are performed after the bride leaves and after she reappears, dressed in the koorai saree. Rather than an exchange of rings, the nuptial knot involves the groom placing the thaali, wedding necklace with pendants inscribed with religious symbols, around her neck, at an auspicious moment. The veil is then removed, and the groom also places a vermillion kunkumam mark on his wife’s forehead at the hairline—she will wear this mark forever to indicate that she is a married woman. The mood of jubilation follows, when the couple is showered with

flowers and yellow rice. The bridegroom takes his wife’s right hand in his left hand and together they encircle the Agni fire seven times, each circle indicating a different form of wealth. Thereafter, the groom conducts the ammi mithithal, placing his bride’s right foot on a grinding stone to symbolise chastity and a solid foundation, and slips a silver toe ring on her second toe. More delightful rituals follow.In one, the couple look at themselves in a mirror. In another, they immerse their hands in a pot of turmeric water to fish out items in a symbolic enactment of working joyously together through life.

At the end of the ceremony, the thetpai and the yellow thread around their wrists are handed over to the priests. The aaraththi is performed again and everyone sits down for a grand vegetarian feast. The couple eat from the same plate, nourishing each other as a married couple for the first time in their lives.

