

Wedding Ceremonies in Punjab

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While the religious specificities of different religious communities are underscored, the paper focuses on the shared cultural values and symbols that frame marriage ceremonies in the Punjab. The study concludes with how ritual theories help us analyse these ceremonies and assess the impact of modernity on their nature and function.

Traditional cultural practices in a society do not fade away or disappear in the face of modernization, but rather these practices transform and even become revitalized. This is illustrated in the case of religious and cultural rituals that Punjabis perform in relation to different stages of life. Rites of passage refer to a genre of rituals that people perform at major events in life--like birth, puberty, marriage and death. These types of rites characteristically mark a person's transition from one stage of social life to another. The authoritative traditions of the world religions have sanctioned and institutionalized their own life-cycle rituals, which the followers share across different cultural and geographical contexts. Historically, religious authorities have often displayed a keen interest in defining these rituals to mark religious boundaries. Several studies that detail how Hindus, Jains, Muslim, Sikh, and Christians celebrate the birth of a child, perform weddings, and handle death in different parts of the world. Similarly, in the Punjab the core ceremonies related to these life events are distinct for every religious community, but yet they are performed within a shared Punjabi culture.

This paper focuses on marriage (*viah*), the most celebrated life event in Punjabi society. Different religious communities use distinct symbolic tools of legitimating the institution of marriage. Whereas the Hindu and Jain couples exchange vows while participating in seven circumambulations (*sat phere*) around the fire (*havan*), the Sikhs circumambulate around their scripture (the Guru Granth) four times (*char lavan*) as part of the contractual act. Among Muslims it is the marriage contract (*nikah*) after the consent of the bride that solemnizes the event, and Christian bridal couples exchange wedding bands and vows in the presence of a priest.

Surrounding these contracting rituals, however, are clusters of ceremonies that do not necessarily stipulate a marriage, but work as a 'cultural overlay' to the religious practices. For instance, there are ceremonial acts of betrothal, practices related to the preparation of the bride and bridegroom, as well as

ritualized exchanges of gifts for establishing new kinship ties. The religiously sanctioned ritual remains at the core by contracting a marriage and transforming the social status of the groom and bride, but is enclosed by cultural ceremonies that are considered equally significant for implementing a marriage and new social relations. It is possible to argue that while religious rites of passage work as a marker distinguishing one religious community from another, cultural practices and ceremonies carry the opposite function of providing a common denominator within a shared cultural context.

Over the years, anthropological and sociological research has accumulated a considerable array of data on the social and economical aspects of 'life-cycle' events. By viewing marriage as a social institution, governed by rules of caste, class and kinship, these studies have focused on the internal dynamics of arranged marriages, the criteria of spouse selection, the dowry system and generational changes in attitudes to marriage practices due to the impact of modernization.¹ Similarly, the extensive Punjabi out migration during the twentieth century has encouraged interest in how social norms and customs are maintained or challenged among Punjabis in these new lands.² Quite often, studies in anthropology and sociology start from a functionalist paradigm, presuming that rituals are systematically related to social practices and have a function of executing the culture's most significant and guarded indigenous norms, values and concepts. Subsequently, life-cycle rites are often mentioned in research studies focusing on broader cultural and social phenomena (such as caste, kinship structure and migration), since it is generally presupposed that people who perform certain rituals are communicating or confirming 'social facts' in the society.

If we follow this functionalist approach, we see that Punjab's folklore stores many references to the preparation and celebration of weddings—information that is sometimes shadowed in scholarship that privileges classical sources and high culture. With rural life forming the backdrop, Punjabi literature, poetry, folksongs, and folk art often return to the theme of marriage and capture values and sentiments of the common Punjabi culture.³ People of the Punjab can easily recognize the image of a young woman preparing her own dowry at the spinning wheel or embroidering her *phulkari*. These themes may not correspond to the social reality of today, but in more subtle ways Punjabi folklore weaves values and emotions into the web of contemporary practices. In almost every wedding ceremony family members, friends and professional folk musicians perform different sets of folksongs which use themes from a nostalgic past, but communicate feelings of separation, joy, fear, and hope in the present.

There is currently a need for more comprehensive studies on the rituals and ceremonies practiced by people of various communities in the Punjab. In this article, we will introduce the readers to some of the more common practices and ceremonies that work as a 'cultural overlay' to the religious wedding rituals and run across various Punjabi social and religious groups. Naturally, there will always be local divergences in the performance of these ceremonies. Furthermore, rituals are always transmitted and performed by people who adjust

them to contemporary conditions and needs, and attribute them with their own meanings. Here we will offer only an overview of some common cultural practices related to weddings.

I. Arranging a Marriage

At first glance, the different rules and guiding principles of arranged marriages offer a major challenge to understanding the institution. Studying marriage practices requires a careful approach in order to avoid rude generalizations of a multifaceted social reality or falling back on extreme relativism that could easily make the picture incomprehensible. Among the different social groups and tribes in the Punjab there are complex systems of endogamy and exogamy—social rules that require the person to select a spouse from within certain groups or rules that forbid the selection of a spouse from certain clans or certain regions. Some groups practice marriage by exchange (*vata sata*) in which sisters and brothers of two families are exchanged. While some communities encourage cousin marriages, others strongly prohibit it. Similarly there are varying attitudes to polygamy, inter-caste marriage, inter-religious marriage and divergent customs related to hypergamous arrangements, in which a boy or a girl from a lower caste is married off to a spouse of a higher social strata in order to enhance the status of the family. The impact of modernization, migration and generally changing attitudes to marriage will only paint the picture in even more perplexing colors. There are however two guiding principles that Punjabi families share: basic kinship conventions of patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence, according to which the woman moves into the household of her husband and in-laws after marriage. These conventions emanate from a society that is grounded on patriarchal values.

Traditionally, marriages have been arranged between a young aspiring bride and groom. While the groom had often reached early puberty (twelve-thirteen years), the bride to be was often still a child at the time of marriage. In many areas of Punjab these child marriages related to the idea of *kanya dan*, the offering of a daughter or a virgin to a family. Several studies on marriage customs in South Asia have observed that pre-pubescent girls continue to be treated with sanctity; even like goddesses in some religious and social contexts.⁴ Thus to give away a virgin daughter is considered a “gift” to a family of higher status. As marriage life presupposed sexual relations between the newlywed couple, the actual consummation of marriage often took place many years after the wedding ceremony when the bride became sexually mature. On the wedding day the young bride followed the groom to his house, stayed with the female members of his family for one night and returned to her own home the following day. If the bride was very young she returned directly to her own house, while the groom was symbolically given a cake of brown sugar to bring home. In any case, the young bride did not have any intimate relation with her husband, but stayed at her parents’ home until she got her first menstruation. At that time she was taken to the house of her in-laws in a ceremony called *muklava*, which was

regarded like a second wedding and in practice was the final return of the bride to her in-laws. Today child marriages and the ceremony of *muklava* are rarely practiced. Hershman (1981) observes that people delay marriage arrangements to older brides because they are considered to be a financial resource to the household; women employed outside the house contribute to the family budget and sometimes bring their own dowry.⁵ Even if women have entered the professional spheres and the society has become more open for premarital relations, there still exists a strong cultural ethos of preserving and protecting the woman's virginity until the consummation of marriage.

The mediator between two families planning a marriage is called *vichola*. In earlier times, when a matrimonial couple was not to meet before the wedding, the *vichola* worked as the communicating link between two families and was a significant source of information about the qualities of the prospective spouse and the family's social and financial status. The *vichola* was often an elder member of the community, who was known to both the families. Many social groups in the Punjab also used a professional *vichola* who was either the barber (Nai) or a person belonging to the Muslim Mirasi community. These professional mediators often kept track of girls and boys of marriageable age in a village and suggested alliances between families. For instance, when a boy reached puberty, the *vichola* could propose that a family not put off his wedding. As Jyoti (1992) points out, the role of these professional mediators has declined during the twentieth century as families chose to arrange marriage alliances by themselves, often by meeting the prospective spouse and his or her family.⁶ Simultaneously the society has become more accepting of premarital contacts and relationships. Traditionally, the face of the bride should be veiled until after the marriage and it was only the *vichola* who got to see the bride in advance. As a part of the wedding ceremony, there was a specific ritual related to the unveiling of the bride: in the house of the in-laws, the younger brother of the groom should lift the veil and expose the face of the bride, while her in-laws were giving comments on her looks and offered her some money, minimally a silver coin. As the traditional seclusion of women disappears, the physical appearances of the bride and groom have today become a significant criterion in spouse selection. Today parents often consult and seek the consent of their children. At first the prospective couple may get to see a photograph and eventually meet in order to decide whether they like each other or not. Among the urban middle and upper classes, parents may permit the couple to meet outside the house at some restaurant, and stay in contact by phone calls, letters or emails. Young people, especially in urban settings, are also dating on their own initiatives, sometimes secretly or with consent of the parents. Today the concept of having a girlfriend and boyfriend before marriage is becoming common, and couples are finding out about their backgrounds and family status by themselves.

A twenty one year old girl in Chandigarh explained that a more common strategy among youth is 'love becoming arranged,' i.e. a premarital relationship is made to look like an arranged marriage. When the parents are about to arrange

a marriage they usually ask their daughter or son if there is someone she or he likes. Being informed about an ongoing love affair does not always please them, but if the prospective partner's social and financial status is acceptable they do take into consideration the wish of their child and transform the premarital relationship into an arranged marriage. A general impression is that youth seem to be well aware of their parents' preference of hypergamous marriages and the favored criteria in the selection of a spouse, such as caste and financial security. In order to avoid impediment to marriage they conform to these standards by choosing a match accordingly. In the process of locating suitable spouses matrimonial services in newspapers and on the Internet have become popular means. A glance over a matrimonial supplement mirrors conformity to traditional values, in the sense that caste, clan, and religious belonging are significant criteria in the search of a desirable spouse. It is quite common to find information about the boy's annual income, as he will be the breadwinner, while the qualities of brides are often combining the 'homely' and the 'beautiful' with notes of their educational degrees. If the marriageable age in the past was during puberty, it is now expected that young couples finish their education before they settle down in marriage.

In the context of marriage arrangement in South Asia, dowry is an unavoidable subject that has been discussed by scholars.⁷ From the perspective of the Punjabi society it is important to distinguish between the practices of voluntary gift giving (*dan*) and the institution of dowry (*dahej, daj*). As Sheel (1999) observes in her study on the dowry system in North India, in earlier times it was customary that the bride's family offered a voluntary gift to the groom's family in order to establish a good relationship between the two families and to provide the bride tangible assets in her new home.⁸ In the Punjab there was a special custom of giving bedding sets as a part of the dowry. During her childhood the girl would prepare sheets, pillows, blankets, etc., which later were placed in a wooden chest (*peti*) and brought with her on the wedding day. The dowry was usually open for public display after the wedding ceremony, but was only to be transferred to the groom's house along with the bride. According to Sheel dowry was furthermore intimately interlinked with the institutions of hypergamous marriage and the inheritance of property. Thus dowry worked as a means to enhance the status of the bride's family by giving gifts to a family of higher rank and compensate the girl her full inheritance. However, along with the modernization and an expanding consumerism over the last century came a shift in the meaning of dowry, as the moral ethos related to the voluntary gift giving was transformed into a forced institution creating financial strains on the bride's family. Demands of cash and articles of consumerism from the groom's family has undermined the voluntary aspect of dowry, resulting in serious social-cultural problems such as harassments and violence directed at women when families fail to meet the financial requirements.⁹ During the twentieth century the system of dowry has created ill will among common people and has resulted in organized protests and proceedings against it. This does not mean people are not requesting dowry, but they are doing it in more discrete ways. In

reality it will remain very hard to distinguish between voluntary and forced giving of gifts. As we shall see, many of the ceremonies surrounding a wedding are linked with the giving of gifts and counter gifts, but it is still the bride's family who will answer for the major expenses of these transactions.

Traditionally, marriages have been formally settled by a betrothal ceremony called *mangni*, (literally "to ask for"). The family of the bride usually approached the groom's family to stipulate a marriage agreement. The ceremony of *mangni* was an affair of men and the elders in a village. Together with the barber, a selected group of male relatives on the bride's side travelled to the house of the groom to be, bringing lumped brown sugar (*gurh*), dry fruits, money and other gifts depending on their financial status. In the presence of village elders, and some religious functionary, the bride's party ceremonially would hand over the gifts to the groom seated on a wooden platform. He bit a piece of sweets and sometimes the bride's party put money in his lap, while the union of the two families was verbally declared. Another practice of confirming the betrothal was to put a silver coin and sugar in the palm of the groom. In some communities it was the groom's party who went to the house of the bride to perform the *mangni* ceremony by offering sweets, money, clothes, and jewellery that was distributed to the bride's relatives.¹⁰ In either case, the betrothal was seen as an agreement between the families. The bride did not participate in the ceremony. As her relatives returned home, she and her family members were often given gifts from the groom's family, such as ornaments, sweets, dry fruits, money, and often the bridal shawl (*chunni*). If the families had not already settled a date for the wedding, it was the duty of the bride's family to determine an auspicious date. The barber, or some other messenger from the brides' side, conveyed a regular invitation by letter (*sahi-chithi*) to the family of the groom. Except for proposing a date, this letter also indicated the number of guests the bride's family were capable of hosting. When receiving the letter the boy's family would reply by returning *shagan*, auspicious gifts to the house of the bride.

If we turn to the contemporary practices related to betrothal we see just as many similarities and differences. Based on his studies of marriage practices in the Jalandhar district, Hershman (1981) observed that in order to reduce the expenses of weddings his informants chose to perform a more simplified ceremony called *thaka* or *roka*, a "reservation," instead of the traditional *mangni* ceremony. He writes,

Unlike the engagement ceremony, the *roka* (reservation) is a quiet family affair and is often carried out secretly in the village of the groom. It is a type of promising which precedes the engagement so that the ritual of *mangni* is performed prior to the *viah* at the village of the bride on the arrival of the groom's marriage party. By this, both engagement and marriage are performed together and the groom's side is saved the expense of having to feast their

kinsmen twice as they were enjoined to do traditionally both at marriage and engagement.¹¹

Roka is a modern custom reflecting that marriages are more considered to be a concern of individual families than the community at large. The parents get together to settle the wedding, either in the house of the bride or at some public place. Sometimes they meet in a gurdwara or in a temple in company with the religious functionary present who may suggest an auspicious wedding date. Just like the *mangni* ceremony, the bride and her family receive monetary gifts or gold when the agreement is finalized.

Two more ceremonial events have been added to the betrothal or engagement. By influence of Western traditions, many families in urban settings have come to perform a ceremony, in which the couple exchanges golden rings to wear during the wedding. Generally, the bride's family organizes this ceremony, including a music program, at their residence or rented assembly rooms. The ceremony known as *shagan* resembles the traditional *mangni* and has more or less replaced it. One day before the wedding, the family of the bride will visit the groom and his family to present them with gifts. The groom is often seated on a platform holding a red cloth in his lap on which the gifts will be placed. The bride's father in particular feeds the groom with sweets and places a *tikka*, vermillion, on his forehead as a blessing. In addition to household articles, ornaments, clothes, and money, the groom will be given a decorated basket filled with dry fruits and sweets. From this basket he should pick a piece of dry fruit, bite off one half and return the remaining half to the bride. *Shagan* provides an opportunity to invite all relatives and friends for celebration and the ceremony often includes some religious program, as well as singing and dancing. The only one who does not participate in the celebrations is the bride and her mother. In the evening of *shagan* some female relatives from the groom's house visit the bride in her home and hand over a set of counter gifts, including her bridal shawl, henna, make up kit, and the dress she will wear when being escorted to the house of her in-laws after marriage.

II. Preparations

Depending on the different local customs, the behavior of both the bride and the groom is chaperoned for forty days before the marriage and from three to ten days preceding the wedding day they should be confined to their respective houses. This period of seclusion is called *maiyan* and is marked by different preparations for the wedding day, including several ritualized acts that can be interpreted as symbolizing the traditional stage of their social status. In some families and communities the period of *maiyan* formally starts when the boy and girl separately get a red thread (*mauli*) tied around their wrists by some family member or the barber's wife. During *maiyan* both the bride and the groom wear more simple and quiet clothes than in daily life, providing added contrast to the

exquisite wedding day adornment. They will also be well fed, often with sweet and fried food that is coming from the house of their mother and the maternal uncle. At this time the boy and the girl are considered to be passing to a different phase of their lives; their seclusion during this period sometimes evokes popular beliefs of ghosts and the evil eye. The couple is considered more vulnerable to spirits and should be protected by isolation and by maintaining a simple appearance.¹² In some communities the groom is taken out in a procession in his village, wearing dirty clothes and holding a sword to shield him from the harmful influences of spirits.¹³ Furthermore, the Punjabi culture holds the concept of *bhanimar*, people who try to ruin a new relationship by commenting on the couple and insinuating doubts in the minds of the people, in contrast to the role of the matchmaking *vichola*. The preparatory stage of becoming a couple is thought to accentuate these malevolent forces of spirits and backbiters.

One of the more significant ceremonies during *maiyan* is the ritualized anointing of *vatna*-a paste consisting of mustard oil, barley flour and turmeric mixed up with fresh curd. In their respective homes the groom and the bride should sit on a small wooden platform under a canopy or an embroidered *phulkari* while female relatives anoint their bodies with the paste. In the case of the bride it is usually her sisters and female friends who are rubbing her arms, feet and face while singing songs, whereas in the house of the boy this is done by his sisters and his brother's wives, who jokingly entertain the groom-to-be with naughty commentary. In both cases it is their maternal uncle who symbolically lifts them from the wooden platform.

On the wedding day both the groom and bride discard their old robes, are given a bath, and then dressed up in their special clothes. The bathing is sometimes performed in relation to the anointing of *vatna*, and many families will give their child several baths during the days preceding the wedding. Customarily the barber's wife (*nain*), together with her sisters, wash and untie her braids. When the bathing is complete both the groom and the bride crush an earthen jar with their feet to mark the transformation from one social stage to another.

On the evening prior to the wedding day the bride and her unmarried girl friends create ornamental henna (*mehndi*) designs on their hands and feet or invite professional henna painters to beautify them. This ceremonial beautification of the bride is sometimes connected with ideas of good fortune in the house of her in-laws. As one saying goes, if the applied *mehndi* turns out very dark on the hand of the bride it is a sign of the affection of her mother-in-law to be. Women therefore try to make the henna color as dark as possible. Sometimes the hands of the groom are similarly decorated with more simple henna designs or just a small mark to indicate that he is getting married.

Like most events in Punjabi culture there are special songs associated with *mehndi* to communicate sentiments of the marriage preparations. A few days prior to the wedding the women on both sides will gather in the evenings for singing of specific folksongs associated with the occasion. In the house of the bride these songs are called *suhag*, which refer to the marital felicity or a happy

married life. As the dominant social values in Punjabi society remain patriarchal, the preservation of the family's health and happiness is generally considered to be the responsibility of the woman. In emotional ways these *suhag* songs are expressing the woman's uprooting and separation from her family and home and the unknown fate she will have to adjust to. The *suhag* songs are often structured as dialogues between the bride-to-be and her father, who tells her to bow to the inevitable. The songs sung in the house of the groom are called *ghorhian* and are usually composed as blessings of the mother and sisters to the knightly groom who will go to meet his bride. On this event some women may tie a turban on their head and jestingly imitate the groom amid great laughter.

The traditional bridal dress is exceptionally ornamental, alluding to a royal symbolism. The maternal uncles of both the bride and groom play a significant ritual role in the preparations by giving the clothes worn by the bride and groom on the wedding day, along with jewelry, clothes and other gifts to their sister's family. At the wedding of his niece, the maternal uncle should give the bride her red ivory bangles (*churha*), signifying that she is a married woman, and tie a red thread (*gana*) around her wrist. To signify the bride's transfer from her natal house to that of her husband, she changes her dress after the wedding. The bride arrives at her wedding in the suit given to her by her maternal uncle, and departs for her in-laws wearing a dress offered by the groom's family.

From top to toe the bride is adorned with ornaments. On her forehead she wears a trinket (*tikka*). A nose ring (*nath*) is linked with a chain to her earrings (*jhumke*). It is customary to wear two kinds of necklaces, of which one is a golden garland (*har*) and the other a necklace with ornamental designs similar to Muslim amulets (*taviz*). Except for the ivory bangles, the bride will also wear a red thread and bangles on each wrist that are attached with a hanging trinket or bells (*kalira*) given by her maternal aunt. One saying proclaims that any unmarried girl who is hit by these bridal *kalira* will be the next one to wed. The bride is also adorned with finger rings (*mundrian*), anklets (*jhanjharan*) and colorful strings with bells (*parandi*) braided in her hair. Upon arrival at the wedding ceremony she will be veiled in the shawl given to her by her soon to be in-laws.

The marriage party of the groom (*barat*) travels in a ceremonial procession to the wedding, which is performed in the house of the bride or at some other place representing it. The image of the groom as an armed prince riding on a mare to meet his bride still appears today. The departure from his house is a joyful event when people sing and dance. At some places in Punjab a custom called *garauli* is celebrated on the morning of *barat*. In this ceremony, the women of the family fill a vessel with water from a nearby well while singing songs and dancing. Later they bathe the groom in this water and he will be dressed up in new clothes, wearing a turban in red or pink colors and shoes (*juti*) embroidered with golden threads. Before he leaves his sisters or his brothers' wives will attach a small plume (*kalgi*) on his turban and apply *surma*, collyrium powder, to his eyes in order to protect him from evil influences. Over his turban the sisters will tie a chaplet (*sehra*) which will cover his eyes until the wedding.

His mounting of the mare before departure includes several customs: his sister feeds the horse, ties a thread around its neck, and teasingly holds the reins to prevent the marriage party from leaving until they have been given some gifts. The groom also symbolically tests his sword (*talvar*) before setting out on his marriage procession in company with his *sarbala*, a younger brother or cousin who will act as an escort.

The night before the wedding the groom's maternal aunt (*mami*) and other female relatives dress up in beautiful clothes and organize a night procession of light called *jago*. Whereas women used to arrange the *jago* procession after the *barat* had left the house, it has more recently become a ceremony that is performed on the night prior to the departure of the marriage procession. On this occasion the groom's maternal aunt carries a decorated pitcher full of water on her head with lit flour lamps that are placed on top of the pitcher. The women walk around their neighborhood, waking up people, and dancing and singing songs in order to convey the message that a fortuitous event will soon occur.

The reception of *barat* in the house of the bride was traditionally carried out in the presence of the whole village the night before the wedding. All the male relatives would meet in a ceremony called *milanhi* to exchange gifts and share a meal, while the women often celebrated separately after the wedding. The groom did not participate in this formal meeting but stayed at a place outside the village until his wedding day the next day. Today families often combine the formal meeting of male and female relatives, in which relations on both sides embrace each other, exchange gifts and flower garlands, and share a meal before they continue to the religious wedding ritual.

III. After the Wedding

The ceremonies following Punjabi weddings are often charged with mixed emotions of joy and sorrow. Jokingly, the bride's sisters often play a game with the groom, in which they hide his shoes, while his friends try to prevent the girls from doing this. The sisters-in-law make sure to give the groom a hard time and negotiate over monetary gifts in return for his shoes. Framed by sadder emotions is the bride's final departure (*vidai*) from her parental home. After the marriage ceremony, performed in the house of the bride's parents, the bride's departure signifies the final separation from her home and family. In a symbolic gesture of the transition she dresses up in a suit given to her by her in-laws. At the gate of her parent's home she throws rice, barley or pulses over her head, while wishing prosperity for the family and house she is leaving. The bride's brother lifts her up into a palanquin (*doli*) that escorts her to her new home, the house of her husband's parents. When the newlywed couple begins their journey the elders on the groom's side throw coins over the *doli* and to the crowd on the road. People still perform these rituals even if decorated cars have replaced the traditional palanquin. At the *vidai* people again sing sad songs on the theme of separation and departure.

Upon arrival at the house of the groom's parents, the groom's mother is responsible for ceremonies related to the reception of the newlyweds. At the gate she receives them by circulating a small water filled metal vessel over their heads and then drinking some of the water. The mother either sprinkles or smears the threshold with mustard oil before they are taken into the house. To familiarize the bride with her new family and make her feel at home the couple usually engages in a set of games in the evening. For instance, they fill a pot with milk and water and throw a ring or coin into the pot. Whoever gets the coin into the pot the most times wins the game and, as the saying goes, becomes the dominant partner in their married life. They also try to untie the thread that they had tied on their wrists before the wedding. While the girl is allowed to use both her hands, the groom must use only one hand. This is an occasion for the bride, as well as relatives and friends, to tease the groom if he is unable to undo the knot. In the past these games probably provided the new couple the opportunity of making one another's acquaintance and initiating the first physical touching of the opposite sex.

In the morning after the wedding night the bride performs two symbolic acts. Presuming the couple has been intimate in the night, the bride touches the feet of her parents in-law, both mother and father. In return they bless her by wishing her a long life as their son's wife (*suhagan*). She then makes a meal and serves her new family on this first morning after the wedding night. As the woman becomes a new member of a family and clan, these two acts initiate her responsibilities in the family and confirm her new status as a married woman.

IV. Concluding Reflections

Scholars in ritual studies have often emphasized the convention, formalized, or rule governed character of ritual action, even if they have followed quite divergent and conflicting courses in terms of the functions, meanings, motives and forces of ritual activities and behavior.¹⁴ Rituals often display recognizable and repetitive patterns and structures that are framed by a ceremonial event. For example, if we look at the Punjabi betrothal (*mangni*) or its modern counterpart (*shagan*), the core act of this ceremony is the verbal announcement of the betrothal and the giving of gifts to the groom, either in his hands or his lap. Kinsfolk may also perform other acts, such as feeding the groom and decorating him with a *tikka*. Within the frame of betrothal, these separate acts are often carried out in a highly prescribed way and jointly they constitute a structure of acts contained by the ceremony. Thus if the word ritual signifies a specific act, the term ceremony connotes the broader events in which various rituals are enclosed.

A basic question that has interested scholars during the twentieth century is why people carry out rituals. Within the theoretical schools like symbolist, structuralist and functionalist, a number of researchers have proposed their own analytic constructs to the interpretation of ritual activities.¹⁵ Typical of the first two schools is a search for meaning of ritual activities –i.e. what values and

notions are expressed in symbols and symbolic acts—and how these meanings correspond to patterns in the larger society and even conduce a persistence of social systems. Functionalists have been more focused on the social utility of rituals—how rituals affect a social group or society at large, even civilizations—and contribute to the functioning of social systems. If we try to apply some of these ideas to a simple analysis of Punjabi weddings it is possible to discern some cultural notions that these ceremonies communicate. In many cultures weddings often employ symbols representing royalty, fertility and prosperity, as it is an exclusive event establishing socially and culturally approved relations for reproduction. In Punjabi weddings there are several items, such as different food, clothes, ornaments, colors and seeds, which could point to these meanings if we are acquainted with the symbolic universes of people in the Punjab. In the context of an agrarian society, grains, which a newlywed bride throws over her shoulder, may signify the prosperity she wishes for her family and native home. On a structural level there are sets of symbolic acts within the ceremonies that may signify the transformational processes of the bridal couple when these acts are compared. Following Van Gennep's three staged process of rituals, the marriage ceremony qualifies as a rite of passage that comprises three stages in which the person leaves behind one social group or identity, then passes through a phase of no identity before admission into another.¹⁶ This process of change is manifest in the treatment of the bridal couple: bride and groom wearing simple clothes and are held in seclusion during the period of *maiyan* but after the ritual bath they are symbolically crush a pot and consequently are dressed in their wedding gowns. In this ritual process the couple hovers between two extremes—from seclusion and a neglect of the outward appearance to the most exclusive bodily ornamentation as royalties at public display. Overall the wedding ceremonies transform the identities of a couple, from virgin-daughter to *suhaganh* and from bachelor to husband. As patrilocal residence is the prevalent social custom in Punjab, the uprooting of a bride and the process of separation from her native home and family have become ritualized in ceremonies like *vidai* and *doli*.

From a functionalist approach it would be possible to assert that these ceremonies have much broader effects on the organization of the social group. For instance, many ceremonies include the giving of gifts and counter gifts to confirm kinship ties within the individual family as well as facilitate new relations between two families. The symbolic act of offering the groom gifts in betrothal ceremony establishes a marriage agreement that will decide and regulate interaction between old and new relatives in social life and in ceremonies to follow. The sisters in-law are fully entitled to make fun of the groom within the context of a wedding as their defined roles in a newly established relationship allow for it. From this viewpoint, wedding rituals may have a function of maintaining order and rules for social interaction in the society.

At the same time, Punjabi society is going through a major process of modernization, resulting in radical changes of social norms and attitudes,

especially amongst the younger generation. A general trend reflected in this process is that people seem to keep marriage customs and perform traditional rituals even if many of the foundational social values supporting them are changing. A college girl in Chandigarh asked about this replied, “We do not have these things in society anymore, but the ceremonies convey feelings and for that reason they are important. We should not abandon, but maintain our culture. To follow these ceremonies is about maintaining our own cultural identity.”

Keeping traditional ceremonies becomes a way of preserving a cultural identity in a society that is becoming more influenced by global trends. Just as wedding practices may work as means of communicating tradition and a sense of cultural continuity in Punjabi society, the ceremonies will always be exposed to a variety of changes since they are not isolated from the context in which they are performed. People maintain ceremonies as “traditional” while simultaneously appropriating them for changes in the broader society. Punjabi weddings once spanned a long period of time and now they are completed within a week; cars have replaced the palanquin carrying the bride, just as fancy resort hotels or restaurants serve the same function as the bride’s home. Women’s increasing access to new social spaces and the reinterpretation of gender roles will certainly exert a major influence on these ceremonies in the future.

In recent years, many scholars have attempted to move away from a common proclivity to treat rituals as independent sets of activities that exude meanings of different kinds or implement conceptions. These scholars have come to view rituals as actions that contain certain qualities or as processes of transforming ordinary acts.¹⁷ Some have focused more explicitly on the properties of ritual action and human agency in the process of transforming ordinary acts to rituals.¹⁸ Partly this shift of focus critiques scholarly tendencies to create abstractions that often fail to correspond with a social reality. In their search for meanings, symbolists, structuralists, and functionalists have sometimes been guilty of superimposing their own neatly systematized interpretations while neglecting their informants’ voices and changes in the real world. Instead of looking at rituals as objects with intrinsic meanings or functions, many scholars today prefer to study the processes of how humans are ritualizing acts and constructing their own and sometimes quite divergent meanings. From this viewpoint the meaning of ritual practices is not necessarily a treasure to be found by digging deep enough into ritual performances. Rather the meaning may be humanly constructed out of interpretations of beliefs, conceptions, and norms that are attached to formalized and stipulated ritual action. These meanings may vary and contradict themselves, but they may also refer to quite conventional ideas and notions of authoritative traditions since people are socialized and situated within a given socio cultural framework. To put it more metaphorically, rituals could be likened to a vessel: it seems to keep its basic shape and structure, *i.e.* it is formalized and has stipulated features, but it is continuously filled with new content and meanings of various kinds. If we

want to understand why people in the Punjab perform wedding ceremonies the way they do, why they keep them in the face of radical changes in society, and how they construct meanings and appropriate ritual practices in a globalized world, more studies are required that take into consideration all of the social and cultural aspects without losing the perspective of the actors, the people of the Punjab who continue to perform these rituals in their daily lives.

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Endnotes

1. See e.g. Mathur 1964, Singh 1966, Kaur 1967, Mahajan 1967, Rajagopalan & Singh 1967, Singh 1974, Parry 1979, Hershman 1981, Jyoti 1992. See also the project on the people of Punjab launched by the Anthropological Survey of India (ASI), Singh 2003.
2. See e.g. Ballard, R. & C. Ballard 1977, Ballard 1978, Bhachu 1981, Bhachu 1985, Bhachu 1986, Barrier, Gerald & Verne Dusenberry 1989, Ballard 1990, Leonard 1994.
3. The renowned Punjabi author, Giani Gurdit Singh, is often employing cultural practices and rituals as themes in his writing. His book "Mera Pind" [My village] from 1961 has become a classic in the genre of Punjabi literature (Singh 2003(1961)). See also Harjeet Singh Gill's short story "A Phulkari from Bhatinda", which portrays a traditional Punjabi wedding (Gill 1970).
4. Hershman 1981:158, Parry 1979:147.
5. Hershman 1981:159.
6. Jyoti 1992:164.
7. See e.g. Van der Veen 1972, Madan 1975, Vatuk and Vatuk 1976, Paul 1986, Fruzetti 1990, Sheel 1999.
8. Sheel 1999.
9. Sheel 1999.
10. Wikeley 1991:36, Rose 1999(1919): 784 ff.
11. Hershman 1981:162.
12. Hershman 1981:163.
13. Jamous 2003; Wikeley 1991: 37.
14. For a summary of some significant definitions of ritual by scholars in the twentieth century, see Platvoet 1995.
15. For an overview, see Bell 1997.
16. Gennep 1960.
17. See Bell 1992, 1997.
18. Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994.

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