

CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVES AND ANCIENT CUSTOMS: A STUDY OF HINDU TRADITIONS IN ADITI BANERJEE'S *THE CURSE OF GANDHARI*

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Abstract: Hinduism has been practiced with an extensive variety of traditions, customs, and rituals since its earliest days. India's rich cultural legacy has drawn attention from all across the world. The practices and traditions that are followed and handed down from the elders to the following generation served as the unspoken rules of society in earlier times. Any community's beliefs, values and way of life are its culture and traditions. For generations, people have been adhering to these customs and ceremonies. In her novel *The Curse of Gandhari*, Aditi Banerjee saves Gandhari from being reduced to a mere blindfold symbol. The name Gandhari conjures up image of a woman with her eyes covered. The author has depicted Hindu customs and traditions from the time of the ancients in her retelling novel. The paper is an attempt to look at the depiction of ancient India's religiously maintained Vedic practices and traditions as mentioned in the novel *The Curse of Gandhari*. It also discusses the Vedic traditional knowledge that has been passed down from generation. This ancient knowledge of traditions and customs was once thought to be superstitions, but as science progressed, the information and rationale underlying them became clear.

Keywords: Hindu traditions, Vedic customs, Contemporary retelling, Gandhari, Shodasha Samskara

Contemporary Narratives and Ancient Customs: A Study of Hindu Traditions in Aditi Banerjee's *The Curse of Gandhari*

Tradition and Customs

Customs and traditions represent the morals and social behaviour of a community. People all over the world are embracing Indian practices as science advances and the reasons behind them are uncovered. Many customs were once deemed superstitions, but as their justifications were found, people began to adhere to them. *Namaskar*, also known as *Namastey*, is an Indian salutation. People commonly greet one another by joining their palms in front of them and bowing slightly to demonstrate their respect. This represents a sense of unity as well as a way to demonstrate respect for others. *Namaskar* is commonly used to greet parents, elders, and gurus. People put a *Tilak* on their foreheads as part of Hindu custom and tradition. Women apply a little circular *tikka*, or *Bindiya*, on the center of their eyebrows, while men apply a longer

tikka on their forehead. In India, during the wedding ceremony, the groom applies vermilion for the first time to his bride's center hair partition. In India, it is known as *Sindur*. Vermilion is a symbol of good fortune and the marital status of women. Married ladies are expected to apply vermilion, also known as *Sindur*, to the middle division of their hair on a regular basis. Tikka is traditionally made from either sandalwood dust or ash from the *Yagya*, and vermilion is prepared by combining turmeric, lime, and mercury together. Turmeric has antibacterial properties, lime has a cooling impact, and mercury is recognized for relieving stress. Since the female body is considered to be more sensitive than the male body, vermilion is applied to the head above the pituitary gland, which helps in calming the body. It has numerous medical effects including keeping the body comfortable and relaxed while preventing the spread of lice. The area between the brows is believed to regulate various levels of energy absorption in the human body, acting as a storehouse for the energies required by the body to function efficiently. As a result, it may become warm at times. Applying the *Tilak* to this area helps to provide a cooling effect and to relax the nerves. In India, henna is known as *Mehandi*. Women use henna on their hands and feet for a gorgeous dark red colour on numerous occasions. In India, henna is traditionally applied to the bride's hands and feet to decorate her. Henna is used for more than just adornment. It also has medicinal properties. Henna provides a cooling effect that aids in the relaxation and soothing of nerve endings. It also helps to reduce headaches and tension while also protecting hands and nails from fungal infections.

Shodasha Samskara

Many *samskaras* are woven throughout Hindu culture. *Samskara* is an essential component of Indian Vedic culture. It is said that *samskara* aids in obtaining peace of mind, spiritual nourishment, and eventually *moksha*. *Samskara* imbues significant life events—from conception to death—with a spiritual dimension. Upanishads refer to *samskara* as a means of growth and prosperity. In Hindu traditional scriptures, approximately forty *samskaras* are listed. They are performed as the opportunity arises and when the individual reaches the appropriate age for the particular *samskara*. There are sixteen primary *samskaras* called *Shodasha Samskara* in Sanskrit, that are prevalent in Indian society. These *samskaras* comprise practices that alter and signify the development of human consciousness. Many rituals are conducted in Hindu traditions during a person's lifetime, beginning before birth and continuing until death. *Samskara* benefits include mental and physical well-being as well as the courage to take on obstacles in life. They are believed to improve blood circulation and cleanse the body by supplying more oxygen to every organ. They provide bodily and spiritual equilibrium throughout life. The ancient texts, Smritis and Grihasutra have a detailed description of *samskaras*. However, all the different texts have different names and numbers of *Samskara*. There are sixteen major *samskaras* that are practiced throughout life in Hindu tradition. Of these, four are performed prior to the birth of a child, eleven after the birth, and one is carried out following a person's demise. A brief discussion of these *samskaras* is given below.

Garbhadhan Samskara: This is a prayer for a child and the first *Samskara*. “*Garbha*” means

womb and “*Dhan*” means to establish. The purpose of *Garbhadhan Samskara* is to promote the growth and survival of their race. This is to be done immediately after the wedding. It is a ritual performed before pregnancy to ensure healthy and sacred offspring.

Punsavan Samskara: It is carried out to honor the consciousness that exists within the unborn child. Preferably, it is carried out in the first trimester of women’s pregnancy. Raising the spiritual and unique potential of the child is significant in this *samskara*. This *samskara* is carried out with the Vedic mantras being chanted in order to support the physical and mental growth of the baby while it is still inside the mother’ womb. The purpose of this *samskara* is to bestow upon the child heavenly characteristics, wisdom, and goodhealth.

Simantonayan Samskara: During the fourth month of pregnancy, this Samskara is carried out, and prayers are offered for the unborn mental development of the child in the womb. Numerous physiological and hormonal changes start to occur in the body of mother as the birth date draws near. During this ritual, friends, family and other relatives are invited. They assemble and endeavor to grant the pregnant woman her every wish. They bestow their blessings and gifts upon the mother and the child in her womb.

Jatkarma Samskara: *Jatkarma Samskara* is done after the baby is born. It is the first *samskara* following the birth of the child. The meaning of “*Jata*” and “*Karma*” are, respectively, creation and action. Therefore, it denotes the practice that follows right after the child takes birth. This is intended to strengthen the bond between the father and the child in addition to celebrating the birth of the child.

Namkaran Samskara: “*Namakaran*” translates to “naming”. In the Vedic tradition, it is the naming procedure, where a name is decided for the baby. On the eleventh or thirteenth day after birth is when this ritual is performed and towards the end of this *samskara*, the child receives a name from which it would be known.

Nishkraman Samskara: To go out, or to take the first exit, is *Nishkraman*. The child is taken out of the home in the fourth month after its birth. It is when the child visits the temple for the first time, prayers are said for his or her health and well-being. This *samskara* is limited to family members and does not have a formal procedure.

Annaprashan Samskara: This is regarded as first solid food consumption of baby in the Vedic tradition. *Annaprashan* literally translates to “to eat”. After the infant has been born for six months, this *samskara* is performed. It is done to help the digestive system of a child, function better and to introduce them to a variety of food tastes. According to Ayurveda the infant should start solid food after seven months of age and that breastfeeding should be gradually stopped.

Mundan Samskara: Between the age of one and five years after birth, this *samskara* is performed where the head of child is shaved off its hair. It is believed to have a good impact on intelligence of the child.

Karnavedhan Samskara: “*Karna*” is Sanskrit term used for ‘ear’, while “*vedhan*” means piercing. It is the time when the earlobes of the child are pierced. It is believed that the acupuncture aids in boosting the memory of a child and facilitating blood flow throughout the brain.

Vidyarambha Samskara: in Sanskrit language “*Arambha*” means ‘the beginning’, and “*Vidya*” implies knowledge. The child is introduced to the written language in this *samskara* where the ceremony is led by a priest.

Upanayan Samskara: The most significant *samskara*, signifying the start of a new phase of life, “*Upanayan*” is a Sanskrit term that signifies “bringing near”. The young student is brought up close to his guru or teacher and in front of him, the procedure of the ritual is carried out by accepting the *Yagnopavit*, a three-layered cotton thread. A person is referred to as “*Dwij*”, which means “born a second time”, after receiving and donning the *Yagnopavit* thread. *Vedarambha Samskara*: “*Arambha*” in Sanskrit means ‘beginning’, and “*veda*” implies ‘to know’. Thus, it properly translates to “the beginning of the Vedic study.” This celebration takes place on any auspicious day following *Upanayan samskara*. The student vows before the sacred fire to devote his life to his Guru and to lead a life of ethics and virtue.

Keshant Samskara: This *samskara* is intended for boys here, *Keshant* translates to ‘end of hair’ which means haircut. This Samskara corresponds to the first shaving experience a student has, either at the age of sixteen or when their first facial hair appears. For females, after she gets her first menstrual cycle, this *samskara* is performed differently for her. This *samskara* indicates that the procedure will now be different for men and women.

Samavartan Samskara: When the child returns after completing his educational pursuits, this *Samskara* is performed. It signifies the completion of their studies at *Gurukul*. It also signifies one’s preparedness to enter the married life, or *Grihasta Ashrama*.

Vivaha Samskara: Among the most significant and intricate *samskaras* in the Vedic traditions is the *Vivaha Samskara*. *Vivaha* in Sanskrit means ‘marriage’. According to Vedic traditions, the only way for a man and a woman to come together and start a family of their own. It is the enduring friendship that binds a man and a woman together. Thus, this *samskara* is performed whenever the couple is mature enough to comprehend one another.

Antyeshti Samskara: Lastly, there is a ritual of performing *Antyeshti Samskara* also known as *Antim Samskara*. The direct translation of the word “*Antyeshti*” is “the last sacrifice” which refers to the funeral rites of the deceased person according to Hindu rituals and traditions. There are customary Vedic rituals conducted when the body is cremated and is expected to be mixed in all the five elements—air, water, fire, earth, and atmosphere, which are present in both the universe and human body. The idea behind performing the final rituals of passing is to return the body to these five elements and to its origins.

The aforementioned retelling by Banerjee includes the mention of some rituals and festivals. The narrator gives a brief reference about *Navaratri*, one of many Hindu festivals, it is celebrated for nine nights where nine forms of *Devi* are worshipped by performing traditional rituals. In many Indian household people observe fast during these nine days. Different types of food are also prepared to make offerings to nine different forms of goddess Durga for nine consecutive nights. The narrator of the novel mentions about the festival in brief by saying that: “Navaratri: the nine-night festival in honour of Devi, had begun by the time they reached

Hastinapur.” (Banerjee, 48).

...chickpea flour fritters frying in sesame oil, the scent of ghee lamps burning, the simmering rice puddings being cooked as offering to Devi, the crush of flowers being torn into petals for worship during this holy period. (Banerjee, 49)

The narrator briefly highlights the continuous preparations for festival offerings and decorations throughout this time period. When Satyawati offers Gandhari some refreshments after a long travel, she respectfully declines, stating that she is fasting during the festival of Navratri and will only be having milk and fruits. “She explained to the queen, ‘I fast during Navratri. I will only take milk and fruits.’” (Banerjee, 52).

The novel then mentions about the marriage ceremony of some major characters of the epic. Hindu Vedas list marriage as one of the *Sodasha Samskaras*, which is mandatory to lead a normal life in society. It is the most detailed *samskara* as mentioned in the Vedic texts. It was required to perform this *samskara* in order to enter the *Grihastha Ashrama* and begin a family of their own. Gandhari is shown to remember her wedding in haze, as the narrator describes:

The wedding was a blur to Gandhari. She felt the heat of the fire, she felt her hand being pressed by her brother Shakuni into her new husband's; ... heard the droning of the priests; smelled the burnt coconut and herbs offered into the scared fire to bless their union. (Banerjee, 67)

The narrator mentions the welcoming of a new bride in brief, as they are welcomed to their new home after their marriage. “... with welcoming Gandhari, the first bride of the Kuru princes, the city was at peak festivity.” (Banerjee, 48). “It was a sunny winter morning... It was crowded to the hilt – lusty cheers and cries of joy and welcome filled the courtyard. Throngs of people pressed upon them in waves and waves.” (Banerjee, 70)

The mentioned retelling opens with a discussion of impending death. The main protagonists of the retelling are Gandhari, Kunti, Dhritrashtra, and his devoted charioteer Sanjay, who live in an *aasharam* in a forest and are waiting for their deaths. Gandhari, though, is not quite ready to pass away. “...suddenly Gandhari blurted out: ‘I am not ready to die.’” (Banerjee, 6). Gandhari here immediately feels foolish for saying this out loud. The novel makes numerous references to the deaths of various other characters. According to the Hinduism, rituals performed after the death of a person are known as the *Antheysthi Samskar*, which is the final *Samskara* performed for a person. The close relatives of the deceased carry out the last rites and rituals for the dead. The text also mentions briefly about the *Sati-pratha*, where the wife of the deceased man sacrifices herself into his funeral pyre. Madri, the co-wife of Kunti had performed this ritual when Pandu had died. “When Kunti's husband had died, Madri, her co-wife, had jumped into the funeral pyre...” (Banerjee, 40) The novel ends with the death of Gandhari, Kunti and Dhritrashtra as they all were already waiting for their death in the forest.

Conclusion:

The discussion on the reflection of Hindu traditions and customs in Aditi Banerjee's contemporary retelling, *The Curse of Gandhari*, explores the rich cultural legacy of India,

emphasizing the significance of customs and traditions in Hinduism. The novel portrays the character of Gandhari, showcasing her strength and willpower rather than depicting her as an oppressed woman from the epic. The author integrates Hindu customs and traditions from ancient times into the narrative, shedding light on the traditional knowledge that has been passed down through generations. The narrative of *The Curse of Gandhari* also addresses significant life events, including births, deaths and marriages of various characters, incorporating different types of marriages like *Swayamvara*. Banerjee is commended for her contemporary portrayal of Gandhari and her emphasis on Hindu customs, traditional rituals and ancient Vedic practices. The revival of these ancient traditions, once considered superstitions, as their underlying rationale has become clear with scientific advancement. The significance of these customs is not limited to India but is recognized and followed across the worldwide. The study draws on various sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of Hindu traditions and customs, incorporating references to the novel, scientific explanations behind Hindu rituals, customs and traditions.

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