

## ***PRODUCTS AND RITUALS***

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*Products are generally associated with dogma & irrationality. Very few attempts have been made to dispel the misconceptions and understand the positive facets of rituals. This article explores the relationship of rituals with material objects and its role in harmonising relationships between objects and human beings..... **K. Munshi***

## PRODUCTS AND RITUALS RITUALS AND PRODUCTS

*K. Munshi*

I must confess at the outset that I am not a ritualistic person in the traditional sense. I certainly have friends who are very ritualistic. I have very often observed a close friend of mine who has an office in Bombay performing an elaborate ritual before settling down to work and before leaving the office. He has two framed photographs of Sai Baba mounted on the adjacent walls. One has a flickering electric light which is never put off. When he enters, he puts his handkerchief on his head and bows alternately to these photographs, then touches one photograph and then his forehead, then another one, then again his forehead. This is repeated 3 or 4 times. And then he touches the drawer, where I believe another deity presides, then his paper carrying case which is on the table, then his forehead again before he settles on his chair. He repeats the same action when he has to leave his office in the evening. I didn't mention about the sweet nothings he whispers to his gods. To most of us it is a very hilarious and humorous situation, but for him it is a very serious business. Nothing can move him without performing this.

Watching him perform, I am reminded of an advertisement for an instant food- mashed potatoes. In this advertisement two Martians - people of the advance society of Mars are talking about the earthlings, who they have observed lately on one of their jaunts to earth; and one of them is narrating an experience about how mashed potatoes are made.

"They take potatoes, boil them, then peel them, then crush them and eat them", and they have a hearty Martian laugh.

The whole procedure was funny to them, but for the earthling it is a serious business of everyday significance and survival. When I see my friend performing I laugh, at the same time I realise that I behave like a Martian, an alien who doesn't understand the seriousness of his practice. We all laugh at things which we do not understand.

Fortunately or unfortunately rituals by nature are un-understandable, because if they are fully understood, they no longer remain rituals. Ritual is performed without analysis and without worrying about consequences. Ritual absolves the practitioner of the responsibility of the consequences as long as the ritual is performed faithfully.

Another characteristics of the ritual is that it is engaging. Any person who has shed his bias and critical faculty can be deeply engaged and enjoy watching and participating in a ritual. It has a relaxing effect on the performer. It has a kind of mesmerising effect. That is probably why rituals have always fascinated men and women of all ages. Rituals have therefore been performed throughout, and I believe will continue to be performed for eternity, may be in different forms.

Before going further with the various characteristics of rituals, let us try to define it. The easiest way to find is what the dictionary says:

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It says that 'ritual is an established form of conducting a religious or other rite'. This sounds familiar but unhelpful. There is another definition also. It says that 'ritual is any practice or behavior repeated in a prescribed manner'. This definition is more appropriate for our discussion and understanding. We can now see many of our daily activities falling into this definition of ritual like brushing of teeth everyday in the morning in the prescribed manner, washing of clothes with detergent powder as per the instructions on the pack, praying in the mornings, jogging, yoga etc. We also see that many of these activities or rituals are dependent on products. Now, we can also reason out why we do not come across a serious jogger with a Kurta and Pyjama on. He is in a jogging suit or shorts.

To understand the relationship between the rituals and the products in depth it is necessary to classify these. Rituals can be classified as follows:

1. Religious ritual e.g. Shradha ceremony, Yajna, Sunday mass, Namaz etc.
2. Social ritual like throwing rose water on baratis, folding hands for namaskar or shaking hands.
3. Social-religious ritual like marriages, Aarti, Garba dance etc.
4. Personal ritual like washing hands before eating, shaving every morning, doing yogic exercise etc.
5. Work ritual like beating a gold foil, weaving carpet, data entry on computer, assembly line work etc.

Products can similarly be classified:

1. Products used for rituals and nothing else, like spoon for distributing Amrut, or a small cross in the hands of a priest or his special robes or wedding gown.
2. Commonly used products transformed into ritual products for the period of ceremony or ritual, like ordinary 'gagar' turned into 'Kalash' for Yajna.
3. Products which lend themselves to rituals due to their nature, need or method of use.

In the first two categories the relationship between the products, their shape, their materials and their practice of use is complex and also full of semantic connotations and standards prescribed by religious orders. We will not discuss these as only religious scholars and interpreters of such rites would be able to do justice to these. Here, in this paper we will discuss the third category relationship only.

Most of the religious rituals even today pertain to death, marriage and birth - all to ensure smooth sailing in the other world, happiness in married life, and a long happy life in this world. We can see that these practices (rituals) stem from uncertainty, because there is no understanding of what is happening behind the scene, where ordinary reason and logic does not work

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effectively, where there is discontinuity and barrier or where the feed back is not direct or compatible with the action. In design terms it can be said that rituals tend to be used in 'Black Box' situations more often than not. For example putting the TV on, changing the channel, tuning etc. People who are not familiar with electronics do these action or their variations as 'prescribed'. Most of us do the same way with many equipments that we use like sewing machines, washing machines, Xerox printers, computers etc.

The error in performing this prescribed action or ritual or deliberate non-conformity leads to waste of time, inefficiency, or even break down of the equipment, mishap or serious accident. Cost of this error or the penalty that one has to pay can vary from mild to severe depending on the particular situation. For example if you do not follow strictly the procedure for washing clothes in 'Surf, you may not get the 'brightest' wash. If you run your kitchen machine for more than two minutes continuously against the prescription, the motor windings may bum. On the other hand if there is gas leak in the kitchen there is a list of instructions to be followed strictly, like," open all the windows", "Open all doors", "Do not put on the fan or light", "Do not rub anything" etc. If these are not followed strictly, you can imagine the very serious consequence and penalty - explosion, outbreak of fire. There can be many examples.

In cases where the penalties for not performing a ritual are very heavy, like dying in a plane crash after not checking the fuel gauges or going to hell after death for not performing certain ceremonies, the ritual becomes sacrosanct, sacred and inviolable.

If we look at modern technological systems. We find that these systems which includes the human component are susceptible to heavy penalties if the procedure, prescribed manner of operation (ritual) is not followed. And if we generalise we can say all complex systems lend themselves to ritualistic or ritualistic mode of operation and working. One reason is that complex systems are expensive; their maintenance, breakdown and shut down costs are quite high and these can occur if the rules of operation are not followed strictly.

Another reason is that these systems being complex are difficult to understand and therefore lend themselves to ritualistic behaviour. For example in a complex machine like a computer it will be dangerous to fiddle (e.g., keying without knowing the prescribed method or sequence) with the keys to experiment and find out their function as it may bug the computer and corrupt all the data stored in it. So it is very necessary to know exactly the procedure before operating such a complex machine even though one may not know how it functions internally.

If you have to enter an ultra clean room where electronic chips or integrated circuits are manufactured, you have to follow a strict procedure - remove shoes, put on a long apron of special prescribed material, put on a special cap covering your head, take an air shower (observe the apparent similarity in a religious ritual) and only then you can go in, otherwise the products made therein will be faulty.

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### **Rituals democratise**

Ordinary loader in such a facility and a highly trained electronic engineer or a visitor, all have to follow the same procedure or ritual before entering this room.

We can now say that rituals are also democratic in nature, And complex systems which are usually the outcome of modern technologies have democratising influence on societies. We can also say that if we design products and systems which lend themselves to rituals can alter our societies by altering our ways of looking at things and our behaviour towards them.

This democratisation apparently brings us into conflict with what I call hierarchy of understanding. Why should not an ordinary loader in a clean room facility understand or made to understand the significance of the ritual he is undergoing every morning before entering, as much as the highly trained engineer.

One reason is that each and every person cannot have the same level of understanding or cannot acquire the same level of understanding of every phenomenon - scientific, technological, religious, social or otherwise. This hierarchy is bound to be there because of the aptitude, interest, capacity and inclination to shoulder responsibility. Another important factor is the cost of making everybody understand all that goes on in this world. Though same cannot be said about opportunity. The opportunity for higher understanding should exist for everybody.

The task of the loader does not demand more understanding of such systems except that he should learn and follow the 'ritual of entrance' and other necessary 'rituals', otherwise it will be "sin" or it will be dangerous or it will cost him the job or "the boss has said so", etc. etc. This does not mean that loader having low understanding of electronic systems will not have high understanding in any other area, or the electronic engineer will not have low understanding of philosophy and religion. Electronic engineer still performs all religious rituals and the philosopher fiddles with the knobs of his stereo system without understanding anything about these tasks.

So, in fact the hierarchy of understanding which a ritual perpetuates does not conflict with its democratic character.

### **Rituals perpetuate specialisation**

Because of the hierarchy of understanding, specialisation takes place. Rituals perpetuate specialisation. In a society or in an organised system, there are always very few people who understand the complete phenomenon and the large number of people who will be trained in associated routine jobs which are very specific in nature and therefore very ritualistic and specialised. For example a process engineer works out the total processing procedure of a particular product manufacture. The process consists of many specialised activities which he assigns to specialised operators or specialised machines and so on. He is the person who prescribes all the parameters and rituals that others are to follow faithfully. We all know the advantages.

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### **Rituals initiate learning**

Rituals help in training. If you permit I will call it ritual therapy tentatively. It is analogous to physiotherapy. When the brain functions properly, it gives commands to various parts of the body like limbs to act. When it is struck by a paralytic stroke, reverse process is used to activate the brain by exercising the limbs that have been affected. Similarly rituals can be used to train the mind. This process is already used by making the school children recite the arithmetic tables till it gets memorised. They have just to sing it several times every day till it registers. Recall is also sequential. Once it is remembered and recalled understanding of multiplication and division becomes easier and quicker and therefore efficient. The principle of initial training by ritual or "initiation by ritual" can be time saving and effective. A very effective method of teaching car driving to a new driver would be to let him start and stop the car on a straight road many times and once he perfects this the advancement is quick and fault free. I have tried it, it works. It is effective and quick.

So ritualistic beginning helps in quicker understanding, keeping all other factors same. This leads me to say that all crash training programmes must have ritualistic beginnings. That is probably why the military academies lay so much emphasis on ceremonies and parades.

Role of teacher in a ritual is of prime importance. A good teacher has to know all the steps and impart them to his trainees and supervise its initial faithful implementation irrespective of whether he is the creator of ritual or not. The teacher must therefore be looked upon with utmost reverence and devotion (irrespective of his other qualities) and his word must be law. Since the ritual is not based on understanding and if the blind obedience is not there for the teacher, faithful performance is not possible. That is why all traditional rituals start with the homage to the guru - "the guru is supreme and I bow to thy dictum". All this cannot be done unless there is discipline

### **Rituals are disciplining**

Ritual is absolutely a disciplined practice and if it is not so, it is not a ritual. Why is military more disciplined? Because there are more rituals in military. Or, there are more rituals in military because we want the military to be more disciplined. Discipline is indispensable to ritual. If you perform a ritual of whatever kind, you are found to be a disciplined person. It is possible that one may be highly disciplined in one field of work and in disciplined in other areas, but I think over a period of time discipline would percolate to other activities as well, otherwise one can be sure that deterioration and degeneration is taking root and there must be a slip occurring in the original activity as well.

### **Rituals are dignifying**

Rituals add dignity to otherwise very mundane activities and ordinary products. An ordinary activity of entering the threshold of your house is transformed into a very dignified event when aarti is performed on a newly married couple or a guest. Similarly the ritual of filling in tobacco to a smoking pipe and lighting it in a proper way adds considerable value to the

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pipe and gives a new dimension to the smoker's personality. Classical dancers and musicians who perform faithfully according to the texts and true to their style or gharanas are respected more compared to the modern or pop musicians where the rigour of discipline is not demanded and constant prescription need not be followed faithfully.

### **Rituals are meditative**

They make you one with the object of ritual. It changes you as well as the object, irons out the conflicts, brings both into total harmony with each other and with the environment. It makes life and work, person and the object indistinguishable from each other and elevates all together. It clears up the mind for greater understanding. Ritual well performed on a machine or otherwise extends peace and feeling of well being and creates satisfaction for the job well done.

Rabindranath Tagore has said about the "joys of not understanding", which can be implied as the joy of working without understanding, which is ritual. Transcendental meditation which is supposed to be easiest and quickest meditation technique is incidentally ritualistic in character.

### **Rituals are humanising**

Many living species indulge in rituals, but unlike rituals performed by human beings these are performed because of genetic and instinctive compulsions. It is only man who has designed his rituals for varied purposes and occasions like birth, death, marriage, initiation, training and deeper communication with the universe which includes working and communicating with our day to day. Objects of use. Without indulging in ritualistic activities we would be living like animals and working like robots. Typical examples could be ritual of greeting like good morning or namaskar. How would it be if we do not greet each other on meeting. If we think very rationally it is a waste of time, but greeting each other helps us to communicate and starts the process of mutual understanding. In Vishwakarma Puja the worker extends human attributes to his machine and tools and in the process humanises his relationship with them. It helps to develop respect for one's work and tools which is very essential for good and efficient working.

The ritual humanises and therefore legitimises the work codes that must be respected and observed, which otherwise would be soulless and boring.

In the light of the above discussion we may redefine the ritual. Ritual is not just a mechanical or mindless practice or behaviour repeated in a prescribed manner. It is something more than that. That which adds soul to the activity, disciplining dignifying, unifying and humanising activity which brings, together the subject and the object in complete harmony and which sets off the process of better and higher understanding.

This reminds me of an American TV crew who came to make a film on India and its people and culture. And naturally they went to Varanasi where they met a learned Gyani Pandit. In the morning they went with him to Ganga Ghats where they asked him why are so many people devotedly

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performing rituals which he himself does not perform, though he was a man of religion. He raised his finger pointing to the East across the vast expanse of the river, and asked "Can you see the deer there". They adjusted their eyes in line with the finger and they couldn't see anything, they tried again and couldn't see. He told them, "If you keep on looking at the finger, there is a chance that some day you will sight the deer. Looking at the finger is the ritual, but the real target is beyond. If you left your gaze off, you will never sight it. I have sighted the deer and they are still looking at the finger".

In the light of this I would like to say that the designer of modern products and technological systems and also the designer of political/social/economic systems should review the philosophies and objectives of design and the make such products and systems which lend them to rituals or work codes that are dignifying, unifying and humanising. We have to take up the role of the creators of new rituals so necessary for advancement and lift ourselves to be modern Gyans. We should be able to point the finger which shows the direction and thus start the process of elevating the over all understanding by the use of our creations and the associated rituals to make the life richer, harmonious and meaningful. That means the product and the way of its use should not be treated separately but to be thought together and keep questioning if the way of use prescribed is humane and dignifying as a good ritual should be. This is going to ensure harmony and 'peace' with the things we deal with.

Before concluding, I would like to recite to you my homage to the ritual:

*Let me perform well all the religious rituals to be in peace with my Gods.*

*Let me perform well all the personal rituals to be in peace with myself.*

*Let me perform well all the work rituals to be in peace with my work and the tools*

*Let me perform well all the social rituals to be in peace with all of you, my friends.*  
Namaskar.

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