

Kanyadaan - Its origin and relevance

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Abstract: India is a land of rich cultural traditions and rituals. Marriages are celebrated across the country lavishly with ultra-modern pomp and show following the rituals that have been passed on from generations. In the present context we need to examine the utility and relevance of the rituals which originated hundreds of years ago. All of us follow the traditions some of which have become obsolete but are given religious sanctity and slight deviation from them become sacrilege. *Kanyadaan* is one such ritual. There is a need to question it, revalidate it and the girls be saved from this sacrifice. The present study undertakes to trace its origin and relevance in the present times.

Keywords: ritual, Vedic age, marriages, *kanyadaan*, relevance, society

Women – the new power house; women going to places and reaching zeniths in changing times. The new woman is equally qualified and an achiever as man. Modern woman is financially independent and is highly spirited to map the world hand in hand with man. Today, the woman is a mother, a daughter, and a wife, but at the same time she doesn't bask in her man's glory – she has a definite identity of her own. If she can rear a child, she can scale the peak of Mount Everest, she can even cross the English Channel. There is a paradigm shift in her outlook towards life.

Likewise there is a need for a sea change in the outlook of all stakeholders towards women and treat them as individuals. She is not just a comely wife but also the CEO of a company. Unfortunately our Indian marriage institution is an age old system and so are its customs and rituals. The customs and rituals in this institution have outlived their utility. Hence they need to be redefined.

Indeed marriages unite two individuals. Shouldn't they be taken as equals in all respects? Indian marriages are a gala affair and celebrated with utmost fanfare, to the best of one's capacity and financial status.

There are eight types of matrimonies mentioned in the Vedas that have religious sanctity. They are;

- 1) *Brahma* wedding
- 2) *Daiva* wedding
- 3) *Arsha* wedding
- 4) *Prajapatya* wedding
- 5) *Gandharva* wedding
- 6) *Asura* wedding
- 7) *Rakshasa* wedding
- 8) *Paisashaca* wedding

The most popular and prevalent in the society is *Prajapatya* matrimony where a girl's father searches for the suitable match for his daughter and blesses the bride and the groom to perform their duties in their future life.

The main rituals of an Indian wedding comprises *Haldi*, *Mehandi* to the bride followed by the arrival of the Groom's party. *Jaimala*, then *Pheras* followed by *Kanyadaan* and then *Saptapadi*. These rituals have been passed on from generation to generation unquestioned. All the above rituals find their mention in the Vedas but there is no evidence of *Kanyadaan* in them. The Vedas celebrate the marriage of two individuals who are equals and with the consent of the bride.

The ritual of *Kanyadaan* became prevalent sometime during the Middle Age. The Vedas do not talk about the practice of a father offering his daughter as 'daanam' ' Women enjoyed a much powerful status as humans in the Vedic age rather than later and no way less than a man. Fortunately The *Vedas* and *Manusmriti* (The Hindu Law Book) both do not make any mention of giving away of one's daughter to another man. The Vedas celebrate equality and consent of partners which is the underlying truth of any marriage. In fact, women enjoyed a much superior position during the ancient period.

During the Middle Ages Rishi *Bhrigu* with a coterie of other rishis prepared '*Manusmriti*', a moral codebook for all Hindus to follow. He laid foundation for the modern Hindu Laws. It covers all the aspects of a Hindu life, various dos and don'ts. Hindu culture which evolved from the Vedas, is crystallized in *Manusmriti*. Unfortunately the position of Indian women got undermined drastically. The women were stripped off their independence and individuality. Gradually they became unaware of their rights. Though *Manusmriti* does not make a note of *kanyadaan*, its stress on women protection by male members gave rise to this offering of the daughters.

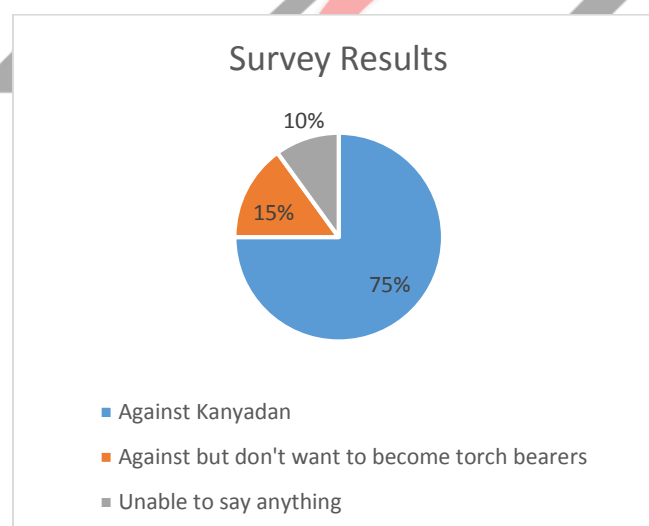
The middle Ages saw the rise of Brahmanism. Brahmins alone had the rights to read *Vedas* and other religious texts. They interpreted them according to their own whims and fancies. They became the dictators of Hindu religious and social life. Until now there was no binding for the married couple to stay with the parents until the Brahmins decided to have control over their sons and daughters. In Vedic age the old parents were supposed to have proceeded to observe the *Vanaprastha ashram* to pass their remaining life in peace involved in the worship of God. Brahmins twisted the old texts and laid foundation for the codes of behaviour for their sons and daughters both. The sons were expected to look after their parents till they died and performed their funeral rights. Brahmins propounded the theory that by performing *Kanyadaan*, the parents of the girls would be absolved of all their sins, whether they committed any or not was a question mark. By offering their daughters the parents severed all links with them. Besides *Kanyadaan* many other social evils like practice of dowry and sati system also crept up silently and unnoticed amongst the Hindus. These *sati* system has been completely eradicated from the society and strict laws have been made to stop dowry system (though not able to stop this).

The present study treats *kanyadaan* as one such evil to be eradicated from the society.

Kanyadaan is a combination of two words, *Kanya* means daughter and *daan* means offering. Offering has a materialistic connotation. Logically only the material possessions and property can be given away to others. If this is true then could a daughter be treated in a way so that she could be given away? In most houses a daughter is addressed as ‘paraya dhan’, ever since her birth. ‘Dan’ literally means materialistic possession. As soon as the girl is grown up and comes to understand the true meaning of the term, her world crumbles. The very idea of not belonging to the family of one’s birth gives her a different approach to life. This very fact of a female child not belonging to the family of her birth forces many parents to crave for a male offspring. This has resulted in major setbacks in the form of rise in population and also in the abnormal personality development of the girl child. She is mentally conditioned to willingly surrender to these biased social institutions completely oblivious of her aspirations and potentials. This relocation makes them insecure and they belong to no place. In the in-law’s house she remains and outsider throughout her life and becomes a guest in her father’s house where she cannot go on her own accord. This results in having no house for women, no rights no power and leaves them vulnerable to endure atrocities mental or physical. Her self-respect is butchered at every step even without her realization.

Why is it so that a girl is always supposed to acquire all the attributes of mother Earth? She is expected to be patient, docile and forever giving. Our social system forces her to internalize these qualities in her heart and soul since her early childhood days so much so that thinking or becoming otherwise makes her a rebel or a sinner in her own eyes. The social offering of a daughter has been so much glorified and given the religious sanctity that it has become mandatory for all the people of Hindu community to get them absolved of their sins.

Recently we conducted a survey on young and educated girls and boys. More than a hundred girls and boys participated. This survey also included the parents of eligible boys and girls. The survey was conducted in the form of a questionnaire where the questions were aimed to gather their views on *Kanyadaan*. The following chart depicts the findings:



75% respondents who participated expressed the view that the system of *kanyadan* was redundant and had lost its value and importance in today’s context. The young girls too had a much rational approach; hence they didn’t approve the system that says they are someone’s property and also none whosoever has the right to give them away. They are truly against their objectification. The modern parents in the survey were also of the view that instead of giving or accepting girls as *daan*, it would be more practical to have the boys and the girls as equal partners for each other. The parents have also risen above this tradition of *Kanyadaan*. They vehemently want to do away with this practice.

15% respondents accepted the sea change in the views of the younger generation. Yet they did not want to be the torch bearers. At the same time feel embarrassed using the term *Kanyadaan* for their daughters. The girls are equally qualified and sometimes more qualified than the boys. They are skilled at multi-tasking. On one hand they are the home makers, on the other they run big companies.

The balance 10% expressed their inability to express their opinion.

This ritual leads to patrilocal residence and it reduces our girls to be mere objects of gifts. In the modern times, not having a son is very common. The roles of the girls have changed tremendously. It has not remained limited to child rearing and household chores. They are educated, they contribute in enhancing the family wealth, and they take care of their parents, siblings meekly without questioning this patriarchy. The very idea of offering a girl child to some other person and relinquishing all the so called rights on her is the root cause of the misery of many girls in the country. The Honorable Supreme Court of India in its benchmark judgment under Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 has made the daughters equally liable for their parents as the sons. Although many people are not even aware of such an act. Secondly according to popular faith if one has given away the daughter than taking any help or assistance from her is sinful. This mind set needs to be changed, awareness amongst the masses should be spread.

There needs to be a change in the upbringing of the girls. While providing play toys to young children there should not be any gender discrimination. The girls should not only be given feminine toys to play with. When they are young, we provide them with small dolls to play. This eventually inculcates the habit of child rearing and motherly instincts in them. They are made to think that wherever and whatever they achieve in life, their primary role lies in raising a child. People struggle to produce male child so as to ensure their comforts in their old age, whereas the girl being the *paraya dhan* is considered a liability who would be gone to the other house along with the riches of the family of the place where she is born. Until this displacement both physically and mentally is stopped, the condition of a girl child will remain no more than a commodity who would continue to be offered and used as exchanging hands.

Nowadays there is an awakening in this context. Along with the young girls they have educated parents who are trying to take stand against this outdated ritual. They are not making any *kanyadaan* and nor the boy's side forcing them to do the same. Such marriages have been reported in social media and have been hailed and welcomed by all the sections of society.

The conclusion of the paper lies in the following prayer made by a small girl to her father

मैं हूँ तेरी लाइली बाबा , मत कर मेरा दान
लहू मेरा भाई सामान , फिर मेरा ही क्यों अपमान
प्रसव पीड़ा एक समान , लहू से संचित
में ही प्यारी क्यों , क्यों मुझमे तेरा मोक्ष निहित
न चहु तेरा घर , न हिस्सेदारी
ऐसे शोहर पे चरि जो न ले तुझसे मेरा दान
क्यों सब रिश्ते मुझसे ही छूटे
क्यों पड़े मुख देखना बाबुल तेरे घर आने को
न सिखाता यह हमको कोई वेद पुराण और धर्म
पंडितों ने कही पुरुषों ने मानी बेटियां देवियां हैं न की वस्तु मनमानी
इसके दान से मिलता स्वर्ग जाती दुनिया खली
बाबा मैं हूँ तेरी लाइली , मत कर मेरा दान

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