

Marriage Rites and Practices among Indian Muslims

¹Shahnawaz Hussain Bhat

¹Research Scholar (Ph.D.), Department of Sociology,
Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh (UP), India
Email: aligshahnawaz24@gmail.com

Abstract: *In Islam marriage is a very simple affair. Islam doesn't recommend an elaborate set of rites and rituals for marriage. But the Muslims in India practice an elaborate set of rites and rituals while contracting a marriage. The imprint of Hindu culture is so flamboyantly conspicuous on Muslim marriage that Muslims don't appear much different from the majority Hindu community in family and kinship patterns and marriage practices. Also Muslims living in different regions don't exhibit a uniform picture of marriage practices. Researchers find it inexorably difficult to summarize marriage practices in Indian Muslims inevitably because of the regional and cultural dissimilarity. The present paper based on secondary sources studies and presents a colourful picture of these customs and practices among Indian Muslims.*

Key Words: *Islam, Nikah, Rites, Customs, Practices, Muslims*

1. INTRODUCTION

The paucity of empirical research on social life of Indian Muslims has led Indian masses to live with a popular paradox that Muslims in India strictly follow Islam and apply religious precepts in daily life. Even the intellectual class too lives with the same impression. But the studies conducted so far, while discarding the above perception reveal that Muslims and Hindus in India are not much different when it comes to family and kinship patterns and Marriage practices. Like Hindus, it is difficult to summarise Muslim social life in India owing to variations it presents across India's North to South and East to West. The present paper presents a colourful picture of marriage customs and practices among Indian Muslims. It also proves against the above widely held perception (Ahmad, 1976).

1.1. MARRIAGE IN ISLAM:

Marriage ceremony in Islam does not encapsulate an elaborate set of rites and rituals. Although a religious sanctity is attached to it, the *Shari'a* does not prescribe any particular set of rites and rituals to be observed while contracting this pact. The most important and indispensable ceremony prescribed is the *Nikah* ceremony. In ancient Islamic Arabia, the form of marriage was simple. After the mutual agreement to the marriage settlement by the two parties i.e., the parents and guardians of the anticipated couple, a date was fixed on which the bridal party led by the bridegroom himself assembled at the bride's house, where the solemnization of marriage was completed by the *Nikah* or *Aqd* ceremony. The most important condition in *Nikah* ceremony to solemnize the contract was the agreement on the amount of *Mahar* to be paid to the bride by the groom. Subsequently, a formal consent of the bride and the bridegroom was taken in presence of guests and bridal party. After the *Nikah* ceremony, the bridal party and the guests were given a feast at the bride's place by the host family. The bride was then taken to the house of the bridegroom. The bridegroom's family also used to give a feast called *Walima*.¹

1.2. MARRIAGE PRACTICES AMONG INDIAN MUSLIMS:

The dearth of empirical work on social life of Indian Muslims has resulted into a common and widespread impression among Indian masses and intellectuals that Muslims strictly adhere to the *Shari'a* and apply religious code in daily life, viz. family, marriage, kinship, divorce and inheritance. This impression has, indeed, been so widespread that even Sociologists and Anthropologists, who are committed to the empirical investigation of social life, have been prone to accept it... The one anticipation arising from the general belief that the Muslim family ethos is a product of *Shari'a* laws would be that Muslim family and kinship norms should differ strikingly from those of other religious communities (Ahmad, 1976). However, few empirical works, including Imtiaz Ahmad's (Ahmad, 1976) edited volume, a compendium of best available empirical studies investigating social life of Indian Muslims unanimously speak out against this common and widespread impression. The picture which emerges from these empirical studies on family, Marriage and Kinship among Indian Muslims makes it clear that in terms of structure of family, marriage ceremonies and kinship groupings, the Muslims in India are not necessarily distinguishable from their non-Muslim neighbours. They seem to be a part of wider cultural complex shared by all those who reside in the region as a whole. The social intercourse between Muslims and Hindus in India over centuries has led the Muslim marriage being supplemented by a compendium of rites and rituals from Hindus. Although many practices performed even go against Islamic laws and thus out rightly denounced by the religious dictates but these are still practiced because of their

¹ Feast given by the family of bridegroom usually next day of the marriage

socio-cultural and regional significance (Ahmad, 1976). All these marriage rites and practices can be categorised in to three sub headings.

- Rites and practices preceding Marriage.
- Rites and practices at the time of Marriage.
- Rites and practices after the Marriage.

2. RITES AND CUSTOMS PRECEDING MARRIAGE:

A series of rites and ceremonies start subsequently after the settlement of marriage. These rites prolong until the actual performance of marriage itself. These include:

2.1. ENGAGEMENT:

The first subsequent ceremony to the settlement of marriage practiced by most of the Muslims in India is the engagement or *Mangni*. This custom did not exist in the Islamic form but has come to the Muslims from the Hindus. The *Mangni* also known as *angathi pindhua* in Assamese Muslims describes the visitation of a party from the bridegroom's side to the bride's house on a fixed date. The party carries a gold ring, silk clothes and sweets as presents. The negotiations are sealed with the presentation of the engagement ring to the future bride (Ali, 1976). *Mangni* ceremony among Surati Vohras comprises of a number of elaborate rites. After reaching the bride's house, the boy's mother and sisters, or in their absence some other close relatives who are not widows, approach the girl and help her put on the clothes which they have bought for her. After this they place the silver ornaments on her and then the boy's mother and other three women in turn feed her with sugar and throw a shower of rice on her. They also make her hold her scarf in front of her and place in it one coconut, a sum of one rupee and twenty-five-paise, one betelnut and one dried date (*kharch*). After this, every woman who is present gives the girl a rupee. The girl's mother presents the boy's mother with a scarf (*odhni*). Thereupon, the Imam of the mosque, or someone else, reads the *fatiha* which completes the *Mangni* ceremony and the boy's party returns home (Ali, 1976). The marriage proposal in many Shi'a Muslims also is supposed to be finally settled by the *mangni* ceremony. In some Shi'a families gold or silver rings are also exchanged (Husain, 1976).

2.2. FIXATION OF MARRIAGE DATE:

The date for actual marriage ceremony is either fixed at the time of *Mangni* or few days or months before the actual marriage ceremony depending on time between the two, which may range from few days or weeks to few months. It normally varies between a month to about three months as found in Surati Vohras (Lambat, 1976), to many years as is the case with Gujar Bakerwals of Jammu and Kashmir. The consummation of marriage in Gujar Bakerwals takes place usually three to four years and in some cases nine to eleven years after *Nikah* ceremony, till the girl reaches the maturity² (Khatana, 1976). Muslims do not consider each day, date or month auspicious for marriage. For example, Lambat has found that Surati Vohras do not usually hold marriages in the month of *zil kadd*- the eleventh month of Islamic calendar and also the lunar dates of 16, 17 and 18 are avoided because these dates are not supposed to be good for marriage (Lambat, 1976). The prescriptions and proscriptions for fixing the day, date and month for marriage are much elaborate among Shi'a Muslims. Marriages mostly take place in the months of *Rajab*³, *Shaban*⁴, after the tenth of *Id-ul-Zuha*⁵ and the second half of *Rabi-ul-Awwal*⁶. Shia's do not perform marriages in the months of *Moharrum*⁷, *Safar*⁸ and the first eight days of the month of *Rabi-ul-Awwal*. (Husain, 1976) Like other Muslims Shias also avoid holding marriage in the month of *Ramzan*.⁹

2.3. HALDI(TURMERIC) SMEARING CEREMONY:

Turmeric smearing ceremony is held few days before marriage. The face and the body of both bride and bridegroom are massaged with haldi powder so to change the colour of the skin and make it look fairer and brighter. The family of the bride after massaging the bride with *haldi* paste get her bathed after which she wears the marriage costume brought by the bridegroom's family. This ceremony is called *pithi*¹⁰ among Surati Vohras. The Hajjam (barber) helps the boy with his bath after giving him a hair-cut and a shave . . . the clothes that both the boy and the girl take off at the time of bath are given to the barber and his wife (Lambat, 1976).

² The girl is considered mature after reaching the age of twenty to twenty-two years and thus fit for child bearing.

³ The Seventh month of Islamic calendar

⁴ The eighth month of Islamic calendar

⁵ The most important Islamic festival celebrated every year on the tenth of the *Zil- Hajj*, the last month of the Islamic calendar.

⁶ The third month of Islamic calendar

⁷ It is the first month of Islamic calendar. *Moharrum* is considered an inauspicious occasion for marriage because of the tragedy of Karbala which took place in this month. The coming of *Moharrum* marks the start of mourning period among Shia Muslims and continues up to the eighth of *Rabi-ul- Awwal* every year.

⁸ The second month of Islamic calendar

⁹ It is the ninth month of Islamic calendar. Muslims all over world keep fast from dusk to dawn in the whole month of *Ramzan*.

¹⁰ A Gujarati word for Turmeric

3. RITES AND CUSTOMS AT THE TIME OF MARRIAGE:

The most important ceremony of an Islamic marriage is *Nikah* that legitimizes the consummation of marriage i.e., the bridal couple can together live as husband and wife. However, among Indian Muslims it is not the *Nikah* but the actual marriage ceremony known as *Kalyanam*¹¹ among Moplahs of Kerala (D'Souza, 1976) and *Khandar*¹² among Kashmiri speaking Muslims, that completes the most awaited part of the whole marriage process i.e., bridegroom taking the bride with himself without any fear, opposition and objection from the established social order. There are several ceremonies observed during the performance of actual marriage. These may include:

3.1 MEHNDI CEREMONY:

Mehndi ceremony is practiced among most of the Muslim groups in India, cutting across regional differences in socio-cultural practices. Mehndi ceremony among Moplahs is called *mailanchi*. *Mailanchi* literally means *henna*¹³ and the ceremony consists of applying *henna* juice to the nails and toes, palms and feet, etc., of the bride. The juice has to be brought ceremonially from the *tharavad* house of the bride's father (D'Souza, 1976). Originally *Mehndi* used to be female oriented ceremony but nowadays, even the bridegrooms also decorate their fingers and palms by applying *Mehndi*. Among Surati Vohras, "young girls from the bride's house bring *aughar*¹⁴ for the groom, feed him with it and apply some *Mehndi* on the palm of his right hand"(Lambat, 1976).

3.2 BARAAT PROCESSION:

The guests and relatives who are to accompany the groom to the bride's house assemble at the festive house of bridegroom. The bridegroom is dressed in to unique nuptial attire. The dress a Gujar Bakerwal bridegroom (*Shahwala*) wears is provided by his own family except the head gear (*Pagri*) which is sent by bride's side (Khatana, 1976). However, Shi'a bridegroom from Uttar Pradesh dresses himself with the clothes sent by the bride's side. The *Baraat* (marriage party) then proceeds to the house of the bride. The Surati Vohra bridegroom after signing the marriage register in the mosque, start off in a procession to the bride's house. As the *Baraat* reaches the bride's house, the bridegroom and his whole retinue are given the ceremonial welcome by the relatives and guests from the bride's side.

3.3 NIKAH CEREMONY:

Nikah is the central and most important ceremony of a Muslim marriage. *Nikah* sanctifies the marriage and puts legitimizing seal on the contract after being accepted by both the parties. *Nikah* ceremony is held any time prior to the consummation of marriage. The *Kaniyath*¹⁵ i.e. *Nikah* among Moplahs is sometimes held months prior to the *Kalyanam*. "In case *Nikah* has not already been performed, the ceremony takes place a day or two prior to the *Kalyanam* function. While *Nikah* ceremony is held at bride's house among Gujar Bakerwals of Jammu and Kashmir (Khatana, 1976), and Shia's of Uttar Pradesh (Husain, 1976), among Moplahs of Kerala "this ceremony takes place at the house of the groom"(D'Souza, 1976). However, among Surati Vohras, "due to greater Islamization it is nowadays conducted in a mosque" (Lambat, 1976). After agreeing upon the amount of *mahar* to be paid by the groom to the bride and the mode of payment i.e. *Moajjal*¹⁶ or *Muwajjal*¹⁷, the consent is taken from the bride and then from the groom to solemnize the contract. However, Khatana (Khatana, 1976) observes that the consent taking rite among Gujar Bakerwals is held prior to the fixation of *mahar*. The girl affirms her agreement through one of her friends and her affirmation is announced by the witnesses to the marriage party. Similar affirmation is then sought from the boy. Once the consent of both the parties has thus been obtained, the *maulvi* recites an offering *fatiha*¹⁸ from the holy Quran. In case of Moplahs, the bride herself is not present on the occasion but her consent is to be given on her behalf by her *Wali*, who is usually her father (D'Souza, 1976). Among Shia's of Uttar Pradesh, after agreeing upon the amount and mode of payment of *mahar*, "the bride's *Mujtahid*¹⁹ goes to the bride in the woman's apartment and asks her three times whether she accepts the person concerned as her husband, with the amount of *mahar* as settled, she generally answers in the affirmative after a short hesitation . . . Then the *Mujtahids* from the bridegroom's side asks the bridegroom three times whether he accepts the woman concerned as his wife with the amount of *mahar* as settled and he answers in the affirmative. After this the *Mujtahid* from the bride's side recites the *Khutba* (religious discourse) and then both the *Mujtahids* pronounce the *Sigha of Nikah*²⁰, and some responsible persons from amongst the audience

¹¹ It is the actual marriage ceremony held among Moplahs. Before *Kalyanam* a bride cannot even see the face of his bride.

¹² A Kashmiri word for actual marriage ceremony

¹³ A dye prepared from the plant *Lawsonia Inermis*, also known as the henna tree or the mignonette tree

¹⁴ It literally means grapes but in this ceremony it refers to the sweet dish prepared out of crushed wheat.

¹⁵ It is the local word used for *Nikah*.

¹⁶ *Mahar* paid at the time of *Nikah*

¹⁷ *Mahar* paid up front in the future

¹⁸ First Surah of Quran

¹⁹ A religious head and scholar deemed to have enough theological knowledge to form and give independent opinion and judgment

²⁰ A set of phrases and sentences recited at the time of *Nikah* to give religious and legal cognizance to the contract

sign the *Nikahnama* (marriage document) as the witnesses (Husain, 1976). However, drawing of *Nikahnama* has become obsolete among Assamese Muslims (Ali, 1976).

3.4 WEDDING FEAST:

The bride's side usually gives the bridegroom and his whole entourage a feast on the actual marriage ceremony after having completed the *Nikah*. Theoretically, Muslim feasts are supposed to be simple but not lavish, Muslims follow Hindu pattern and provide a lavish feast consisting of varieties of dishes. A lot of money is spent over it (Madani, 1993). However, "the meal provided by the Surati Vohras is quite simple. It always consists of fried rice and *dal* (lentils) cooked with mutton"(Lambat, 1976).

3.5 RUKHSATI /BIDAI:

Rukhsati or *Bidai* means the departure of bride from her paternal home for the bridegroom's home. The Rukhsati usually leads to an emotional atmosphere as the bride usually indulges in a lot of crying and weeping and leaves the parental house with great reluctance. She is consoled by her parents, friends and relatives. She is accompanied to the bridegroom's house by some of her relatives and friends. The bride is given dowry at the time of rukhsati or after it. The dowry may include; the items for domestic use like sheep, goats and horses which makes her share in her father's property (Khatana, 1976), or clothes, ornaments, furniture, utensils, etc., and in some cases cash also among Shi'as of Uttar Pradesh. The couple on their way to the groom's place first visit some local holy shrine (Husain, 1976). The bride in the Surati Vohras does not stay at her husband's place overnight but returns to her parental home with her relatives and friends. Early next morning the groom's sister or some other young relative goes and fetches her, and this time she stays at her husband's place (Lambat, 1976).

4 RITES AND CUSTOMS AFTER MARRIAGE:

4.1 WALIMA FEAST:

Walima feast is the only festive ceremony besides *Nikah* which has religious significance and importance in Islam. This feast is given by the family of the bridegroom generally on next day of marriage. "The majority of the Shia's consider this feast to be essential part of the marriage because the Holy Prophet gave *Walima* feast at the marriage of his only daughter, Hazrat Fatima Zehra" (Husain, 1976).

4.2 RETURNING OF BRIDE TO HER HOME:

The bride and in some cases the bridegroom also visit the parental house of the bride after spending few days at the bridegroom's place. Among Assamese Muslims the bride and the groom visit parental home of the bride on the eighth day following marriage where they are entertained with a feast. This custom among Assamese Muslims is called *ath mongola*. Among Surati Vohras this custom is observed after the girl has spent four days at her husband's place. The groom sometimes accompanies his bride and stays with his in-laws until his wife returns. However, usually the groom's people come to fetch the bride back. This ceremony of fetching the bride is called *anna*, and it is the last ceremony directly associated with the wedding (Lambat, 1976).

5. CONCLUSION:

Although, marriage in Islam is a simple affair entailing a proposal, acceptance, agreement upon the *mahar* and signing of the marriage contract before two witnesses, but marriage practices among Indian Muslims doesn't present the same simplistic picture. The impact of regional and cultural background is not restricted to Muslim family norms alone. It extends to the norms related to marriage including customs and practices as well. Marriage in Indian Muslims does not confer an identical picture. Researchers find it inexorably difficult to summarize the marriage in Indian Muslims inevitably because of the regional and cultural dissimilarity in customs and practices. The Hindu and the Muslim influences coalesce and impinge upon Muslim marriage in a way particular to a particular region. The imprint of Hindu culture is flamboyantly conspicuous on Muslim marriage. Any attempt to summarize the Muslim marriage in India will only produce a flawed picture coloured by misinformation, prejudices and biasness (Ahmad, 1976). Instead, it presents a colourful picture with regional and cultural variations.

REFERENCES

1. Ahmad, I. (1976). *Family, kinship and Marriage among Muslims in India*. New Delhi: Manohar.
2. Al-Husaini Seestani, A. (2007). *Taudhihul masae'l* (5th ed.). Qom, Iran: Ansariyan Publications.
3. Ali, I. A. N. M. (1976). Kinship and Marriage among Assamese Muslims. In I. Ahmad (Ed.), *Family, kinship and Marriage among Muslims in India* (pp. 1–26). New Delhi: Manohar.
4. Baqri, S. M. Z. (1987). *the Family Life of Islam*. Karachi: Najafi book library.
5. Conklin, H. G. (1976). Muslim family Life and Secularization in Dharwar, Karnataka. In I. Ahmad (Ed.), *Family, kinship and Marriage among Muslims in India* (pp. 127–140). New Delhi: Manohar.
6. D'Souza, S. V. (1976). Kinship Organization and Marriage customs among the Moplahs on the South-West Coast of India. In I. Ahmad (Ed.), *Family, kinship and Marriage among Muslims in India* (pp. 141–168). New Delhi: Manohar.

7. Hasnain, N., & Husain, S. A. (1988). *Shias And Shia Islam In India: A study in Society and Culture*. New Delhi: Harnam Publications.
8. Husain, S. A. (1976). *Marriage Customs Among Muslims In India*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers.
9. Khatana, R. P. (1976). Marriage and Kinship among the Gujar Bakerwals of Jammu and Kashmir. In I. Ahmad (Ed.), *Family, kinship and Marriage among Muslims in India* (pp. 83–126). New Delhi: Manohar.
10. Lambat, A. I. (1976). Marriage among the Sunni Surati Vohras of South Gujarat. In I. Ahmad (Ed.), *Family, kinship and Marriage among Muslims in India* (pp. 49–82). New Delhi: Manohar.
11. Levy, R. (1957). *Social structure of Islam* (2nd ed.). London: Cambridge University Press.
12. Madani, M. (1993). *Impact of Hindu Culture on Muslims*. New Delhi: M D publications PVT LTD.
13. Marriage in Islamic Law: The Modernist Viewpoints. (n.d.). *The American Journal of Comparative Law*, 26(2).