

## COMMENT

# Passages of life

**RITUALS:** The diverse tradition in weddings, births and funerals are practices deep-rooted in the beliefs of our respective cultures and religions

**T**HERE are all kinds of traditions and rituals in human society. Among the sacred rituals are those related to weddings, childbirths, coming of age and deaths.

Weddings are about love, passion, joy and banter, and the coming together of relatives from near and far. Weddings are about families and communities. People must choose the right days for weddings and avoid inauspicious days.

Beautifying the bride and groom, wearing the right attire, veils and headgear, using henna or other materials and colours with tattoos on hands and feet, and make-up are all universal aspects of weddings across various traditional and modern cultures.

Brides and grooms may be pampered with milk bath, flower and

lime baths and massages. Foods and fruits, eggs, drinks and other symbols of fertility would be in abundance.

Related symbols of love and eternity and legal contracts witnessed by all are hallmarks of wedding revelry. Symbolic acts of protection and enhancement of prospects of happiness are practised among various cultures like crashing plates in Germany during weddings, crying ritual tradition in China, blackening bride and groom in Scotland, in certain cases, in India, symbolic marriage with a tree before marriage with their spouse to avoid any curse, spitting on the bride in the Massai nation, Kenya, or couples in Congo not being allowed to smile on the big day. Whatever the practices, cultures are always mindful of taboos and good omens and actions to ward off evil spirits or bad luck.

And the time comes for the sacred ritual of birthing. Families then decide on home births, medicated births, natural childbirth, Caesarean section, water birth, hypnobirthing, and the practice of chiropractic, reflexology, acupuncture, acupressure, aromatherapy, herbs, Robert A. Bradley or Ferdinand Lamaze methods or other indigenous and traditional methods of birth. The rituals of child-

birth are followed by various kinds of blessings and prevention of evil occurrences and hopes for a good life for the child.

Death and disposal of the dead involve funeral practices deeply ingrained in culture and beliefs. Funeral ceremonies, rites and rituals are about finding a sacred place on a mountain, riverside or desert land, and establishing memorials for the deceased. Colours to mark the passage of life are not just black but also white, purple, green, yellow and grey. There is poignancy and intense emotions of eternal partings.

There are funeral etiquette of eulogies, of messages of condolences, wreaths, mourning, grieving, wakes, vigils, sacred prayer rituals of after burials or cremation, and charity to the poor.

In the past in India, a widow would burn herself on a funeral pyre of the husband. Funerals can be lively events for families who dance with corpses and there are the Chinese funeral bands and the New Orleans Jazz Band balancing sadness and joy.

In Madagascar, the Malagasy people have the turning of bones ceremony. There are Aboriginal mortuary rites in Australia, the South Korean burial beads where remains compress into gem-like



A traditional Hindu wedding in all its finery.

beads, of turquoise pink or black.

There are the northwestern Filipino death traditions, for instance, of the Bankuets and the Caviteño who bury their dead in tree trunks.

There are now Green funerals or environmentally-friendly burials and sea or ocean burials as well as reef burials providing habitat for marine life.

People have, of course, begun to donate their organs for other people and their bodies for scientific study. And some believe in cytolysis, preserving their body for resurrection at some future time.

The departed are buried immediately in the Muslim tradition or cremated a few days later in other cultures. Balinese cremation is to release the soul from the body so that it is free to inhabit another body.

There is sky burial in Mongolia

and Tibet with beliefs in transmigration of spirit after deaths. In some societies, the dead corpses are kept and revisited and the village regards the departed as the person who is sick or asleep. And, of course, there are the mummified bodies of kings, horses, cats and other pets. And there are those who are believed to be reincarnated, to find nirvana, be damned in hell or find paradise, and allowed into heaven.

With all the diverse tapestry of beliefs and cultural practices, to change others, evangelists have to learn their languages, cultures, thousands of years of history and beliefs, and find entry into the various societies! Let no man or groups desecrate the time honoured core sacred rituals of others as we would not let others desecrate our rituals.

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