

# What is Sikh in a 'Sikh Wedding'?

## Text, Ritual and Performance in Diaspora Marriage Practices

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This paper provides a commentary on changes in marriage practices among Sikhs both in Punjab and in the diaspora context. These exhibit an intricate interplay between tradition and modernity. In addition to demonstrating that trends in marriage practices are complex and fluid, involving new information channels, the paper argues that the 'Wedding Event' has become primarily a Punjabi cultural performance in which the Sikh marriage ceremony (*Anand Karaj*), given its highly spiritual character, loses its significance for most marrying couples and is, in fact, overshadowed by exuberance shown through pre and post wedding rituals and practices which have become ever more lavish and commercialised. The paper ends by speculating on some motives of second and third generation Sikhs to opt for a 'traditional' Sikh wedding.

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### **Context: young British adults and shifting marriage rituals and practices**

Sikh society in Punjab and in the diaspora is undergoing fundamental change in ethos and values, which is profoundly transforming aspirations, family lives and relationships. Although this move began in appreciable ways with the arrival of the British in Punjab and the economic modernisation that ensued, more fundamental shifts have occurred over the last fifty years. Rapid modernisation and globalisation in the Punjab after independence and experiences of dislocation, moving away from home and re-building lives in very different, often hostile, cultural environments profoundly impacted traditional values but has not completely replaced them with western ones. Tradition and modernity sit side by side, often the former reinforced, renewed or reinvented in the diaspora with the

community experiencing extreme tension between them and trying hard to skilfully navigate their way through it. In this paper, I take the case of one cultural practice, also an important 'rite of passage'—marriage—as a marker of tradition and explore how young British Sikhs, Sikh parents and Sikh society in general are responding to broader cultural shifts, as well as inter-generational and cross-cultural tensions. Whilst the modernist impact on marriage practices is clearly evident in both Punjab and diaspora, the focus of this paper is largely on the UK Sikh diaspora. The paper also attempts to explore reasons for the growing schism between understandings of the spiritual significance of marriage as enshrined in Sikh scripture and actual marriage and Punjabi cultural practices.

Although the Sikh *Anand Karaj* (Marriage of Bliss) ceremony is very simple and elegant and can be easily completed in less than an hour, the 'wedding event' or occasion itself can take more than a year to plan. The week preceding the main event is characterised by several pre-wedding, wedding and post-wedding ceremonies and their associated rituals. We are able to find references to some of these in the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (SGGS) but others are part and parcel of the wider Punjabi and north Indian folk and cultural practices. These include meeting between parents/guardians of both families to formally agree to the *rishta* (*thaka/roka*) and set a date for marriage, engagement ceremony (*kurmai*), *mehndi* and *sangeet*, *choora* (bride) and *sehra bandi* (groom). On the evening or night prior to the wedding, there is the obligatory *Jago* ritual led by the maternal side of the boy or girl's family which seems to be a purely folk practice, becoming very popular in recent times and an occasion for a 'warmup' pre-wedding party.<sup>1</sup> Just prior to the wedding ceremony in the morning and before the *barat/junj* is invited to partake in refreshments, there is the *milni* ceremony following *Ardas*. After the *Anand Karaj* and the wedding reception, there are rituals associated with bride leaving her parental home (*doli*), and with her arrival in the new parental home.

British-born young Sikh adults (where only a small percentage will have taken *amrit*) have warmly embraced these ceremonies and their associated rituals without critical questioning or serious attempts to understand their religious or cultural significance. Some couples see these as 'exotic' or 'a necessary pain' that has to be endured when opting to have a 'traditional-style' wedding. Others may see them as way of connecting with their heritage and a time to bond or cultivate a closer relationship with the extended family. But all these ceremonies are not costless. Although for some parents and their relatives it is a time to show off their newly acquired wealth being first-generation migrants—a process of embourgeoisement—for others the financial burden imposed by peer pressure

becomes unsustainable. The 'Wedding Event', taken in its totality, has become the most expensive single act of conspicuous consumption for the family yet focus on the ceremony's religious or spiritual significance via educating the would-be couple about its meaning seems to have been pushed to the periphery. The decision by the would-be couple to opt for a traditional style marriage can, often, lead to financial hardship or even ruin, especially for the bride's family which disproportionality bears the cost, especially if they have more than one daughter to marry off.

While without doubt all ceremonies and rituals add to the auspiciousness of the great occasion, we have little nuanced understanding of the relevance or meaning attached to them by the marrying couple in post-industrial Britain. What motivates them to embrace these ceremonies and rituals? Are they demonstrating attachment to their parental culture, fulfilling parental expectations and upholding family *izzat* (honour) or are they behaving in an unrestrained selfish way to experience the best of both worlds—a traditional Punjabi Sikh wedding and a modern British wedding? Whilst both objectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive and confer mutual benefits to all stakeholders, we still require a more nuanced understanding of the trends and motives behind why traditional style weddings continue to be preferred by the majority of second or third-generation British-born and educated Sikh couples.

This paper has four main sections. The first section provides an overview of the unique features of the rites and rituals associated with a Sikh wedding as expressed through verses and hymns in the SGGS. This section brings out the deep spiritual character of the pre-wedding preparations and the wedding ceremony itself. The second section identifies new trends in marriage arrangements and practices and argues that rapidly changing globalisation technologies have created new dynamic marriage markets and information channels, enabling the manifestation of varied and complex patterns in diaspora Sikh marriage practices. The third section outlines the rise of the wedding economy, and its associated commercial suppliers both in India and the Sikh diaspora and reviews changing expectations regarding what have become the accepted norms regarding marriage occasions. These suggest a diminishing significance of the Sikh wedding ceremony (*Anand Karaj*) in the overall context of the wedding occasion with the wedding event becoming primarily an act of Punjabi and British cultural performance with Bollywood celebratory overtones. The fourth and final section concludes by offering some explanations regarding historical continuities and changing values and expectations among British-born

would-be couples on how they negotiate marriage practices and demonstrate increased desire of having the best of both worlds on their special day – perform the rituals and relish the gatherings of a traditional marriage and indulge in and enjoy the main features of a modern British wedding. It is also suggested that it is no longer possible to separate the Sikh religious aspects of the wedding occasion from the wider Punjabi, Indian and British cultural practices, making the occasion a truly transnational, transcultural and translocal event.<sup>2</sup>

Primary data for this paper were collected through the author acting as participant observer in 10 separate Sikh marriages during the years 2010 and 2013. The author was closely involved in the discussions, including with groom or bride-to-be, in many stages either as a close family relative or as a friend. Involvement in six of these marriages was from the bride's side of the family and four from groom's side. One of these marriages involved a couple from different castes and one involved an *Amritdhari* couple and all marriage partners were British-born and of Sikh heritage. All marriages were 'negotiated' or 'mediated' in the sense that the marrying couple gave full consent and even may have went through a period of courting and further, had full blessings of both sets of parents or other relatives before arrangements for the marriage were initiated. All weddings took place in a gurdwara and were followed by a wedding reception in a banqueting hall, with one exception.

### **Sikh wedding ceremony: origins, text and meaning**

The Sikh *Anand Karaj* (technically the ceremony is *Anand* (joyous bliss) and *Anand Karaj* signifies the deed of *Anand*) ceremony and some of the associated pre-ceremonies have their basis in hymns and verses composed by Guru Nanak, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjun. The ceremony remains an important identity marker for Sikhs and confirms Sikhism as a distinct and separate religion from that of the Muslims and Hindus who happened to be the dominant communities in Punjab during the Guru period. According to Guru Amar Das, the marriage signifies a spiritual bond between the couple who by undergoing *Anand Karaj* attain a single soul in two bodies.<sup>3</sup> The *Anand Karaj* ceremony itself is in many ways also unique because it does not signify a legal contract but a sacrament or a spiritual bond because it happens in the presence of the SGGS and does not require a priest to perform it. Thus, any *Amritdhari* Sikh (man or woman) who is able to recite the specified hymns and verses from the *Guru Granth* is able to perform the ceremony, while the bride and groom circumambulate around it

four times. Moreover, the ceremony does not have to be performed in a gurdwara and can take place at home, in a community hall or hotel function room or another appropriately prepared public space. The only conditions being that a Sikh must marry a Sikh, irrespective of their caste or social standing and the ceremony must take place in the presence of the SGGS. The latter two conditions have caused tensions within the Sikh diaspora in the UK.<sup>4</sup>

The tradition regards marriage as a monogamous, unbreakable sacred bond that provides worldly and spiritual happiness to the *gurmukh*, thus there is no mention of separation by divorce in the scripture. Divorce is, of course, possible but only under civil law. According to tradition, the *Anand Karaj* ceremony has been performed since the time of Guru Amar Das (1479–1574), although there is some ambiguity about its wider practice and acceptance given that Sikhs, although constituting the '*tisar panth*' (third community), were still an embryonic minority.<sup>5</sup> In India, the *Anand Karaj* ceremony eventually became legally binding (solemnised) with the passing of the Anand Marriage Act in 1909 despite the very hostile opposition to it from segments of Hindus and even Sikhs who refused to recognise its distinct nature and wanted it seen as continuation of Hindu social and customary laws.<sup>6</sup> The *Anand Karaj* ceremony was fully incorporated into the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* (Code of Conduct) by the *Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee* (SGPC) in 1950, superseding all earlier versions. However, the law regarding Sikh marriage and its registration as a Sikh marriage (rather than Hindu under the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955) was only passed as late as 2012, after persistent lobbying by Sikh organisations.<sup>7</sup> This amendment to the Act needs to be seen as an important landmark, recognising Sikhism as a separate, unique and distinct religion for the first time despite years of struggle by Sikh organisations. Diaspora-based Sikh couples are also required to undergo a civil ceremony as per marriage laws, and at least in the UK, the gurdwara management committee will insist that the civil ceremony must already have occurred before the *Anand Karaj* can be performed. Or if licensed, the gurdwara registrar will perform the civil marriage in the presence of the SGGS at some appropriate point during the Sikh marriage ceremony.

Sikh tradition repudiates celibacy and places great emphasis on the institution of marriage and sees it as a necessary sacrament and a sacred duty of humankind. Certainly, parents of Sikh heritage, if they have unmarried children, consider it almost their religious duty to see them married off. Marriage is perceived as a holy union, consecrated in accordance with Divine Will or *Hukum*. It is a necessary fulfilment by which the highest form of love, the Love for the Divine, may be

experienced. Married family life or *grihith* is seen as the most 'natural' and 'superior' form of living. Furthermore, married life, especially in the case of women, is to be celebrated since it grants them equality in society and legitimises their important role as mothers, homemakers and nurturers of tradition. This is consistent with Guru Nanak's overall teachings which accords absolute equality and respect for women.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, throughout the SGGS, the metaphor or symbolism of the bride is used for mankind and the human bride pining for her Divine Groom is central to the poetry of the SGGS ('*Mera man loche gur darshan tai*' – My mind pines for a glimpse of the Guru, SGGS, 96). Nanak's young bride is a very lively, strong-willed and passionate individual engaged in a spiritual conquest, does everything to make herself attractive as a bride, darkens her eyes with *surma* and decorates her neck with jewellery. Surrounded by sisters and female friends, she makes arrangement of her marriage and is overjoyed at her good fortune ('*Meri sakhi saheli sunhu bhai, Mera piru risaalu sangi sai*' – Listen affectionately my friends and sisters, My Groom is handsome! He is always by my side, SGGS, 1170) and ('*Sambat saha likhia mil kar pavo tel, Deho sajjan asisaria jio hovai Sahib sio mel*' – The day of my wedding is fixed, come and gather to pour the ritual oil at my threshold, Give me your blessings, O' friends, that I may be united with my Lord, SGGS, 12). The soulbride is never widowed and forever happily wedded (*sadaa suhaagan*) to her Lord ('*Sej suhavee sadaa pir raavai Har var paa-i-aa naar, Naa Har marai na kade dukh laagai sadaa suhaagan naar*' – The bride's couch is beautiful on which she enjoys forever the love of her spouse. She has obtained her Husband-Lord. Her Lord will never die, she will never suffer pain, and forever she will remain a wedded woman, SGGS, 651). It is important to mark that all the Gurus, except Guru Har Krishan, the Eighth Guru, due to his tender age, led married lives and this provides further evidence of importance attached to the institution of marriage and the view that a bride's yearning for union with the groom is celebrated because the experience of love within the marriage ennoble or dignify men and women and brings them that much closer to the love of the Divine. Thus, for Sikh families, marriage as a social institution has deep spiritual significance first and foremost.

It is worth noting that all Sikh Gurus supported Guru Nanak's proclamations against the major social ills of those days – dowry, purdah, female infanticide, co-sanguine marriage, child marriage and sati. Widows/widowers can remarry and there are no injunctions against couples who profess Sikhism but may be from different caste. Sikhism places great emphasis on a monogamous marriage and mutual fidelity of the spouses and condemns polygamy.<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, the

simplicity of the *Anand* ceremony in solemnising the act of marriage appealed to many people, particularly to those whom Hindu priests had excluded, and this was an important factor in bringing more and more people into the Sikh fold. Sikh faith gives women equal opportunity to find spiritual liberation as they can read and recite *bani* and partake in all the religious ceremonies. Of course, we must not forget that these are ideals expressed in Sikh scripture but within Sikh society the power of patriarchal attitudes and social behaviour can be powerful barriers towards achieving them. Feudal and agrarian mindsets take a long time to erode and we know that patriarchy has still not disappeared even in the most developed nations. Patriarchal behaviour is also clearly visible during the wedding ceremony. After all, it is the bride's father who hands the groom's *palla* to his daughter and it is the bride who follows the groom four times around the SGGS, escorted by her brothers, rather than the couple walking side by side.

### **Sikh marriage ceremonies and rituals and their spiritual significance**

In this section, I outline the relationship between Sikh scripture and Sikh wedding ceremonies and try to identify which have clear reference in Sikh scripture and which are more to do with cultural/societal norms. As stated earlier although the Sikh wedding ceremony is simple and formal, it is preceded by various rituals and ceremonies. Here, only the main ones, especially those that have direct reference in the SGGS, are discussed.<sup>10</sup> All others tend to be related to common folk practices associated with wedding celebrations, for example, ladies *sangeet* where Punjabi folk songs and dance—*tappe*, *boliyan*, *jugni*, *gidda* and *bhangra*—are performed and others are designed to ward off the evil eye, to signify fertility or bless a long life. The role of superstition, for example, consulting horoscopes or astrology to fix date and day of marriage, is of course not accepted within the Sikh tradition. The four pre-wedding ceremonies briefly discussed here are *shagun* combined with *chunni chadana*, *mehndi*, *sehra bandi* and *kurmai*, which all act as important precursors to the main ceremony. The *shagun/chunni chadana* ceremony involves parents and relatives of the boy and girl bringing auspicious gifts for them to formalise the forthcoming marriage. The *chunni chadana* ceremony has a greater significance in that it involves beautifying the bride-to-be with a rich red-coloured garment, which is meant to protect her and also marks her departure from a maiden to womanhood. In the UK, often, the bride-to-be also receives bridal make-up and other accessories. In the SGGS, the festive red *manjithara* of the bride's *chunni* is symbolic of the new colour her life will thereafter assume

(*'Tara eko naam manjithara rata mera chola saad rang dhola'*—With your Name alone have I everlastingly dyed red my garments, O Beloved, SGGS, 729).

A day prior to the wedding ceremony, the bride (and groom but with limited significance) undergoes the mehndi ceremony. Mehndi—made from powdered henna and water—is applied on the hands of the bride by a professional mehndi artiste. A few hours later there is the ritual-application (*maiyyaa*) of *vatna* (paste made of turmeric, gram flour and mustard oil) on the bride by close relatives and friends whilst she sits under a canopy, to signify cleansing or ritual blossoming and purification of body and mind in preparation for the wedding ceremony (*'Satgur sev dhan baal-arre-ai Har var paa-vai soo-ee Ram, Sadaa ho-vai sohagane phir mael-aa ves na ho-ee Ram, Phir mael-aa ves na ho-ee gurmukh boojh-ai ko-ee haum-ai maar pachhaan-i-aa'*—Serve the True Guru, O' young and innocent bride, and thus attain the Lord as your spouse, Forever will you be the wife of the True Lord, and never again wear soiled garments, Your garments shall never be soiled: rare are the *gurmukh* (followers of God's wisdom) who recognise this having conquered their ego, SGGS 770).

The *Sehra Bandi* ceremony incorporates important aspects of the attire worn by the groom as he departs for the wedding: tying of a decorative fringe made of strings of flowers to cover the face of the groom by sisters of the groom (although nowadays optional)—attaching the *Kalgi* (a jewelled ornament with a plume fixed on it) to the turban and the *Kirpan*. The latter two appear to have become popular after the last Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, initiated the *Khalsa* with its regal overtones. Traditionally, the groom is supposed to depart on a white *ghori* (mare or horse) with gathered women marking the departure with traditional folk songs (*ghoryian* or *sehra*) although nowadays an appropriately decorated luxury car, such as a limousine or Rolls Royce, is substituted, although some over-enthusiastic grooms have trialled horses. The folk songs—*ghoryian*—do have reference in the SGGS in a verse by Guru Ram Das (in *Raag Wadhans* entitled *Ghoriyaan*)—where the ritual associated with mounting and riding on horseback is given special spiritual meaning (*'Deh ghodi ji jit Har paa-i-aa Ram'*—Human being riding to meet the Lord and *'Har Har kaaj rachaa-i-aa mil sant janaaa junj aa-i-ee, Jan Nanak Har war paa-i-aa mangal mil sant janaa wadha-i-aaee'*—The Lord Himself has ordained this work, the saints ride together in a wedding procession, Servant Nanak has been granted the Lord as the spouse! In joyful unison the saints glorify him, SGGS, 575). During this journey, the groom, assuming a princely position, slowly following behind the *band-baja* and dancing by members of the *junj*, is supposedly experiencing an awakened mind (Figure 1).





Figure 1. Guru Nanak's Wedding Procession (Janam Sakhi, c1800–1900). Gift of the Kapany Collection, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco. I am very grateful to Professor Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh for referring me to the paintings depicting Guru Nanak's marriage in the Janam Sakhi (Life Stories) manuscripts.

The final ceremony and ritual—nowadays usually performed in the presence of the SGGS and before the *Lavan Pheras* (circling) ceremony rather than several months before as was the earlier custom—is *kurmai*. Convenience and acknowledgement of the significance and sanctity of the ritual and in stricter adherence to conventions of the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* have compelled many parents to leave this as the penultimate act – performed a few minutes before the formal Anand Karaj ceremony begins. Hymns associated with the *kurmai* ceremony— ('*Sat santokh kar bhao kuram kurmaee aiya bal Ram jio*'—She/He who is embellished with truth and contentment is favoured by the father-in-law Guru's visit to betroth her to the Lord, SGGS, 773) —go back to early origins of the scripture itself. Actual practices seem to vary here. Since the ring ceremony takes place during the civil marriage, either at the gurdwara or local Marriage Registrar Office, the *kurmai* ritual tends then to focus on the groom alone – another aspect of patriarchal behaviour and which also acknowledge the *barat/junj* as guests of the

bride's family. After *Ardas* and as the *ragis* begin to sing the relevant *shabad*, the bride's male family, led by the father, pour into the pouch of the shoulder-draped *palla* worn by the groom, dried mixed fruits and nuts, including traditionally, dried dates (*chhuhare*) and offer a gift to the groom, either a gold *kara* or neck chain (or watch) and the occasion is marked with feeding the groom some *mithai* or *chhuhare*. Token gifts of money are given to the groom by the father and close male relatives of the bride. It is as if the *chunni* ceremony performed on the bride is now reciprocated by the *kurmai* ceremony for the groom.

The *Lavan Pheras* mark the central part of the ceremony with the gurdwara diwan hall assuming its significance as sanctified sacred space. Diaspora-born couples find this segment of the ceremony the most apprehensive to deal with and may have rehearsed the correct code of behaviour, for instance, bowing to the SGGS before getting up or when sitting down, whom to follow and how to deal with the *kirpan*. The ceremony commences with *Ardas* and there is a clear order in which proceedings must be conducted. Appropriate *shabads* are sung and the bride's father places in her hands the *palla* draped over the shoulder of the groom to initiate the beginning of the union—perhaps European equivalent of tying of the nuptial knot. The ceremony now begins and the core of the proceedings is the reading of the four stanzas of the *Lavan* hymn with the couple circumambulating clockwise around the SGGS whilst they are sung. Guru Ram Das (1534–1581) composed the *Lavan* (SGGS, 773–774) in *Rag Suhi* to celebrate the union of human soul (*atma*) with the master soul or God (*paramatama*) with each stanza leading to 'higher and higher circles of existence' (Singh 1995, 149). However, as part of the mandatory hymns of the *Anand Karaj* ceremony, these stanzas are now commonly understood by the community and the couple as explaining the four stages of married love and blissful family life. The first *Laav* may be interpreted as emphasising the importance of performing a duty towards one's family and community and commencement of the rite of passage to a married life ('*Jan kahai Nanak laav pehlee arrambh kaaj rachaa-ia'*—Says Nanak, with the first circling the commencement of the [wedding] rite has begun, SGGS, 773). The second *Laav* focuses on sacrifice, mutual love and yearning and that Divine music of the *shabad* (word of God) is now heard ('*Jan Nanak doojee laav chala-ee anhad sabad vaa-jai'*—Says servant Nanak, when the second circling is begun the unheard melody of the Divine *Shabad* is struck, SGGS, 773–74). The third *Laav* celebrates the achievement of detachment (*bairag*) from the midst of family life and love and benevolence of God awakening in the heart ('*Jan Nanak bole teejee laavai Har upjai man bairag jeeo'*—Says Nanak, with the Third circling Hari brings forth in the mind

detachment from the world, SGGS, 774). The fourth and final *Laav* emphasises the final union in the company of saints and when human love immerses into the love of God ('*Jan Nanak bole chothee laavai Har paa-i-a Prabh avinaasee*'—Says Nanak, servant of the Divine, with the fourth circle, the Eternal Lord is found, SGGS, 774).

The ending of the fourth *Laav* or circling is followed by the *raagis* singing the first five and the last stanzas of Guru Amar Das's *Anand* and the first verse of Guru Ram Das's celebratory hymn in *Sri Raag* ('*Vi-aah hova mere babula, gurmukhe Har paya, Again andhera katiyaa, gur gyan prachand balaiya*'—My marriage is performed, O my father, through the Guru's guidance I have obtained Hari, Darkness and ignorance are dispelled, the Guru has revealed the blazing light of spiritual knowledge, SGGS, 78). Celebrations effectively begin with relatives and friends congratulating both sets of parents on completion of the auspicious occasion, although a concluding *shabad* and recitation of Guru Amar Das's final hymn from the SGGS (496) still remains. The ceremony is formally concluded with the *Ardas* and taking of *vaak* and finally *karah parshad* is distributed to the *sangat*.

With the ceremony over, the couples' parents give their *shagun* to the newly wed and this is followed by other relatives and friends offering theirs. The practice in the UK is for this to be always offered at the gurdwara before departing for the wedding reception although this will vary in India and other diaspora locations. Also in the UK at least, on most marriage occasions, although there are a few exceptions, the earlier tradition of partaking of *langar* after the ceremony has been replaced by immediate post-wedding celebrations and dinner which could last anything between four to six hours, depending on the initial arrival of the newlyweds to their wedding reception. It is also customary in the UK for the bride to return to her parental home and for the groom to come and collect her for her new home. There are various customs, rituals and folk songs associated with this *doli* ceremony but the time of bride's departure is generally perceived as an emotional time for the bride and bride's siblings and parents – well enshrined in Punjabi folklore (Figure 2).

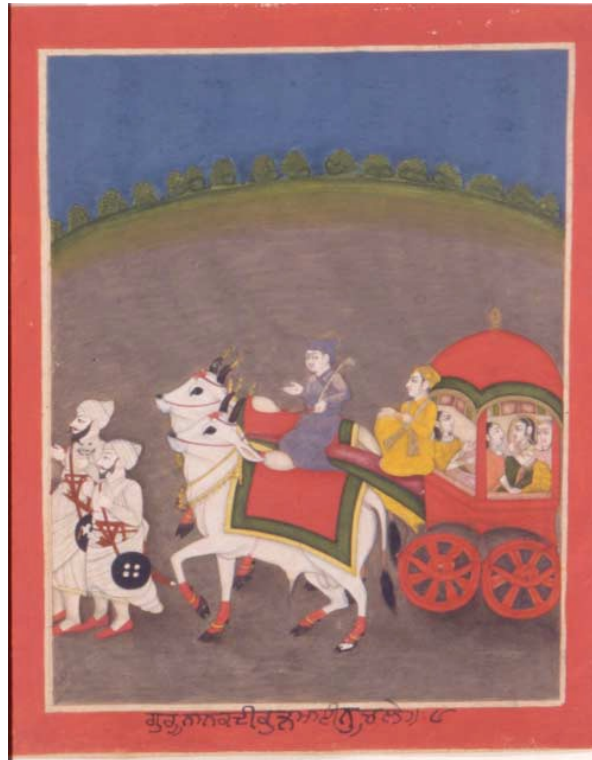


Figure 2. Guru Nanak's Marriage – departure of Doli (Janam Sakhi, c. 1800–1900). Gift of the Kapany Collection, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco.

In this section, I have tried to explain the deep religious or spiritual significance associated with some selected pre-wedding ceremonies and with the wedding ceremony itself and briefly described their associated rituals. Since these derive their authority from the SGGS, they are uniquely Sikh ceremonies. I have not discussed other ceremonies and rituals usually associated with the wedding occasion as I understand them to be part of the wider folk traditions of the north Indian region. But as I have indicated earlier, many of them have become intertwined with wedding occasions at the popular culture level and it becomes difficult to demarcate, what is Sikh and what is a Punjabi cultural practice. This is not wholly surprising as Punjabi culture or *Punjabiyaat* precedes Sikhism (or Sikh culture) by several centuries and its umbrella and composite character—captured in the folk lore, legends of romance, songs, dances and festivals—and shared across all the religious communities, remains deeply ingrained among people of Punjabi heritage. Although a contentious issue, many would discount the

underlying tension between Punjabi and Sikh identities and regard them as complementary rather than mutually exclusive (Khurana 2013; Singh 2012). This interweaving between Sikh religious and Punjabi cultural practices is even more complex in the diaspora especially as these practices are also subjected to the wider Indian, especially Bollywood, and host country influences. The hybridity and fluidity we see represented in these practices are often neglected in discussions about Sikh or Punjabi identities and typically exhibit what have been termed as 'diaspora or third spaces' that help cultivate a homing desire (Brah 1996).

Whilst we would expect considerable diversity in degrees of adherence to Sikh wedding practices, more worrying is the growing imbalance between exuberance expressed in celebrating various pre-wedding ceremonies but displaying little commitment to understanding the religious and spiritual meaning of the occasion. Nor is there any serious attempt by gurdwara managers to explain its significance in a language that the couple and many younger members of the congregation can understand. Since the majority of young couples are not practicing or *Amritdhari* Sikhs, it is a common practice for most gurdwara management committees to present the couple a '*gutka*' with a request for them to live a '*gursikh*' way of life. It is difficult to comprehend how the couples perceive this request and gift but it is something that very rarely comes up in casual conversation. We now turn to look at rapidly changing trends in wedding practices.

### **Sikh marriage practices at home and abroad: from tradition to modernity with heightened expectations**

Despite societal pressures and changing values and norms, many Sikh parents still yearn towards upholding the principles and expectations of an ideal traditional marriage for their offspring. These are: that marriage must be within their caste group but outside the *gotra* or clan; in accordance with the four *gotra* rule prohibiting marriage within the father's, mother's, father's sister's and mother's sister's *gotras* (and therefore logically also not in their villages); that bride givers are supposedly inferior to bride takers and need to show humility; that the woman must marry 'up', both socially and economically; that the giving of *daaj* (dowry) makes the marriage honourable and transfers a daughter's share of family wealth and finally; that the bride is expected to live in the groom's household, and not vice versa. Furthermore, to ensure a 'good' match, relatives or

an intermediary—popularly known as a '*bachola*' or '*lagi*' (traditionally *nai*, the village barber)—is important to ensure accurate information exchange about family background and economic position, their character and reputation and to negotiate the marriage arrangements, including the potential value of any dowry sought (Jhutti 1998; Verma 2002; Voigt-Graf 2005).<sup>11</sup>

Despite these tall ideals, in practice there is tremendous variation in how strictly the four *gotra* rule actually operates. Increasingly, only prohibition regarding the father's and mother's *gotras* is emphasised when marriages are arranged and negotiated but even this condition has weakened. Furthermore, although the principles underlying marriage rules and the requirement of a good match place certain constraints upon the spatial spread of marriage networks, marriage practices have always been quite varied and the rules more relaxed in urban or semi-urban localities, particularly among educated groups or trading castes, where families might, for instance, seek spouses through newspaper advertisements, or via arranged transnational marriages (Hershman 1981; Jyoti 1981; Sandhu 2009). Also in certain historical periods of Punjab, if adverse sex-ratios created shortage of marriageable females (for instance, due to increase in female infanticide) marriage rules were ignored and even polyandry and payment of bride price became common practice among certain groups, especially the poor (Malhotra 2002). Today, however, marriages occur across the three main geographical sub-divisions of Punjab—*Malwa*, *Doaba* and *Majha*—and also cross-border, especially given that Sikhs now constitute a global diaspora of approximately two million (author's estimate). 'Arranged' marriages are, moreover, conducted in varying combinations and degrees, with partners sometimes not meeting at all or only meeting under chaperoned conditions or after a period of courting with both parents' blessing.

Since the 1970's, marriage practices have been greatly affected by rapid socio-economic transformation, large-scale internal and external migration and accelerated phase of globalisation of Punjab which have all contributed to increased affluence. The construction of grand Marriage Palaces have now spread to all sub-regions of Punjab and provide novel venues for modern-style celebrations of the wedding occasion with commercially arranged and lavish western-style personalised buffet service and live music/disco. The religious marriage ceremony (*anand karaj*) usually takes place in a gurdwara in a village nearby and is expected to be attended only by close family members. There is, in fact, a growing convergence between these marriage practices in Punjab and in

diaspora locations where many people will forgo the gurdwara ceremony and only attend the reception party afterwards.

Thus marriage practices nowadays may be better described as a varied and complex social trend than as traditional practice and have undergone fundamental changes over two generations. Within the Sikh diaspora, in particular, the practice of what an outsider may perceive as a typical 'arranged', 'assisted' or 'love' marriage shows considerable complexity, variability and fluidity, increasingly blurring the distinction between a modern or western 'romantic love' marriage and a traditional 'arranged marriage'. It is as if rural, urban, western and celebrity practices have all converged giving us a Sikh diasporic cultural performance, with only symbolic differences depending on locality.

Transformations in marriage practices are also reflected in strategies for partner selection which are also increasingly fluid, diverse and complex. These include matches that would traditionally be frowned upon, such as marriages between elderly overseas (divorced or widowed) males and young brides; girls marrying *below* their socio-economic status; inter-caste or inter-racial marriages, male spouses living with bride's parents; promoting marriages in which caste or status antecedents of one or other partner maybe extremely doubtful. Needless to say such marriages have a higher chance of marital abuse or failure (Bajpai 2013; Stewart 2013; Thandi 2013). In response to the rapid socio-economic changes in Punjab and their associated modernising impact on marriage practices, some overseas Sikhs regard themselves as proper upholders of 'tradition' than India-based Punjabis.<sup>12</sup>

For many Sikh parents in the diaspora, the traditional practice of marrying their child (usually son) to a spouse from India represented both an important motive for maintaining a link with their homeland and a crucial vehicle for transmitting cultural values, tradition and language maintenance in their diasporic children. However, attitudes regarding this began to change among the first-, second- and now third-generation 'migrants' (Ballard 1978; Nayar 2004). In the UK, for instance, except in households with recently migrated parents (assumed to have a first-generation '*pendu*' or villager mindset) most parents nowadays show a preference for finding a compatible partner for their offspring from their own country of residence or from another Sikh diaspora location, preferably a higher-ranked place (Mand 2002; Mooney 2006; Thandi 2013). Looking at this from a British-born youth perspective, when it comes to selecting their marriage partner, a vast number of diaspora Sikhs may be best described as

skilful 'negotiators', using a range of tactics to achieve the best outcome for them but also to ensure that there is cultural and religious conformity. Many are increasingly likely to meet their partner at college or university or through social media rather than traditional kinship networks, keep within the acceptable boundaries of class, caste and religion, with the traditional 'arranged' marriage always available as a default option if an acceptable partner is not found. The final choice may involve timely intervention by relatives (brothers, cousins, uncles and aunts, brother- or sister-in-laws) as advocates in a complex and protracted negotiation process. As Netting (2006, 141) has argued '...family negotiations depend on respect between genders and generations, without this base, families are polarized and youths' choices virtually limited to rebellion or capitulation'. Such negotiated marriages, where the children have a veto, not only meet parental expectations and bring harmony to family tensions, they also enable siblings to have control over their life choices, uphold family honour and show respect for the cultural values of their parents (Brah 1978; Hall 2002; Nayar 2004).

### **Emergence of new marriage markets: changing contexts and practices for partner selection**

Given the rise of the wedding economy, both in Punjab and the diaspora, the wedding occasion signifies a substantial potential financial burden for parents especially as they are not oblivious to the risks involved in the face of growing incidence of failed marriages and divorces. Nevertheless, for parents the act of marrying off their children remains an important, sacred or religious duty, and they will pursue whatever strategies necessary and use whatever information channels are available to find a suitable match for their children. But marriage networks are dynamic and evolve over time and with enhanced connectivity to the web which offers relatively cheap and instant information, existing arrangements have transformed and new commercially based matchmaking intermediaries have emerged, leading to radical impacts on marriage rules and marriage practices. For instance, online matrimonial columns in leading Punjab and diaspora-based vernacular and English language newspapers have enlarged the choice of potential marriage partners, leading to the rapid erosion of system of arranged marriages and marriage rules relating to endogamy and exogamy. The advent of online matrimonial portals and websites has enabled globally dispersed Sikh communities to become closely connected despite huge geographical distances, leading to increase in transnational marriages.



We can identify four main information channels regarding marriage arrangements and practices. Firstly, family kinship networks still remain the most common and preferred ways for extending marriage relationships whether domestically or cross-border. These networks enable the community to uphold the principles and practices of kinship reciprocity constructed on kinship trust and solidarity. Most Sikh families continue to use both their diaspora-based personal kinship networks and homeland ones to find suitable *rishtas* for their children as these networks continue to provide the most 'trustworthy' information about prospective in-laws. For first-generation Sikh migrants, extending and strengthening kinship networks and solidarity, especially through strategic marriage alliances, remained paramount and was an important means of protecting or raising family honour. Moreover, many of the '1.5 generation' adults – who were child migrants themselves – also continued to favour this particular form of partner selection when arranging marriages of their second- or third-generation diaspora-born children. Attendance at family weddings, other family gatherings and cultural functions at different diaspora sites and the popularity of videoing the proceedings and their subsequent circulation across transnational spaces, provides opportunities for extended family networks to identify and screen children of marriageable age and discuss potential 'matching' possibilities for them. In fact, the recent upsurge in use of social media has speeded up information flows even further.

It is worth emphasising that, especially in the context of transnational marriage arrangements, women have emerged as important intermediaries in constructing new transnational social spaces. For instance, those women who migrate, often, through marriage, especially if they are the first migrant from their family and are migrating to localities where they have no prior caste or kinship links, tend to create marriage networks around them. In the UK, for example, often, the occurrence of a single marriage leads to further marriages, especially because current immigration rules allow it. The married woman brings other women – sisters, first and second cousins, nieces and neighbours' daughters – creating fairly dense women's support networks, generating stability, solidarity and trust in new marriage alliances. This critical role of women, in providing a new agency in initiating, constructing and strengthening new forms of chain migration and kinship networks and especially in the reversing of earlier gendered roles in fulfilling obligations to kin, remains hardly documented in the prevailing narratives on Sikh transnational marriages, unlike, for instance, for Pakistani Muslim Punjabis (Charsley 2005; Shaw 2001; Charsley and Shaw 2006).

However, increasing evidence suggests that protection and the unifying impact offered by traditional kinship networks began to weaken as new forms of marriage arrangements and practices emerged.<sup>13</sup>

Secondly, nowadays family-based kinship networks can be extended to incorporate religious institutions such as gurdwaras as many of them now also offer matrimonial services and maintain a database on youth seeking marriage. The growing provision of this service by leading gurdwaras, along with other cultural and religious activities, such as summer camps, *kirtan* and *gatka* classes, sports tournaments and weekend sleep-overs oriented towards youth, fulfil a particular need where parents and youngsters may be looking for partners with a similar worldview. Users of these services, unlike for instance users of online matrimonial websites, could also be perceived as accommodating their children's needs by adopting risk-averse strategies given the increased incidence of marital breakdowns in the Sikh diaspora.

Thirdly, marriage bureaus began to fill an important information void from the 1970s onwards because of difficulties in importing spouses, especially grooms from Punjab, due to more stringent immigration controls (for example, the primary purpose rule designed to weed out bogus marriages) and growing resolve by British born children that they would prefer their marriage partner to be British as well. The Suman Marriage Bureau, based in Southall, the heart of early Sikh settlement, was the first to offer this service in 1972 and still remains one of the largest Asian marriage bureaus in Europe. Since then a large number of other marriage bureaus, online dating and speed dating agencies have proliferated in the UK, catering for different South Asian communities and even for specific social and caste groups within them. The real revolution, however, has been in the phenomenal growth in India-based online matrimonial portals since the early 2000s, growing at an average rate of more than 120% annually and the online matrimony industry is now worth \$1.4 billion (Rs. 8719 crore). There are an estimated 20 million users of around 150 matrimonial websites with 48% of the internet users in India making use of these sites (Trivedi 2014). Although the Indian market has experienced the most rapid growth, diasporic Sikhs, especially professionals, increasingly use online services. Matrimonial portals such as shaadi.com (linked to Indian Express online), bharatmatrimony.com and jeevansaathi.com amongst others boast millions of registered users with estimated 40% based in the diaspora. Needless to say the development, global spread and popularity of this commercially oriented market have further removed marriage

practices from their usual customary norms and provide no kinship-based safety nets in the case of marital difficulties.

Fourthly and complementing the above has been the rapid growth and popularity in the use of matrimonial columns. Although the placement of matrimonial adverts, especially in the vernacular press, has a long history—for example, *Des Pardes*, the oldest and largest circulation Punjabi newspaper in Britain was the pioneer in the late 1960s—nowadays almost all vernacular and English papers, whether based in India or abroad, and aimed at Indian communities, have a special weekend matrimonial pull-out section catering for different social groups within the community. As most of these newspapers also have their online editions, diaspora Sikhs make comprehensive use of them. For example, one of the most popular matrimonial services in Punjab is provided by *The Tribune*, a Chandigarh-based daily paper published in both English and Punjabi editions. Its weekend English editions have two comprehensive listings that cover almost every conceivable caste or social group, including a separate category for NRIs. Many NRIs seeking marriage partners for their children often announce their forthcoming visit to Punjab with advance contact information in these columns.

The point in discussing these new emerging marriage markets in some considerable detail is two-fold: they have radically altered marriage practices and expectations of both spouses and parents. Furthermore, they have created new opportunities and introduced higher risks, leading to a fundamental shift in traditional values associated with the institution of marriage. The combined effect of rising cost of marriage and increased risks associated with new marriage practices has the potential to erode the institution of marriage as conventionally understood in the Sikh tradition. Anecdotal evidence seems to suggest a correlation between changed/changing marriage practices as described earlier and increased cases of abuse, desertion and higher rate of marital failures (Bajpai 2013; Stewart 2013).

### **Rise of the wedding economy: conspicuous consumption, commercialism and profitable rituals**

Sikh marriages, along with Indian weddings in general, have historically always been lavish, glamorous, extravagant and emotional affairs and continue to be so whether in India or in the diaspora. Excessive expenditure on marriages and the financial ruin they can bring by increasing household indebtedness were often

commented upon by both Punjabi writers and visiting civil servants such as Darling, Calvert and Falcon during the British period. However, we must caution against overstating this cause of indebtedness relative to other more critical problems associated with the dominance of unscrupulous moneylenders who worked to keep farmers in a debt trap (Sohal 2012). Even in recent studies on increased incidence of indebtedness and farmer distress, consumerism including exuberant marriage expenditure, usually financed through land re-mortgages or loans from moneylenders, contributes to their state of indebtedness (Gill 2005; Iyer and Manick 2000; Padhi 2009). In the diaspora too, it is not uncommon for weddings to be financed through bank loans or by re-mortgaging property to release equity.

In many ways, the 'spiritual' or 'religious' significance of the Sikh marriage ceremony is dwarfed by the growing commodification and symbolism of the wedding event where celebrations are spread over at least three or more 'parties', culminating in the post-wedding reception where anything up to 500–700 guests may be invited. This overindulgence continues despite the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* stating preference for small marriage parties and as per girl's parents' wishes and major Sikh organisations pleading with Sikhs to curtail wedding expenditure. The growth in the wedding economy and its rampant commercialisation and commodification over the past decade has been quite spectacular and incorporates a whole range of other ancillary services such as marquees, bespoke Punjabi or fusion food and refreshments with multiple menus and courses, music by either a DJ or a popular Punjabi *bhangra* artiste with their portable dance floor and smoke machines which transforms part of the reception room into a mini night club, video and photography, florists, wedding cake and wedding favours, exaggerated wedding invitation cards, bridal hair and make-up and mehndi services, stylish gold and diamond jewellery, designer bridal fashion wear and dresses for bridesmaids and the best man. Of course, no wedding can be complete without a stretch white limousine or another luxury car or even a helicopter to whizz the marrying couple in and out. Nowadays, even close members of the family in the wedding party from both sides of the family must wear matching-colour turbans or head coverings to the wedding ceremony to mark them as special. These 'must-have' services are in addition to the hiring of a desirable—read expensive—wedding party venue, bespoke room layout, table decor and lighting and couples identifying a suitable place for 'stag or hen night', preferably in a foreign country, prior to the wedding, and a glamorous honeymoon destination. With so much to arrange and organise, no wonder it is a very tense and anxious time for all

involved and many families increasingly take advantage of the growing number of Asian wedding planners and event managers with their exclusive tie-ups with popular wedding venues and caterers. The excess demand for such services has provided economic opportunities for hundreds of male and female micro-entrepreneurs, also largely from Asian backgrounds, to supply these niche services. Since these niche 'ethnic' suppliers face little competition from mainstream suppliers and are sometimes almost monopolists, they are able to rake in a decent profit from their services.

The wedding-related accessories and services are aggressively promoted to youth through bridal exhibitions such as *Bride & Groom*, *Bridal Asia*, *Celebrating Vivah*, *Asian Wedding Exhibition* and *Asian Bride Show*, in glossy magazines such as *Asian Bride*, *Occasions* and *Asian Woman*, through Bollywood films and on numerous Asian satellite channels now available throughout the diaspora. The huge popularity of Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it Like Beckham* and *Bride and Prejudice* and Meera Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* is in large part due to their inter-mixing of marriage occasions and themes within diaspora contexts. The recent resurgence of Punjabi cinema partly owes its popularity for taking on themes around transnational marriages and multiple diaspora locations. Punjabi weddings have increasingly taken a distinctly 'Bollywood turn' and give new meanings to the term 'big fat Punjabi wedding'. In the UK alone, for instance, over 8000 Indian weddings are assumed to take place annually and the target market is estimated to be worth over £100 million per annum. It is not unusual to book the wedding venues—the gurdwara, banqueting halls for the pre-wedding and post-wedding reception parties—at least a year or even more in advance. The larger South Asian wedding industry in the UK was estimated at £300 million with an average wedding costing between £15,000 and £20,000, and average cost of the bride's wedding lengha starting at around £2500<sup>14</sup> and in India, the industry was valued at US \$25.5 billion and growing at a rate of 20–25% per annum.<sup>15</sup> Wedding-related consumption spending is an important driver of economic activity and estimates suggest that in India the wedding economy was fourth (at 12%) in 2008 in terms of its contribution to GDP – behind Services (60%), Manufacturing (22.5%) and Agriculture (17.5%).<sup>16</sup> At a more localised level, it would not be an exaggeration to state that the textile and ladies garments businesses in Delhi, Chandigarh, Ludhiana, Jalandhar and Phagwara are largely sustained by domestic and foreign wedding seasons.<sup>17</sup> These figures however are now somewhat outdated due to both the inflation and the ever-expanding size of the middle class with their huge appetite for spending on wedding occasions. According to the author's own

estimates based on weddings observed, the average cost of a wedding in Britain has now risen to around £40,000–50,000 for the bride's family which disproportionately bears the burden and when added to the expenditure on the groom's side, the total cost for the event can be as high as £80,000–100,000, enough to wipe out lifetime savings of both families. In some cases, where parents have taken out a loan, their state of indebtedness can last several years, well into their retirement.

### **Some tentative conclusions**

In this paper, I have argued that marriage still remains and is likely to remain the most revered and dominant social institution among Sikhs and although core Sikh marriage ceremonies have not changed, means, scope and scale of exuberance associated with celebrating them certainly have, reflecting change in societal norms, values, expectations and, of course, wealth. The vast majority of marriages take place with the blessings of both families and although they are predominantly embedded in kinship relations, they reflect hybridity, fluidity and locality in terms of actual practices. Differences in practices and exuberance tend to be determined by the size and structure of the family, socioeconomic background and wealth of the parents. Only in *Amritdhari* weddings (that is where both families are *Amritdhari*) do we witness elements of self-imposed injunction against overindulgence especially in vibrant Punjabi cultural celebrations, in both the pre- and post-wedding period. But even in some of these weddings, as witnessed by the author, western influences can still be seen, for example, use of bridesmaids, a wedding cake and exchange of gifts in the Langar Hall. These tend to reflect both the degree of acculturation and wishes of the bride and groom.

Furthermore, radical changes in marriage arrangement practices, given their variability and complexity and especially the weakening of earlier protection offered by kinship networks, have increased the risks of an 'unhappy or abusive marriage' or marital failure. Growing evidence on incidence of domestic violence among South Asian diaspora lends supports this view although there may be other factors at work and without detailed research on this sensitive aspect it is difficult to generalise (Abraham 2000; Gupta 2003; Sundari and Gill 2009). Issues relating to the loss of family *izzat*, *sharam* (shame), *behzti* (dishonour) and status still remain important considerations and in order not to compromise future

marriage possibilities, much of the information on relationships is kept confidential within the families affected.

Another important argument in the paper relates to increasing preference by British-born Sikh youth to positively choose traditional style Punjabi weddings rather than be content with just a modern British style wedding with its more selective, sombre and measured forms of celebrations. Three inter-related reasons can be put forward to explain this complex social trend. Firstly, this behaviour demonstrates that scholars who argued that second and third-generation children will not engage with the traditions, customs and norms of the first-generation have perhaps understated the powerful influence of transnational social fields. Since almost all these children are brought up in families that have regular contact with visiting relatives from the homeland or on family visits there, of objects, practices and cultural memory, they are consciously or subconsciously being socialised into the norms and values of the ancestral homeland and as a consequence they develop social skills and competencies which they can use strategically as and when required (Levitt 2009). Secondly, one could argue that this is just another reflection and behavioural aspect of the larger trend in the diaspora where parents and Sikh youth consciously want to celebrate their religious and collective ethnic identity, culture and difference. After all, other forms of cultural expressions by the community have also become more visible – for example, in terms of cuisine, sport (*gatka* and *kabbadi*), *bhangra* music, *melas* and religious processions (*nagar kirtans*) and all these are important in connecting the second- and third-generation to their homeland culture. Thirdly, although Sikh youth want to show respect for their parental culture and heritage, they also want to express their individuality and Britishness by negotiating over marriage arrangements and celebrations. This choice enables them to create symbolic cultural boundaries and also meet parental expectations especially since the parents will be meeting much of the expenditure. Most wedding couples tend to feel comfortable with these arrangements as they are able to express individual freedom within the protection offered by the extended family network.

Sikhs settled, born and educated in the diaspora, whether parents or children, will inevitably undergo a process of acculturation and assimilation, although some may not openly admit to it. However, levels of this 'integration' will vary across families, depending on their socio-economic status and length of settlement overseas. Both parents and children are also under tremendous peer and societal pressures to deliver a particular type of wedding celebration and perhaps, being status-conscious, even outperform others by doing something extra and special.

For British-born would-be couples, the wedding is an event where they ought to be at centre-stage of all ceremonies whereas for the parents the focus may be on the coming together of the two families as per traditional values, so tensions do arise. This inter-generational tension is diffused by skilful navigation by the children, by accommodating traditional expectations but also meeting their and their peers' expectations associated with wedding occasions. Given that many of the couples may be professionals with high earning power, especially Sikh women who appear to be doing well in the British labour market, their own savings and incomes enables them to afford 'add-ons' and experience western wedding practices. In fact, Sikh would-be-brides are exercising greater agency as most arrangements tend to be bride driven and elaborate wedding ceremonies give Sikh women in general, special cultural spaces enabling them to enjoy the celebrations. Through these arrangements, with their unifying rituals and symbols, both the children and the parents are able to fulfil their aspirations, strengthening the family unit.

It is difficult to speculate on future trends except to say that weddings will, as they always have, remain an important occasion for family gathering and celebrations. Furthermore, given the current demographic make-up of the Sikh population in the UK—with around 25% (106,000) of the total Sikh population (423,000) aged between 15 and 29, the number of weddings taking place every year is unlikely to diminish (ONS 2011). The only doubt is over the scale of their celebrations and whether rising expenditures can be sustained given the evidence on higher risks associated with new forms of marriage practices. Already the perceived risks are leading to an increase in the age of marriage, as youth are prepared to wait longer for the right partner, greater variability in how weddings are celebrated and in some cases, some couples even signing pre-nuptial agreements. Adopting the norms of western weddings where only close relatives and friends are invited would be a welcome trend and there is some anecdotal evidence that suggests that some young Sikhs and parents are rebelling against 'wasteful large fat Sikh weddings'. To ensure this trend spreads to the wider community may require greater intervention and more effective moral sanctions against large-scale celebrations from the religious authorities, whether in the diaspora or Punjab. Unfortunately, past attempts to intervene in this sphere do not offer much cause for optimism.



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The *Jago* (Call to Wake up) ritual which usually takes place one or two nights before the wedding ceremony is performed in almost all Sikh weddings in the UK and is a direct continuation of village practice in Punjab. Although the folk traditions behind it are not clear, it signifies the onset of the wedding occasion and a signal for start of festivities and celebrations usually led by the bride or grooms maternal side of the family who start dancing whilst holding decorated pots (*gaggars*) with lighted candles on their heads. For the bride, it usually follows the *Choorā* ritual usually performed by her mamas (mother's brothers or cousins). *Bhangra* artistes such as Malkit Singh have popularised folk songs around the ceremony and it is not unknown for some men and women to dress up in drag, masquerading elders or as part of ritual clowning. For details of latter among Muslim Punjabis, see Werbner (2005).

<sup>2</sup> A typical Sikh wedding in the UK is truly transnational in the sense that there will be guests and relatives from India, Canada, the USA, East Africa and mainland Europe.

<sup>3</sup> '*Dhan piru eh na aakhien behin ikathe hoe, ek jot due murti dhan piru kaheay soe*' — 'Bride and groom are not they who pose as one whole, bride and groom are they who are two bodies with one soul' (SGGS, 788).

<sup>4</sup> The place of marriage has become a highly contested issue in Britain as marriages began to take place in hotel function rooms, community centres and leisure clubs as the SGGS has to be taken where there may be smoking and alcohol or meat may be served. Some weddings have been stopped due to this injunction placed by a self-styled *Khalsa* organisation, despite the fact *Sikh Rahit Maryada* (Code of Conduct) does not specify that a wedding must take place in a gurdwara, only that it should be in the presence of the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. See Booth (2005).

More recently in the UK, the solemnising of mixed marriages in a gurdwara where one of the partner may not be Sikh has come under close scrutiny and has caused controversy and tension within the community, especially among parents who consented to a mixed marriage and want their son or daughter to undergo the *Anand Karaj*. Such marriages have increased in number in recent years, forcing some Sikh organisations to take direct action to defend *Sikh Rahit Maryada*. For details, see Neiyar and Khatkar (2013).

<sup>5</sup> Although the Anand ceremony may have become less popular under Maharajah Ranjit's Singh rule, but under British rule, both the *Namdharis* (also known as *Kukas*) and the *Nirankaris* were great advocates of the simple *Anand* ceremony and promoted it with vigour among their followers. The founder of the *Nirankaris*, Baba Dyal is known to have undergone an *anand* marriage himself in 1808 and later his son Baba Darbara Singh in 1856 issued 'A Catalogue of Nirankari Conduct' to further popularise *anand* marriages. Apparently, he was also able to persuade the *Namdhari* leader Baba Ram Singh in 1863 to also propagate the ceremony among his followers. For details, see Grewal (2003).

<sup>6</sup> The leading advocates of separate legislation were leaders of the Singh Sabha movement and *Chief Khalsa Diwan* as they wanted to reconfirm the 'distinct' Sikh identity by shedding Hindu rituals and also importantly Prince Ripudman Singh of the Nabha royal household, despite his father's opposition. The main opponents of the legislation were *Arya Samajists*, the *Brahmin* priestly class and *Mahants* and *Pujaris* who managed gurdwara affairs. The *Brahmins* and *Pujaris* had most to lose by the removal of *vedic* rituals which only they could perform. They continued to argue that couples, despite undergoing the *Anand* ceremony, should be seen as cohabiting illegally and their offspring be regarded as illegitimate.

<sup>7</sup> This was done through an amendment to the Anand Marriage Act of 1909. This affectively meant that Sikhs were no longer required to register their marriage under the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955. The diaspora Sikhs had been very vocal in their support for amendment of the Anand Marriage Act as this caused many legal, personal and identity issues for them.

<sup>8</sup> The oft-quoted shlok from Guru Nanak is:

From woman, man is born;  
 Within woman, man is conceived; to woman he is engaged and married.  
 Woman becomes his friend; through woman, the future generations come.  
 When his woman dies, he seeks another woman; to woman he is bound.  
 So why call her bad? From her, kings are born.  
 From woman, woman is born; without woman, there would be no one at all.

[SGGS, *Raag Aasaa Mehal 1*, Page 473]

ਭੰਡਿ ਜੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਨਿਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਮੰਗਣੁ ਵੀਆਹੁ ॥

ਭੰਡਹੁ ਹੋਵੈਦੋਸਤੀ ਭੰਡਹੁ ਚਲੈ ਰਾਹੁ ॥

ਭੰਡੁ ਮੁਆ ਭੰਡੁ ਭਾਲੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਹੋਵੈ ਬੰਧਾਨੁ ॥

ਸੋ ਕਉ ਮੰਦਾ ਆਖੀਐ ਜਤਿ ਜੰਮਹਿ ਰਾਜਾਨ ॥

ਭੰਡਹੁ ਹੀ ਭੰਡੁ ਉਪਜੈ ਭੰਡੈ ਬਾਬੁਨ ਕੋਇ ॥

ਨਾਨਕ ਭੰਡੈ ਬਾਹਰਾ ਏਕੋ ਸਚਾ ਸੋਇ ॥

<sup>9</sup> Bhai Gurdas in his *Vaaran*, Var six says '*ek nari jati hoe par nari dhee bhain vkhane*' – 'a *gurumukh* is monogamous and faithful to the spouse and respects other women as daughters and sisters'.

<sup>10</sup> For a descriptive overview of the most common Punjabi wedding ceremonies, see Myrvold (2004).

<sup>11</sup> The marriage norms described here are usually associated with Jat rural practices and some extreme elements of these practices can still be seen in the way *Khap* panchayats in Haryana impose sanctions against breach of the norms, although even the *Khaps* have recently started to relax restrictions.

<sup>12</sup> One infamous case, which shocked the Canadian Punjabi community a few years ago, was the alleged murder (by her natal family) of 25-year-old Canadian Jaswinder Kaur

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Sidhu (Jassi) who fell in love with a poor rickshaw driver whilst on holiday in Punjab. Since he came from Jassi's mother's village and had the same surname, her family disapproved of the marriage. For details see Brown and Lakshmi (2003).

<sup>13</sup> To illustrate this point, in 2005, *The Calgary Herald*, a Canadian newspaper, responding to Sikh community's growing concern over abandoned wives by Sikhs based in Canada, presented a five-part investigation on this issue. Based on interviews with abandoned wives, police authorities and lawyers in India and the supposed perpetrators of abuse in Canada, it concluded in an optimistic note on how civil society organisations and women's groups and victims of abuse themselves were fighting back despite the absence of effective legal remedies. For details, see Fortney (2005).

<sup>14</sup> See *India Today* (2004), for details.

<sup>15</sup> See Trivedi (2012) and Raval (2011) for descriptions of the sheer extravagance of Delhi and Indian weddings.

<sup>16</sup> See Mampatta (2009). Furthermore, the Finance Minister blames the rising demand for gold imports related to weddings for India's balance of payments difficulties.

<sup>17</sup> Recently, a Wedding Souk opened in the Pitampura area of Delhi, spread over one acre and dedicated to weddings and in Gurgaon, home to the newly rich, there are large malls with hundreds of shops selling wedding apparel.

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Sikh marriage as an act of Resistance: The case of Sikhs as Hindus in the Hindu Marriage Act. Loveleen Kaur Sikholars Submission.  
L.Kaur. L.Kaur. In addition to my concerns of the political implications of Sikhs in India being married as Hindus, I began wondering the connection, if any, to the Sikh marriage ceremony. As a Sikh in the diaspora, I became concerned that I would not even know what events, traditions, or customs would need to be followed but simultaneously, I began to question many traditions I would see at weddings that I attended as they did not seem to mesh with my understandings of Sikhi. A website focused on weddings in India describes Sikh wedding rituals.<sup>15</sup> It prescribes many Hindu traditions Offering information upon sikh wedding in this section of sikh wedding ceremony india of surfindia. Sikh wedding rituals in india is very traditional. Kurmai or Engagement: An engagement ceremony or kurmai is not mandatory in a Sikh wedding but is sometimes performed one week before the wedding. It is usually conducted in the Gurdwara or at the home of the boy. Kurmai involves Ardas (the common Sikh prayer), Kirtan (hymns from Sri Guru Granth Sahib) and langer (community meal) if performed in the Gurdwara. If performed at home, the bride's family visits the house of the groom and present kara, kirpan or traditional sweets besides auspicious items like coconut, chhuhare (dry dates), sugar and money.