

The Indian Wedding for Dummies

The "Indian wedding" (I should say the Hindu wedding to be exact) has made the subject of numerous books, movies, visits to India. In short it's an institution. I will try here to understand something to it!

The Indian wedding for Dummies - 1. The arranged marriage

Arranged marriage: and why not?!

Let's make the distinction between arranged marriage and forced marriage.

If I can de-dramatize arranged marriages (read below), it is impossible to do the same with forced marriages which are still widely practiced in India: 40% of women do not have a word in the choice of the husband, less than 20% of women (over 25) knew their husbands before the fateful day and worse, almost 50% of women have married before the legal age of 18 (source <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/many-women-have-no-say-in-marriage/article5801893.ece>).

Which means that there are still thousands of people (Hindus) who, each year, follow the tradition and find out whom they are going spend the rest of their lives with only when they are already married: SURPRISE! As per the custom to groom arrives first, and his view is hidden with a bed sheet, which is removed once the bride is brought in by her maternal uncle and cousins and the consent of the parents exchanged. The bed sheet is simply a less sexy version (but more promising ;)) of the veil used in Catholic marriages, originally to hide the face of the bride (source <http://www.le-mariage.com/traditions/>).

The concept of arranged marriage, still very prevalent in India (more than 90% of cases), tends to shock the Westerners. Before crying wolf and saying Indians are horrible, remember that from the time of Ancient Rome to the 19th century (i.e. 2 500 small years), the marriage of convenience was the norm in our civilization. The family was then a "business of social or economic survival" and marriage a "contract" to ensure its sustainability*.

What about love in an arranged marriage? When a Westerner thinks of arranged marriage, he immediately gets the image of a pretty girl forced to marry a loser, too ugly and too stupid to find a woman by himself! While in fact, parents seek someone who matches as much as possible – and we can assume that they know their offspring pretty well! And the candidate has a whole lot of criteria to fill: religion, caste, skin colour (fairness being an essential criterion of beauty), income, location, diet (non-vegetarian vs vegetarian), horoscope to mention only but the most important.

Whatever said and done, it is likely that two "virgins of love", that many things draw close (see above-mentioned criteria), which have been waiting for it since childhood, end up loving each other (they so want it!). The passion, the ignition of the body and desire, is less guaranteed but at the same time it is known to be ephemeral, isn't it? ;)

Let's be honest: who has never felt, while celibacy and the thirties are at their full, as meetings on the Internet have only led to failures (ending up, at best, as entertaining sex buddies), as the stock of single friends' friends is exhausted, when the anxiety of ending up as a lonely spinster eaten by her cat makes the ball in your throat so big even Häagen-Dazs doesn't get down anymore : "if only my awesome parents who have (almost) always fulfilled my whims could find me the perfect match!" Who did not want to make this call, unthinkable, and yet potentially life-saving?!

In the same vein, it is a bit hypocritical to criticize arranged marriage when you see the success of online dating sites in the West (in 2007, 1 out of 8 married couple in the US met online! source <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-9FaJPhFxQ>).

And then even if it is not written black on white, if it is not man-da-tory, despite our increasingly multicultural environments, we are still largely endogamic – most of my friends have married people from their tribe, and it is certainly easier to manage than for the eccentrics who get a partner from another country, another colour, another religion or another social class. Easier because two endogamic people only have to overcome the differences due to gender and personality and not all the others. But it is also probably less outlandish, enriching and rewarding!

So when you dig a little, you realize that what mostly shocks my fellow Westerners is not so much the "arrangement" itself but rather the idea of not having "tested the goods before purchase", ending up on the wedding night in bed with an unknown person... I admit that in our culture where sex is ubiquitous, obsessive, glorified, overvalued (?), the idea is off-putting. In addition it is a bad one if I

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take the example of my (Indian) close friends' experiences: unconsumed union, weird practices, very often the man is not "up to the mark" and this up till the divorce! Seeing a young couple on honeymoon who has nothing to say to each other in the first days (before things warm up) surprises me every time, and makes me reflect on the oddity (from my point of view) of the situation.

And yet it is still the rule. For the lucky ones, the "choice" to refuse an application is becoming increasingly available. So is the option to introduce someone (from school, from the office) and if the afore-mentioned criteria are met and that the union takes place, it will be called a "love marriage" (even if very often, there is no romantic relationship). Real love marriages, guided by passion and defying the afore-mentioned criteria, remain very rare and often end up in bloodshed (especially in under-privileged backgrounds).

That is why passion is exalted as the Holy Grail (something you dream of but will never get) in the movies, and in families as a trouble maker (the uncontrollable versus the social codes that govern a well-ordered life).

* "It is during the 18th century that the family ceased to be regarded as a business of social survival or economic to rely more and more on the feeling of love [...] The mentioned change was influenced by economic factors such as industrialization, opening markets, wage labour, the progressive improvement of conditions of life, but also by an encouragement of the Church and the State. [...] We can see, for example, that today, despite the diversification of modern societies which are often multicultural, a trend quite generalized to contract endogamic marriages; the choice of the partner is often influenced by social origin, ethnic, racial or religious." Source: <http://www.asblcefa.be/cefa/images/pdf/9mariagearrange>
"Marriage is first a contract between a man and a woman. Subsequently, free consent developed, and marriage for love gradually override the marriage of convenience during the nineteenth century, in parallel with the evolution of the role of women in society, aimed to bring the equal of men. This process culminated with the legalization of divorce in 1884. » Source: <http://www.mariages.net/articles/origines-et-histoire-du-mariage--c5102>

The Indian wedding for Dummies - 2. Finding a suitor

When it is decided to put such son or such daughter on the market, the family prepare a resume and letter of motivation – I'm not kidding, my ex-boyfriend was super happy when he received a spontaneous application even though 1. He was not officially "available" for marriage and 2. He thought his reputation was ruined because he was dating a foreigner.

Then they activate social networks (and here I am not speaking of facebook but of the original networks, which have incredible proportions among Indians, who are able to talk to anyone anywhere and make friends in five minutes.

There is also the tradition of the *nayan*, the matchmaker (source <http://postcolonialstudies.emory.edu/marriage-in-india/>) It is usually a friend or a distant relative, neutral, having a talent as a recruiter (to find the unique one) and as a negotiator (to succeed in having both parties agreeing to the "terms" of the marriage (although the dowry is illegal in India since 1961, it is commonplace that the family "buys" the guy – I gift you a nice car if (please, please, please) you marry my daughter).

They also publish matrimonial ads in newspapers.

Today they also register on marriage websites.

The family astrologer is also involved. While we are at it, you should know that in India, the astrologer isn't considered as a charlatan but rather as a pillar in the life of every good Hindu: birth first, marriage then (that's why on invitation cards, the time is very precise, like 9:46 AM; is not a typo mistake but the exact time when the stars will cross path!) and then at any other important moment. For instance, one of my best managers shifted his interview for a few days, so that the planets would be aligned. So be it. Hindus even grant astrologers with the benefit of mistakes and don't hesitate to consult several experts to get the real truth. Astrologers are also a bit magicians because when the alignment is messed up, they have the chance to correct it. So sometimes the horoscopes of a couple don't match and the horoscope the bride predicts that her first husband will die young (she is called *manglik*). The trick is to marry her to a tree or an earthen pot, which then are destroyed (or immersed for the second), leaving her a widow, and free to remarry without bringing bad luck to her human husband. It has happened to some of my friends... And here's a great post by an Indian blogger on this rite (pdf) and incidentally on all her experiences as a modern dating Indian girl: blog <http://jupiterjuice.wordpress.com/2013/08/05/monsoon-mahabaleshwar-and-getting-married-to-an-earthern-pot/>.

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The Indian wedding for Dummies - 3. Some figures

Once we understand the importance of marriage, not as the union of two people who are in love but as the alliance of two families who share an interest (socially, economically), we understand that people don't go half-way for this very social event.

In India, more than 15 million marriages take place every year, or 300,000 on each auspicious day (in addition to individual horoscopes, Hindu can marry only on certain dates, less than 50 in the year, which creates some logistic problems, especially to rent wedding halls; for those who live above a slum (as yours truly) and are interested to know when planning a night out to avoid becoming crazy at the sounds of the drums, see this website <http://www.drikpanchang.com/shubh-dates/shubh-marriage-dates-with-muhurat.html>).

People (mostly the bride's family) spend between 20 and 100% of their savings on a wedding, which costs in cities between 40,000 and 120,000 euros (source <http://www.mapsofindia.com/my-india/india/recession-resistant-wedding-industry-in-india>))

On the podium of the most expensive weddings in the world, the silver medal goes to Subrata Roy with a small 132 million dollars in 2004 in Lucknow (source <http://listdose.com/top-10-expensive-weddings-ever/>); for the story, at the time of writing, Roy is in jail because his company, Sahara, owes \$500 million to investors, and his bail is set at half this amount... That guy has missed the chance to save some money and be low profile!

Between 100 and 10,000 people (on average one thousand) come to the wedding, but in general they don't attend all the ceremonies.

I have even seen posters inviting the entire neighborhood to join: this illustrates the importance of social appearances, the more guests you have the richer! (This is how Roy fed more than 100,000 beggars on the wedding day of his sons!) Remember that this is THE event of a lifetime! And it is an event of great social importance.

Due to the desired lavishness and the number of ceremonies, Hindu weddings are spread over several days, between 3 and 7 in general. Hence the exorbitant cost and incredible logistics for the preparation: on each occasion they need different clothes, a buffet (in general everything is paid for the guests, including the hotel, and they even receive gifts) etc.

The Indian wedding for Dummies - 4. Rites and ceremonies

So here is how it goes – in broad lines and in general (as there are significant differences according to regions and castes).

1. The talking and the seeds

The groom must begin by making a vow of sainthood (*brahmacharya*) and refusing the marriage. The father of the bride must then convince him to give up this idea and to marry his daughter.

The said daughter sews then 9 seeds in earthen pots in time for them to have germinated on the D day; this is the symbol of fertility in marriage. Simultaneously she invokes the goddess Gowri Devi, an icon of the ideal woman.

2. The *Tilak* ceremony

Traditionally, the father and other males of the bride's family go to the guy's house and, so as to seal the deal, they apply a dot of vermilion paste on his forehead (*tilak*) then offer him some gifts. In return, he will send presents to his future in-laws.

3. Betrothal and *sagai*

During the betrothal/engagement ceremony, gold rings are exchanged.

During *sagai*, sometimes performed along with the engagement, the mother-in-law offers jewelry, clothes, make-up and baby toys. It is the time of setting the wedding date.

4. *Sangeet* (traditionally a North-Indian custom)

The women on the bride's side gather with music, dancing, gossiping and snacks.

5. *Pitthi* and *Mehndi*

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The woman (and also the man if he wants to) is covered with a paste of turmeric, chick-pea flour and water or oil, in order to be purified and have a beautiful skin on the D day.

Follows the henna painting on the hands and feet (*mehndi*). According to some belief, the darker the henna the more the husband will love his wife; and according to the tradition, the woman should not step out of the house after the *mehndi* is applied and only resume housework once it has faded.

6. The arrival of the spouses

The groom must arrive with great fanfare (*baraat*), on a horse or an elephant or in a car luxury, to the sound of drums and trumpets, with a procession of relatives dancing. Upon arrival, the mother-in-law receives him by putting a *tilak* on his forehead, waving a tray with fire under his nose to chase the evil spirits away and then he takes place on stage where he waits for the bride. When she arrives, she tries to pass a garland of flowers around his neck (I say try because the groom's friends, to tease her, prevent her from doing it for some time). Finally he has a garland, and he returns the favor to her and everything can start. This doesn't fit in too much with the sheet story below but well...

7. *Mandap*, or the marriage itself

We arrive finally at the point where the priest will perform his rituals. Are present on the stage the bride, the groom and their parents. The other guests are free to attend but usually enjoy their time, talking and eating.

To be short, during the *mandap*, here is what happens: after a prayer for Ganesh, the groom is regarded as an incarnation of the God Vishnu and worshipped as such. The bride, adorned with gold, is offered by the father as a wife to Vishnu. The hands of the spouses are joined to symbolize the union but they are still separated by a bed sheet and can not see each other. Over the cloth, they place on the top of each other's head a paste made from cumin seeds and jaggery (dough having with a positive energy) and the curtain falls!

The groom then tie a rope made of grass around the waist of his bride, to support her in her new responsibilities (apparently Hindus are used to tie a rope around their waist to protect their spine in the effort). He will untie it at the end of the *mandap*.

He passes around her neck a necklace with two pendants in gold (*Mangalya*), one given by the father and the other by the father-in-law. This sacred necklace represents the commitment, protection and security offered by the groom. He ties the necklace with three knots. Then the scarves of the spouses are knotted together, symbol of the eternal bond.

A bit of fun then: the bride and groom spread on each other rice mixed with saffron and turmeric, before *Homam*, the ceremony of the Holy Fire: seven small rounds around the fire.

Finally, the groom takes his wife's left foot and places it on a stone ("be as strong as this stone and don't let the tribulations of life take you down") and passes silver rings (*mettelu*) on her toes. They look at the stars together while being reminded that they must lead a life as stable as the stars.

They break the fast by feeding each other. And *ghee* (some kind of fat) is offered to feed the fire.

There are a lot of other customs, sometimes very funny: when the bride's family steal the groom's shoes and he has to bargain to buy them back, when the bride's brother twists the ears of his brother-in-law to guard him against bad behavior or has to wash the groom's feet, the fact that after walking around the fire bride has the right to sit on the left of her husband, closer to his heart, or the exchange of coconuts (symbol of fertility) between married couple in some communities etc.

Throughout the wedding there are obviously many buffets (with or without alcoholic, depending on the religion, caste, families) and dances! But there again, it also depends on the region. The "Bollywood weddings" are mostly performed in the North (Punjab) while people in the South (especially in Kerala) are less lavish, less loud, simpler (the important thing is to eat well!)...

Sources: <http://suravajhala.hubpages.com/hub/Hindu-marriage-secrets-behind-the-tradition> ;
<http://www.culturalindia.NET/weddings/wedding-rituals/> ; <http://www.thecultureist.com/2013/05/31/vivaah-traditional-Indian-wedding-ceremony-rituals/>

The Indian wedding for Dummies - 5. Life with the in-laws

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Once all the ceremonies of the marriage are completed, the bride goes up to the threshold of her house (where traditionally the wedding takes place) with relatives and throws a handful of rice and coins over her head, as a symbolizing of “paying back” for what her parents have done for her as well as her best wishes for prosperity to her former household. Similarly, the car in which she sits with her husband is pushed by the family and covered with money to keep away the evil eye.

After that, she fully becomes a member of her in-law family: she goes to live with them, she is invited to call the parents mum and dad (which is simply inconceivable for Europeans). In some communities, she even changes her first name for one selected by her new family, sometimes even for the female version of the husband’s name! Like that you make sure there is a clean slate of the past... Though I must say, there is often much more to look forward than backward as in the villages (where more than 60% of the population live), girls are married on average at 16.

Life in the *joint families* (extended families where several generations live under the same roof and especially (this is the very principle) share food, worship and property)) is not always easy. Take my friend for instance: she married into a very rich family and yet was not allowed to go out unaccompanied after sunset...

I must admit that the *joint families* system is very practical, more economical, with in-house babysitters and papsitters etc, but it doesn’t really encourage personal development...

Economic growth (and for example the creation of new jobs* with children not embracing their father’s career and having to be geographically mobile, or the women’s access to education and employment) is accompanied by socio-cultural changes, including the decline of the *joint families* system and the rise of nuclear families (63% in urban areas) and 59% (in rural areas) (source <http://www.hindustantimes.com/India-News/the-changing-Indian/Article1-1077028.aspx>).

In the *joint family*, the daughter-in-law has to deal with the mother-in-law, *saas*, which is an icon in India; it’s recommended not to read too much on the topic because it’s just super scary! Half of the soaps feature the tyranny exerted on her daughter-in-law, a kind of revenge for what she herself suffered from her own mother-in-law and all the men of the family! (source <http://www.economist.com/news/Christmas-specials/21591745-curse-mummyji>)

Anyway tyranny happens only when they live! If the parents cannot afford the dowry they committed to, things can heat up pretty bad... In 2012, more than 8,000 women were murdered for this reason; a popular technique is throwing acid or an accidental fire in the kitchen.

And to top it all, even if the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law share a good relationship, the first will have to deal with the mother-son relationship, which, in India, is of the same ilk as with Jewish or Italian mothers. I once read that “since Indian women cannot marry the perfect man, they make him”. Good luck to keep the kid on Earth! And what expectations, what pressure he has to deal with!

The Indian Wedding for Dummies - 6. When things go wrong

With hardly 1 per cent of divorces, do Indians have the “keys” to successful marriages? Could it be arranged marriages?

To finish with the topic of marriage, the divorce! Yes yes!

Indeed, the figures are ridiculously low: 1.1% (source <http://www.statisticbrain.com/arranged-marriage-statistics/>)

Firstly it is only since 1955 that divorce for Hindus is legal in India – which is 86 years after Christians, which was even 15 years before the legislation restored divorce in France in 1884! (In India, the divorce rules depend on the religion and there even was even a law, in 1969, specially for Indians who married a non-Indian.)

Secondly divorcing in India is not an easy task. (Hindu) spouses may divorce by mutual consent (for very specific reasons, such as adultery, cruelty, desertion for two years, religious conversion, mental disorder, venereal disease and leprosy) and only after living separated for one year. In addition, there is a mandatory six-month period of reflection after the case is filed. At the end of which the judge must

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estimate that the spouses have made all what was in their power to solve their problems (source <http://www.futurescopes.com/getting-divorce/821/guide-getting-divorce-india-mutual-consent>)).

Thirdly, one should not believe that all problems are solved once the divorce is granted: there is no regime of community property in India, everything returns to its owner (often the man).

And as for the pension, already quite low in general, the woman must prove the income of her husband and the tax authorities estimate that only 3% of the population declare their income! (source <http://www.firstpost.com/living/the-ugly-truth-about-Indian-divorce-why-the-new-cabinet-law-is-important-253387.html>)

Quite a few women must regret, as some point of time, not having born in Kerala (in the Nairs, Ezhavas and Warriors communities) or in a tribe of Meghalaya: they are matrilineal societies where descent and inheritance is by women – in Meghalaya, it is the youngest daughter who inherits property and the burden of caring for her aging parents and unmarried siblings! (source 1 <http://metro.co.uk/2013/03/05/where-women-rule-the-world-matriarchal-communities-from-albania-to-china-3525234/>; source 2 <http://nitawriter.WordPress.com/2008/03/19/Meghalaya-and-Kerala-status-of-women>)

Beyond (very frequent) violence and adultery, “incompatibility” is more and more frequently the cause of separation. And that generally refers to a not-getting-along with the in-laws or the spouses’ egos that seem to take more and more space as the West’s influence grows (source <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article1593.html>) and/or some sexual incompatibility.

I can almost only hear stories of marriages without sex around me (in India), and most often the man is the culprit, forcing my girl friends to take up running as mad women to get rid of their frustration! Or to take temporary lovers – having been screwed once in 10 years by her husband, there are extenuating circumstances...

Already that sex with someone you love needs to be worked on, I can only imagine what it is like with someone you are not particularly attracted to... Especially when it's a taboo, so there is no way you can share it with your girl friends and get reassured, because somehow, women always tend to believe that everything is their fault... While sometimes it is not!

I am quite convinced that a lot of Indian men cheat on their wives (I could take the example of my ex-boss, my landlord, his father-in-law, my sales representatives) and who would they do it with if not with married women?? Well not so many single girls would allow it... It is like if there was a natural rebalancing of life: you get a sexless marriage but you can get sex outside without commitment and it is good for physical and mental health!!

A funny thing is that Westerners associate India with Kama Sutra and think of the country as a sex paradise! While in fact it is nothing like that. The Kama Sutra was written 1,500 years ago and since then the Muslims and then the British invaded the place and Indians became a little ass-tight on the subject... And when white girls come to India and see how Indians look at her, or when they go further and screw the guide or the waiter (who blesses all the gods for his luck, but this girl does not know that), it doesn't not contribute to convey the correct image: banging an Indian guy is very easy, living with one is another story*!

* PS: Obviously there are exceptions, the most important being of course my favorite Indian ;)

* The 10 most popular jobs in 2008 did not exist in 2004. Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-9FaJPhFxQ>

Tags: India, marriage, wedding, arranged marriage, forced marriage, love marriage, rites, ceremonies, rituals, divorce, sheet, mehndi, henna, baraat, sex, incompatibility, contract, Classifieds, matrimonials, matchmaker, nayan, astrologers, horoscope, marry a tree, marry a pot, auspicious, date, joint family, Kama Sutra