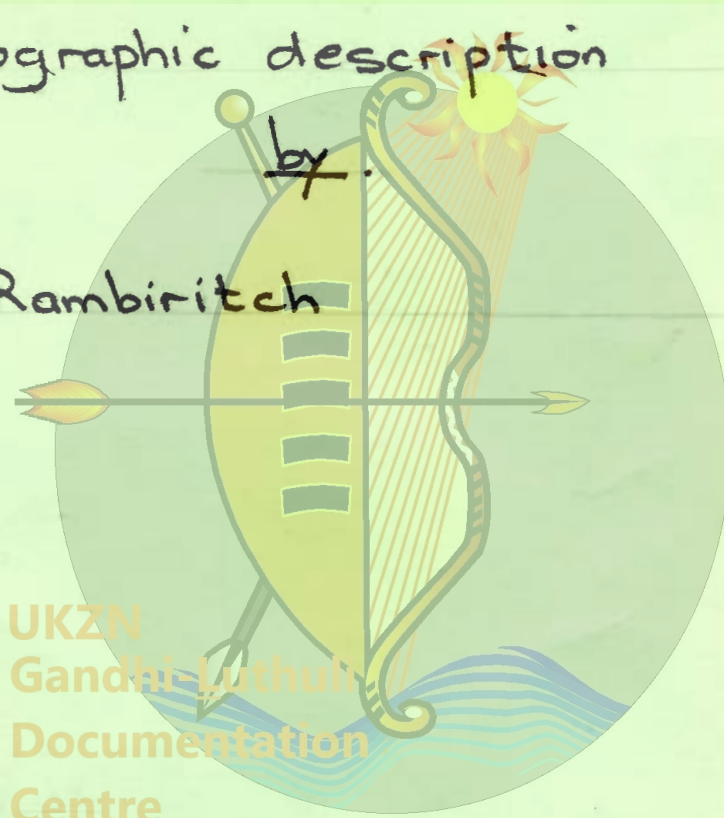


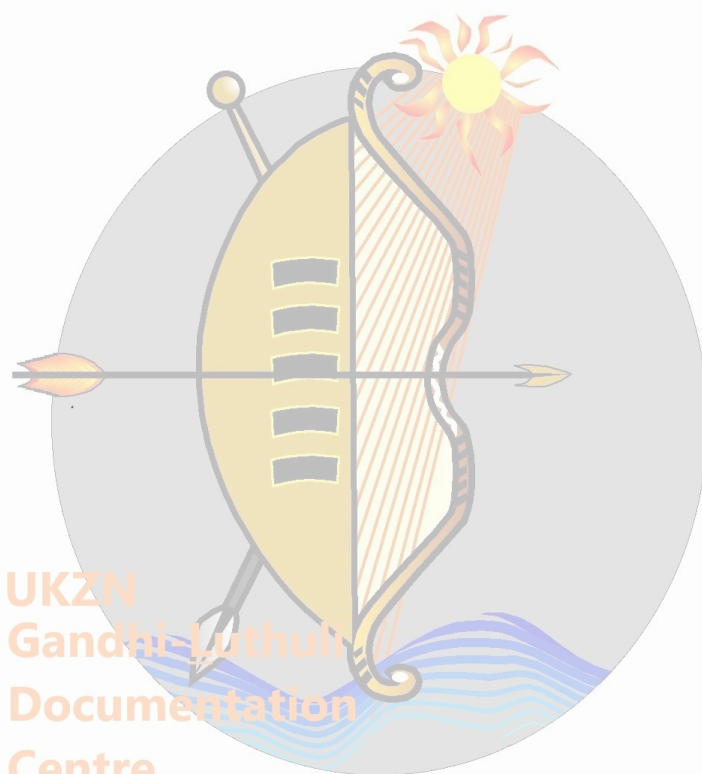
A Hindi-speaking Hindu marriage : an
ethnographic description

by .

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A HINDI-SPEAKING HINDU MARRIAGE**AN ETHNOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION.**

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A HINDI-SPEAKING HINDU MARRIAGE.

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INTRODUCTION:

This study attempts to give an ethnographic description of a Hindu marriage which characterises the orthodox Hindi-speaking section of the community and whose religious beliefs and social customs are expressive of the ideals of the Sanatana Dharma as opposed to the school of thought held by the Arya Samaj. The author recognises that slight variations in the ceremonial procedure do occur from priest to priest and family to family. The aim here is to present a general picture of the various rituals involved and their significance to the institution.

For the purpose of this discussion the preliminary marriage arrangements whether the result of matchmaking or courting; the consulting of the horoscopes of the groom and the bride in order to ensure successful matching; and the astrological considerations with regard to the setting down of a suitable date for marriage will be taken for granted.

AIMS OF A HINDU MARRIAGE:

Before a detailed consideration of such a marriage is undertaken we will briefly consider the aims which underline every Hindu marriage. There are three main purposes which every Hindu wedding is supposed to fulfil. Expressed in Hindi idiom, they are dharma, praja, and rahi.

By dharma here is meant the performance of the five household sacrifices - the panch mahayajna. These are:-

- i. Brahmaja, the worship of Brahman by reciting the Vedas.
- ii. Pitrayajna, the worship of the ancestors by the offering of libations of water (arpana) and the periodical offerings of sradhas (rice balls)
- iii. Devayajna, the worship of the gods by performing the Homa sacrifice.
- iv. Bhutayajna, the worship of living things as for e.g. the offering of food to birds and animals.
- v. Purushyajna, the worship of human beings by extending hospitality to strangers and friends alike.

Praja, i.e. procreation is the second aim by which the ancestors are assured of a happy life after death. A son is termed "putra" and is derived from the Sanskrit roots "pu^{tra}" or "poo^{tra}" meaning "hell"; and "ra", one who saves. Hence a son is one who saves one from being sent to hell. This does not imply that a daughter in a Hindu family is not desirable. A daughter offered in marriage earns the parents great spiritual merit. Hence the importance of the rite of kanyadhaan which will be explained later in this discussion.

Rati expresses the erotic ideal. Sexual pleasure is also a function of marriage and the subject is treated fully in the Hindu social document, the Kama sutras.

The material of this study is drawn from both empirical and literary sources.

The priest who officiates is known as the purohita and is usually a learned man drawn from the Brahmin caste. He is assisted by a nao, the general factotum and a member of the traditional Hindu barber caste.

THE TILAK.

The tilak ceremony represents an initiatory rite which is a preamble to all auspicious undertakings. It is performed on the eve of a coronation or when a great personality is to be honoured. The ceremony, as the name suggests, consists of the placing of a dot of sandalwood paste on the forehead of the person to be honoured. The tilak then aims to give the prospective groom such honour.

Traditionally, the ceremony was performed usually a week before the wedding ceremony, but in modern practice and as a matter of convenience it takes place on the day before the wedding. It is held at the residence of the groom. The tilak occasion also marks the impending change in the groom's social status. The deities, beginning with Ganesha, the God of Wisdom are invoked and the groom is presented with gifts consisting of grain, clothes, fruits, utensils, a ring and money by the bride's family represented by her brother.

PREPARATORY RITES:

In the interim, i.e. between the tilak ceremony and the wedding proper, the groom and the bride undergo several initiatory and purificatory rites at their respective homes. These are identical for the both, and they consist of the harees, matkaur, the placing of symbols to represent the various deities, kangan, hurdee, kuarpath, pitripooja, nechoo and aamli gotai. An attempt will be made to explain these.

The harees is the planting of a bamboo pole together with some thatch grass (gareda), a bearing plantain tree and a piece of deal on which there are seven markings on the edge to represent the seven vows of marriage. Matkaur, also known as dhartipooja, is the worship and invitation of Mother Earth. Women, singing to the accompaniment of the dholak, an Indian drum, proceed to a flowing stream in the company of the bride or the groom and after some offering is made they carry back some earth which is placed on a platform (vedhi) made around the bamboo pole. Earth is invoked as the provider of food and the source of material comforts. The bamboo is chosen for its tallness and it symbolises the wish that the couple's life may be long. The plantain with its fruit

represents procreation. Several symbols are now placed on the vedhi and these consist of the kalsa, a clay pot containing water with some white rice on its lid and a clay lamp. A cocconut is also placed near the clay lamp. The water in the pot represents Mother Ganges, the rice, Vishnu as the Preserver, and the lamp Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu. Brahma is represented in the cocconut, the kernel or the white thread round the cocconut represents Saraswathi, the consort of Brahma. A mill and a grinding stone is placed to represent Siva and Parvathi in their aspect as Destroyers. This completes the Hindu trinity and their consorts. A pestle and mortar are also kept near the harees. The pairs of items indicate the importance of marriage. To each of these a kangan consisting of a piece of wire, a raw betel nut, a copper piece, usually a cent, some lawn grass (darbha) attached to a piece of calico dyed yellow is tied to give it the significance of unity. Agni, i.e. God as manifest in fire is then invited by the placing of some embers of coal on the vedhi. The purohita then performs worship to Lord Ganesha and the deities.

After due worship is done, a mixture consisting of turmeric powder and mustard oil is smeared on the subject's body (i.e. the groom or the bride as the case may be) by some of the women relatives, usually seven in number on seven different occasions, normally in the mornings and afternoons if the time factor permits it. The purpose of this act is purificatory. This ritual is termed hurdee.

On the morning of the wedding day, the subject observes the kuarpath which also marks the change of status from youth to adulthood. In the company of seven youths the bride and the groom at their respective homes partake of sweetrice after the mother has circumambulated some of the food collected from each of the plates of the youths participating. The mother repeats the act seven times and at each performance she asks the subject if his or her youth is over. The subject replies in the affirmative.

Pitripooja, i.e. the worship of the ancestors is then performed and this is followed by the rite of nechoo, literally meaning the touching of the toe and fingernails. In this, the nao decorates the hands and feet.

After this cosmetic and manicure operation, aamligotai or imligotai, i.e. the chewing of the mango leaves by the mother takes place. The maternal uncle who is the chief figure in this ritual first offers the leaves to the mother and then presents her with suitable gifts consisting of clothing, jewelry and money. The groom is then dressed in ritual clothes either by his brother-in law or by the nao. With him is his younger brother also

ritually dressed and is supposed to act as the witness of the marriage, -sahiwalla. Before departure to the bride's residence, an arthi, i.e. the circumambulating of a tray consisting of lamps made of dough, is performed by women relatives in order to ensure auspiciousness.

ARRIVAL AT THE BRIDE'S RESIDENCE.

The arrival of the groom's party at the bride's residence is sometimes accompanied by music, (in ancient India the shenai, a flute was used), the sounding of motor of horns and the bursting of crackers.

Here, the bride's family has erected a marquee to seat the wedding guests and in a central position a gaily decorated canopy called the mandap and supposed to represent the inside of a temple where the wedding ceremony is to take place is assembled. The mandap is built round the harees of which we explained earlier.

On arrival, the groom's father is made to face the father of the bride and the purohita recites a mantra, i.e. a sacred Sanskrit verse. The bride's father then places a dot of sandalwood paste on the forehead of the groom's father and garlands him. He then hands him the mangalakalsa which is a brass goblet containing water and a silver coin. The two then meet chest to chest, ^{as if embracing each other} a traditional way of greeting a loved one.

Ganpathi prarthna or Dwarpooja.

Literally dwarpooja means worship on the doorstep. At a spot in the courtyard, preferably facing the front of the house, a vedhi, i.e. a platform decorated with flour and turmeric powder is prepared by the nao and the bride's father and groom do worship to Ganpathi, another name of Lord Ganesha, with the aid of the purohita. This is done to invoke the deity to take care of the proceedings preventing any mishaps. This is followed by worship of Surya, the Sun and Shakthi the female aspect of God to give their blessings. Five or seven women relatives then perform arthi on the groom while other women present sing appropriate songs.

The party then retire to the marquee. The nao appears with a goblet, brass tray and a towel and symbolically washes the feet of some of the groom's senior male relatives. They are then offered some curd and honey as part of the symbolic reception.

COMMENCEMENT OF THE WEDDING CEREMONY.

The groom is brought into the mandap, (the marriage altar) and is made to stand facing the east. In appropriate Sanskrit verses the priest recites what the bride's father is purported to say:-

" I am ready to serve and extend my hospitality due to you".

The groom acknowledges this and the bride's father holding the wedding stool offers it to the groom who accepts it and takes

a seat. The bride's father hands the groom three blades of kusa grass which the latter places under his feet. The groom says:-

" Like the rising sun this seat elevates me above my equals in status".

b. Jalpoojan.

The bride's father now offers the groom some water from a goblet with a mango leaf to perform ablutions symbolically. He places some more water on his hands to wash his face. The groom then pays homage to the presiding deity of the oceans and beseeches of him that the water may give him the necessary strength and success in his undertaking.

c. Achmanya.

With a third leaf of water, the bride's father performs the rite of achmanya, i.e. purification. The groom invokes Mother Ganges to grant him the necessary vitality and freedom from disease.

d. Madhuparka.

Three ingredients representing the essence of life-giving food i.e. honey, curd, and clarified butter are offered to the groom by the bride's father. The groom receives these and looking at the offering he addresses the ingredients thus:-

"Through the grace of the Sun and the Aswini gods, I accept you. I churn the ingredients to free it from impurities."

He then picks up some of the mixture and flicks it in three different directions after which he places some on his tongue as if partaking it and in this way seeks strength vitality and power. He then washes his hands and performs the achmanya.

e. Angnyas.

Angnyas is the act of touching the several aspects of the body. The groom touches first his mouth, nose, eyes, ears and shoulders and then the whole body and in this way praying for their perfection.

f. Goudhaan.

All auspicious undertakings and especially ceremonials begin with the offering of a cow (goudhaan) or value in its stead. Such a cow is supposed to help the worshipper to cross the river that separates swarga (heaven) from karmabhumi (earth). The groom now offers a cow or money in its place to the purohita. He then breaks a piece of kusa grass and throws it behind him.

g. Agnistaphan.

Agni, i.e. God as manifest in fire is invited to take seat in a previously prepared havan kund, (sacrificial well). This is done by the placing of some fire in the well or a lit camphor. The bride now enters the mandap.

h. Sanmukhikaran.

The bride and the groom stand facing each other and they

garland each other. Both then address the assembly:-

"Dear beloved and the assembled. We wish to declare to you that we consent to enter the life of a grahasti (householder). It is our fervent prayer that our existence will be blessed with peace. As is the desire of all to live in harmony, so do we promise to live together. All the gods including Agni and you bear witness as we are about to accept the holy bonds of matrimony."

Both then take their seats on the wedding stool.

1. Kanyadhaan.

In this act the bride is ceremoniously offered by ~~her~~ her parents to the groom. A dough containing some darbha, rice, betelleaves, betel nut, flowers, sandalwood paste and a coin is held in the hands of the bride's parents, the bride and the groom. A brother of the bride pours a continuous stream of water from a goblet upon the dough so held and in this way they seek the continuity of this unity which they are helping to perpetuate. During this process the purohita recites the kanyadhaan sankalapa, the offering of a daughter, and a statement by the father in the following words:-

"Dear bridegroom! Adorned with the traditional dress and jewels I give you my daughter for fulfilling the dharma of the grahastarama and for praja (procreation). Hitherto, her welfare was my responsibility, From now onwards she is being entrusted to your care and it is our prayer that you will accord her the same care and happiness."

The groom replies:-

" I accept her and all the responsibilities".

j. Padpooja.

The groom who in the initial stages has been equated to the status of a deity (Vishnu), and the bride, his consort, Lakshmi are now worshipped by the senior relatives of the bride. A brass tray containing a goblet, a loin cloth, a cocoanut, betel leaves betel nuts, flowers and money is offered as a gift by each. In this way the relatives are seeking punya, i.e. some of the spiritual merit gained by the parents of the bride by offering a daughter in marriage.

k. Mangalasutradhaan or Thaagpaad.

Generally known among the Hindi-speaking community as Thaag paad or raksha sutra, and in more progressive section as mangala sutra, it represents the sacred nuptial cord which binds the couple for life. It is supposed to bring peace upon the couple. Together with a gift of clothing, jewels and cosmetics, the mangalasutra offering is made by the groom's eldest brother to the bride. As a rule it is supposed to be worn by the bride and is not to be removed unless the death of one of the married couple causes it to.

1. Granthibandhan.

A sister of the brides then proceeds to tie a knot in the ritualistic garments of the groom and the bride. While this is being done the groom says:-

" Dear Chaste one! As the wind with the help of the sun draws the waters from the earth to give it back as rain, and as the sun spreads its rays upon all parts of the universe, likewise be thou to me. May God help you to ever remain as such. As the Creator looks upon the welfare of all, destroying their sorrow and providing them with prosperity, May He create in you the feeling of love for all beings, give you the strength to perform good actions and make you the bearer of desirable children. As I beseech upon the gods that you will look upon the welfare of people and domestic animals, so do I as your husband will forever do likewise. ."

Both then pay homage to Brahma.

m. Commencement of the Homa sacrifice.

In the havan kund where a fire has already been lit in the course of invitation to Agni, sixtytwo different offerings are now made by the couple to each of the several deities in the Hindu pantheon. Before the final offering, four ceremonials take precedence. These are the lajahoma (the offering of popped paddy rice); hastagrahana or panigrahana (the holding of the hands); asmarohana (the stepping on the millstone by the bride); and pradakshina, the homage paid to the deities in the mandap by circumambulation.

1. The lajahomasacrifice: The wedded couple offer some popped paddy rice into the sacrificial well three times. The first offering signifies the bride's readiness to leave her filial home for that of her affinal one in compliance to the rules injunction of God. In the second she prays that the groom may be granted long life and that her parents and parents-inlaws may be blessed with material prosperity. In the final offering she invokes the deities to ensure that the bonds of affection between the groom and herself may increase, and that though she is being parted from her parents, may God do nothing to part him from her.

ii. Hastagrahana: The groom then holds the hand of the bride and addresses her thus:

" For the promotion of the good and the embellishment of my life I accept your hands in companionship. May our lives prosper even in old age. This day we have been declared as wife and husband. God, the deities, Agni and our guests assembled here bear witness to this. Knowing thus we accept each other. I am the Saamveda, you the Rigveda. I am the rain-producing Sun and you the earth. In the grahastasrama, we are one. Let us together do good deeds, procreate good children who shall live a

live a hundred years; listen to good speech, look towards the path of righteousness; and speaking kind words live for a hundred years in harmony."

iii. Asmarohana.

The bride now places her right foot on the mill stone. The groom utters:-

" Dear ~~be~~ ~~the~~ ~~the~~! As this stone is solid and firm so do thou remain steadfast in the duties and obligations of the grahastaroma dharma, treating alike happiness and sorrow and overcoming all obstacles and suffering as the stone under your foot".

Addressing the goddess Saraswathi the groom invokes her to look upon the welfare of the bride.

" As you with your kind words turn poison into nectar, so do you bestow upon my bride the sweetness of speech. I, too, will cherish and practice this ideal."

iv. Pradakshina.

The groom then holds the right hand of the bride and walks round the altar three times and ~~in~~ ~~in~~ at the completion of each circle the lajahoma offering is made three times, ^{and} the hastagrahana and the asmarohana are performed.

The couple then circumambulate the altar a fourth time, but performing none of the rituals in the first three.

v. The Saptapadi.

Seven pieces of kusa grass are now placed a few inches apart to mark seven steps. The bride and the groom place their right feet on the first and after the recitation of a sacred verse by the purohita they move on to the next until the seven steps are thus covered. This is the rite of saptapadi, (seven steps). According to the "Sopangpadithi", the steps have the following significance:-

- 1st: Lord Vishnu is invoked to provide all desires.
- 2nd: He ~~will~~ is asked to provide the necessary strength.
- 3rd: Material wealth is sought.
- 4th: Assurance is sought for all forms of happiness.
- 5th: Increase in domestic animals is desired.
- 6th: Purity of the bride during her state of menses is sought.
- 7th: Assistance is sought to help enjoy the benefits of the earth and the seven planets.

In certain interpretations, the seven steps signify, food, strength, wealth, happiness, welfare of domestic animals, purity during menses and friendship.

The bridegroom asks the bride to be always loyal and devoted to him. Lord Vishnu will assist in making her a pativrata, (literally the worshipper of one's husband) and with the seventh step in the saptapadi, the bride abandons her family gotra, i.e.

her ancestral name, and adopts her filial¹ one. This is done by the bride sprinkling some water on the head of the groom and on her own.

e. Suryadarshan.

If the wedding takes place during the day which is the modern practice, then homage is paid to the Sun and being of unchanging and permanent nature, having existed from the beginning of creation, it is asked to bear witness to the marriage vows and to bless them with a happy and healthy marital life. If the wedding is performed during the night, then the star Dhruva is given this status.

p. Grahastarsha upadesh.

The priest now gives the couple the traditional advice (upadesh) of the life of a householder.

" From this day onwards you are declared man and wife. It is your duty to follow the path of dharma according to the code of the grahastarsha. It is within your power to make yourselves happy. If you both live in harmony, serving the aged and elders, doing worship to the deities, performing your rites to your departed ancestors, making sacrificial offerings (yajnas) and doing charity and welfare work in unison, your future is guaranteed with peace. Share your joys and sorrows. Whatever the provocation, never take shelter in adharma (unrighteousness). Follow the code of the loyal husband and wife."

q. Vows and Promises.

In some marriages the above advice is elaborated and takes the form of vows and promises by the wedded couple. In such an event the bride sits on the right side of the groom to denote that the marriage contract is incomplete unless the groom makes these seven promises:-

- a. That he will consider her a partner in all pilgrimages, fasts, sacrifices, acts of dharma and karma (good deeds)
- b. That he will jointly worship the deities and ancestors.
- c. That he will allow her to participate in the welfare of the family, the aged and the infirm, and the domestic animals.
- d. That he will help to practise thrift with regard to food and wealth and will use these as required with her consent and without waste.
- e. That in initiating all charitable acts such as building char welfare and religious institutions, he will seek her advice.
- f. That in entering into any form of contract such as purchase and sale, her opinion will be sought.
- g. That he will not look upon another's wife however beautiful with lust, will regard all older women as mothers, his equals as sisters and all ~~el~~ younger as ~~elst~~ daughters.

The groom agrees to honour these and in return seeks these five guarantees of marriage from the bride:-

- a. To be always united in mind with him.
- b. To be always obedient to him.

- c. To follow the path of the pativrata dharma, (that of loyal and devoted wife.
- d. To keep away from houses of ill-repute, forests and places where her honour is likely to be threatened. She must not leave the home at the inauspicious hours of noon and midnight.
- e. That whatever the temptation, she will look upon all mankind as fathers, brothers or sons. If together we follow the rules of dharma, we will be assured of a happy life.

The bride consents to accept these and promises to honour them. She then takes her seat on the right of the groom thus signifying her complete submission to him.

r. Sandhoordhaan.

A red lead dot which is the external symbol of a married woman is now placed on the forehead of the bride by the groom. In the process a white sheet covers the couple. In ancient tradition the rite had an erotic significance symbolising consummation. But its modern interpretation is associated with worship. The rite is completed by a sister-in-law of the bride who fills some of the red lead on the bride's head where the hair is parted.

o. Conclusion of the Homa sacrifice.

The purohita now makes the final offering to Agni as present in the havan kund.

p. Blessings:

The purohita first and then others bless the bride and the groom.

The couple are then led into the house after a few women have performed a ritual in which the several parts of the bodies of the groom and bride are touched with some rice and darbha while the couple hold a handful of rice upon which is placed a silver necklet. Below the hands is placed a winnow containing rice. This is carried into the house by ~~the~~ a sister of the bride. At the entrance, a sister of the bride ^{GRACI} awaits a gift from the groom before he is allowed entry. The groom then meets the women relatives in the house and they present him with gifts. The groom then returns to the mandap alone. After the feeding of the guests, the groom is taken into the house and accompanying the bride he departs. ~~Just before departure the fiancé~~

The marriage ceremony is now over.