

Sacred Thread Ceremony

By Jayendra Desai. Mississauga, Ontario. CANADA.

What we in Gujarat call "Janoi" is derived from the Sanskrit words "Upnayan" or "Yagnopavit".

Yagnopavit is a joint word made of two fragments - Yagna and Upvitam. Yagna means a sacrificial ceremony and Upvitam means sacred thread. Therefore, Yagnopavit is a ceremony where sacrifices are pledged and a sacred thread is worn as a reminder of that pledge.

Upnayan is also a joint word made from Upa and Nayan. UP prefix means "leading to" or "smaller step" towards something. For example, Upahar means breakfast or a light meal. Thus Upnayan means first step towards the guidance to knowledge, which includes spiritual knowledge. Hindu faith requires a few Sanskara ceremonies to be performed by any born soul such as Chulakarma, Annaprashan, Sacred thread, Marriage etc.

For Brahmins, the Sacred thread ceremony is the symbolic second birth to a new spiritual life and quest for knowledge. Hence, Brahmins are sometimes referred to as Dwija meaning twice born.

When a child goes through this Sacred thread Sanskara, he gets ready to start getting knowledge at the hands of a Guru - a learned man. The ceremony guides the child into taking a pledge of undertaking an eternal pursuit of knowledge - secular and spiritual. Hindus don't recommend pursuing that without a Guru's help. In the past this involved moving in with the Guru and his family. They usually lived in secluded places congenial to studies. The child leaves his parents and the Guru and his wife become surrogate parents.

The Ceremony:

The ceremony can be divided into three logical parts.

(1) The first part involves purifying the surrounding environment, then purifying yourself (cleaning the body etc.) then praying and inviting Lord Ganesha to bless the assembly and the occasion (Shree Ganesh Pooja). Then we invite all the major planets (nine) to do the same (known as Grahashanti). This first part is also common to several other Hindu ceremonies. In this ceremony, however, purifying the child also means a close shave of the head.

(2) The second part involves the priest going through the explanation of what is meant by taking Deeksha, taking vows of Brahmacharya and taking vows to gain

knowledge. The priest also elaborates on the value of knowledge, the code of behavior the student must follow and what types of daily prayers, meditation the student must conduct or practice.

The student is also told that the Guru's discourses are essential but so are the Self studies. It also lays down how the Guru and his wife must be respected. How to develop your personality is also explained.

After this process is completed, a sacred symbolic thread called Janoi is put around the shoulder. It is to be worn in a certain way and there are rules on how to maintain its cleanliness etc. At this point, the child is ready to receive the Gaytri Mantra from the priest. The Gaytri mantra was recorded in Rig Veda - one of the oldest Vedas of Hindu faith. Through it we pray the earth, the space, the Sun in our galaxy, millions of similar stars and also the infinite number of galaxies in our universe (remarkable for an ancient document). Very roughly the mantra translates as: Let us contemplate the most radiant of the supreme - ultimate God. May he inspire (prachodayat) our intellect (the word Dhi in Sanskrit).

(3) The third part involves celebration. In all ceremonies there is a need to celebrate in company with family, friends and with well-wishers. After very somber serious stuff it is time to relax. In a way it is traumatic both for the parents and the child. The social part relaxes them.

For Anavils "Badvo" has become synonymous with the ceremony but as I explained above the more important parts are one and two. During this Badvo activity, the Child's Mama (maternal uncle) chases the boy who pretends to run away to the Guru. The Mama offers bribes of expensive gifts and money to stop him from going.

The other activity involves giving gifts, meeting the guests and enjoying live music (some families hire professionals to do this). In the past the gift was always cash and came very useful to the host. In a way it is a sort of lay away process in the West - you contribute in small amounts when you attend other ceremonies. The guests return the same during ceremony in your family.