

## Marriage Customs in Kashmir: An Appraisal

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What is culture and why is culture so important? What are our sacrosanct cultural traditions with regard to marriage and why are they sacrosanct? What is the meaning and significance of a host of rituals and practices connected with marriage in traditional set up of Kashmir? Is there a connection between cultural practices and metaphysics or spirituality? These questions are hardly discussed by our scholars. This is unfortunate. This is possibly because we have lost the understanding of metaphysics in the light of which alone can we explain all things traditional from the style of the cap or *dastaar* to embroidery or design of houses. Before critiquing existing degenerate residues of what once were genuinely sacred and meaningful cultural rituals and mourning over the loss of symbolic significance of them I present before you some empirical data and facts in connection with marriage.

Here people marry because they are supposed to. The question of preventing sin by fulfilling our biological desires in a legal or sanctified manner doesn't matter for them. If that mattered people would opt for early marriage. The question of fulfilling our *iman* too is irrelevant for most people. Why do we invite relatives and friends on the day? Because we are supposed or otherwise people will take us to task for not inviting. Why are we supposed to accept invitation even if it is at a great cost? Because otherwise we will earn displeasure. Why must we patiently wait for hours till the last guest comes? Why should we serve many dishes? Why do we need to prove our status by ensuring that some food is wasted? Why should there be *wazwan* for a *firsaal* even if it causes one some health trouble and inconvenience to everybody? Here marriage is



a ritual dictated by social forces rather than any meaningful or even comprehensible event that is spiritually fulfilling and culturally enriching. In many cases instead of cementing relationships it weakens them as some feel they should have been invited and some they have not been properly attended and some that they should have been selected for *baraat* or this or that particular occasion. I have interviewed people regarding the reasons for inviting people on a lunch on the day of marriage and none has been able to convince me that the invitation is for pleasing God or that it is a sort of *niyaz* which has traditionally been highly recommended in Kashmir. Why can't we invite – if invitation is deemed necessary – on tea or tea plus light dose of meat dishes? Timing is such that it is neither lunch nor dinner so what harm would be if people would be invited for *kahwa* with *kulcha* rather than pastries. Why can't we adopt buffy system instead of the *trami* one which leads to wastage though traditionally people didn't waste food and considered it ideal to lick *trami* clean. Traditionally Kashmiris consider it sacrilegious to trample on food or waste it but today it is sin not to throw away as waste significant quantities of rice and meat. Traditionally people volunteered to help, mostly in *jins* (kind) rather than in cash, and brought almost everything from utensils to rice and firewood to the host. All the villagers or community people around were informally invited. In Ladakh this tradition still continues. Everybody was welcome and attended as per his convenience. A great festive spirit was operative. A real get together often for days was organized. Today there is hardly any real festivity as formalities are too burdensome and demanding too much attention to allow any festivity. There is vulgarity rather than simplicity which is the key to real joy in ceremonies. Traditionally *mehndi* alone sufficed to beautify the bride but today parlours are deemed necessary which make it a point to disfigure God given shape. Traditionally beautification of bride and bridegroom costed hardly anything and yet people



didn't fail to look beautiful and graceful. Traditionally groom's family used to arrange feast by sending a ram to bride's parents and much of *wardan* was to be furnished by the bridegroom's parents. Thus the Islamic injunction that bride's family should not be put under any financial burden was observed. *Goulmeuth* didn't have the present form which is a kind of usury. The culprit for degeneration is capitalism and hegemony which most people are unable to understand. We are economically no longer able to sustain marriage ceremony and most people need to finance it by taking loans. Golden lies are perpetrated in the form of gifts of gold items. Austerity drive is the need of the time. Capitalism has degraded our culture to such a degree that we have even lost the consciousness of loss. Where is the culture of sharing, of voluntary service, of gifts of which no ledger was kept, of beef served with grace and elegance in Muslim marriages, of *shireen* that supplanted all the hundred kinds of sweets and burfis, of kulchaas that were served to all and the sundry, of festivity that knew no formalities? Religion is the heart of culture. Sans religion culture is degenerate and a means of needless bondage and formalities. Traditionally dower was something really needed by the bride in new home. Today it is greed rather than need that defines it. Money hardly came in the picture anywhere in traditional marriages. Today money alone makes the mere of marriage go and is omnipresent. We have sold our soul of culture to the Mammon of money. Capitalism has dried up all the sap of love, fellow feeling and care for the downtrodden in our hearts. Traditionally it was believed that wife is a companion for life not an object of either lust or love as understood in popular romantic terms. It was a sacred bond that could hardly be revoked ordinarily. Today it is a social contract only with all sanctity gone. We have hardly added anything beautiful to tradition but only corrupted it. No wonder that our marriages are failing at such an alarming rate. More than 80 percent marriages are disappointing be-



cause we have false ideals and expectation which can't but crumble in the heat of hard reality. Today people are sexually frustrated and of love they hardly know much. Very few know the virtue of lowering gaze. Lust is almost in every eye in the street or bazaar or bus. Our culture prized modesty above everything and today we feel no immodesty in being immodest.

Why do we marry? This is hardly known to anybody and hardly anybody bothers to know it though people go on marrying, breeding and dying all in a meaningless way. Saivist metaphysics and Islamic tradition have a complex system of ideas to answer this question. Marriage of bodies is the lowest rung on the ladder of essentially spiritual ladder of marriage leading to union with God or attaining self-realization. Sex is sacred and body is a temple of God according to Tantric Buddhist, Saivist and Islamic perspectives which constitute our Kashmiri heritage. Here most people know of marriage of bodies only. Some do cognize marriage of minds, souls and hearts but very few of the marriage of spirits. In traditional civilization all things have symbolic significance and have many levels of meaning and function. For Islam *iman* is incomplete or even invalid without marriage as the Prophet Saw has stated so emphatically. Sex gives us the foretaste of paradise. The joy of physical union is at root not carnal but spiritual according to both Saivist and Islamic traditions. Women manifests divinity as Ibn Arabi has explained. Two worlds that are to realized according to Sufis are constituted by men and women. A kiss earns the merit of an accepted *umra* according to one tradition. A prophet was given special power to enjoy superlative joy of physical union. Some of the most revered saints in the history of Islam have been great lovers having multiple wives and many children. All these traditions are best understood in light of Islamic metaphysics and spirituality. Islam, like Saivism denies body-soul dualism. For it all things are essentially sacred, holy. There is nothing merely and exclusively pro-



fane. Islam has no hesitation to employ sexual symbolism for its heaven and Sufis have been masters of erotic symbolism.

Now we come to other questions. Marriage with whom? The Prophetic injunction that we should select spouse on the basis of beauty of character rather than the beauty of body has hardly been understood. I think that arranged marriages were based on intuitive understanding of this injunction. For a lasting relationship and for appropriating spiritual significance of marriage the beauty of the body is not of great significance in Islamic perspective. One should be able to enjoy all things in God or see God equally in all things. It is indeed a saintly attitude that can genuinely assert *jiski bewi kali uska bi bada bnam ha.....* Body, wealth, status, family honour are the things which are kept in consideration while tying the knot. No wonder that most of our marriages are failures from spiritual perspective. Divorce rates are increasing because of faulty understanding of psychology and the relation soul and spirit or psyche and *nous*. There is no place for *thaikun* in Islam that bases itself on the recognition of illusoriness of separating individuality and thus ego with its associated pride. *Timov kor badi nahyi khander* (They married with great fanfare). *Luk kya wanan agar kamae pich ein* (What will people say if less number of guests come?) Too lavish a *wazwan* and tent and *zool* are all manifestations of social ego and that is why amount to major sin or even *shirk*. People associate partners with GOD not by constructing idols of stone (that is a lower form of it) but by worshipping ego and believing that they too exist besides the only Existent. Only God has the right to say I and not man. When anything is done to please people and not God, to puff up social ego that is real idolatry. How can proud people enter heaven? In hell burns only the self-will. 'We are nothing and God is everything' as implied in one Quranic verse. Printing more expensive invitation cards, preferring *zen* or *alto* to *maruti* for groom in *baraat*, spending money on decorating the groom's car (a few flow-



ers of one's own garden are enough to distinguish it and preserve the symbolic value of a special person on the occasion, gifting gold or diamond in different ceremonies of marriage, opting for *lhang* instead of our traditional *shalwar qameez*, preferring disposable glasses, trays, bowls, plates when we have steel glasses or plates we normally use in houses, gifting sweets in highly decorated baskets, serving pastries which are mostly wasted as guests can afford to take only some part of it and many guests can't afford even that much—all these are mainly for ostentation or show off and thus antitraditional practices disallowed by both religion and traditional cultural ethos.

*Wazwan* in its present form, I strongly believe, needs drastic change. It is a bane on our society. A huge industry has grown around it that fools and loots us. It is not indigenous to Kashmir. It has been imported from Iran (though its not being indigenous is not *per se* an argument against it. I mention it only to inform those naïve culture bastions who defend *wazwan* as our glorious cultural tradition.). It is no longer economically or ecologically sustainable. Gluttony is a major sin in all traditions of the world including Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam – the three religions that have shaped our heritage. More than three meat dishes – if at all meat is ecologically now a valid option for functions – and a couple of vegetables or salad qualifies as wastage. Chicken has been a new innovation (*bidat*) to *wazwan*. *Paneer* is a burden. Four *ristas*, a *gushtaba* and a single *kabab*, around 60 percent of the present size and one piece of *rougan josh* for four persons suffice both for our taste buds and the stomach if we have no depraved appetite. No need of *lifafa* and no need to wait for any guest as well if we adopt buffet system. And this has been the standard especially in rural areas till recently. I think this should be adopted again. Beef is more economical and should be reintroduced. No disposables, no *tokri*, no *cake*, no trays, no niceties of culture industry are really needed. We



have been doing so well without them. Our preference for mutton is a prejudice that costs us a great deal. In America beef costs much more than mutton and in terms of nutrient value and even, for most purposes, in terms of taste not inferior and perhaps superior. Rabbit meat should be introduced for functions both to boost rabbitry and prevent cardiovascular problems. We have been taught, unconsciously, to prefer mutton and disdain rabbit meat. Let us focus on home industries to meet requirements of *wazwan*. It is fasting that our traditions consider as virtue rather than eating too much. We are asked to keep stomach slightly unsatiated in Islam and modern *wazwan* implies overfeeding. Food poisoning, other gastric disorders, metabolic dysfunctions, obesity and many cardiovascular disorders are a contribution of *wazwan*. I am not counting the huge cost on environment leaving it to my brother who teaches ecology and is therefore more competent to speak on it to debate. I know *wazwan* tastes so sweet as to corrupt our faculty of judgment and conscience. Let us enjoy it only if we can afford and if our neighbors too can afford, if our ecology allows it, if our biology allows it, if it no wastage accompanies it, if we don't strain our stomachs. Let us simplify it but in practice we are reluctant to simplify it. *Wazwan* is a delicacy and could still be cherished but minus wastage and other harmful consequences. Civilizations' are built by hardy people who can afford to fast and they are destroyed by overdose of lusts or desires amongst which appetitive lust reigns supreme. There are hotels where a meal costs more than five lacs. There are people who give money or gold to guests accompanying groom in *baraat*. Our addiction for extravagant *wazwan* is a sign of decline of our culture. We seem to be doomed if we still don't feel revulsion at the wastage, ostentation in current form of *wazwan* and the social forces that compels people to take loan and serve people a feast. If people come uninvited to condolence parties why can't they afford to come for marriage par-



ties in like manner? If huge gatherings are served food with such efficiency and economy on condolence days why the same can't be done on the days of marriage? There are other reasons – ideological ones that benefit capitalists – that dictate so-called cultural practices of sending an invitation card and making it a point to arrange a wasteful feast. I know there is a difference between condolence and *khusi* but who says that we can't celebrate and eat without wasting, without show off, without borrowing money for arranging simple *dawat* – *dawat-shiraz* –, without feeling compelled to invite? We are slaves of rotten cultural practices and social ego. We have no courage to loosen our chains. Let us invite informally our kith and ken and keep the option of non-attending open to them so that nobody feels strained or compelled to come. Let us invite them on phone only to avoid formality of *dapan-dawat*. Let us truly celebrate our wedding by circulating an open invitation on *kahwa* and keep some food ready with few dishes for those who have to travel too far for *dawat*. All our well wishers will feel free to come. Doing anything under the dictation of social opinion is like listening to a sermon by a beast and this is the sign of doomsday according to the Quran (*Dabatul arz* of the Quran has been thus understood by some scholars).

*Wanwun* remains a beautiful part of our tradition that still continues though it is now more and more Westernized in practice and thus earning a warranted critique from *ulema*. Traditionally women used to separately sing and in the darkness of the night without gaze from camera and lusting males. To conclude the present form of marriage ceremonies is, generally speaking, corruption or degeneration of traditional ones. We need a massive awareness campaign and legal intervention to straighten up the burdensome and unhealthy customs. We, as a nation, are too poor to afford *wazwan* and most other lies that go with marriage parties. Guest control is not an option but total ban on *baraat* should be



effected. Bride's guardian should drop the bride at groom's house. *Wiliema* should be served in community centers or some such public place or health resort in a simple style that involves no obligation for guests, no business deal of any kind between the host and the guests, no wastage, no *trami* system. Gold exchange should be strictly watched and fined by authorities. The so-called culture should not be defended because of its complicity with capitalism. As long as people – our neighbors - starve and are denied basic amenities of life and the poor are unable to get better education in good schools we have no moral right to spend so lavishly on marriages. It is primitivism and egotism to demand fanfare on such occasions. People should be able to meet and friends and relatives assembled on such occasions without *wazwan*. Serving them *kahva* and *kulcha* and *halwa* could easily substitute *wazwan*. Let relatives and friends come with hot cases with packed or prepared lunch to a groom's home in his honour as we were taught to do in schools while going on excursion and then share it with others and enjoy get together. All bride's relatives should come to groom's house and served there. There is no reason why any *dawat* should be arranged at bride's house. *Wiliema* is due for groom's family and the bride's. There is hardly any reason for bride's parents to celebrate as they achieve nothing on marriage day and instead have to pass through a painful process of parting with their daughter for good. They have only a negative joy of breathing a sigh of relief as they feel a burden on their shoulders has been lifted as Dr Israr has pointed out. What are girl's parents gaining by losing their child to an unknown destination where she is probably going to suffer. Deep down people are more interested in eating than congratulating the groom if they object to such suggestions. I have heard relatives and friends complain that they have *shouq* and love to attend the function and no desire to eat *wazwan* and would not mind *haaki bati* (vegetable meal). Let them demonstrate their unconditional love



by coming for *kahwa* or simple lunch. Everybody could be invited and we would not need to pick and choose and "dishonour" some by not inviting them. Let people refuse to eat in *tramis* to protest against wastage and let them boycott all invitations to *baraat*. If professors and scholars can't muster such moral strength understanding the role of capitalism in all this culture industry as Adorno has also argued they are betraying their role as organic intellectuals, as conscience of their people.