

# The Story of a Wedding in Pakistan

By

YUSUF JAMAL HUSAIN

Coming from a country where women are held as no burden unless the parents are desperately poor, and a girl becomes more a liability than a boy, my attempt will be to tell the story of how a girl is given away in marriage amongst the Moslems in Pakistan and India.

Marriage is a serious family matter in our part of the world. There was a time when all marriages were arranged. We do have many more people marrying of their own choice today but there seems to be a compromise today between tradition and new ways. A couple chooses each other, and their parents or elders are approached discreetly through the ubiquitous brother-in-law or sister-in-law or friends, who then intervene and "arrange" the marriage.

My main concern today will be Muslim wedding customs in East and West Pakistan. Despite slight differences, the pattern followed amongst the Moslems of Pakistan and India is by and large the same. The marriage proposal in the Moslem community in these countries (and in all Moslem communities in general) comes from the boy's side, i.e. the groom's side, and not from the bride's side as is traditional in Hindu communities in India and Pakistan. Moslem girls are legal shareholders in their parental properties since the inception of Islam (i.e., 612 A.D.) and are not even required to change over to their husband's surname when married. Her entity as an individual is legally ensured. This gives her a status, and no father can regard her as a burden nor a brother patronize her, because she holds property in her own right. Nobility however has its obligations and a woman's main charm, say men, is her docility. Often in trying to live up to male ideals, she may get exploited.

Once a proposal of marriage has been accepted we get on

to the business of the wedding. Weddings are of two types amongst the Moslems of Pakistan—prompt and deferred. Moslem marriage is a legal contract and not a sacred covenant. Therefore if parents feel that if the girl is too young and needs to get used to the idea of her spouse, she goes through the process of *nikah*, i.e., signing of the contract, but is not sent to live with the husband. The departure of the bride for her husband's home is known as *rukhsati*, or in Bihar as *gauna*. The important fact about the drawing up of the legal contract affirming the marriage is that in it, two to four witnesses from each side (the bride's and the groom's) testify before a *qazi* or a judge, that the bridegroom in their presence has agreed to stipulate a sum of money for the bride on her assenting to marry him. The witnesses also testify that they took the groom's stipulations to the bride and that she had accepted. The contract forms a pretty tough document and in the right hands is quite a piece of agreement. In it are stipulated all sorts of terms and conditions safeguarding the bride's rights (sorry, men are regarded as potential recalcitrants). It often states that the girl must be given so much *paan-daan* per month, so much a month in case her husband should be away, and at times to circumvent the yet unwedded groom's intentions of indulging in polygamy. The clause is added that in such an event he will either (1) have to take his wife's permission or (2) permit his wife to take divorce without foregoing her dowry, for Moslems have the right of divorce with full claims to her share in her husband's money to the extent the law permits her. But should she want a divorce not covered by the ten conditions laid down by the *shariat* law, she can do so by foregoing her stipulated "dowry".

So much for laws. It is not our aim to get into this aspect any too deeply here. The wedding party which has met in the bride's house will now disperse without the bride and groom having seen each other. But legally they are man and wife and liberal parents permit them to meet or exchange letters. The whole affair becomes quite romantic for here a courtship starts between two who cannot lose. The *rukhsati* or departure of the bride for the groom's house can come a few months or a few years later as decided by the elders. In "prompt" marriages, the *nikah* and *rukhsati* take place on the same day, at times the wedding party lasting from noon to midnight.

Now let us get on with the wedding. The proposal is

accepted and the wedding date is set. This is no "deferred" marriage. The wedding will be a complete one, and the bride will leave for the groom's house the evening she gets married.

Islam is non-ritualistic and there are few ceremonies that are really needed. A Moslem marriage is complete with the signing of the document, the *kaabin-namah* or *nikah-namah*. But in each country, Morocco, Algeria, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, India, Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia and China, wedding customs have come in in accordance with the local customs. In Pakistan, the Indian influence is naturally great. But there are aspects of the ceremony not found in Indian life yet practised by Moslems all over Pakistan and India from Kashmir to Mysore, Bombay to Tippera. I had always been baffled by this. But while living in Egypt, I had the occasion once to pick up Edward Lane-Poole's *Egyptian Manners and Customs* (published by Everyman's) and was surprised to see these customs described by Lane-Poole. One such custom referred to was the ritual bath that the bride and groom are given after having been anointed with oil. The Egyptians and the Turks had similar practices. Evidently therefore some aspects of the Moslem wedding ceremony came into the subcontinent with the Moslem settlers and rulers.

We must get back to the wedding. The proposal sent by the groom has been accepted. The *meher* or dowry has been decided upon. The wedding date is fixed after due consultation with the Qoran<sup>1</sup>, or *istikhara* (or prestidigitation). Fifteen, seven, five, or three days before the wedding (an odd number of days) the bride is retired to a dark room to remain there all by herself.

But before this can be done, the day she is to be retired a colorful ceremony is held. The women members of the groom's family come to the bride's house with an embassy of curd or yogurt, fish and perfumed colored betel nuts. The next day the bride's family will go out to invite their guests with portions of this gift, and a *roqqa* or card all to be handed over personally. Invitation by mail is sent only to those too far away or not considered important enough.

The groom's family also bring two saris (in Bengal and South India) or two *joras* in the northern parts of the coun-

---

1. The Bible of the Moslems.

try. In Bengal one sari is a plain white red-bordered cotton sari. The other is as gorgeous as means allow.

At no stage until she is married can the bride's face be shown. She is brought into the assembly (often carried in) dressed in the gorgeous sari, her face veiled. After a while she is taken to another room, or guests are told to leave the room, and she is dressed in the red-bordered white cotton sari, all the time her veil intact. Now everyone is invited to join in what is called diversely *mayun*, *manja*, *lagan* or *mehndi*.

Along with all the goodies the groom's family bring with them, they also bring a *sohag puria*<sup>2</sup> containing *ubtana*, a dough paste made of flour, turmeric perfumes and cream of milk, a dish of *haldi*-paste (or turmeric-paste) and *mehndi*, i.e., *henna* paste.

All the ladies, except those who are widows, now take turns in putting a blob of *ubtana* or skin cleanser on the girl's arms extended from under her veils, a blob of *haldi* on her white sari and a pinch of oil on her hair or forehead which is held partially exposed by some loving aunt or friend. *Henna* paste is put on the palms of her hands. As each *sohagin* (a married woman) anoints her in this way, she also places a sum of money in the bride's lap. This custom is quite elaborate and diversified according to the region. During this ceremony all her jewelry is taken off. Sometimes another ceremony called *goad bharna* is added to it. This is to ensure against barrenness. The prospective bride's lap is filled with rice, coconut and fruits and a small child is placed in her lap at the end of the ceremony. Songs are sung at this time and at the end of the ceremony.

The guests then are entertained to a feast in which the bride takes no part, and she is now retired to be put in solitary confinement, all in the interest of beauty, from this evening.

She is not allowed to be seen or visited by any male members of her family and is seen only by her mother, the nanny who has brought her up, or a relative who takes her food to her and ministers to her needs. The bride is kept on a special diet (often given milk with crushed almonds in it)

---

2. Literally a "chest full of conjugal happiness", is in actuality a case full of toilet articles.

and an extensive beauty treatment is given to her. She is massaged all over several times a day with *ubtana*, a marvellous concoction, and is not allowed to take a bath during this period. Her health and beauty is kept under strict surveillance.

Now comes the day of the wedding. Early in the day the bride is given a lavish bath. She gets a pedicure and a manicure. She is given a shampoo and often her long tresses are dried with perfumed incense put in an open brazier covered with a basket. In Deccan an elaborate process of the trimming of the brows etc. is done. She is dressed in a light muslin or *mulmul* sari or *jora* and returned to her room to catch up on sleep.

Some years ago in more leisured times, the groom's party would arrive before the lunch hours and a wedding reception would entail lunch, tea and dinner. It is easy to see why people went bankrupt. Today with less time, tighter budgets, and economists spoiling matters by telling people to save, the groom's party arrives at a decent hour before dinner, i.e., around six or seven in Pakistan. The groom would generally arrive in early times riding a white charger dressed in a brocade *sherwani* (long coat) or as more sophisticated grooms demand these days, white sharkskin sherwanis, pyjama (tight or full trousers) and a turban, his face covered with a *shehra* or a screen of flowers, and holding a pink silk handkerchief over his mouth. (Let me disillusion the ladies—this is a temporary measure, very temporary).

Today the groom in urban areas arrives in a beautiful Baby Austin or a Cadillac as means permit, and on Adam's shanks in the rural areas of Bengal. In West Pakistan the caparisoned white charger is more readily available, and yet very much in the picture.

The groom's car is flanked by other cars of the party. Or if he is on horseback, the groom is followed on foot by his male relatives while the female relatives ride in *dolis* or palanquins.

The men of the groom's party, with the groom, are taken to the outer rooms, or a canopied area. The women go indoors. They are received by a girl with a fan at the door, and several other women who put some perfume or sandal paste on their foreheads, and a piece of rock candy in their mouths. The

first item on the agenda is the *nikah*<sup>3</sup>. Two or four witnesses from each side are now appointed. They are close relatives or friends.

The male members of the bride's party, all hosts, now sit down with the groom's party to re-examine terms and conditions. The whole assembly hears. The *qazi* or judge, a notary public as called in the U.S.A., puts the proposal before the gathering. These people are not troublesome. They agree without too much fuss. The dowry or *meher* is in accordance with the girl's status even if the boy's pockets will take many years filling to come up with the whole sum. The jewelry and the clothes which have been brought by the groom for the bride, the dresses which are put out in sets, have to conform again to the mystic three-five-seven-twenty-one *joras* or sets, as means permit, and are all displayed. At times a groom's father will demand that the money spent on the jewelry be regarded as deductible from the *meher* or stipulated dowry. (But he is a shark and thank God at this wedding there are no such spoil sports!) Everyone is adequately impressed. Everyone comments on the good taste and extravagance. The witnesses are asked by the *qazi* to go into the women's chambers and take the bride's opinion of the matter directly.

A passage is made. The women clear out of the room where the male witnesses arrive. The bride is on the other side of the door, a bundle of clothes and veils, the most stalwart amongst them quaking with fear at the realization of the enormity of the step. The mother holding the bride is unsure and upset. Her aunts crowd around her. The women of the groom's party are not allowed in the bride room. But they are behind other doors acting as "cheerleaders" for the witnesses. When the bride assents it will be their victory. From then on they will give a hard time to the bride's family, complaining about the cold drinks, the lack of cutlery and the negligence shown to their comfort. The armies are poised.

The oldest amongst the witnesses from the bride's side, a loving uncle or grandfather, calls out in a loud voice, "Miss X daughter of Mrs. Y. You are promised by Mr. So and So a dowry of Rs 1000 or 10,000 plus this, this and this should you agree to marry him". If the contract stipulates other rights,

---

3. The contractual part of the marriage.

such as her *paan-daan kharch*<sup>4</sup>, right of divorce without financial loss, all these are called out. The girl must then in all modesty refuse to answer but start weeping (if she has not already started to do so). The more she weeps, the more the tension rises and the more the people are impressed with her modesty. If she doesn't weep the groom's party might have a field day criticizing the "shameless girl". The choice is so limited that the girl weeps.

After much coaxing and several threats of calling a faint, the bride says, *kaan*, i.e., "yes". The witnesses cannot hear her. They *have* to. So she is requested to speak out louder. A busybody cousin obliges. But the witnesses are wise men—at least at that moment—and they detect the deception. Finally the bride says, "yes". This time it is her mother and her father who has been hovering in the wings as it were, who burst into tears. And there is nothing sham about this. Every girl is special in these families. All children are loved, daughters at times more because they must leave. Rarely is a girl considered a curse in any Moslem community though her disadvantages are at times felt more keenly in an agrarian community.

The witnesses return. The witnesses for the groom corroborate the statements made by the witnesses from the bride's side. The *qazi* now asks all of them to sign the contract. The groom signs. The bride is spared, but someone signs on her behalf. A prayer is offered. Dry dates are distributed. Rose water is sprinkled. The serious part of the business is over. The dinner starts.

Later in the evening after dinner, the groom will be taken indoors. He brings along a friend or two, and his younger brother, to help him hold his own. The bride, after her assent, will be dressed in the clothes brought by the groom. The two will sit on a richly embroidered rug and the groom will see the bride's face for the first time in his life, perhaps not directly, but reflected in a mirror. Her eyes are closed and she will not open them until he says three times, "O, wife, open your eyes, I shall be your slave all my life." She will perhaps after much persuasion do so, and he will be asked, "What do you see?" He must say if he is any lover or for that matter any gentleman, "I see the moon."

---

4. Pin-money.

Rings will be exchanged. Some rice pudding and *sherbet* will be shared from the same dish. This emphasizes their oneness. Songs will be sung to the accompaniment of *dholak*<sup>5</sup> in some parts of the country. Then the groom will literally carry away the bride accompanied by the teasings of his friends and sisters-in-laws. His great ally at this moment is his own younger brother, who will try to foil the efforts of the bride's brothers and younger sisters and friends. The older relatives will enjoy all this discreetly, but except for the grandparents, will not join in directly. One of the groom's shoes is hidden and he has to pay often a heavy sum to get it back. He also will pay heavily to be permitted to leave the house. The money is divided amongst the younger relatives and friends of the bride.

The bride's nanny or an older female relative will sit with the couple in the palanquin or the car, and will remain with the bride until it is time for her to return to her parents' home after three days to remain there from nine to fifteen days as the in-laws permit. Her relatives now invade the groom's house on the day of *walima*, an intriguing event in itself. But that is another story. This story must end here.

As for the bride, we know she lives happily ever after.

Paper read on June 23rd at the Asian Folklore Conference held at Indiana University.

---

5. Two-headed drums.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qoran*, American International Printing Co., Washington, 1946.
- Sir Syed Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam*, Christophers, London, 1952.
- Zeenuth Futehally, *Zohra*, Hind Kitabshan, Bombay, 1951.
- S. M. Ikram, *Muslim Civilization in India*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1964.
- Shaista S. Ikramullah, *Behind the Veil*, DAFF, Government of Pakistan, 1951.
- Shaista S. Ikramullah, *From Purdah to Parliament*, Cresset Press, London, 1963.
- Marmaduke Pickthall, *Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, New American Library, 1953.
- Sir Abdul Rahim, *Principles of Mohammedan Jurisprudence*, All Pakistan Legal Decisions, Lahore, 1958.