

Indian Wedding Traditions

One billion people, more than 1600 spoken languages, 28 culturally different states, over 9 religions, one country – India defines *diversity*. This diversity, seen in every realm of Indian life starting from food & clothing to customs & traditions, is reflected in Indian marriages as well. We are restricting to Hindu weddings in this article.

In our culture, marriage symbolizes not just the sacred union of two individuals, but of the coming together of two families and extended families as well! Arranged marriages are strictly intra-religion and intra-caste. Compatibility of the couple is assessed on the basis of horoscopes, and if good, then an alliance is sought for.

In urban areas, the couple goes a step further to interact and see if their interests and natures match. Though *arranged* marriages are still the norm, *love* marriages are becoming a common occurrence these days, predominantly in urban areas.

Months before the wedding an engagement ceremony, known as *Mangni* (in North India) or *Nischitartham* (in South India), is held. The two families meet to perform rituals to make the engagement official. A *muhurat* (auspicious date & time) for the wedding is decided based on horoscopes. The couple is then blessed by elders of both families, and is given gifts including jewellery and clothing by their new family.

In certain traditions, engagement is marked by the exchange of rings between the bride and groom to be. Indian engagement ceremonies are very elaborate and vibrant, a sort of prequel to the main wedding, involving close friends and relatives in order to get the bond.

Pre-wedding ceremonies

Traditional Indian weddings last a week, and start with pre-wedding ceremonies. *Haldi* is a ritual holy bath during which turmeric (Haldi), oil and water is applied to both the bride and groom by married women.

This is followed by *Mehendi* ceremony, during which the bride's hands and feet are decorated with intricate patterns by the application of Henna. On a lighter note, it is believed that, deeper the color of the mehendi (henna) stronger is the groom's love for the bride. With foot tapping music and dances, this 'ladies-only' party lends a break from the otherwise more ritualistic ceremonies.

When the bride goes to the groom's house after the wedding, she is not expected to perform any housework until her mehendi has faded away.

Other important North-Indian pre-wedding ceremonies include *Sangeet*, and *Tilak*. *Sangeet* means music. As the name suggests, this function is an evening of musical entertainment and merriment hosted by the bride's family. The main significance of this ceremony is that the bride is introduced to all the members of her new family.

As a part of the *Tilak* ceremony, vermillion or kumkum is placed on the forehead of the groom by all the male members of the bride's family. Kumkum is a sign of auspiciousness. Presents are given to the groom and his family, requesting them to take care of the bride.

Janavasam is a predominantly south Indian tradition, where the groom is paraded around the town on a chariot (or nowadays a open car!), the evening before the wedding. In small towns and villages this event serves to show the groom to the people, so that if they knew anything about the groom that had to be brought to the notice of the bride's family, they could do so. This is similar to the Christian tradition of the priest asking those present, if anyone had any objection to the wedding.

Wedding Attire

Traditionally the bride wears a *sari* or a *lehenga* which is highly ornate with gold and silver embroidery. The color of the *sari* or the *lehenga* is of great significance, and is different for different communities. The colors generally considered auspicious for the occasion are, red, yellow, green or white. Red is most common and it symbolizes prosperity, fertility and *saubhagya* (marital bliss).

The bride also dons elaborate and beautiful ornaments primarily made of gold and precious stones. Her hair is plaited and decorated with flowers and jewellery. In north India, the bride also wears a *ghunghat* (veil), draped modestly over her hair as a sign of respect to the deities worshipped and the elders present.

The groom wears a *dhoti* or *sherwani* which also has a lot of subtle but intricate embroidery. The color of *dhoti* or the *sherwani* is usually white, off-white or beige. In North-India, the groom also wears a turban with white flowers tied in suspended strings called the *Sehra*. In some traditions, he may also sport a sword as part of his wedding outfit.

In most south Indian weddings, both the bride and the groom have a *kajal* (black) mark on their cheek, to ward off ill omen and evil eye. Though the bride and the groom clearly steal the show with their exquisite outfits, the families of the bride and the groom, friends, relatives and guests wear very grand clothes. Thus, a typical Indian wedding is a very colorful affair!

Wedding ceremony

If one thinks this is a lot of rituals, wait till the big wedding day. The actual wedding ceremony itself is around 3 hours long, not including many other smaller rituals before and after the *muhurat* (auspicious time).

The wedding is usually held at the bride's home or a wedding hall. The arrival of the groom is an important and fun-filled event. The groom, dressed in his wedding attire, leaves his home to the wedding venue on a decorated *ghodi* (horse) or for the more extravagant, on a decorated elephant! Along with the groom sits his 'best man' usually a younger brother, cousin or nephew who acts as his caregiver. However, these days, these customs are not seen any more as most grooms like to travel by luxury cars.

The groom is usually accompanied by his family members, relatives and friends in a big procession (*Baarat*) with a lot of pomp and show including music, orchestra, dance and fireworks. At the wedding venue, the bride waits for the groom, with a *Jaimala/Varamala*, which is a decorated garland.

Soon after the groom arrives, the bride and groom exchange garlands. On a lighter note, it is considered that, whoever puts the garland first on their partner, will have an upper hand in the marriage. Following this, the bride's parents and elder members of the family welcome the groom and the guests. The mother of the bride performs the *Aarti* when the groom enters the house. The *Baraat* and *Jaimala* are primarily North-Indian traditions. In South-India, on the morning on the wedding day, there is a ceremony called *Kashi Yatra*, during which, the groom dressed simple attire, throws a fit (obviously a fake one), declaring that he has decided to give up the institution of marriage to go to *Kasi* (Varnasi) to take up sainthood. This is when the bride's father/brother humbly requests the groom to choose marriage over sainthood, convincing him that the bride will assist him in his subsequent spiritual pursuit.

The couple exchanges garlands following this event, during which both parties carry the bride and groom making it tougher for the other to put the garland. This is another fun event, eliciting a lot of laughter. Another popular north Indian tradition is *Baasi Jawari* or *Joothe Churana* (stealing the shoes). The bride's sisters hide the groom's shoes, and demand the groom money to have them returned. Apart from all the fun, many *pujas* (prayers) are performed by the bride and the groom on the day of the wedding.

The bride does a *Gowri puja* (worshipping the Indian goddess *Parvathi*), and the groom does a *Ganesh puja* (worshipping the elephant headed Indian deity *Ganesha*), to gain their blessings, so that the entire wedding runs smoothly without any hurdles.

Kanyadaan or giving away of the bride, is an important part of the main wedding ritual. *Kanyadaan* is derived from the Sanskrit words *kanya* which means virgin girl and *daan* which means giving away. This is performed by the father of the bride, where he gives his daughter to the groom, requesting him to accept her as an equal partner. Unlike in a Christian wedding, the bride and groom marry each other and the priest only facilitates the marriage by reciting *mantras* or holy hymns, but doesn't have the authority to declare them married.

The bride and groom are considered wed when the groom ties a *mangalsutram/thali* which is a sacred thread that symbolizes his promise to take care of the bride as long as he lives. The groom ties three knots when he ties the *Thali*, symbolizing the gods *Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara*. The entire wedding is done around an *Agni Homam* (sacred fire). *Agni* (fire god) is considered as the main witnesses to the marriage. The bride and the groom then circle the fire seven times, in a clockwise direction, called *Saat Phere* which signifies seven goals of married life which include religious and moral duties, prosperity, spiritual salvation and liberation, and sensual gratification. The bride leads the *Pheres* first and then the groom leads them, signifying equality of the two partners and their determination to stand beside each other through happiness and sorrow.

Another interesting tradition is the *Sapthapadhi* which means taking seven steps together. It is believed that if one follows seven steps with another person, it is considered as a confirmation of their eternal friendship. Thus in a wedding this symbolizes that the bride and the groom will keep up their friendship for life and also partake equally in both good and bad times in life.

The wedding culminates with the groom applying vermillion or *kumkum* to the bride's forehead, welcoming her as his partner for life. This is the first time that *kumkum* is applied to the forehead of woman, when the bridegroom himself adorns her with it. In South-India, this is usually followed by the groom putting toe-rings on the bride. The *kumkum*, the *mangalsuthram* and the toe-rings symbolize a married woman.

South Indian weddings also have a ceremony where the groom shows the *Arundhati Nakshatram* (a subtle star in the Ursa Major constellation) to the bride. Historically, *Arundhati* was the wife of Sage *Vashishta*, and was considered to be the chastest of

all women. It is believed that by seeing the *Arundhati* star, the bride will be as chaste as *Arundhati* herself.

Some wedding traditions also include wedding games for the couple to lighten the mood. In one such game they are to retrieve a ring from a pot of colored water, and this is done thrice to decide the winner. In another game, the bride and groom work together, to untie a ball of knots, using only one hand each. This symbolizes their perseverance in resolving together, issues that might come up in life. Other games include breaking *papad* on each other's head, playing with a ball of flowers.

Food served during the wedding ceremony is traditional and vegetarian. A wide variety of dishes are served. The types of dishes vary extensively from region to region. In South-India, food is served on banana leaf.

Post – wedding ceremonies

After the wedding ceremony is over, the bride is bid farewell as she leaves for her husband's house. This is a very emotional moment for the bride and her family, as she is leaving her parent's family to join her husband's.

In some traditions, the couple goes first to the bride's house, and after a few days leaves for the groom's. In olden days, the bride used to be carried to the groom's house in a *doli* (palanquin). Upon arrival at the groom's house the newly-wed couple is greeted at the doorstep with *Aarti* to ward off bad spirit. The bride then topples a *kalash* (metal pot) of rice with her right leg. Following this, the couple enters the house, taking the first step with the right leg. In some traditions, the bride steps into a plate of vermillion mixed in water, and walks down to the prayer room. All this constitutes the *grihapraves* (*griha* – house, *praves* – entry) ceremony.

The bride and groom then perform *Satyanarayana puja* (prayer) showing their gratitude to the lord. The bride and the groom's side hold a reception for family and friends. They may combine it with the wedding or may hold it separately. This event is non-ritualistic. People come to offer their greetings to the newly wedded couple. With so much of color, vibrancy, food, people, rituals, music, fun and frolic, the Indian wedding is truly a festival in itself!