CHAPTER – 3
UNDERSTANDING THE RITUALS, MANNERS AND ETIQUETTE
Ritualistic stance of various religions and cultures broadly appear to be harmless in being mere symbolic pursuits serving the purpose of achieving the immediate pleasures and purposes. But all rituals in one form or the other take their present shape from out of the primitive tribal conventions. Many of these tribes have vanished but their ritual has survived by way of putting their harsh imprints on the growing cultural dimensions in the course of human progress.

A ritual emerges from what Jung calls the 'collective unconscious' of a given society. Therefore to locate them from the utilitarian or a rationalist angle is as useless as stratifying inter-personal human affections into the limited range of institutional prerogatives. Most of the rituals in any culture are historical reminiscences of ancient myths and lores. Somehow the 'collective unconscious' concept of Jung arrives at a conclusion that the whole humanity in its pre-historical phases resorted to certain understandings which culminated into the forms of myths. These myths, being the primal representative modes of human hopes, fears and dreams, find a readable scope and operation in all the forms of life as pursued by people from time to time. The modern trends of
'demytholygation' and the inclusion of myth awareness as a principle property in the modern phenomenological discussions are likely to explain the inherent proneness of man towards rituals as an inevitable course of life activity. Even the aethiest, knowingly or unknowingly is susceptible to the inevitable enticement of rituals. But for Chaudhuri, almost all traditional rituals, in-spite of the fact that they are primitive in text and texture, are prominent practices in life and to that extent they are inevitable but then he is a hater of ritualistic extravaganza.

Rituals take different and variant modalities from time to time. Theoretically speaking, the only purpose of rituals is to inculcate a faith in the masses towards so called spiritual purposes of a given society. Different religions and social systems differently designate these purposes. In India, the rituals, in-spite of having religious origin have lost their devotional characteristics. In this context Dr. Radhakrishnan observes:

Though our age has largely ceased to understand the meaning of religion, it is still in desperate need of that which religion alone can give. The recognition of a Transcendent Supreme, the freedom of the human individual as a manifestation of the Supreme and the unity of mankind as the goal of history are the foundations of the major religions. The religion of spirit reasserts these fundamental truths. It does not regard dogmas and rites as anything more than a necessarily inadequate symbolism. It calls upon the leaders of religions to set in motion a process of fermentation that will preserve the faiths from hardening into moulds of orthodoxy. religious and social. (1)
The Indo-European Core of Hindu Rituals:

Indians brought religion into their day to day lives in such a manner that it could not leave most important events of a man's or a women's life free from its control and sanction. The rituals observed by the Indians have mostly evolved from the Indo-European core of Hinduism and Chaudhuri has tried to find its roots by tracing the similarities between the Indian and Roman rituals.

Chaudhuri argues that the elaborate rituals of the Vedic religion which have continued in a more or less modified form down to this day and which constitute the most obligatory part of religion of the Hindus, furnish the most decisive evidence for its Indo-European character. He says that though these cannot be traced to their origins they can be proved by comparing them with Roman rituals. In respect of rituals both the Hindus and Romans were extremely conservative and tenacious, so that even when the beliefs and cults were transformed the rites remained true to type. The parallelisms are very striking, and the first of these is seen in the rite of sacrifice. Chaudhuri writes:

The 'yajna' is the major rite in Hinduism, so is 'sacrificum' in Roman religion. In Hinduism the creator himself began the work of creation with a sacrifice. The purpose of sacrifice among both the peoples was the same. (H 74)
Primarily it was with the purpose of obtaining a secure worldly welfare of every kind that these sacrifices were made. In addition was the idea of attaining some kind of magical efficacy and lastly the notion of consecration. The Latin word 'sacrificare' exactly means that to make 'some thing sacred.' Though the Brahminic word does not mean exactly the same thing, sacrifice is the means of raising all that is profane to the sacred plane.

Chaudhuri also finds a striking similarity between the Brahmanic and Roman sacrifices as regards the species of animals to be sacrificed. The sacrificial animals of the Hindus, arranged according to their importance in respect to the result from the sacrifice, are the following, man, horse, bull, ram and goat. For animal sacrifice the Romans had horse, bull, ram and hog (instead of goat). In the Hindu rituals man was sacrificed because he was the first among animals. The Romans excluded human sacrifice from their national cults but there is historical evidence that they did practice human sacrifice.

Another parallel, which Chaudhuri finds between Hindu and Roman ritual, is in the separation between private and public rites. Chaudhuri writes:

In Rome the two were placed in two categories: 'sacra privata' and 'sacra publica'. Among the Hindus the injunctions for the domestic rites
were laid down in the 'Grihya Sutras' and for the public in Srauta Sutras. In their different ways both were equally important. (H 76)

In both the cultures the domestic rites ensured the safety and welfare of the home in both the societies, and in both it was the head of the family - grihapati of the Hindus and pater familias - who was in charge of these duties. The performance of the domestic rites could be a heavy burden but neither the Hindus nor the Romans neglected them.

Both the societies laid emphasis on the correctness of invocations, utterances of the incantations faultlessly, appropriate gestures and also adornment of the sacrificial animals. The place of sacrifice for both the people was sacred and at the time of sacrifice there had to be either silence or music.

Parallelism between Hindu and Roman religion is seen by Chaudhuri in the domestic religious obligations also. These obligations as laid down by both, are series of prescribed rites from birth to death and service of regular oblations to the departed ancestors. For instance, no Hindu wedding could take place unless it had been preceded by oblations to dead ancestors. Among the Hindus as among the Romans, the continuity of the service to the death has to be maintained from generation to generation and therefore the continuation of the male line of descent is essential. The Romans in their attitude to their dead ancestors
always assumed that the manes weighed on the living with a burden of an undefined disquiet. This is the case with the Hindus as well. Due to some cause if the oblations for the ancestors ceased there was terror with the departed as well as the living descendants. This was called the calamity of pindalopa. With both the people, the first group of rites were almost sacrament. For example, with both, a period of seven or eight days after the birth of a child in the family are unclean days, and a purification ceremony was performed at the end of the period. Among the Romans, as among the Hindus the initiation and marriage are equally important.

Chaudhuri has traced the most striking resemblance between Hinduism and Roman religion in their rituals regarding their obligations to maintain fire both in public and private life. For the Romans, the hearth, which their called focus was the center of the home. It was considered the most holy and necessary feature of the home for fire was regarded as divine. It was the duty of the master of the house to maintain the fire in the hearth continuously for its going out could harm the family. Sacrifices were made into it every day. Among the ancient Hindus too, the establishment and the maintenance of the household fire was a strict religious obligation. The inauguration of a new household which coincided with marriage was marked with lighting of a new fire by its new master. Only then he attained the status of a householder recognised by both religion and society. On the death of a householder, his son relighted it. Oblations were also offered on it at home. In both the
societies public fires were equally important for the Hindus the whole contract between men and gods rested on the fire sacrifices. Their cessation meant collapse, and as a result dire calamities in the worldly order. Chaudhuri observes:

In ancient times, the Hindu Kings saw to it that the great public sacrifices were performed frequently and with due splendor. Among the Romans it was the Republic which had this responsibility. The State had its eternal fire, which was tended by the Vestals. It could not go out without endangering Rome. (H 78)

The shape of the altars for the fires was both important and significant. In the Hindu arrangement the private fire was circular and the public rectangular. The Romans also maintained this convention of shapes. The shapes and arrangements were symbolic. Among the Hindus, it was explicitly stated; the private fire was the earth and this world, and the public the sky and the other world. The explanation was the same in the case of the Romans.

Rites and Rituals in the Indian Society:

Religion is woven into the everyday lives of the Hindus. Most of the rituals they follow emerge out of their religious beliefs. Dr. Radhakrishnan observes:

The inadequacy of religion is evident from the disparity between outward allegiance and inward betrayal. Religion is confused with the
mechanical participation in the rites or passive acquiescence in the dogmas. Many of those who observe the forms of religion, the gestures of faith, the conventions of piety do not model their lives on the precepts they profess. We keep up the forms of religion, which seem to be of the nature of play-acting. (2)

The religious practices of the Hindu are more varied than their beliefs. They have so many aspects that they give rise to the impression that they belong to many religions. A Hindu's religious life is led on different planes and his practices call for different degrees and kinds of participation according to his position in the society. In the first place, the practices of the Hindus who remained in the world are generally very different from those who have left the world. Among the Hindus in the world, these differ according to caste, sex, and age. Chaudhuri writes:

A person who is not a twice born, or is a women or a child, has no obligation to perform any rite or worship in any way, except in respect of the dead or for sanctifying marriage and other worldly events (H154)

For an Indian, rituals are woven into his life in an intricate manner. Indians have made all the events starting from birth to death as well as many other occasions, which other societies look upon as purely secular, subject to religion. The rituals concerned with these began with conception from which the Hindus reckoned their age. Chaudhuri finds that each of these ceremonies is an occasion of considerable pomp and
publicity and as in all religions it was accompanied by music of the usual noisy kind i.e. beating of drums and gongs, clanging of cymbals, and blowing of pipes. The priest conducted the strictly religious part of the ceremony with great solemnity. Each ritual also had a non-religious festive side. He mentions the vratas, which are personal forms of worship and are observed generally by women. The completion of these vratas after a period of time are ceremonious accompanied by great pomp and show. Chaudhuri calls it the “consolidation of the merit acquired by observing the vow.”(H157)

According to Chaudhuri, most of the religious observances of the Hindus like the vratas do not have a devotional character and are only formal rites.

In the religious practices, Hindus never showed the casualness which marked their activities in the worldly life. Here alone was unfailing alertness and efficiency, and even attention to the aesthetic side of life so absent in everything else. Chaudhuri writes, that “the Hindus, who never serve food with any aesthetic sensibility at their worldly banquets, arranged the food platter of the gods and goddess in a manner which was beautiful to see.”( H159)

The rites and rituals accompanying the social ceremonies are different from those accompanying the religious. What Chaudhuri finds
common in both is the zeal with which they are followed accompanied by
a display of wealth, in the form of dressing up and feasts. He writes:

"...Hindu women wear their most gorgeous clothes and valuable
jewellery at religious festivals, and at weddings and other social
occasions. Not only are these not considered to be opposed to the
religious spirit, it is even unbecoming to be before god or goddess on
these occasions in everyday clothes. (H21)"

In The Autobiography he writes about his observations as a child,
regarding how the ladies would adorn themselves with new clothes and
jewellery during Durga puja. Here Chaudhuri also narrates the ritual of
buffalo sacrifice which used to take place in his ancestral village after the
five day ceremony of Durga puja. In-spite of his complete lack in religious
faith, he powerfully conveys the intensity and completeness of the rituals
felt by those who performed it. Though he makes no comment his
description portrays his disgust. He describes the "orgy" in the following
way:

All servants, all the spectators, all my relatives, old, middle aged and
young, fell on the convulsive and, as it seemed to us, mountainous
carcass of the buffalo, smeared themselves and the others with its
blood, kneaded the dust of the yard into a dough with blood, and pelled
one another with the mixture. This went on for some fifteen minutes
while I looked on aghast and awestruck from the backdoor of the Hut
under the Bakul. After this rampage the yard exhaled the mixed smell
of blood, moist earth, decayed flowers, and incense for a whole day and
even till the next day. (AUI 77)

This was followed by songs sung in praise of the goddess. Songs
for the mortals, immortals, songs voicing perplexity at the destructive fury
of the Great Mother. But by evening, Chaudhuri writes, the mood was
neither orgiastic nor devotional. It was gay and heart-free with lights
blazing, a whole crowd laughing and jostling, and the wild music more self
abandoned and noisy than ever.

Chaudhuri is equally critical about the rites involved during all
events starting from life to death. The Brahmanic culture that ensures that
each of the evils are accompanied by huge feasts reduce the solemnity of
the occasions to gregarious affairs. Now-a-days, these occasions have
become "means of advertising one’s wealth and position". (TLNL 56)

As such the Hindu way of life, as observed by Chaudhuri, is a dull
grind into which a living quality is not infused."The Hindu’s daily life is
bound hand and foot."(H191) The rituals performed during various religious
festivals become their only source of joy. With their habit of falling back on
religion in their sorrows and disappointments, Indians have rituals to
overcome all kinds of disappointments in life. Certain rituals observed for
the atonement of one’s sins can be extremely disgusting. Chaudhuri, in

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The Autobiography recalls how one of his neighbours had to atone for his sins by eating cow dung. Prof. Kaul observes:

Chaudhuri is right in observing that the Hindu religion controls every facet of one's life......He could have gone further and stated that the distinction between the religious and secular is not valid in Hinduism. One's diet, bathing habits, social relationships, marriage and death rites are all laid down.(3)

But the reason as to why the Indians resort to exquisite traditionalism as against innovation and experimentation can be found in the sub-conscious fears of the race. The fears arise from the fact that the Indians were forced to face new realities of life from time to time. The onset of unexpected novelties gave rise to fear and the rituals emerged mostly in order to provide supernatural help. The Indians, whose religion is basically worldly also devised rituals that ensured worldly gains.

Chaudhuri's critical approach towards the rituals as followed in India emerges from his rationalistic outlook. He combines his microscopic observation with historical perspective and objective to ruthlessly analyse the Indian life around him. A robust intellectual, he never shies away from the drawbacks of our social system, rituals and conventions. He attacks his fellow Indians for the discordance between their principles and practice. As he was brought up in a household whose members were adherents of Brahmoism, Chaudhuri developed a rationalistic outlook in
place of traditional Hindu superstitious outlook. No horoscopes were cast for any children in their house and Chaudhuri too never believed in them.

In *The Autobiography*, he has written:

> The worries and complications horoscopes bring in to life are almost endless to list. They draw a red herring across every personal problem – choice of profession, marriage, journeys, treatment in illness – and in truth, disturb and upset every rationale arrangement. (AI 132-133)

But Indians in general believe in superstitions. Both educated and uneducated Indians are alike in this regard. Chaudhuri comments that even scientists and barristers cannot do without superstitious rites. He observes:

> Even a professor of Physics would not think it was inconsistent with his vocation to wear an amulet and highly Westernized barristers would utter spells before the image of Ganesha, the God of worldly success and burn incense before it every morning so that his professional work might be successful. (II 32)

Chaudhuri whose own perspective towards life was based on reason and logic found this kind of behaviour among the Indian intellectuals extremely disgusting. His skeptical attitude towards the rituals emerges out of his perception that these rituals, in their dogmatic pursuits contribute to dehumanize the individual by way of rendering him into an excessively impassioned and emotional agent instead of restraining his
creaturely aberrations as against spiritual and secular existential norms.

Whatever be the ultimate intended purpose of these rituals, in the middle course of their operations, they only contribute for a colossal expansion of ignorance condescending to disregard of all the niceties of human values. Therefore Chaudhuri preached for a typical objectivity towards these rituals and not for an unthinking involvement in them, for he feared that excessive adherence to these rituals in one form or the other would stifle and stratify the most requisite human progress.
Notes and References


2. Ibid, p.21