

The Hindu Wedding

Introduction

Marriage in the Hindu religion is the 13th of the 16 ceremonies in a person's life. It is a sacrament and as such is solemnised in accordance with the VEDAS, the holy scriptures of the Hindu religion that date back several thousand years.

Hindu Ceremonies seem to last for hours, days or even weeks. Although the wedding itself is held on one day, there are a number of ceremonies that are usually held on separate days preceding the wedding:

Engagement ('Misri', the Ring Ceremony) - this event is held to exchange the gold wedding rings. The couple welcome each other with garlands and sweets are exchanged between the two families. The engagement is often completed a dinner party for friends and relatives. Among Gujarati families the bride's family presents the 'Matli', which consists of significant quantities savoury snacks and Indian sweets, to the groom's.

Mehndi Party - This is a festive occasion celebrated by the bride's family. The bride and close female members of her family have henna painted on their hands and feet while the rest of the family celebrate with songs. Mehndi signifies the strength of love in a marriage so brides try to leave it on as long as possible! Mehndi parties are often held at home and end with dinner for the family and friends.

Raas Garba (Sangeet Party)

In many families, the Sangeet Party is a much larger affair held as a separate joint event for both families. It is an opportunity to sing songs, eat, drink and dance the night away. Among Gujaratis, Raas Garba is a favoured alternative. These are held in a hall and involve traditional dance (Garba), and dandia raas (dancing with sticks). The Raas Garba usually ends with a light supper for all those attending.

Ghari Puja

This is a religious ceremony performed on the eve of the wedding day in the respective homes of the couple. The priest performs prayers with rice, coconut, wheat grains, oil, betel nuts and turmeric. During this event, the mother and close female relatives dress up in their finery. They carry earthenware pots of water on their head and plant a small stalk in their garden in celebration of the marriage. Nowadays, the Ghari Puja is often combined with the cleansing ceremony (Pithi) during which the bride and bridegroom are pasted with turmeric powder in a beautification process.

Outfits & Jewellery

The bridal outfit consists of a red and white sari heavily embroidered with gold thread. The white signifies purity and the red signifies fertility. It is customary for the bridegroom's family to gift the bride a wedding sari, so she may actually end up wearing two saris! The first, a simpler silk sari given to her by her maternal uncle (mama), and covering her head, a heavier embroidered sari given to her by her husband's family. The groom also wears white (ivory or beige). His outfit can be a traditional Sherwani (long tunic embroidered with gold thread) worn with Kurta pyjamas, or a simpler dhoti and tunic. Both families use the occasion to wear their finery and much of their traditionally ornate gold jewellery. This is not custom, so much as fashion!

The Wedding Ceremony

The wedding day usually commences with a fast for both the bride and groom. The groom will leave his house accompanied by his best man and one of his younger female relatives whose job it is to keep the groom awake by shaking a metal pot filled with a few coins and a betel nut over his head. The history behind this curious custom is that weddings in India were traditionally held in the evening at which time many a groom might succumb to slumber!

On leaving his house, the groom's car may be impeded by the younger female members of his family who demand a "gift" in exchange for allowing him to leave for his wedding ceremony.

The majority of the wedding ceremony will take place in a Mandap (the four-pole canopy at centre stage). The sacred fire in the Mandap symbolises not only the illumination of the mind, knowledge and happiness but is also a clean and pure witness to the ceremony as it progresses. The ceremony itself is a collection of rituals performed by the bride, bridegroom and their respective parents and close relatives. The priest chants "mantras" from the Vedas that were originally written in Sanskrit. He will also use the following in his ceremonies:

- Fresh flowers - to signify beauty;
- Coconut - to signify fertility;
- Rice, jaggery and other grains - to signify the food necessary for sustenance of human life
- Ghee (purified butter) - to feed the sacred fire;
- Kumkum (vermilion) - red powder used for marking the forehead to signify good luck and to say that your soul (husband) is with you.

The major stages of the Hindu Ceremony:

Ganesh Puja - The wedding day starts with a prayer invoking Lord Ganesh whose divine grace dispel all evils and promotes a successful and peaceful completion of the ceremony.

Grah Shanti (Worship to the Nine Planets) - This is a prayer to the nine planets of our Solar system. Ancient Indian studies indicated that various celestial bodies have an influence on the destiny of every individual. The effect of the nine planets is meant to be the most profound.

During this puja the Gods associated with these planets are asked to infuse courage, peace of mind and inner strength to the bride and groom to help them endure life's sufferings.

The Welcome (Parchan) - The bride's mother welcomes the bridegroom with a garland and she then escorts him to the mandap. The father of the bride washes the right foot of the bridegroom with milk and honey. At the end of the welcome, a white sheet is held to prevent this bridegroom seeing the arrival of the bride.

Arrival of the Bride - The bride is escorted to the mandap by her maternal uncle (Mama), female cousins and friends. In some wedding ceremonies she may be carried in a small carriage to the mandap.

Kanyadaan (Entrusting of the Daughter)

Consent of the parents is obtained for the wedding to proceed. The bride's parents give their daughter to the groom by putting the bride's right hand into the groom's right hand (Hastamelap, joining of hands) while reciting sacred verse. The curtain separating the bride and groom is then lowered and the couple exchange flower garlands. The elders of the house place an auspicious white cotton cord around the couple's shoulder's to protect them from the evil influences. This also symbolises the couple's bond. The groom holds the bride's hand and they both take vows to love cherish and protect each other throughout life.

Ganthibandhan (tying the knot) - The priest ties the wedding knot as a symbol of the permanent union between the bride and groom as husband and wife.

Agni Puja (evocation of the holy fire) - The priest sets up a small fire in a kund (cooper bowl). Agni (fire) is the mouth of Vishnu and symbolises the illumination of mind, knowledge and happiness. The remainder of the ceremony is conducted around the fire.

Shilarohana (stepping on the stone) - The bride places her right foot on a stone. The bridegroom tells her to be as firm as the stone in his house so that she can face their enemies and the difficulties of life together.

Laja homa (putting parched rice into the sacred fire) - Three obligations are offered to the sacred fire. The brother of the bride puts into the bride's hand parched rice, half of which slips into the bridegroom's hand. Mantras are chanted. The bride prays to Yama, the God of Death, that he grant long life, health, happiness and prosperity to the bridegroom.

Mangalfera (walking around the fire) - The couple walk around the sacred fire four times. Each time they stop to touch with their toe a stone in their path. This symbolises obstacles in life that they will overcome together. These four rounds stand for the four basic human goals:

- Dharma - righteousness
- Artha - monetary accomplishment
- Kama - energy and passion in life
- Moksha - liberation from everything in life.

The groom, signifying his contribution in helping the union to attain dharma, artha and kama, leads the first three rounds. The bride signifying their continual journey spiritual liberation leads the last round.

Saptapadi (seven steps) - The bride and groom take seven steps together around the fire. It is said in Hindu philosophy that if two people walk seven steps together then they will remain lifelong friends. They exchange sacred vows at the beginning of each encircling walk. At the end of each walk, the open palms of the bride are filled with puffed rice by her brother signifying wealth and prosperity. The seven steps and their promises are:

1. Let us take the first step to provide for our household, keeping a pure diet and avoiding those things that might harm us.
2. Let us take the second step to develop our physical, mental and spiritual powers.
3. Let us take our third step to increase our wealth by righteous and proper means.
4. Let us take our fourth step to acquire knowledge, happiness and harmony by mutual love, respect and trust.
5. Let us take the fifth step so that we may be blessed with strong, virtuous and heroic children.
6. Let us take the sixth step for self-restraint and longevity.
7. Let us take the seventh step to be true companions and remain life-long partners by this wedlock.

Saubhagya Chinha (blessing the bride) - The bridegroom blesses the bride by putting kumkum or sindhur (vermilion powder) at the parting of her hair (or on her forehead) and by giving her a sacred necklace (Mangal Sutra). The Mangal Sutra represents the couple's togetherness, love and sacred union.

Haridaya-Sparsha (touching of hearts) - The bride and bridegroom touch each other's heart reciting promises to each other.

Chaturthi Karma - The bride and groom feed each other four times for nourishment of the bone, muscle, skin and soul.

Aashirvaad (blessings) - The priest blesses the bride and groom. Flower petals and rice are given to the guests to shower them on the bride and groom with blessings. The wedding guests can then give their individual blessings to the bride and groom and once completed, the marriage ceremony ends. Guests are invited to enjoy a sumptuous meal with the newlyweds.

Viddai (Bride's departure) - The farewell to the bride by her family and friends is a very emotional episode. The bride is leaving her parents home to build a life with her husband and his family. She leaves with tears of joy and sorrow.

Pilucinchuanu - Before the wedding car departs for the Hindu temple, the priest will place a coconut under the front wheel of the car and wait for it to be broken by the weight of the car. The historic significance of this is that in the old days the couple would use a horse drawn carriage and the breaking of the coconut ensured that the vehicle was roadworthy for the journey.

The pilucinchuanu concludes the entire ceremony.