

# Indian Wedding Customs Tradition and Spectacle

By Abha Dayal Kaul

A feast for all senses, an Indian wedding is immensely important not only to the couple getting married, but to their parents, families, friends and communities. Often it is the elders and *gurus* who advise and guide the couple on customs and ceremonies, even taking charge of the whole event. Customs differ vastly from region to region, depending on the religion, provenance and caste of the bride and groom, and on social status and economic means. However, some common elements characterise most marriages in India, held together by Vedic traditions considered to be over 4,000 years old.

A typical Hindu wedding begins in the homes of both parties to the marriage with *puja* (prayers) offered to Ganesha and Gauri or Parvati to remove obstacles and bring good fortune during the celebrations. Festivities include a *haldi* ceremony, a simulated holy bath to beautify the bride and groom with symbolic applications of turmeric and sandalwood – auspicious ingredients in rituals, also known to soften the skin and brighten the complexion. Then comes the part most closely identified with the joy and beauty of Indian weddings, the delightful henna or *mehndi* ceremony. The bride's hands, forearms and feet are skillfully covered in traditional motifs bearing good luck, while women guests also enjoy getting their hands hennaed. The *mehndi* is often marked by lively music and dancing, lavish food and sweets and heavily dressed family members and guests who participate in the *sangeet* (music) or party.

The bride's family usually hosts the wedding at home, at a temple or other public venue. As the bride is readied and adorned in sumptuous bridal finery by female relatives and



A bride at her wedding



Groom riding a white mare on his way to his wedding, in November 2012, Ajmer, Rajasthan, photo by Andra Leo

friends, the *baraat* (groom's contingent) is warmly received by her representatives, possibly to the melodious notes of wind instruments – *shehnai* in the north and *nadaswaram* in the south. In some traditions, bells are rung, conch shells are blown and women ululate. The bride's mother performs a welcoming *aarti* or oil lamp ceremony for her son-in-law-to-be and the bride's brothers fondly 'wash' his feet. A *teeka* or *tilak*, an auspicious mark made with a red paste, is applied on the groom's forehead to welcome and honour him.

The groom may ride to his wedding on a horse or elephant, to the excitement of all present, although present-day weddings are doing away with these traditional modes of transport. Guests are greeted with a sprinkling of rosewater and perhaps flowers to weave into the women's hair and the men's buttonholes.

The radiant bride emerges to face the glowing groom and gorgeous floral garlands are exchanged, symbolising their accepting each other as the chosen partner. Generally, the bride is resplendent in gold ornaments and ornate clothes; in the north, she covers her head or wears a veil as a sign of respect to the deities and for modesty before the assembled people. Wedding garments are in vibrant reds and pinks for brides in the north of India and elegant white or cream in certain areas of the south. A groom can wear any colour, often sports a regal turban embellished with a *sarpech* decoration, even a *sehra* or a male veil for the face made from strings of white, perfumed flowers, and in some communities may carry a sword.

The *muhurat* (auspicious date and time based on horoscopes) arrives and the couple gets seated in the *mandap* or four-pillared wedding pavilion, decorated



Bride's intricate henna patterns

with *kolam* or *rangoli* designs and festooned with mango or banana leaves and bright, fragrant flowers – marigolds, roses, jasmine, tuberose. Priests conduct Hindu marriages by chanting mantras and singing hymns in Sanskrit from ancient Vedic texts; modern priests translate and explain these in local languages or in English since most don't understand Sanskrit. The wedding ceremony commences by invoking the presence of God and various divinities including the nine planets to bless the occasion. A fire is lit, symbolising the fire god, *Agni*, as the greatest power in the universe and sacred

purifier who witnesses the marriage. The bride and groom offer oblations and puffed rice to pay homage to the deity.

Tying the ends of their garments into a knot and going around the holy fire seven times, the couple takes seven vows upholding specific goals and duties of married life. For the marriage to be completed they then walk the *saptapadi* or crucial seven

steps together. It has been said that these significant steps are symbolic of two people coming together as pilgrims, not merely travellers, as they share a sacred destination – towards *moksha* or liberation. To this end, the couple prays to God to lead them along every step. The groom ties a sacred thread or necklace called *mangalsutra* or *thali* around his bride's neck, sealing his promise to always take care of her, and puts vermillion powder in the parting of her hair indicating that she is now a married woman. The priest blesses the couple and family and friends bestow blessings by showering them with flower petals.



Groom in turban, sporting a sarpech

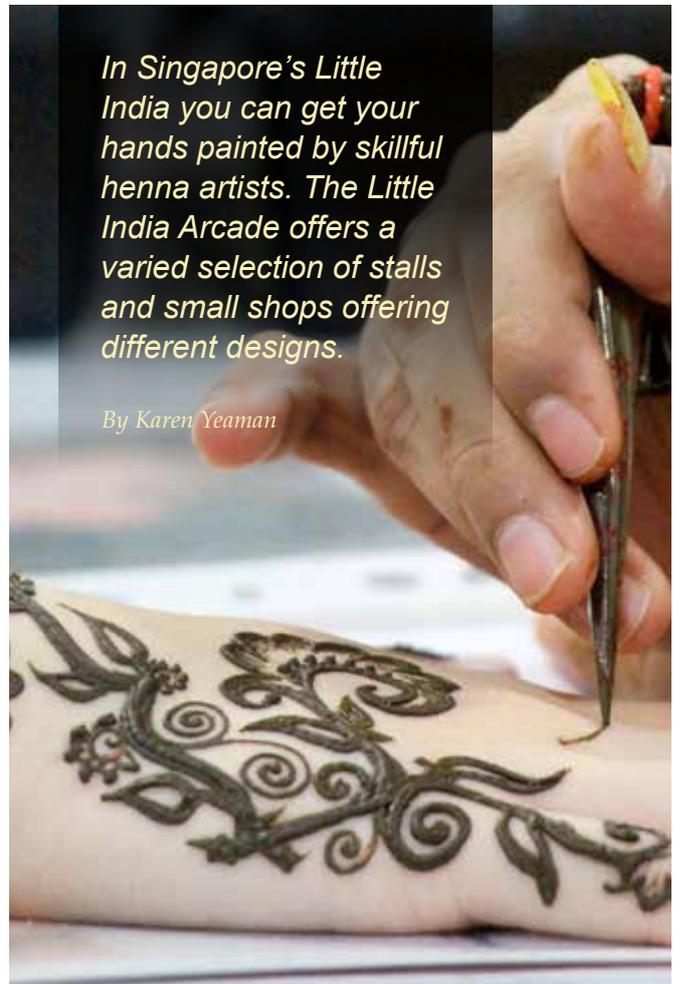
The bride's father gives her into the hands of the groom, who accepts her as an equal. The newlyweds leave during the last ceremony of the day, the tearful farewell. However, further joyous ceremonies are in store when the new bride enters her marital home and another round of celebrations begins as she is introduced to her new family and friends.

**Abha Dayal Kaul** is an FOM docent, council member and study tour leader who enjoys sharing insights on Indian culture and heritage. She married in a full-blown traditional Indian wedding years ago, in New Delhi.

Unless otherwise noted, photos courtesy of the author

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By Karen Yeaman



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