



## Use of Flowers for Special Occasions in Kolkata

- Jharna Chatterjee

Ah, the intoxicating fragrance of thousands of tuberose! I am sure that just this one factor alone could make any Bengali person feel romantic or nostalgic – depending on the situation. Recently, I attended a few ceremonies in Kolkata and admired the abundant and artistic use of fresh flowers. Mostly, the white flowers were delicately fragrant tuberose (somewhat like jasmine, but even milder and sweeter), all-white florets that bloom on a slender stalk, somewhat similar to gladioli. Red roses added color to the garlands. I have seen decoration with flowers at North American weddings and funeral ceremonies too. However, the flowers are not the same, and they are not used quite the same way. Here are a few examples, illustrated with photos (all with the exception of one) taken by the author.



Left: A wall-to-wall floral decoration at a small, home-wedding; right: the bridal bed in a home, with floral curtains and a canopy. In fact, the bride and the groom spend their first night together on a bed called "the bed of flowers" ("phul-shojya" in Bengali), referring to the floral decoration.



Left: A bridal bower with hand-painted floor-decoration and two wooden seats in the center for the couple to sit upon; right: floral canopy of another bridal bower, decorated with garlands made of fresh marigold of two different colors, tuberose, green foliage and red roses.



Exchange of garlands (primarily made of tuberose) at a wedding ceremony – symbolizing exchange of hearts. This is a special step in a typical Bengali wedding ceremony, without which no wedding would be complete. Quite often, young female wedding-guests too would decorate their hair with a single strand of tuberose.

The use of flowers is not limited to wedding ceremonies alone. They are used to decorate rooms and photos for "shraddha" (a Sanskrit and a Bengali word) ceremony or the ritual of showing respect to the deceased as well. The word "shraddha" is derived from the word "shroddha" that means respect. After a mourning period of ten days, on the eleventh day, the immediate family of the deceased invites extended family members and friends to this religious ceremony where special offerings are made for the deceased, accompanied by prayers for the peace of the departed soul. It is followed by a vegetarian feast for all.



Photo: Deep Banerjee – decoration of a dear grandmother's photo at her "shraddha"; a photo of the grandfather, also decorated with garlands can be seen on the wall. In addition to tuberose, following traditions, other white flowers including gladioli stems have also been generously utilized to decorate her photo and her bedroom. The color white typically symbolizes purity and peace, also sometimes, sorrow or bereavement.

I miss the tall, elegant stems of tuberose lovingly placed in a multicolored, brass flower-vase, a common but simple home decoration in many Bengali homes, especially during the monsoon season when they bloom in profusion. In a popular romantic song, Tagore, the famous Bengali poet wrote:

"You never knew how you filled the cup of my life  
Overflowing its brim with sweetness,  
Just as tuberose unknowingly fill a night  
With dreams and their fragrance". (Translated by the author from Bengali)

It is a tropical plant that is difficult to grow as a house-plant here in the "True North", or even outdoors within the confines of our short Canadian summers. So I guess I just have to be satisfied with jasmynes, gardenias, lilies and freesias – until I travel to Kolkata again.