



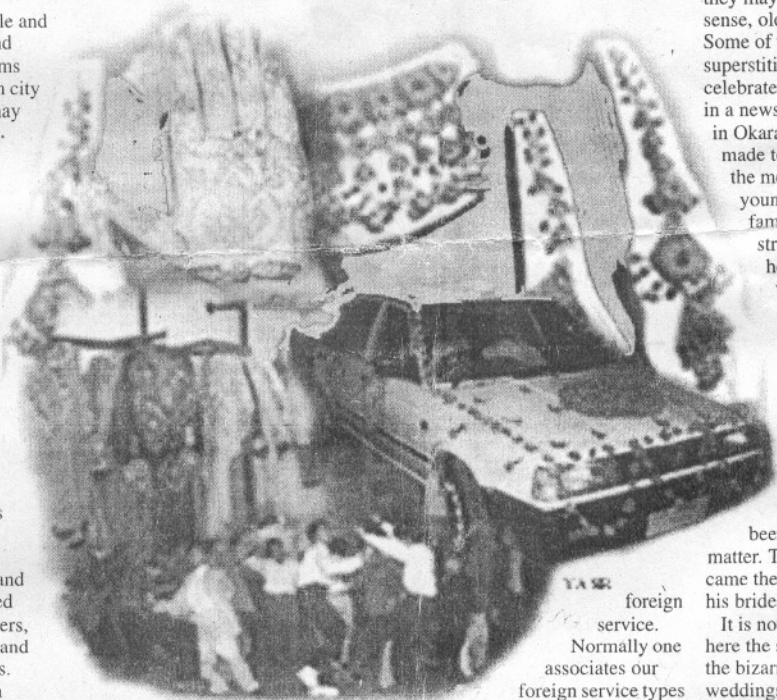
Culture Talk

Weddings as cultural events

HAFIZUR RAHMAN says that the wedding ceremonies are an integral part of our culture and impart a certain amount of colour to an essentially solemn occasion

Photo

Culture Nation 20.10.02



foreign service. Normally one associates our foreign service types with ultra-modern

You must have seen in the illustrated papers how, in Pakistani embassies abroad, whenever it is intended to give the people of those countries a glimpse of our culture, a wedding is staged and the usual bridal finery and jewellery are shown off to the accompaniment of a *mehndi* ceremony and marriage songs. A foreign observer may be pardoned for believing that all our culture lies in weddings and the connected rituals.

The fact remains that even in the most primitive civilisations, weddings are still the most typical occasions in which the distinctive features of a society make themselves evident. While modernity and technology have tended to give sameness to life the world over, weddings still retain their original characteristics. Indeed, it can be said that the ceremonies pertaining to weddings are symbolic of the common man's innate concern with culture.

From the very rich to the very poor, all partake of the cultural feast provided by the ceremonies held for a wedding, depending upon the amount of money that is available for the various rituals. Three things that the most indigent of Pakistanis will not forego are the *mehndi*, *baraat* and the *valima*. The prosperous among us have added many more to these, including such conflicting items as *Quran khani* and a boisterous *mujra* of professional singing and dancing girls.

As far as the requirements of religion are concerned, the only must for a wedding is the *nikah*, while the *valima* may be considered as a socio-religious obligation. All other rituals and ceremonies are social and cultural in nature, and it is in these that women, the repository of our domestic culture, display their ingenuity and

imagination.

The display may be simple and quaint, deriving its form and manner from ancient customs which sometime differ from city to city, tribe to tribe, or it may be the flamboyant and exhibitionist, providing a blend of the modern garish with the culturally traditional. Let me tell you about an unforgettable wedding that took place in Lahore some years ago which involved taking the latter opulent style to its ridiculous limits.

Two extremely rich and well-known feudal families were being connected. Since the residences of both were on the canal, a good half a mile of the public road was decorated with fairy lights and bunting and whatnot. Dance parties from Jhang and Bahawalpur villages regaled the non-invited, the onlookers, with their rhythmic drums and flute music and their capers.

Camels caparisoned with precious cloth provided an Arabian Nights touch to the affair, while the *mehndi* and *baraat* processions were led by the dancing girls from *Tibbi galli* who gave uninhibited performances. It was estimated by people who are in the habit of making such estimates, that, apart from the dowry and the expenses of the dinners and gifts and the money spent within the two families, some fifty lakhs were spent on the cultural entertainment alone.

The most intriguing and at the same time the saddest part of this fabulous show, was that the

marriage broke up after two days — just two days — the bride refused live with the groom. But that was an aspect over which culture had no control. It was a matter exclusively between a man and a woman with individual mental cultures which had somehow failed to click.

Sometimes a conscious effort is made to invest weddings with cultural symbols of old. They may look anachronistic but they do lend the aura of bygone times to the affair. Two years ago, in Islamabad, one such wedding held between two officers from the

ceremonial and a predilection for features borrowed from the West, but this wedding was absolutely different from anything I have ever seen.

When the *baraat*, led by a band of *desi* musicians, approached, the groom trans-shipped himself from a car on to a traditionally decorated horse some two furlongs from the bride's house. The young man himself was wearing a *tehnad* and a village-style turban, and the only thing missing was that his friends were shouting slogans in the manner of Punjabi movies.

This was not all. The bride appeared in a *lacha* and old-fashioned silver jewellery. At the time of *rukhsati* she was bid farewell in a *doli*, with the groom accompanying it on his steed. A quarter of a mile away, they both alighted from their exotic mounts and drove away in a car. Whatever one may say about this wedding (you may call it genuine or theatrical) it did portray the urge for one's ancient and typical cultural mores.

In many areas and among many communities, howsoever advanced they may in the modern educated sense, old cultural customs persist. Some of them are based on superstition while most of them are celebrated in a spirit of fun. I read in a newspaper the other day that in Okara the wedded couple were made to walk together around the mohalla, followed by the young members of the two families. It was not a simple stroll. The bride earned on her head a pitcher full of water, probably in emulation of some ancient practice. A naughty street urchin hit the pitcher with his catapult and drenched the couple. Everybody laughed except the groom who walked away in a huff without the bride.

But the *nikah* had already been performed, so it didn't matter. The newspaper said he came the next day and took away his bride.

It is not my intention to recount here the strange, the odd and even the bizarre things connected with weddings. My point is only to say that wedding ceremonies, whether modern urban or traditional rural, are an integral part of our cultural life and impart a certain amount of colour to an essentially solemn occasion. Into this basic fact intrudes the social reform syndrome which frowns on ostentation and excessive expenditure.

However, since people must celebrate, I am sure a via media can be adopted whereby weddings and connected rituals may retain their cultural characteristics and become interesting events, without one having to spend fifty lakhs on doing so. ■