

Royals for a Night - Dr. Jharna Chatterjee



To say that a traditional, Hindu Bengali wedding is an elaborate affair is a huge understatement, and to capture all its multifaceted, multicolored complexity and festivity is perhaps beyond the scope of a short article. A traditional Bengali wedding does not just bring the bride and the bridegroom together; ideally, it is a joining of two families as well. I will try to outline the basics of the days-long ceremony in a much less elaborate, simplistic way. To a Western observer, these ceremonies may look chaotic, but there is an order underneath all the apparent chaos, – 'there is meaning in the madness' as the saying goes, and there is plenty of scope for spontaneous enjoyment for all.

The preparations start months before the actual wedding day, especially at the would-be bride's home. Colorful (mostly red and/or golden yellow, the colors of good fortune) invitation letters that introduce the bride and the bridegroom as the daughter and son of so and so usually are extended from the senior-most living member of each family. As much as possible, these letters are hand-delivered to all family members and close friends since just to send these by mail would not be courteous enough. The family of the bride starts shopping, ideally according to the means of the family, for the gifts for the bridegroom such as a wrist-watch, clothing items, gold-ring and the bride's trousseau – consisting of saris, jewelry, accessories, and practically anything and everything that the newly-wed couple might need or wish for.

A day before the wedding, the bride's family prepares the formal, woven trays to welcome the bridegroom, in which an artistic cone representing the goddess of fortune or "Shree" is a component (may not be universal among all Bengalis), among other colorfully painted terracotta containers that contain different kinds of seeds and fruits, a lamp, with un-husked golden grains of rice and green twigs of grass to symbolize wealth and a vivacious life respectively.



Left: The formal welcoming tray (baron-dala) and the 'Shree'; Right: A few of the styro-foam trays full of gifts for the bride from the bridegroom's family – photos by author

On the day of the wedding, the first religious task for the two families is to worship their ancestors and ask their blessings for the would-be bride and the bridegroom. About this time, several trays containing gifts for the bride arrive from the bridegroom's family – all

artistically and cleverly arranged. A feast follows and then the feverish activity of getting the bride decorated and dressed begins. She is attired in lavish clothes and jewelry virtually like a princess and is seated on a throne, with a backdrop of fresh floral decorations. A similar place of honor is prepared for the would-be bridegroom as well. The place where the wedding ceremony would take place is also decorated in fresh flowers including garlands of fragrant tuberose and colorful marigold.



Left: Bride the 'princess'. Middle: Welcoming the bridegroom. Right: Exchange of garlands – photos by author

In the evening, the bridegroom accompanied by his family and friends arrives in a car, decorated with fresh flowers, and is greeted by the bride's mother who uses the special welcoming tray to welcome him in a ceremonious way. Shehnai (an Indian flute) pours out happy melodious tunes off a tape-recorder and mixes with the ambient excited noise. He is then ushered to the specially prepared room until the auspicious moment (according to the lunar calendar) arrives when he is invited to come to the wedding 'mandap'. The bride seated on a small, wooden platform is carried by two able-bodied family members or friends with her face covered by a betel-leaf (in some families), and goes around the bridegroom seven times symbolizing a seven-fold bond. Then the bride is brought face-to-face with the bridegroom and on an auspicious moment, their glances meet. This is immediately followed by an exchange of garlands, symbolizing exchange of hearts. Traditionally, in the era of arranged marriages it was not uncommon for the bride and the groom to see each other for the first time. Things have changed in the recent times and a large majority of middle class youth chooses their own partners – from among their classmates or other acquaintances, with their parents' approval in most cases.



Left: The top of the wedding 'Mandap' decorated with flowers. Right: "Giving the bride away" - photos by author



Left: "The priest is tying the knot". Right: "Giving up inhibition together – puffed rice (laaj) to fire" - photos by author

Only after these rituals, the actual religious ceremony begins when a priest (or two from the two families) would recite sacred Sanskrit verses (mantras) and lead the bride's father or some other male member to repeat them and officially give the bride away. This is done by placing the bride's right open palm on the right open palm of the bridegroom tied together with a garland and placed upon a sacred vessel filled with water (meaning the full presence of God). Throughout the various steps of the ceremony, mantras are recited to ask for God's blessing and for the two parties to proclaim their respective rights and responsibilities. There are a few poetic and romantic mantras too, which mean that the respective hearts of the bride and the groom belong to each other and that their mission in life from now on is one. The priest then literally ties the two ends of the scarves of the bride and the groom with a piece of red cloth containing a few specific dried fruits (to wish a fruitful marriage). The bride and the groom walk around the fire (the all-purifying witness), take seven steps together while making seven vows to perform all duties of a family life together, and then jointly offer puffed rice to the fire. This rite symbolizes giving up all egoistic inhibition. Incidentally, in a traditional Hindu wedding, the three principal witnesses are people, God and fire.

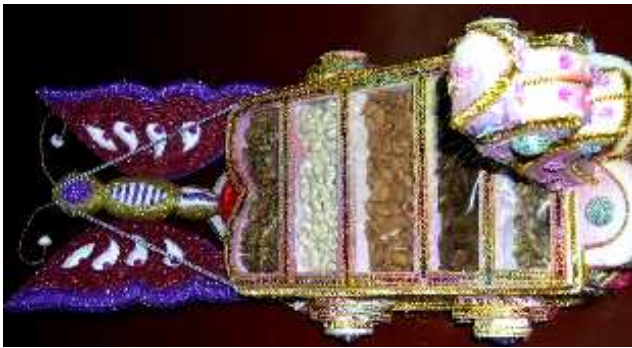


Putting 'sindoor' on the bride's forehead – photo by Nilanjana

Finally, the bridegroom puts vermilion or "sindoor" (a red powder) on the bride's forehead with a golden ring, which establishes her as married to him. The formalities over, the bride and the groom are served food (traditionally after fasting all day) and then taken to a bridal suite, but are

not allowed to be by themselves immediately. In some families, the tradition is for their friends to stay all night with them, and the two camps to get acquainted with one another among laughter, jokes, good-natured teasing and fun. In some other cases, after a while they might have their first opportunity to be physically close – as dating in the North American sense is still not very common. Throughout the evening, guests are treated to a grand, multi-course sit-down dinner, batch by batch in order to accommodate the hundreds of invitees.

The next day, the bride and the groom depart from the bride's home for the bridegroom's home where the bride is welcomed in a ceremonial fashion by the bridegroom's mother and/or other senior female members of the family. Traditionally, the son and the daughter-in-law reside in the family home, together with the in-laws, unless the son lives in another city for his job. The first night after the wedding, the bride and the groom are not supposed to see one another; it is considered bad luck. On the following day, trays of gifts are sent by the bride's family to the bridegroom's home to reciprocate, and in a friendly way, to compete for artistic merit of the trays.



Two of the trays from the bride's family: A tray containing a variety of nuts and raisins and a 'cartoon' replica of the bridegroom's parents made of sandesh (a dessert made of milk product) – photos by author

In the evening, there is a big reception at the bridegroom's home; adorned in finery and floral decorations, the bride is seated on a throne as guests arrive and meet her. The bride may serve a small amount of rice or some other item to the guests, or at least to the family members – as a way of being recognized and accepted by the bridegroom's family and friends as a new family member. At night the newly-weds are led by female relatives to the bridal suite where the bed is elaborately decorated with fresh flowers for their first full night as a couple. The newly-weds return to the bride's home for a short, formal visit eight days after the wedding – just so the bride's family can be reassured that they are on their way to living "Happily Ever After!"