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- [Style](#)
- [Teens](#)
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- [Reno / Tahoe](#)
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### Hindu ritual made her house feel like a home

By Mona Vijaykar

While growing up as a young Hindu girl in India's Catholic schools, my imagination was caught up in Western fantasy. Visions from "The Sound of Music," Cinderella and Enid Blyton's stories dominated my daytime reverie. I dreamed of a Prince Charming whisking me off to his castle with an enchanting garden, where we would live happily ever after.

Fortune granted me everything I had ever wished for, although typically confused. By the time my Prince Charming succumbed to matrimony, I was almost gray, and my dream home turned up in California, thousands of miles away from my loved ones. Here, I toiled, like Cinderella, sweeping, cooking, washing and cleaning, happily ever after!

Over the years our castles varied in size. Yet, I marveled at how those empty spaces assumed the culture of their occupants with unresisting ease.

Nothing could have prepared one of our earlier homes for what it was about to receive. Along with our precious possessions, came two new births, two naming ceremonies, three sparkling Diwali celebrations, three swinging Dasehra dances, three boisterous Holis, several joyous visits from grandparents in India, umpteen reunions, a host of birthdays and anniversaries, among other happy Indian and American festivities.

Yet the mother of all celebrations had to be our grand housewarming or *Vaastu Shanti* in Sanskrit, which set the shape of things to come. This was an elaborate Hindu ritual that began with the *Griha-pravesh* or the formal entering into the home and ended with the *Ho-m* or tribute to fire. Despite my limited knowledge of Hindu rituals, I wanted to have a traditional housewarming just for a lark. Little did I know it would open new doors for me (pun intended)!

Meaningful rituals add significance to an occasion and leave an imprint for posterity. How else could I explain my own desire, as an adult, to re-create the rituals of my childhood? I relished the warm, communal atmosphere, surrounded by incense and floral perfume, the aroma of sweet offerings and the buzz of family and friends over strains of classical Indian music.

Yet as a child, I would turn up my nose at the "boring ancient rituals" that our elders performed. I was oblivious to the meaning of the Hindu chants and rituals because of my ignorance of the Sanskrit language.

Imagine my surprise and shame when I learned that Hindu rituals were in fact geared to contemporary and relevant issues of environmental awareness. This invaluable message of praise and reverence for ecological balance, recycling, conservation and the protection of endangered species is contained in the Hindu Scriptures.

Our master of ceremonies, an elderly gentleman and an engineer by profession, cut the most un-priestly figure as he arrived to perform his sacred duties. But his vast knowledge of the Vedas, the Hindu scriptures, and his ability to convey their treasured meanings in delightfully simple English made him our perfect guru for the day. It was his advice, after consulting my lunar calendar, that helped us determine an auspicious date and time for the event. After all, if the position of the stars could indeed influence our future domestic harmony, it wouldn't hurt to comply.

Hindu philosophy is replete with brilliant symbolism that is open to innumerable interpretations and practices. As we groped our way through the sequence of events, our priest guided us through each ceremony, offering meanings and explanations of their significance while unfolding an astounding array of answers to age-old riddles.

The very first entity to do *Griha-pravesh* through the main door, which was adorned with a *toran*, a colorful banner of marigolds and mango leaves, would be the true owner of our home. This meant neither my husband, nor me, but Lord Ganesh or Ganpati.

This plump and cheerful elephant-headed figure represents boundlessness to Hindus and would be a constant reminder of the greater power that owns the universe and of our own humble place in the bigger scheme of things. We would be mere caretakers of this home.

With his tiny friend, the mouse, Ganpati would emphasize equal respect in our home for creatures great and small. From his vantage point, his tiny but sharp eyes would represent that power that surveys all, and his swollen belly would store every obstacle that he intercepts. His raised palm would assure us of the supreme positive energy that prevails upon our family and those who pass through our home. Ganpati's presence enhances all new beginnings.

While my husband, Atul, carried the Ganpati *moorti* or idol into the house, I would escort them in, bearing a *kalash* over my head. I welcomed this idea as a child would accept a balloon. The *kalash* is a copper pot filled with water, the source of life, topped with a coconut and a spray of mango leaves symbolizing creation.

This water also represents all the knowledge contained in the Vedas, essentially a compilation of every science known to humans. As we passed through the door, I caught a glimpse of the lemons and green chiles that we hung in the doorway to keep evil spirits at bay.

We began the ceremony with an acknowledgment to our elders. We stood, palms joined in salute or *namaste* before our parents' photos, expressing our gratitude for their unflinching love and support and inviting them to join us in spirit as we crossed the threshold to a new phase of our lives.

We settled with our guests around the makeshift fireplace, or *havan*, to begin the *ho-m*, and images of ancient sagely fire rituals came alive. The power of our combined voices resonated throughout our home as we sacrificed butter and wood chips into the *havan*, accompanying each spoonful with a pledge in Sanskrit verse.

Thus began a relationship with this land, or *Vastu*, that would sustain us through the coming years. In turn we would protect and nourish it and pray for its *shanti*, or peace. As the smoke rose heavenward it carried our prayers to all the powers of the universe for strength of body and mind to serve ourselves, our neighbors, our community and all of humanity. Who could deny the spiritually refreshing effect of positive thought?

Finally, we would tour every room, every corner, with the *kalash*, using the mango leaves to spray its contents in a symbolic gesture of purification and to infuse our home with life, joy, creativity, learning and growth. In short, it would be home, sweet home!

