

The Body in Visualisations and Images

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The Multiple Bodies of the Bride: Ritualising ‘World Class’ at Elite Weddings in Urban India

This paper examines the gap between the wedding and the beauty or fitness industries, underlining how closely they are connected by means of ‘marketing the body’ and how much pressure is put on aspiring candidates in terms of their performance. The beautiful and the fit body of women as well as men have moved centre-stage in the feel-good ideology promoted in neoliberal urban India. The wedding ritual is a field of discourse through which a host of media and gender concepts are entangled in an ambivalent way: at once empowering and domesticating.

Key Words: Middle Class; Media; Ritual; Sexuality; Performance

For a bride, her wedding day is like walking the red carpet. It’s her big moment, when countless eyes are watching her every move. And every bride wants to look her absolute best. But reaching that stage requires preparation and dedication. Because you don’t want your audience, much less the bridegroom, to notice flabby arms, dark circles under the eyes or love handles. (SRINIVASA 2007)

This quote from *Savy*, a lifestyle magazine, bridges the gap between the wedding and the beauty or fitness industries, underlining how closely they are connected by means of ‘marketing the body’ and how much pressure is put on aspiring candidates in terms of their performance. The beautiful and the fit body of women as well as men have moved centre-stage in the feel-good ideology promoted in neoliberal urban India. Its celebration is a relatively recent phenomenon: The first time I met with the passion and disgust aligned to the physical body of worldly India was in 1996, when the first Miss World contest was hosted in India and became a contested issue in various media (cf. BUTCHER 2003; RUNKLE 2004). Then, a highly moralistic debate was led about the commodification of the female body, the question as to whether the display of “so much skin” was not insulting to the eye of the traditional beholder, and whether the idealised female Indian body should be exposed that way in the light of a booming consumption industry based on pleasure (instead of motherhood, at least so it seems). Another aspect underlining this recent development, and so far rather marginalised, is that despite all the talks about the commodification of the woman, there might be genuine pleasure in the ways in which women participate in these events. I would argue that

there are regimes of disciplining and empowerment at work, and the body and its manifold sensories, is the key stakeholder of this arena of negotiations.

In this paper, I am not so much focussing on the changing role of women in the mass media¹, indigenous conceptions of interrelatedness or specific constructions of familial personhood. Instead, I examine “big fat Indian” weddings as a stage for the display of “world-class” lifestyle and pleasure. These weddings set a new trend in India since the 2000s. As marathon celebrations of exuberant volume, usually lasting about ten days, and even though budget-wise they must be a matter of the social elites, they have come to stir discussions about the “vulgarity” of the “new rich” in India. Yet, these “Big Fat Indian Weddings” set the tone of lifestyle magazines and impact on wedding choreographies of less wealthy families.

Possibly more than any other social performance, these lifecycle rituals help us understand the effects of economic liberalisation on urban social life. In this context, the body becomes the central stage of communicating these new concepts (as if they were essential, given) in a highly ambivalent space. The wedding industry is vast and specialises in the creation of pleasure and desire, distinction and status, the marketing of travel destinations and culinary and other sensual experiences, status, style and etiquette. Through the romanticized, “ethnic” and “cultured” body of the bride, a moral universe of neoliberalism (conspicuous waste), of tourism (destination weddings and honeymoon) and of commercial film (romantic, free love) is constituted. That way, the wedding ceremony becomes a soundboard for the moral economy of the middle classes, rendering the bridal body at once docile and energetically seductive, helping to shape vernacular cosmopolitan middle-classness.

This paper evolves around the concept of the body-at-marriage as it is developed and staged by new lifestyle-experts, magazines and performative environments in contemporary urban India. The bridal body does not dwell at one site but is nourished by an intervisual mobility: it moves from popular magazines, to commercial films, to photostudios and “Page Three”-events such as the weddings of film-stars or millionaires. These people, media and events, have come to specialise in the provision of various kinds of well-being and pleasure to affluent middle class consumers in the course of economic liberalisation since the 1990s. They have taken over the bridal family’s agency of usually hosting and designing a wedding, and the priest as ritual specialist and key authority. Centre-stage of this agglomeration of rites, rituals and ritualisations is the concept of conspicuous consumption and an event, the celebration of wealth which can at times even be referred to as “conspicuous waste.” It has become a crucial part of the economy and performance of material wealth and excess on the one hand and a means of drawing borders based on distinction in order to negotiate the concept of an Indian-specific “world class” as cultural capital on the other hand. The body, in particular, the female body, surfaces in many visual and performative empires of weddings,

1 On the subject of gender, liberalisation and media, see FERNANDES 2006, MUNSHI 2001, OZA 2006, REDDY 2006.

beauty, tourism and wellness as much as these industries feature centrally in lifestyle media and discourses and must be understood as elements of new identifications and subjectivities, notions of intimacy and romance as well as affluence and aspiration. I argue that the aspiring middle classes' dream of self-transformation and a "good life" is made accessible by the wedding industry into which the ritual has to some extent been transformed. The body of the bride is tamed and used as an index of how much value is within can be accumulated and displayed in a ritual of conspicuous waste. The argument thus evolves around what I call different types of bridal bodies through which different regimes of values and ideas of womanhood are played out against each other. The paper examines some of the physical categories with respect to pleasure and taste: the "themed" bridal body as "ethnic" and "cultured" moving between icon and idol, ritual gift and fetish.

Pleasure, taste and distinction

The bridal body patrols and transgresses borders between tradition and modernity, taste and vulgarity, global and local flows. The performative concepts of ritual, heritage, leisure and exhibition are important to understand the complexity of lifestyle politics in neoliberal India. Notions of love and romance that entered into current wedding rhetoric, for instance, were shaped in the colonial context, both in appropriation of a model of loving partnership as well as against strictly moral and patronising tones of colonial rulers towards "Indian society" (see SREENIVAS 2003). The notion of liberalised sexuality among members of the aspiring middle classes enables women to think of their own sensuality and sexual desires vis-à-vis those of the groom, on the one hand. Yet it is simultaneously restricted by a bourgeois ideology that aims at disciplining female sexuality by means of rendering her docile to (male) codes of honour and appealing to the value of chastity, on the other hand (see KAKAR 1989). Canons of taste are written into and defined by codes of distinction in rituals and festivities, dress and fashion, and at sites and performances of consumption. In weddings now, as in all public consumption, but heightened because of it being a *rite of passage*, the crucial question from the perspective of anthropological reckoning is not how much is spent, though size does certainly matter, but in what way it is spent. Thus, taste is an elementary aspect of value-constitution. Much has changed with economic liberalisation: The wedding ceremony is no longer the sole expression of two families' consensus about their contractual fusion and wealth by means of an arranged marriage. It has also become the sign of a couple's choice ("arranged romantic love"), their attempt to acquire friends' and relatives' recognition of their sexual relations as well as their effort to be accepted as members of the social category of the new middle class, or even social elite (see ADRIAN 2003).

In his study on advertisement and globalisation in urban India, William MAZZARELLA (2003) takes up the topic of sexuality and consumption. He elaborates how the dogma of family planning (including forced sterilisation; see

TARLO 2003) and planned development in the first three decades after India's independence considered and rejected the desire of citizens for consumption as a sign of a bourgeois lifestyle and deficient civil, collective responsibility. The Indian citizen was rendered dutifully committed towards public welfare. This logic was drastically reversed in the 2000s. The citizen's duty was to ensure national growth through consumption. Pleasure as a means to reach satisfaction and happiness became the driving motor of this new citizenry, the new middle classes.² The body is no longer a site of re/production but a source and site of different pleasures assigned to different agents. Consumption, so MAZZARELLA, moves from vice to virtue. The anthropologist defines this shift as "progress through pleasure" (2003, p. 101). The desiring self challenges the demanding state by means of shifting loyalties and priorities. Moreover, despite the paradigmatic shifts of national identity, and the alleged weakening of the state, the concept of the (joint) family receives remarkable attention as the prototypical element of a changing nation. The joint family now becomes the custodian of heritage and modernity, of new lifestyles and national identity, as many commercial films made in Bollywood have come to underline in the last fifteen years or so (cf. DWYER 2000, UBEROI 2006). Their narratives evolve around concepts of romantic love versus familial duty, and are increasingly concerned with national identity, particularly since they are set firmly in transnational contexts.

To study wedding rituals in the context of consumption and pleasure is a fascinating task because seemingly dichotomous entities seem to clash and be resolved in and through them. Even more so, the bridal body as a field of discourse conveys these conflictuous relationships. It is my interest to look into the cultivation of the bridal body as a tradable item of "world class" and national taste.

The themed body

Here in India, weddings are meant to be grand, meant to be big. Weddings, in fact, are the biggest celebration of a person's life. The size and scale of your wedding determines your pecking order in society... But suppose, you can't quite manage an Antwerp or Bali wedding and a French chateau is totally out of the reckoning: you can always create a Venice in Goa, a Rajasthani fort in Mumbai or a tropical forest in Delhi. As disposable incomes grow healthier, more couples than ever are opting for professional planners to see them through their weddings rather than depending on the sage advice of uncles and aunts who would otherwise have pitched to help with wedding preparations. ... Today, you too can have your own version of the big fat Indian wedding! (MENON 2007, p. 37)

In order to convince, new taste, new pleasure, and new sensuality localise the body in a themed environment, that is, a choreographed narrative that managed to generate a trend. It is here where the themed wedding and the destination wedding

² The new middle classes are made up of several segments: aspiring, affluent and arrived (cf. BROSIUS 2009; VARMA 1998). There are approximately 200 million people that can be counted into this growing class.

began their career. Many “theme weddings” are a monumentalised extension of photostudios, where people could dress up in trendy costumes, and pose in front of colourful backdrops (see PINNEY 1997). There would be replicas of the Kremlin in Moscow, of the Moulin Rouge in Paris or the White House in Washington. The most glamorous weddings took place in 2004, for instance, when the owner of the Sahara Business Group got his two sons married on Valentine’s Day. Moreover, Laxmi Mittal, Steel industry baron from London rented parts of a grand castle near Paris for his daughter’s wedding in 2004 for 30 million pound sterling. All 600 rooms at the Hotel le Grand Intercontinental in Paris were booked for wedding guests. Dancers, *mehendiwallis* (Henna painters to decorate the womens’ hands and feet) for the wedding were flown in from Delhi and Mumbai. Another example are the week-long wedding festivities of New York hotel and restaurant owner Chatwal’s son Vikram and Priya Sachdev from Delhi (a model and investment-banker) in 2006 included a masked “fantasy party” at the palace-city Udaipur in Rajasthan, as well as a “Queenie and Raja (king, CB) party” in Bombay. The wedding planner from New Delhi ensured that the painted elephant, 50 thousand kilos of flowers from Bangkok and Amsterdam, three chartered jets and 70 private cars arrived at the right time to transport and surprise the over one thousand guests. For one of the events, the Rajasthani theme, to be as “authentic” as possible, the wedding venue of a five star hotel was transformed into a Rajasthani village. Folk artists performed traditional dances and guests had been instructed to dress in Rajasthani outfits. Why Rajasthan has become the most popular region to stage “India” is part of an auto-orientalist self-perception: the colours and fashion of the desert state, the density of exotic palaces and maharajas, have always served as fairy-tail backdrops for all kinds of “romantic” colonial and neo-colonial narratives.

Theme weddings do not just represent a fashion that goes by. Instead, they stand for a concept that cultural geographers or sociologists refer to as “themed” environment, that is, the design of a public or private space or site according to a particular theme and event that invokes pleasure and aspirations in the beholders. Themed environments seem to become the fingerprint of neoliberalisation, not only in India, but also in Dubai, or Shanghai. The most obvious term for this is Alan BRYMAN’s “Disneyisation of society” (2004). However, I am not referring to this specific term because in my view, this would lead to impression that India undergoes Americanisation. But “Big Fat Indian Weddings” are not just a big showdown of conspicuous waste in the age of late capitalism. The performances surrounding the wedding rite are staged to create cosmopolitan bodies that come eye to eye with “the West” and be both: global and local, pretend to speak in the world’s tongue—but also display national and even neo-colonial chauvinism. Cosmopolitan mimicry here is an act of seeking to position modernity in an Indian context—place value of family, of tradition, of nationality, even affluence as a value. It is also a test of dressing up and fusing successfully the rustic, ethnic and rural versus a global and urban body. The importance given to a “special” wedding

by celebrating it abroad or by recreating the world *en miniature* in the backyard is part of one's display of cultural capital. In some ways, weddings and the bodies related to them are structured and organised like theme parks and their props, appealing to the desire of self-transformation through consumption.

Cosmopolitan Indianness then is the capacity to cite, and to move in and around the world: For this, new ritual spaces and displays are required for new desires and needs and bodies/performances. But instead of locating them isolated, they are tied up to other, "traditional" rituals. For this, various bodies of the bride are required. In the next steps, I shall examine two kinds of intertwined bodies: the "ethnic body" and the "cultured body."

"Ethnic body" and "cultured body"

The bridal industry, states Patricia UBEROI (2008) is all about the making of class, ethnic identity, gender, and family relations. Even though these notions are fluid, the role of the bride has probably changed least, and is still confined by concepts of chastity and devotion to the husband. What is considered to be suitable or appropriate is highlighted in the next example. Ashok S., senior manager at one of India's leading marketing and consultancy agencies with its head office in Gurgaon tells me that while weddings in the 1980s and 1990s would even sport western suites for the groom and guests, therefore documenting their cosmopolitan attitude, this was hardly fashionable any more today. Today, "trend-conscious" urbanised persons wear "ethnic" dress of royal and historical background, mostly Punjabi or Rajasthani style with long and beautifully embroidered coats for special occasions. "Ethnic chic" is associated with knowing one's culture, being proud of and willing to show it. The new middle classes display such an increasing fascination with ethnic stereotypes, something rather unpopular fifteen years ago, for one's own fashioning of the body as a status symbol. Until the 1990s, ethnic elements were usually attributed to define the "Other," such as the peasant or the tribal (*adivasi*). To constitute oneself as urban, educated *and* ethnically conscious is a development of growing globalisation and economic liberalisation. Anthropologist Emma TARLO (1996) coins "ethnic chic" as an urban and upper middle class phenomenon of a new "ethnic chic," where the past is romanticised and appropriated into a sanitised, ordered and hygienic present. In terms of the bridal body, we find a rustic, seductive, and yet chaste woman as key symbol of urban nostalgia and exotic fantasies of "tradition" and "indigeneity." The village girl is considered innocent and pure (naive and uneducated), her body appears civilised but with traces of the untamed. Often, such an allegedly naïve and uneducated woman is considered ideal for the male professional living overseas whose family wants him to revitalise his Indianness through the genuinely traditional bride and her voluntary self-sacrifice for the preservation of "traditional values."³

3 See UBEROI's (2006) excellent analysis of diaspora films such as *Pardes* (Foreign Land, 1997, dir. S. Ghai).

Cultural diversity is one aspect of the bridal body's celebration as ethnic and authentic. Another is cultural heritage and "cultural consciousness." Historical costumes from nineteenth century colonial north India have a strong impact, especially since blockbusters like *Devdas* (2002, dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali). Rajasthani "folk style," too, has been "gentrified," for example, with films like *Lagaan* (Tax, 2001, dir. Ashutosh Gowariker) or *Paheli* (2005, dir. Amol Palekar). Moreover, elements appropriated from religious practices are no longer perceived as auspicious Hindu items in the first degree but become part and parcel of a material culture and circulation systems that define a social value instead. In this context, Hindu rituals become scripts for new narratives of an ethnic underlining. Most of all, while the marriage rite of the couple by a *pandit* (priest) would have absorbed most of the time in a "traditional" wedding, today the fact that choreographies last over several days, involving elements that have become independent "items," such as the engagement, the *sangeet*⁴, or the reception, clearly show a reduction of the key rite in favour of other modes of entertainment. Previously only the weddings of the upper class, senior politicians and royals would count more than hundreds of guests from all kinds of regional, religious and caste background, while traditional weddings kept to themselves, that is, within a regional compound of face-to-face contacts. Today, a middle class wedding event might add up to 500 guests and involve a host of diverse participants. The latest "fashion" for so-called A-grade weddings is to clad the wedding *mandap* (pavilion) in orchids from Thailand and Swarovsky jewellery, to fly in Bollywood film stars, or prominent personae from the west, for instance, Bill Clinton. What remained more or less the same, however, is that at conservative urbanised high-caste, upper class weddings, no alcohol is served on the day of the ritual ceremony itself, that for the wedding rite, groom and bride wear traditional dresses, and that a *pandit* (priest) is called to perform the wedding rite according to an auspicious date and time.⁵ "Ethnic" brides (and tribes) are a trope through which the Indian state but also the wider popular imaginary of Indianness has been visually manifested and circulated; on postal stamps, bazaar prints, at state parades, beauty pageants, or calendars.

In themeing Indian cultural heritage, young and upwardly mobile Indians take a fresh look at "traditional" India, turning its culture into the property and repository of a heritage exhibition and performance, making it an extension of new consumer culture. In this context, a central and ever growing category of wedding event clients and trendsetters are the NRIs. They have started to claim custodianship over heritage. The *Delhi Times of India*, a section of the newspaper *Times of India* that predominantly reports about "society" events such as exhibition and restaurant openings, business fairs, and weddings, takes the New York hotelier Chatwal's son

4 *Sangeet* means a pre-marital gathering of family, accompanied by singing and story telling.

5 The caste and class specific requirements here demand more research in terms of urban contexts. Moreover, there are many weddings, e.g. in the Himalayan region, that request alcohol even at the ritual occasion, thus it is not always a taboo.

Vikram with “Delhi party girl” Priya Sachdev on Valentine’s Day in 2006 as a marker of affirmation of at once knowledge of western habits (Valentine Day as the celebration of romantic love) and India’s self-esteem (celebration of India’s ethnic diversity). The event is said to have spread the “India everywhere-mood,” a feel good-factor metaphor related to the rhetoric of the economically booming subcontinent. The newspaper cited Vikram saying: “Oh wow, this is such fun. I just love the magic around Indian weddings”. And the bride’s father saw no reason in feeling embarrassed about the following description of his son’s “initiation” to India: “I strongly feel that it’s very important to understand one’s roots. Becoming an Indian (by marrying a model and ex-banker from India, CB), Vikram needs to see and feel the country, its culture, tradition and its diversity. In Rajasthan, he saw how kings lived, in Delhi he gets to discern the cosmopolitan flavour of an international city, just like New York is.” The bodies of the groom and the bride thus become markers of the rite of passage, the transition to something Vikram will probably only remember as magnified “Queenie and Raja” party, “just like New York.”

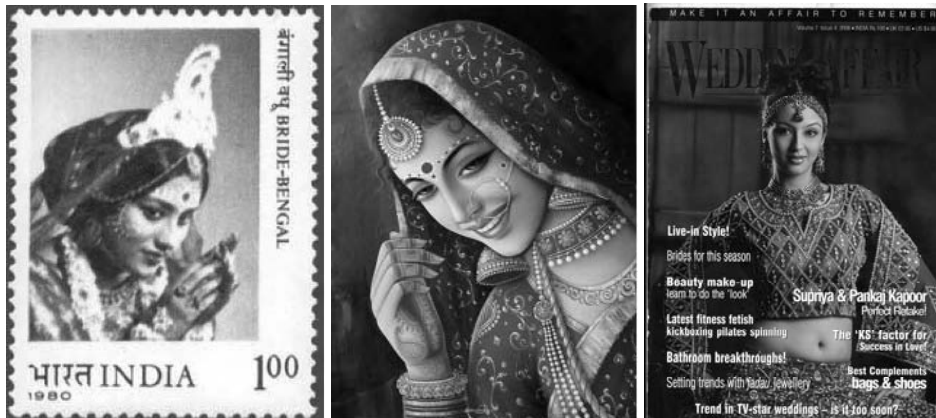


Fig. 1 (left): Stamp from India, entitled “Bride-Bengal” (1980). Fig. 2 (centre): “Indian Bride,” popular bazar print, Delhi (2006). Fig. 3 (right): Frontpage of bridal magazine *Wedding Affair* 7(4), 2006.

With respect to the bridal’s body as “ethnic body,” we can argue that dress and posture have become important markers. There is an interesting dynamic in that ethnic fashion had been outdated as element of self-constitution (not as element of constructing the other) among the urban middle classes and elites until the mid-1990s. It was conceived as “backward” and un-modern. After “the west” started to consume and promote it as “exotic” and fashionable, along with yoga or Ayurveda, Indian “folk” was reimported and became appreciated by the aspiring Indian middle classes. Those who felt that it was part of a cosmopolitan rhetoric could appropriate the “ethnic.” In the shaping of the upper middle classes and social

elites as an aesthetic community of cosmopolitans, the “cultured” body came to play an important role. To know one’s culture, and to be able to place it among other signifiers of themed weddings, such as *Carneval of Venice* or *Moulin Rouge*, citing the world without being dominated by it (rather the opposite), is part of status distinction.

Traditional wedding: the bridal body as ritual gift

In order to better judge changes occurring in wedding ritual and embodiment, let’s recapitulate for a moment to see what is new, or what seems new. While weddings are important in that they are a key life-cycle ritual, the idea that they are the biggest celebration of an individual person’s life is rather recent. Today, this is part of a shared imaginary of a largely urbanised and educated audience considering individual choice (romantic love) above, or at least equal to collective norms and values (e.g. arranged marriage). To be sure, a “traditional” wedding does not acknowledge the individual. It underlines the contract between two families by means of marrying two of their members to each other, a rather asymmetrical alliance between families in which the bride is “given” to the groom (*kanyadan*, that is, the gift of the virgin, the purest of all gifts; cf. RAHEJA 1988; see also PURI 1999). During the ceremony, highly complicated family networks but also social and business relationships are enacted and negotiated, almost as if explosive substances are mixed together carefully. Who interacts with whom, who gives and who receives a gift, who eats what kinds of food and when is crucial for the efficacy of the ritual itself (cf. KOLENDA 1984). But the meaning of status and lifestyle declaration has become very important, as has that of romance and intimacy. It is here where the bridal body comes centre-stage. Traditionally, marriage alliance is moderated by the concern with monitoring the “purity” of women. And it still is. The bride to be given to the new family had to be a virgin. The imperative of the Hindu religious ideal of *kanyadan* that ensures that wife-takers rank higher than wife-givers (hypergamy) is not that relevant any longer (while endogamy still is). In the ritual of *kanyadan*, the bride delivers herself, and is delivered by her father, to the prospective future family of her groom. In commercial films as well as home videos, the moment of farewell, obviously following the marriage ceremony, is marked by the public display of sadness, close-up of faces of the bridal family and herself crying. The camera also pays attention to her touching the feet of the elders of the family as a sign of obeisance and respect. This scene is still a part of the choreography, even though one can observe that behind the veil, the face of the bride is a smiling one.

Moreover, traditional weddings have long been key stages of conspicuous consumption and thereby the production of a cycle of symbolic capital. What is new in the case of the weddings explored here is their scale and the public, media-savvy, glocal aesthetics, taste and means of distinction imbued in them. Today, a wedding is highlighted as a celebration in certain contexts such as in lifestyle magazines or a commercial Hindi film. It has become an act of declaring romantic

love, where two companions deliberately decide to devote their life to each other (and not the whole family). While the bridal body in weddings prior to the “Big Fat Indian wedding” trend used to be covered, rather static and passive objects of a ritual economy, the new bridal body must be agentive, seductive and pro-active. While “before,” the bridal body was predominantly veiled and moved like a statue with little agency of her own, it is now publicly displayed, rendering itself performatively available to the public. Then, the couple did not know and had not even seen each other before the ritual ceremony itself. Now, the couple has to stage its fascination of being in love with each other, and wanting to be intimate. Many of the bridal magazines I examined over the past few years deal with the question of how to be intimate, how to find the right words, the right gestures, the right tricks. And how to be all at once, including love, trust, honesty, respect, fidelity and patience. Only bridals of the 2000s consider the paradox situation of wanting, and even having to explore sex-life, make it erotic and romantic and yet be able to share a joint family household.

The wedding ritual, as a rite of familial separation and incorporation for the bride and a display of social relations and cultural desires, has been studied in anthropological terms as to how the rite consolidates traditions and trends of marriage and family in the transition from traditional society to modern consumer and “Erlebnis”-media society. We deal with the transformation of intimacy in modern times, with weddings as visual expressions of social status and cultural capital, as markers and display of visual competence (taste). Visual spectacle is a crucial means of display and analysis of bodies and rituals. In our case it relates to cultural imagination, fuelled by the media, and propelled by the desire for life betterment, individual choice and solitude.

Bodies of Lineage

There is a host of associations aligning women to marriage, and I will only briefly mention a few: usually, it must be underlined that marriage alliance is moderated by the concern with monitoring the “purity” of women, and to ensure that her entering into a new family is not threatening that family’s stability and purity. This is why belonging to the same caste and having the right horoscope matters vitally to conservative contexts. A couple of gendered concepts are cited from time and again, even in modern weddings, and often indirectly: goddess Sita and Mother India as representatives of the sacrificial, nourishing and devout wife and mother, then the figure of the courtesan from Mughal courts of North India, and more recently the beauty contestant Miss India or Miss World.

The incarnation of the dutiful, chaste and obedient woman reappears in the modern bride: Sita is still often referred to in lifestyle magazines, etc. Proto-typical models for the ideal Indian bride/wife are pan-Indian “classics” such as the Ramayana or the Mahabharata, depicting romantic celebration of conjugal love and self-sacrificing wifely devotion—themes which had an enormous “Orientalist” appeal for Europeans as well, in particular the scene where Sita undergoes the

divine ordeal by fire to prove her purity and devotion to husband Rama. The role of the mother, and obviously, motherhood, are key concepts of the married woman, and pressure on young women is still high to produce a child, preferably a son. However, with urbanisation and modernisation of middle class environs, this concept of being a mother only is increasingly challenged, or, at least paired with the ambitious workingwoman who is both mother and businesswoman. The idea of the duty to reproduce is also nourished by the independent nation-state, however, under the banner of population control and family planning (resulting in mass sterilisation campaigns in the 1970s). With economic liberalisation, as Mazzarella maintains, pleasure as progress shifts the attention from restriction to celebration. The female body becomes the centre of attention for a revitalised desire for sensual events and selves. These new sensualities also mirror in the bridal body as it goes on a honeymoon of intimacy, as it is fetishised, and as modern selves evolve increasingly around caring for and experiencing oneself corporately, for instance, by means of travel and tourism, or Asian spas. Several surveys have found that despite womens' growing articulation and awareness of their own sexual desires, urban educated Indians are still a far cry from what is considered as equality and emancipation in the West (being aware that these concepts are often as unreal for "westerners").⁶

Fetishised Feet: The Groom's Pleasure

A large part of the bridal media universe is occupied by film/video. From this, we can understand some of the regimes that monitor the contemporary bridal body. Commercial cinema of the 1960s and 70s marked the wedding choreography of the years to follow. Films like "An Evening in Paris" (1967, dir. S. Samatha) depict love and romance of honeymooning couples in Europe, away from home, then the ultimate and possibly only site of modern romance and love, where the couple could dwell in solitude and intimacy. But besides opening up an imaginary space for romantic love, the bridal body has its own choreography and iconography in film. Filmic language and actual wedding performance reinforce each other. Every wedding must be documented by a photowallah and a videowallah (at least), that is, professional camerapeople. Their craft is imbued by visual, ritual and normative traditions elaborated in popular film and studio photography since the beginning of the technologies. In wedding videos, eyes, hands and feet of the bride (the groom hardly features) play a vital role in the fetishisation of the female body. The camera flirts with the eyes of the bride, loading the scene with seductive meaning (see SENGUPTA 1999). This play with the eyes is a clear reference to the dance numbers in Hindi cinema where the courtesan's gaze towards the camera carried a great deal of erotic charge for the largely male audience. In this process, her body is marked as territory of the gaze, rendered available for the groom and the male public. The

⁶ Several surveys have been published in mainstream journals such as *The Week* or *India Today* between 2005-06.

(unmarried) courtesan is the only element through which open seduction of the bride can be alerted to. The underlining narrative of such elements is that the courtesan longs to marry but must not out of status reasons. Famous Hindi films have narrated dramas evolving around courtesans in the 1970s and it is interesting that these films have recently enjoyed immense popularity again, pinpointing a nostalgia for Mughal and colonial history, and dramatic romantic narratives. This revival has also impacted on the bridal fashion.⁷

Wedding videos both celebrate and examine the bridal body in lengthy sequences. First comes her dress, the jewellery and other ornaments. Then body parts are studied in close-ups, eyes (often veiled), hands and feet, in order to show the elaborate henna patterns that decorate them and mark her as bride. These close-ups, as SENGUPTA argues, are “bearers of highly charged erotic meaning. ... This convention derives from a literary, and largely poetic code of expressing erotic sentiment by referring to the ornaments that mark a woman as a bride—a legitimate object of sexual interest, if not an active sexual agent” (1999, p. 292). According to Uberoi, the visual celebration of the courtesan’s (and now the bridal’s) feet generates mystery and (male) desire. For Uberoi, the feet are corporeal signifiers, and coins this as “podo-semiology” and “podo-erotics.” This then is a culture-specific form of fetish-creation that renders her between the role of courtesan and bride, virgin and divine mother.

Interestingly, bridal magazines pick up on this idea of fetishised feet, translating it into spirituality and moral value of a (Hindu) Golden Age, underlining what I referred to above as intervisuality, or possibly intermediality of a particular signifier moving through various media domains, generating its own life. What western feminists would call suppression of the woman is now interpreted as respect and recognition of traditional essential givens. In an article entitled *Traits of an Ideal woman*, Yogi ASHWINJI (2007, p. 156f.) from the spiritualistic Dhyan foundation in North India tells us how to choose a perfect girl to marry by looking for significant attributes in her:

Contrary to the belief which is prevalent in today’s world that women were suppressed and ordered around, in the Vedic times, the fact was that they were most respected and considered to be *Devis* in whose hands the whole future generations were dependent. A wrong selection of a wife was considered as a reason for the destruction of the family (*kul*). ... The most important traits of a woman lie not in her face but in her feet. ... Feet which are not too big and not very small with neatly developed toes, where the big toe is the longest toe and the other toes are descending in order, the toes are well-shaped and ... there are no gap in the digits—such women bring intense happiness into the family which they go to and also they age very slowly. ... a woman whose second digit is longer than the toe thumb was considered to be dominating and authoritative. The soles of the feet should be slightly rosy in colour. ... Such women were said to bring financial gains wherever they go. ... a woman with strong well-formed nails was considered to have the capacity for bearing healthy children. ... If the thighs are very

7 The most famous film of this genre is *Pakeezah* (1972, dir. Kamal Amrohi).

thin and along with it if the complexion is slightly brownish i.e. towards the darker and not fair, the girl was considered to be very talkative and husbands of such women should be extra cautious about their health.

This way, what has been analysed as the production of male fetishes by Sengupta and Uberoi is further heightened as stigmatising stereotype by means of putting such a fetish into a structure of religious ideology, constituting the woman as product of external forces by claiming to empower her. A slim empowerment, however.

Bridal Pleasures?

Independent women are still considered threatening, both for the groom and his family. And often, this perception has been internalised by the women too. Weddings, as they are presented in bridal magazines, are a ritual where exactly these floating parameters are given attention but still marginalised (for the lifestyle magazines are inherently conservative in their moral values). There is an interesting emphasis on bride's sensuality and her sexual desires that mark the coming of the wedding in various articles in bridal magazines, most of all, with respect to the wedding night's promise of erotic pleasure (a rather western concept, shifting attention from reproduction to pleasure). Moreover, there are many articles too about possible hang-ups and crises after the wedding, where the wife's body is still locus of failure or success. An anonymous author suggests the following in the bridal magazine *Wedding Affair*:

Be subtle... be seductive... be wild too... It's important to make the chemistry ... And what is most important is to keep the pleasure going. Say cheers, expose, explore...and experiment... because this is what the trend is! (Get Rocking 2006, p. 168)

This quote alerts us to a range of topics that will be discussed in this paper. There is the emphasis on the bride's responsibility to be subtle, seductive, wild in order to ensure the relationship holds. And there is the notion of doing something because it is mainstream, "trend." Responsibility does not lie in reproduction any longer, or pleasing the in-laws—it seems. Instead, the relationship's "chemistry" and sustainability is what worries and matters.

Bridal magazines are not just about shopping, preparations and the celebration of the wedding day. They also introduce the urban bride and groom to tabooed themes such as lovemaking, impotency or jealousy. Some even advise the bride to get pre-marital sex counselling, others suggest "outdoor sex" and "sex in the shower," if the first attraction has paled (cf. Steam up your sex life (2008), pp. 158f.). In the chaos of wedding preparations and family negotiations, the individual desires and fears of the married couple are usually marginalised. And they have in fact not really mattered much until recently, unless with respect to childbirth. Intimacy, romance, pleasure and trust, are largely talked about since economic liberalisation. The issues are coined by conservative bridal and lifestyle magazines, sometimes with a surprising openness. Themes such as sexual desire, unwanted

pregnancy, impotency are addressed in lifestyle magazines such as *Women's Era*. Post-marital conflicts, too, are mentioned: arguments, nagging, familial tensions. Time and again the issue of “making love” instead of “having sex” is underlined as both a challenge and a huge pressure on the newly wed. And many unmarried people now seek their first sexual experiences through magazines or online forums instead of depending on their parents' choice. Online Dating is a popular way of getting in touch and having pre-marital experiences and exchanges with others. Lifestyle culture takes over from dry official state discourses, encouraging citizens to dream the dream of self-transformation. But rather than being liberating, new pressures are enforced on the couple's bodies. Thus, we can read the following statement by a skin expert in the popular bridal magazine *Celebrating Vivaha*: “Brides and grooms should ideally start their beauty and skincare regime about 45 to 60 days prior to the wedding, since there has to be a gap of seven to 10 days between sessions. We also give couples last-minute skincare tips and home remedies for any blemishes that may appear” (6(3) 2007, p. 27). Groom and bride must care for the fetishised parts of their body: “Hands and feet need attention. Moisture them at night and protect with gloves and socks” (ibid., p. 28). Moreover, arms, as the entry quote to this paper underlines, must not be flabby, and so forth. A regime of beauty and fitness is enforced upon bride and groom's bodies in order to appear as “lively” and “pleasurable.” Self-surveillance and self-discipline become key tasks in this context.



Fig. 4: Staged intimacy: Diwan Saheb advertisement preparing the wedding night as relaxed, friendly event (2005).

Pleasure is possibly a new means of liberation for some. In the context of the weddings, it means new forms of disciplining and enforcing social and moral universes upon the body. The bridal body, as we encounter it in bridal magazines that feature “Big Fat Indian Weddings,” is made up of different layers, historically and symbolically. In the wedding ritual, the bride does not only become a wife, but somehow the soundboard for different values and concepts that have shaped with economic liberalisation. Judith BUTLER has maintained that, “to be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ,woman,’ to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project” (2003, p. 394). Thus, when we look at the following advertisement (fig. 4), we can see the seeming lightness of intimacy as a new phenomenon of modern sexuality, we can see the ethnic body, the enjoying and beautiful body spread out in front of our eyes.



Fig. 5: Erotic underwear, preparing for the wedding night. Source: *Indiawali Brides* Oct-Nov 2006, p. 97

Conclusion

This paper examined different regimes of values and ideas of womanhood as they are played out against each other via the bridal body. The body is rendered vulnerable, dangerous and dynamic in the wedding as an act of transferring the bride as ritual gift, transcending borders of various kinds. In this course, different physical categories and concepts evolved with respect to pleasure and taste: the “themed” bridal body as “ethnic” and “cultured,” moving between icon and idol, ritual gift and fetish. The key domains in which the bridal body is traded in those magazines are pleasure, taste and distinction, predominantly with respect to “world class.” In transgressing and drawing borders between tradition and modernity, taste and vulgarity, global and local flows, the bridal body is an ideal means of analysis of rituals in the context of lifestyle politics in neoliberal India. Yet, what has also become evident is that beyond the liberating lifestyle spectacle of a wedding, surveillance and disciplining operate.

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