

Anand Karaj – A Spiritual Commitment

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With the gradual development of agriculture in olden times, man shunned the nomadic way of life turning to domesticity. Marriage as an institution developed all over the world as men sought women to lead a family life. It is because of marriage that civilizations flourish.

Every religion has its own set of customs and rituals which when performed socially under the stewardship of the clergy, whether a Pundit, Priest, Granthi or Kazi, sanctifies the marriage, thus declaring man and woman as husband-wife. In virtually all religions, marriage is **a life-long union between two people sanctified by ceremonies and rituals**. The two people are most commonly a man and a woman, though some societies permit polygamy. Even same sex marriage is now permissible in some countries.

Like other religions of the world, Sikhism too has developed a unique code of conduct, named as *Anand Karaj*, thanks to the Fourth Master, Guru Ram Das ji. Till the time the *Anand Karaj* was introduced by the fourth Guru the usual practice adopted was **circumambulation around the sacred fire**, *Parikrama*, *Pradakshina* or *Mangal phera*, in which the bride and bridegroom walk around the sacred fire (clockwise) seven times. In the first three rounds the bridegroom leads the bride as they circle together around the sacred fire. In the rest three, the bride leads the bridegroom around the sacred fire. Each time an appropriate *mantra* is recited which expresses noble sentiments in relation to their future. Each round culminates in both the bride and the bridegroom placing offerings or *ahutis* of fried rice in the sacred fire. The Hindu religion emphasises enjoyment of life as well as the discharging of family, social and national responsibilities.

The Hindu custom of marriage was elaborate, expensive and time consuming, rooted in Brahmanism. Guru Ramdas ji simplified the procedure. The beauty of *Anand Karaj* is that it involves not only the bride and groom but also the Guru of Sikhs, Guru Granth Sahib. ***Laavan* is a spiritual affirmation and pledge taken by the couple to remain joined with the *Shabad Guru* till their last breath.** For a Sikh, his/her life revolves around the Guru Granth Sahib right from birth till death. No wonder that Guru Ram Das ji while framing new pattern for a Sikh couple kept as the focal point the **circumambulation around the Guru Granth Sahib**, as integral to four *Laavan*.

Spiritual marriage comes from the idea of “love transcending sex.” Spiritual marriage is the ultimate relationship. *Laavan* for Sikhs is indeed a spiritual marriage, though of a transcendent nature, between the couple on one side and the Guru on the other. *Laavan* involve a tie and a bond, a bond, between the mortal male and the mortal female with the immortal *Shabad Guru*. Guru Ram Das ji elevated marriage into an *Anand Karaj*, literally meaning ‘Blissful Work’. A Sikh male and a Sikh female who willingly, voluntarily enters into *Anand Karaj* begins a spiritual journey which makes the effort a joy for both.

It is profoundly regrettable that 99% of Sikhs who undergo *Anand Karaj* are unaware of the greater significance it holds in the life of Sikhs. The last few years has brought about a change in the mindset of Granthies both in India and the diaspora. Earlier this year I happened to attend at Gurdwara Jagat Sudhar, Kolkata, two *Anand Karaj* ceremonies of closely related family members. It was indeed a pleasant surprise to hear the Head Granthi explain the meaning of the four mandatory *Laavans* taken in quick succession to the rendition of musical notes accompanied by singing of the hymns in *Raag Suhi* (SGGS 773-774).

Upon hearing the Granthi, I was transported 18 years back into the sweltering heat of May

1989 at Amritsar. I was then 28 and my wife-to-be 21. There was no one at that time who explained to us the significance of the four *Laavans*, neither did anyone feel the necessity to impart its meanings to us. Like most Sikhs today we were more conscious of how smartly we were dressed or how gracefully we were looking in our expensive attire. We were conscious of the glares of the invitees and of the video cameraman taking our shots from all possible angles, though offending Head Granthi of the Gurdwara. My wife-to-be was more concerned about not letting go of her grip on the *pallu* which I was also tightly holding on to. My thoughts were focussed elsewhere. I was totally deaf to what was being sung or read from the Holy Granth. While listening is the first step towards understanding, the import of what was being sung was seven seas apart. We were more concerned about going through the act flawlessly in public.

That day after 18 years, when I heard the head Granthi explain the four *Laavans* I was amazed how the *sangat* sat engrossed in what was being sermonized. And I silently uttered a prayer, **“May the newly married couple really listen to what is being explained”**.

According to *Gurbani*, all humans, both males and female, are *Naris* (brides). Only God, Akal Purakh, Allah, Ram, Waheguru (or by whatever name one calls) is the only Master. When a Sikh boy and a Sikh girl sit before the Guru Granth Sahib to take the four *Laavans*, the marriage is between both the boy and girl in unison with the Guru or *Shabad Guru*. Since the marriage is not just between two persons as is the practice found in diverse communities, Guru Ram Das ji had obviously to name it something different than the ordinary term *Vivah* in vogue at that time. Thus, the name *Anand Karaj* evolved.

When I took the four *Laavans* way back in 1989 I was totally unaware of this fact. Today I realise that the ceremony I undertook became a mere ritual since I was ignorant of what I was actually going through or what significance it was meant to carry in my married life. The same holds true today, for those Sikhs who do not realise true meaning of the ceremony. The Granthi explained, *“The first Laavan instructs us to perform the daily duties of married life, viz. embrace the righteous conduct of Dharma, renounce sinful actions, meditate on the Lord’s Name and enshrine the contemplative remembrance of the Naam, through which Anand or bliss is attained.”*

I looked within myself and introspected. I asked myself : **“ Have I renounced all sinful actions? Without practising the 1st Laavan how do I expect to move on to the 2nd ?”**

The Granthi continued to explain the second *Laavan*: *“With the fear of God imbedded in the mind, the filth of egotism is eradicated and singing the glorious praises of the Lord makes us aware of His presence everywhere, in each and every being. This very realisation of Him pervading everywhere resounds the unstruck music of the shabad deep within us.”* A qualitative calm descends upon the seeker once the second stage is accomplished.

Now I further stirred myself inwardly, **“Am I still egoistic? Is the fear of God within me?”**

Had the fear of God been within me, I would in fact follow the *hukumnamah* I take everyday in the *Babaji’s* room and not leave it just as it is making a mere ritual out of it. *Shabad Guru* tells us the way to eradicate ego from within us by following the teachings with full and complete commitment and belief. No halves and no quarters. Without practising the Guru’s commands, one cannot expect to reach the second stage of *Laavan* with *Akaal Purakh*, which Guru Ram Das ji wanted each Sikh to attain what was actually attained by Him. Always remember that whatever is written in Guru Granth Sahib is the real life experience of 35 enlightened souls. It is the experiences transformed into ‘potent Words’ which act as a lighthouse for us in the vast ocean of *maya* we remain drenched in, for the most part of our sojourn on earth.

The second *Laavan* stage envisages a higher level of spirituality whereby the dirt of ego –

ahankar is cleaned up and the soul or *atma* inside us becomes more blessed and pure. In short, both the mind and the soul are purified and cleansed.

The next stage is the third *Laavan* in which **the mind is filled with Divine Love for the Lord**. Once a person reaches this level, he/she yearns to practice *sangat* or holy communion with the humble saints of the Lord. What type of *sangat*? That in which only the glorious praises of the Lord are sung and whatever the tongue utters is the Word of the *Shabad Guru*. Having reached the third stage of married life, one remains absorbed ceaselessly in *Naam Simran*, singing in praise of Waheguru. One talks and listens only to *Gurbani* and *Kirtan*. Nothing else is yearned for.

In the fourth round of *Laavan*, Guru Ram Das ji shares with us His experience. He says, *"My mind has become peaceful; I have found the Lord. As Gurmukh, I have met Him, with intuitive ease; the Lord seems so sweet to my mind and body. I am devoted to my God. Night and day, I lovingly focus my consciousness on the Lord. I have obtained my Lord and Master, the fruit of my mind's desires. The Lord's Name resounds and resonates. Servant Nanak proclaims that, in this, the fourth round of the marriage ceremony, I have found the eternal Lord God."* Indeed the fourth *Laavan*, as per Guru Ram Das ji, is the union of our soul with the universal Soul- *atma* merges with *parmatma*.

In sum the four *Laavans* are four levels of spirituality one must pass through in succession when one steps forth on the path of spirituality. Leading a householder's life, engaging in physical love, bringing up children, etc are only physical facets of married life, making it mundane. The actual purpose of human birth is rightly recorded by Guru Arjun Dev ji, *"Gobind milan ki eh teri baria. Avar kaaj teray kitte na kaam, mil saadh sangati bhaj kewal naam"* .. (SGGS 12 & 378). To attain this purpose in a joint effort by the couple as envisaged by Guru Ram Das ji, the four *Laavans* are guideposts to the couple not to forget, in the course of discharging their duties and responsibilities as householders, to realise the goal of life.

Human life given to us shall go waste if we do not attempt to actually walk the four *laavans* in our lifetime. To walk the four *Laavans* one holds the hand of a life partner. It is naturally expected of the partners to support each other, or else discord and strife could create as impediments for the person yearning for *gobind milan* - union with the Divine.

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