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Sikh Marriage Customs- the Adaptation from Traditional India to Modern Day Britain.

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Introduction

My father is a Sikh, whose parents are from the Punjab region of India. Several of his family were born in India and have lived there for a number of years, but many of these also emigrated to Britain. This must have been a very different experience for people used to one way of life and one cultural tradition. I began to wonder what sort of effect this move could have had on their traditions and festivals. My own family lives in Ireland and therefore, because of distance, I knew rather little about the Sikh religion and the customs. I wanted to know more and to do this it seemed a good idea to base my thesis on the subject.

The subject of marriage interested me as it is a different situation to what is known here in Ireland. I, myself, knew very little about the ceremony and what it means. Having attended one particular wedding I had seen what occurs but knew none of its meaning or whether it had always happened like this. So I made the decision to find out more.

Firstly I decided to start my search with available literature. My target list was compiled from university libraries, embassies and also important libraries. I began with the National College of Art and Design, Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin, the Ilac Library and the Indian Embassy. I contacted the High Commission of India, the British Library, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Indian Tourist Office, 'India Today' (magazine), the Sikh Cultural Society, the Sikh Missionary Society and Brunel University. My search proved to be quite difficult. Very little has been written about Sikh marriages and almost certainly no full book.

The Sikh Cultural Society has produced a list of publications,

describing and explaining many different events in Sikh history and religion. They are written by various people, qualified to speak on each subject. Three of these held matters of interest to my research, 'An Introduction to Sikh Belief', 'The Sikh Festivals' and 'The Sikh Marriage Ceremony', and proved to be of great use in explaining certain aspects of Sikh belief to me.

Chapter 1

The Sikh religion began with the birth of Guru Nanak Dev Jee in 1469.⁽¹⁾

He was the founder of the Sikh faith. He has come to be known by many names: Apostle of peace, unity and truth infinite, the First Guru of modern thinkers in India. These names in fact give an idea of the respect and honour Sikhs hold for the Guru (Baba). Born in Nankana Saheb, Pakistan on 20 October 1469 (Christian Timetable), Guru Nanak was married at the tender age of twelve, this being the usual occurrence in India. Very little is known about his bride. Her name was Sulakhni Jee and she was the daughter of Mula, a Chona of Batala. In different pieces of literature there are discrepancies regarding to Nanak's age of marriage and also his wife's name. Was he six or twelve years of age? Was his wife's name Sulakhni or Ghumi? Whichever the case, his marriage was arranged by his father, Kahi, on the advice of the locals. Nanak had been withdrawing from society, enduring long periods of silence. Therefore it was thought that marriage would be the best option for him.

Nanak saw that there were many things he thought wrong about the Hindu religion. He realised that a religion should be accessible to all, that it should have one basic message. The Hindus believed in many various Gods and had to offer up to and pray to each. This was a complicated system, possibly confusing many. Nanak was an ordinary man with a lot to say and decided to do so. He had no intention of starting a new religion, it just happened. He left his home and wife for some time to preach what he believed, taking with him two friends, a Hindu and a Muslim, for support. He wanted to teach the people that there was only one God and anyone else thereafter was only a prophet, like himself. "The belief was in the Oneness of God, the Creator, and the practise was in the constant remembrance of His Name, with the ultimate aim of achieving salvation."⁽²⁾ In existing religions

ceremonies took place, conjured up by various priests and astrologers, to enhance their pockets further. Nanak did not agree with this deception of the people, more specifically the poor. He therefore composed a hymn to sing to the growing number of people following him, called the 'Mool Mantra', to show them that they need not follow these ideas. The hymn conveys to us the idea that " Servility and blind faith are obnoxious. Obedience, on the other hand, is possible only when the qualities of the master are such that inspire in the disciple absolute trust and create perfect love and understanding between the disciple and his Guru." ⁽³⁾

Over a period of two hundred years the Sikhs were being persecuted, so some form of action was needed to prevent this onslaught. Two of the Gurus had been martyred (Guru Arjan Dev Jee and Guru Tegh Bahadur Jee) for their faith. The Sikh men were to become warriors, the best in India, to protect the Sikhs. They were to be identified by what is known as the Khalsa Brotherhood. Guru Gobind Singh founded the brotherhood on 30 March 1699 (Christian Timetable). He called all devoted followers that would be prepared to die for Sikhism. After two hundred years the Sikhs had decided it was proper to defend their freedom with the sword. This meant a Sikh brotherhood of soldiers with ultimate peace in mind. They were double-edged men (like the Khanda, a two-edged sword), men of God and soldiers, fighters in the search of truth.

The Sikhs had a special initiation ceremony, for the Khalsa Brotherhood, called the Amrit. Five symbols were employed: kesas (prohibition of cutting any bodily hair), kara (a steel bracelet, worn on the right wrist as a symbol of unity), kirpan (a cutting sword, weapon of a soldier, usually drawn in a pair), kangha (comb) and kacha (trouser or undergarment). The true soldier must have each symbol about his possession. He cannot eat meat or anything that has touched meat. Neither is

he allowed to take any kind of harmful drug, alcohol or cigarettes. Sikh means disciple, one who is against war or violence, especially between Hindu and Moslem. Also during the time of Guru Gobind Singh (1675 to 1708), the guru decided to abolish the caste system, which had always been practice of the Hindus. He did this by giving all Sikh men the name 'Singh' and all Sikh women the name 'Kaur'. These, respectively, mean 'lion' and 'lioness', showing the strength of the Sikh people and also giving them strength, psychologically. " In making all Sikhs 'Singhs' he made them into one casteless fraternity. The choice of 'Singh' and 'Kaur' taken as they were from a fighting people had obvious psychological value." ⁽⁴⁾ It had always been easy, in India, to tell a person's caste by his/her name. This prevented different castes intermarrying, one from a lower caste marrying one from a higher caste. Guru Gobind Singh believed that all people were equal and therefore should be allowed to marry whomever they chose, once they were of the Sikh religion.

Sikhs are a religious minority in India, 7 to 10 million of them living in the Punjab. Therefore they make up approximately one- fiftieth of the population of India. One of the reasons that it is so small in population is that it is one of the newest religions in the world, five hundred and twenty- nine years old. India had been colonised by the British, who had been there since the eighteenth century, and remained under its rule until 1947, when it gained its independence. Because of the colonisation there has always been a close connection with Britain and its influence has been strong on India's culture. Also in more recent years many Indians, including Sikhs, have moved to Britain to make a new life. These moves have occurred for the same reasons that many other people leave their native country, for economic reasons and to avoid persecution. Approximately 1 million Asians and West Indians now live

in Britain. Most maintain their beliefs, both cultural and religious. Their traditions and customs continue to live on even if they have changed somewhat. Most continue to speak their native language, along with English and quite often another language taught at school. Often education and schooling plays a large role in the decision to move, as education is cheaper and generally better in a Western country such as Britain.

Marriage, as a social institution, is based culturally upon many different religious principles and also on varied social and moral values. These values differ between societies and communities. In the Sikh community there is a strong emphasis on marriage. The life of marriage is proposed to be the path to God. Along this path the partners are expected to support and guide each other to reach the end of the path. It is seen as a parental duty to find a suitable marital match for a child. The parent must contribute to and arrange the situation.

Child marriage is an age-old custom and often it was seen as a grave sin for a father not to have married his daughter by the age of puberty and “such children are initiated very early. Infant brides are pushed through the ceremony in veriest babyhood.”⁽⁵⁾ This was seen as the normal and usual way of doing things and anything else was deliberate neglect. In child marriages the couple did not actually live together until they reach the age of puberty. Then the young bride went to live with her husband’s family and began her new life. The marriage however was generally arranged when the both were babies and hence neither had a choice in the arrangement. At such a young age, one would not necessarily have understood the concept of marriage and therefore not realised exactly what was occurring. It would probably have seemed like a huge festival or party that centred specifically on him or her. One would also have seen the same ritual happening to other children and

therefore would not think it out of the ordinary. During British Rule in India, the British tried to influence the natives against child marriages. Some of their influence was to good effect and began to slowly lessen the practise. Nowadays the custom is considered illegal but is still practised some parts of India, especially in some small villages but rather rarely by Sikhs as it is forbidden.

‘The Prem Sumarag (Sikh Code of Conduct)’

This is a book exists on the Sikh code of conduct, named the *Prem Sumarag*. It has the following rules which Sikhs are required, by their religion, to obey. These give a guideline as to how a Sikh marriage should be approached.

- Upon reaching ‘maturity’ a girl’s parents must seek a marital partner for her, as it not suitable for her to marry at too young an age.
- It is ideal that she be married into a Sikh home. The prospective husband should believe wholly in Sikhism, have humility, honesty and a hard-working nature. Wealth or material goods should not enter the equation. What matters is that he is a God-fearing man.
- The parents must have the girl’s best interests and happiness at heart. The whole occasion and ceremony should be in accordance with their means and not overtly extravagant if their status cannot afford it.

The conductor of the ceremony should be willing to work without a reward or payment .

Sikh parents see that they have a large responsibility towards their children, as do many other parents. Even after the children are married everything they do is for the love and good of their children, as the family is an extremely important unit in the Sikh community. This is an ideal proposed by the Gurus to

establish a close-knit and caring community. In many cases it has come to be fact. When people follow a religious code quite strictly, the practice often turns into tradition. Miln recorded about the Sikh community that “ ... all their sentiments and religious thought turned towards the Golden Temple at Amritsar, held close together in the firm leash of a common, rigorous, and admirable military discipline, it is not surprising that they have come to have the strongest family resemblance,”⁽⁶⁾

For the Sikh, marriage is not merely a civil or social contract. The Gurus make this quite evident. It is a way of fusing two souls into one. Ideally they are then spiritually inseparable. For the Gurus to say this without appearing hypocritical was not too difficult as all but Guru Har Kishan Jee (the child Guru 1656 to 1664) was married. They were able to prove the respect they held for the state of marriage through their actions.

As women are seen to be equal in the Sikh religion, it is also thought that they should have sound knowledge of the religion. This equality between the sexes is mainly due to the third Guru, Amar Das Jee (1479 to 1539). Patwant Singh states that “ Equality between men and women in the Sikh culture owes a great deal to his foresight.”⁽⁷⁾ This is especially true with reference to his handling of women's matters. During the time of Guru Amar Das, he forbade ‘Sati’ in his teachings. Sati was when widows threw themselves on their husband's funeral pyres because their husband was their whole existence. They had been taught that without their husband they were meaningless and worthless and that their lives belonged to their husband. So when the husband died, they too had to give up their life. Guru Amar Das realised that somebody of respect, somebody of God, would be the only person to convince the ordinary citizen that this need not be the case. These women were not worthless and did have a lot to offer in their own right. He decided to allow widows to remarry-

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it seemed a fair decision. Women no longer had to keep their faces veiled as was previously the custom. Another decision was to reverse the practice of excluding women from acting as religious preachers.

It is believed by many that Sikhs should only marry another Sikh. In fact this was suggested in the book on the Sikh code of conduct, the Prem Sumarag. It is true in India and even today in Britain, though not in all cases. This does not mean however that one must be an Indian Sikh or someone of the same caste, but can be of any colour, caste or race. But in order to be a Sikh, a partner must have the same understanding. When both partners have the same ideas in their religious way of thinking, as is the case also with political ideas, the marital path is often smoother. Therefore the couple should be better equipped to strive for the same aims in life. They would be able to achieve harmony in the way they think. The marriage is a bond, both on a spiritual and physical level. The Lavan is a marriage hymn, sung through the ceremony, describing the procession of love between the couple. The fourth Guru, Ram Das Jee, son-in-law of Guru Amar Das Jee composed it. The four verses sing of the four stages of love.

- Marriage is proposed to be the best state of life for a Sikh.
- A bride leaves her old life for a new one with her husband. This shows the first sign of love between them.
- The third verse shows the devotion a bride has for her husband, that he is now the only influence in her life.
- The couple has a perfect life and love for each other. Their devotion becomes evident when they can never feel apart and are always at one with each other. On a spiritual level one's soul has reached a oneness with God and is completely joyful to

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have done so.

When entering the state of marriage one must strive to follow these rules and ideals. A husband will earn the respect of his wife as he recognises her as an individual and equal partner. He must always support, guide and show her consideration and love. She in turn must remain loyal to and support him and share everything he goes through. The partnership works both ways. With regards to their marriage vows, they are "kept with a fidelity that shames us of Europe."⁽⁸⁾ Each time each makes a decision it must harmonise with what the other wants, materially, intellectually and emotionally. A spiritual love must exist or there is no real marriage. Marriage is the fulfilment of a Sikh's life and especially if blessed with children. When a couple have a child they must provide for and educate the child in whatever way they can. On saying that married life is the very best state a Sikh can be in for spiritual reasons, it is also believed that men are generally healthier when married and also appear to commit less crime. Therefore a healthy, loving marriage is seen as the ultimate happiness.

Guru Amar Das, the third Guru (1479 to 1574), wrote of his thoughts on marriage. He had some very strong opinions, among them some rather traditional or old-fashioned views. However in the time that he wrote them, some were probably quite radical. Of his more old-fashioned views, as we would now see them, is his advice on marriage.

- The bride must be a virgin.
- She must come from a respectable family
- She is to be humble, true and always do as he wishes.
- If there is only a physical union and no spiritual union, the marriage is as good as dead. The true marriage is only arrived at when a couple is one spirit divided

into two bodies.

- Material goods do not play a part in the union. They do not matter in the slightest.

- Each partner must fill the other with joy.

- The bride should be humble and devoted to her partner.

- Neither can ever betray the union by an affair with another. That would be

“ ‘Like the touch of a poisonous snake’ ”.⁽⁹⁾

Within all Amar Das' talk of humility, he says “ ‘Adopt these habits, dear sister, Then you will have him in your power.’ ”⁽¹⁰⁾ This seems to suggest that a man is not necessarily the dominant partner after all, but that possibly the woman holds the power.

There are never just two people getting married. Their families are also forming a partnership or alliance. Within the Sikh community this is a very large and deliberate relationship. “Individuals may live together, but families marry, although the definition of family varies from wedding to wedding... And one may marry not only another person, and another family, but also another culture as well.”⁽¹¹⁾

In Sikh tradition a marriage does not only concern the two people involved but also their immediate families. A match has to be decided upon carefully and the families cannot be related. In India many of the families in villages are related, so marriages must take place with someone from another village. The families must have similar backgrounds and interests. This generally helps in achieving a successful marriage, especially when both families get along.

Chapter 2

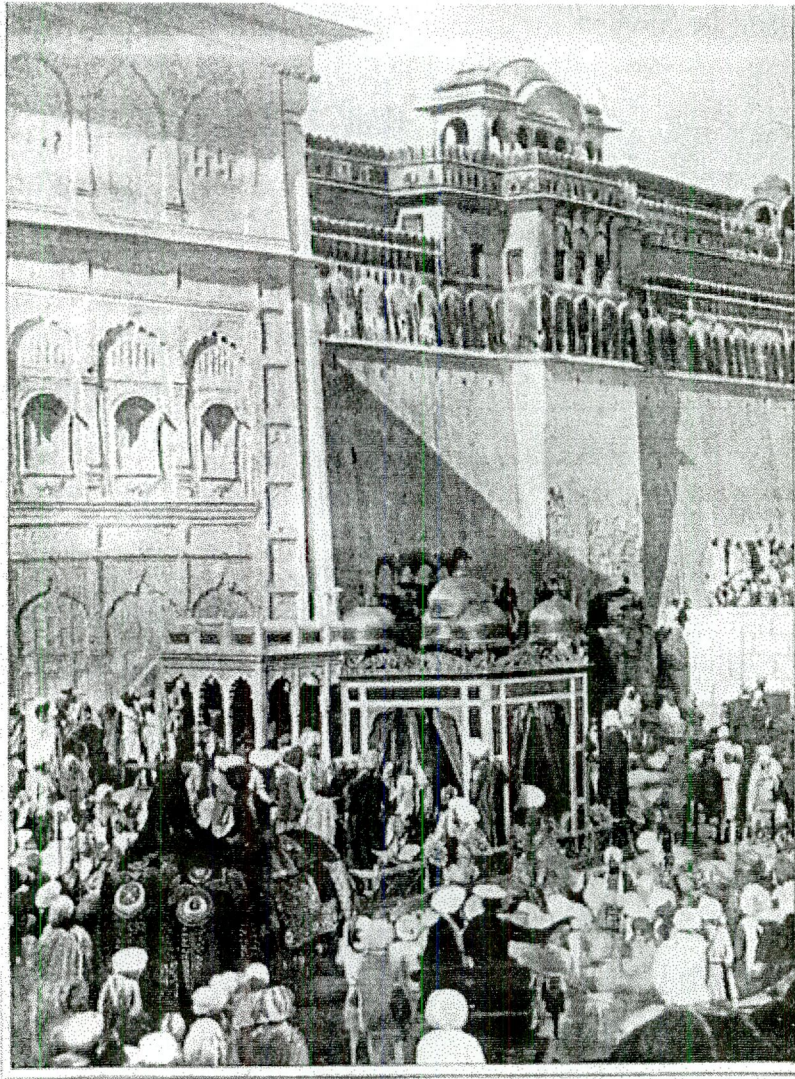
To find a match for a child, the girl's parents generally met the boy beforehand and also the boy's parents met the girl, rather than the actual couple meeting. These matches were, and sometimes still are, arranged through word of mouth. Usually the parents of either a girl or boy would make it known that they were looking for a prospective partner for their child. Upon hearing this fact, through friends or relatives, another set of parents might decide that it would be a suitable time for their child to marry also. If they liked the sound of the other family, they might decide to research the situation further. If everything seemed to suit, the next step was to contact the other family. The parents then discussed an arrangement, after deciding whether this was a suitable match. This was decided by meeting the respective children and finding out whether the families had a similar background. Traditionally a match was made without the couple ever having seen each other. The nuptials took place based on the parents' choice and agreement. Rarely did the bride and groom see each other, even just before the wedding ceremony. Sometimes the couple saw a portrait or, in later years, a photograph of each other. If a father was unable to meet his child's prospective match, a brother or elder son was sent instead. In earlier times the son or daughter was not given a choice as to whom one would marry. It was a decision made by the parents and by them alone. Nowadays this still occurs, but generally only in Indian villages as yet untouched by Western ideas and culture. As society has changed this process of arrangement has relaxed. In India, with the influence of a modern society, marriages are still arranged but an agreement is also procured from the couple through a meeting. Depending on the family the son or daughter can refuse a match and wait upon another prospect. In Britain this is also the

case, but another practice has begun to appear. A son or daughter is allowed to choose or find his or her own partner. Providing this is then agreeable to both sets of parents, they then settle a match. Therefore both parties have agreed, the parents feel they have done their duty and everyone is satisfied. "In better placed and educated families, Western influence has had a large impact. Young people are allowed to choose their own partners, but it is still deemed necessary to obtain the consent of the parents." ⁽¹⁾ The age of marriage has also risen, as with nearly all other cultures. No longer do people marry as they reach 'maturity', but only as they decide that it is materially feasible for them to support each other and prospective children. Nowadays the actual marriage seen is as a confirmation of the partners' commitment to each other.

The world over marriage is still being celebrated in a variety of styles and fashions. Within Sikhism the celebration has continued, but some aspects of it have changed. The Sikh marriage was legalised in India in 1909. In small Indian villages, the tradition of announcing an impending marriage by circling the village on horseback has in some cases also changed- a bicycle is used if a horse is unavailable.

The whole marriage ceremony is called Anand Karaj. It means the 'ceremony of bliss'. In 1552 Amar Das Jee took over the role as Guru from Guru Angad Dev Jee. He brought into being the ceremony of Anand Karaj. The wedding day celebration, marking the beginning of a life together, takes on huge and momentous significance. The occasion was always one of great festivities and celebration. It consisted of many days and many nights, and hence, many hours of ceremony. Usually a couple of days before the arrival of the groom's party (Baat) [fig. 1], the bride's relatives begin to gather. The bridegroom, his family and friends travel to the bride's town or village in a huge procession, the groom travelling on

[fig.1]



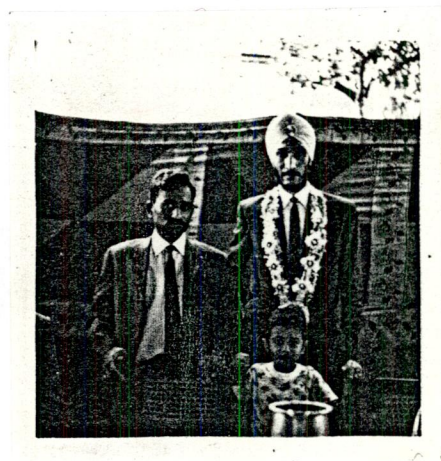
A traditional Barat (groom's wedding party) in India.

horseback. This procession begins soon after the necessary prayers are said. As it is probably the most important event in the groom's life, all this paraphernalia seems quite appropriate. The Braat (the groom's party) reaches the bride's home by evening, are welcomed and catered for [fig.2]. They are received with 'Milni' (tea and refreshment). Then the groom is taken inside, teased and joked with by the bride's sisters and friends. They make merry for that evening and then retire to await next morning's celebrations- the marriage.

The ceremony takes place before sunset. Guru Nanak Dev Jee (1469 to 1539) composed a prayer to be sung on the wedding morn, known as '*Asa Di Var*'. This is sung by the 'Rajis' (the professional musicians and singers) and all parties gather in front of the Guru Granth Sahib (the Holy book), which is laid in a place of honour, either in the bride's house or the Gurdwara (temple) [fig.3]. A Gurdwara is the temple where prayers and all religious ceremonies can take place. The actual word means 'doorway to God'. It is not deemed necessary to hold the ceremony in the Gurdwara, but some place where the Guru Granth Sahib (the Holy book) is present. Often weddings were held outside to accommodate the large numbers attending them. Nowadays in Britain the weddings are usually held in the Gurdwaras, as private homes or outdoors are not very practical. The Holy book is usually now covered with synthetic brocade velvet. It was, and still is, placed on a type of velvet or silk-cushioned altar, at sitting height from the ground, which had a fabric canopy shading it.

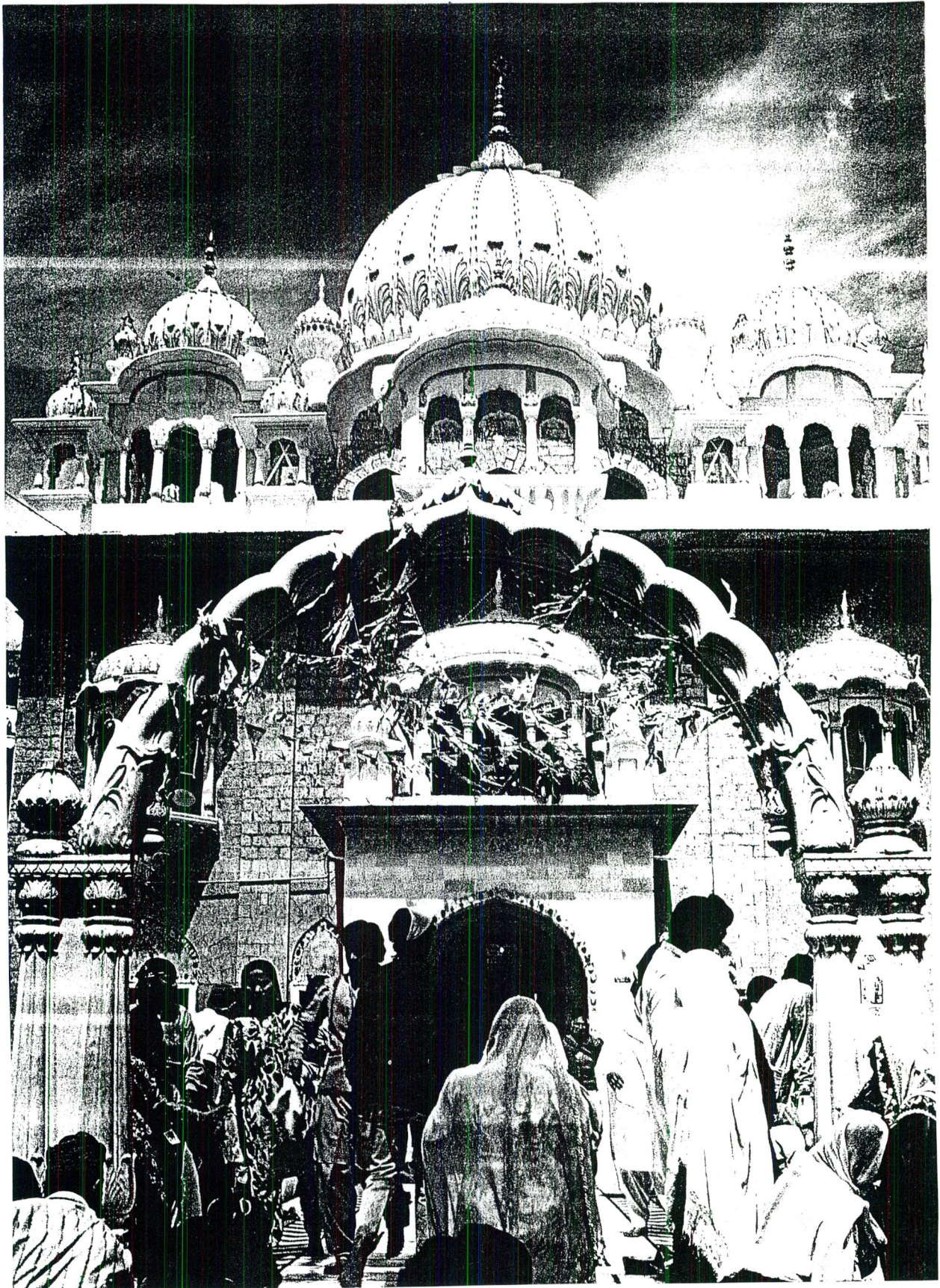
When '*Asa Di Var*' has been sung, the groom sits before the Guru Granth Sahib and is soon joined on his left by the bride [fig.4-6]. As the Sikhs hold men and women as equals, they do not differentiate when it comes to the question of

[fig.2]



The groom is decorated with fresh flower garlands prior to the 'Ceremony of Bliss' (Anand Karaj or marriage ceremony).

[fig.3]





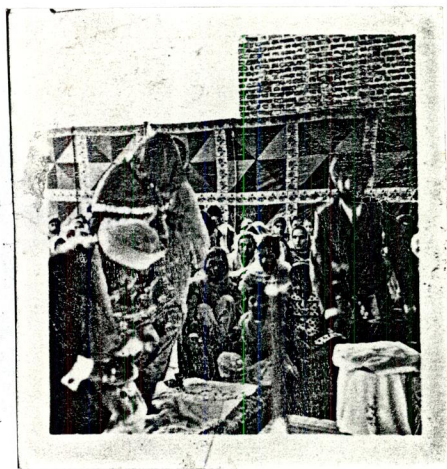
[fig.4]



The groom holds the Palla (scarf), filled with sweets and coconut.



[fig.6]



The bride, accompanied by a female relative, joins the groom.

priests. The person conducting the ceremony can be either male or female, as long as he or she is a good Sikh. For the most part though, ceremonies seem to have been conducted by male granthis (priests), possibly because many women are not interested in assuming this role. The granthi (priest) makes certain that both partners are Sikh and are also agreeable to being married to each other. The bride and groom then stand, as do their parents, and the granthi prays to God, asking for His blessing for the couple. They are then seated and a short hymn is sung.

“ ‘Before undertaking any thing,
Seek the Grace of God,
By the grace of the True Guru,
Who in the company of saints
Expounds the truth,
Success is attained.
It is with the True Guru
That we taste the ambrosia.
O Thou destroyer of fear,
And embodiment of mercy,
Bestow Thy grace on Thy servant,
Nanak says, by praising God,
We apprehend the infinite.’ ” (2)

The couple are then addressed and the meaning of Sikh marriage is explained to them. It takes the form of going through the principles of Sikh marriage, carefully, so that the whole meaning and guideline can be understood. Then the granthi tells both bride and groom that each has made a sacrifice to become part of this marriage. He asks them to believe that the other person is the other half of his or her body.

‘Ardhanghani’ means half of the body and this is also another name for a wife. As this is completed the granthi asks the couple to show their agreement and acknowledgement of these principles. To do so, they then bow in front of the Guru Granth Sahib (the Holy book). The bride’s father then places a garland of flowers on the Guru Granth Sahib and also around the necks of the bride and groom. Today in Britain these flowers would not necessarily be fresh, but may be silk. He takes one

end of the saffron coloured scarf (palla) about the groom's neck and hands it over to the awaiting bride. She holds this continuously for the remainder of the ceremony [fig.7]. In a way this is the Sikh form of giving his daughter away, to another man's son. They are now joined in matrimony and can take a sacred marital vow. Once again the Rajis (musicians) sing a short hymn of praise.

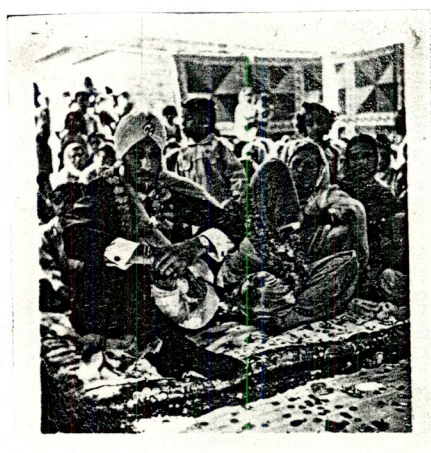
“ ‘Praise and blame I both forsake,
I seize the edge of your garment.
All else I let pass.
All relationships I found false.
I cling to Thee, my Lord.’ ”⁽³⁾

After this hymn the Guru Granth Sahib is opened to allow the reading of the Lavan from it. The Lavan is the most important marital hymn in the ceremony. It blesses and guides the couple for their life together. At this point it is customary for the bride's brothers or male cousins (these are also deemed to be her brothers) to encircle the Guru Granth Sahib (the Holy Book). The first verse is read and then sung by the Rajis. The Lavan is sung to a set metre, during which the married couple slowly circle the Guru Granth Sahib in a clockwise direction. The groom leads the bride, while she still holds the end of the scarf/palla. While circling the Holy Book each of the bride's brothers or male cousins help to pass her along, almost like a type of blessing.

“ ‘In the first round, the Lord ordains for you a secular life.
Accept the Guru's word as your scripture
And it will free you from sin.
Let your law of life be to meditate on the Name of God
Which is the theme of all scriptures.
Contemplate the true Guru, the perfect Guru
And all your sins shall depart.
Fortunate are those who hold God in their hearts;
They are ever serene and happy.
The slave Nanak declares that in the first round,
The marriage rite has begun.’ ”⁽⁴⁾

The couple complete the circle and sit once more. The second verse is then read and once more the bride and groom begin to walk as the verse is sung. This format

[fig.7]



The Palla (scarf) is held, throughout the ceremony, by the bride.

is repeated for the third and fourth verses. During the fourth verse however, flower petals are thrown to show the general happiness felt and as a wish of congratulations.

“ ‘In the second round, the Lord has caused you to meet the true
Guru
The fear in your hearts has departed
And the filth of egoism has been washed away.
Imbued with the fear of God and by singing His praises,
You behold His very presence.
The Lord God is the Soul of the Universe
And His presence pervades every place.
Within and without is the One God
And in the company of the saints the songs of joy are sung.
The slave Nanak proclaims that in the second round,
The divine strains of ecstasy are heard.

In the third round, love for the Lord stirs in the heart
And the mind becomes detached from worldly things.
Through the company of the saints and by the great good fortune,
I have met the Lord.
I have found the Immaculate Lord by singing His praises
And uttering His hymns.
Good fortune has brought me into the company of saints
Where tales of the Ineffable are told.
My heart is now absorbed in the Name of God
In accordance with the destiny written for me.
The slave Nanak declares that in the third round,
Divine love and detachment are born in the heart.

In the fourth round, divine knowledge awakes in the mind
And union with God is complete.
Through the Guru's instruction the union is made easy.
And the sweetness of the Beloved pervades my body and soul.
Dear and pleasing is the Lord to me
And I remain ever absorbed in Him.
By singing the Lord's praises
I have attained my heart's desire.
God has completed this marriage
And the bride's heart rejoices in His Name.
The slave Nanak proclaims that in the fourth round,
You have obtained God as the Everlasting Bridegroom.’ ” (5)

The ceremony is almost over. Six stanzas of the Anand (composed by Guru Amar Das Jee) are sung. Following that is the recital of the Sikh prayer or the ‘Ardas’, in which

everyone joins. Then a random verse is read from the Guru Granth Sahib. Finally, 'Karah Parshad' or the sacred food is served to the congregation, on the hand. This is to be eaten with the fingers. The ceremony is over [fig.8]. The reception follows.

After the ceremony the bride leaves her old life and doli (own home and family) behind and goes home to the groom's family house[fig.9]. The Sanskrit word, Barat, applies

to the procession of taking the bride home. In India the couple generally then lived with the groom's family until they could afford to buy their own house.

The cost of marriage is usually very expensive and has probably become more expensive over the years. In Britain this is not as much of a problem as the standard of living is also higher. However all the trimmings, food, clothing and jewellery still add up to an enormous amount of money. Generally the cost of the ceremony is worked out in proportion to a family's means and has been done so for years. Very often the less wealthy, try to emanate the pomp and splendour of a wealthier family's wedding and many will spend up to six or seven years saving for it. This is especially true for the lower classes, even today in India. Marriages are never a casual affair. Whatever the bride or groom wears, something is said about his or her personality. An image is projected of the kind of person he or she is. One's clothes tell a great deal about a person, his or her status and wealth. The Sikh community is no different to any other community. All clothing carries a language of its own and portrays something different. " Dress distinguishes a person's status and position in society."⁽⁶⁾

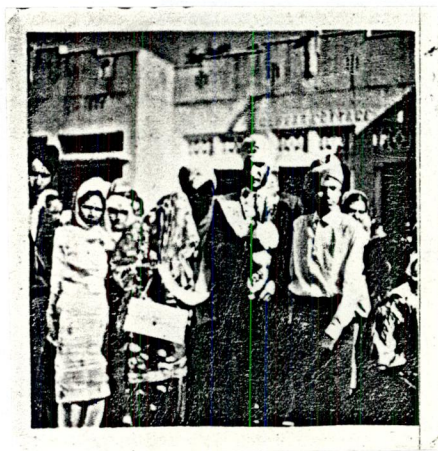
Nowadays for the groom, the marriage is less based around costume and has been for some years. He wears a completely Westernised, tailored suit in sombre dark colours [fig.10]. If he were to wear traditional dress, he would wear a

[fig.8]



Conclusion of the Marriage (Anand Karaj).

[fig.9]



The bride leaves after the ceremony and reception, with the groom and his family (Barat).

[fig.10]



Notice the bride wears full, ornate traditional Indian dress, while the groom wears a Western suit with a Patiala or Tipu Sultan style turban.



For the purpose of this study, the data was collected from the following sources:

pyjama-style outfit, loose trousers and a long tunic in light colours. A more updated version would be a suit, but with narrow trouser legs and a mandarin collar. The fabric would always be light, both in weight and colour, to contend with the high temperatures in India. Nowadays the turban is the only traditional element to his apparel. There are a number of different styles of wearing the turban.

- Patiala style: this is very popular, especially in Britain. The two sides of the turban meet in a sharp angle on the forehead.
- Tipu Sultan style: this meets in the same sharp angle, but is flat on the top and broader. This turban is worn over an under-turban or wide ribbon of different colour.
- Namdhari style: this turban is pure white and wrapped flat across the head.
- Some people, mainly peasants in India, wrap the turban fabric about the head in no particular style or fashion.

At the wedding the groom wears a red or pink turban. This colour appears many times throughout the ceremony. However there is no significance or meaning the use of red. Even so, it is a colour associated with marriage as white is with mourning and yellow with particular festivals.

The bride also wears red or a tone of that colour, pink or orange. Her garments consist of a Salwar Kameez, a long, usually tight-fitting tunic over loose trousers, gathered at the ankle, or a skirt. The bride was always closely veiled, as often her groom would only have seen a picture and she wished to protect her modesty and project an image of humility. [fig.11] This is a traditional idea, as nowadays a bride would be less conscious of projecting an image of humility. It is not such an issue, as society, especially Western society, has become more relaxed

[fig.11]



Notice how carefully the bride's head is covered, for reasons of modesty.

about viewing the body. Nowadays the bride is not veiled so heavily as before. However, in saying so, the Sikh bride is still very much covered, in comparison to brides of other religions. The implication of modesty is still there but is not needed to be so strenuously emphasised. Most of this particular tradition has survived. Biswas states that "Aesthetically dress serves two purposes. It helps to accentuate the beauty of the human form towards perfection by suitable emphasis. It also contrives to conceal what is not shapely or beautiful by intelligently designing artificial folds, lines and curves on the clothes." ⁽⁷⁾

Traditionally when a marital match was announced, the bride-to-be, her friends and relatives joined force to make a trousseau [fig. 12] and wedding outfit [fig. 13-15]. Before beginning the embroidery, prayers were recited to bless the endeavour. Cloths, known as 'phulkaris' and 'baghs' were embroidered, using 'flowering work'. Phulkaris were only embroidered in places, leaving the woven fabric visible to the eye [fig. 16]. However baghs were more elaborate and worked into. The background cloth was not visible and the result was a much heavier and richer fabric. For the actual marriage 'chopes' or veils for the bride were embroidered. The fabric was only decorated only in the centre and the four corners, with motifs of peacocks, parrots, wheatgrains, barley, Gurdwara doors, coins and jewellery. This embroidery is extremely labour intensive and is now associated with a forgotten way of life. Nowadays this would be too impractical for a working girl. She would generally buy her outfit, possibly importing it from India, or if she could afford it, go to India to buy the outfits. Women find the work too time-consuming and have little use for the fabrics, as they are too heavy to wear draped over the head. The Handicrafts Board of India and Pakistan has tried to revive the craft, but has only been partially successful in its efforts. The embroidery was a folk art but yet extremely

[fig.12]



A newly-wed bride wears new jewellery and Sari or Salwar Kameez, from her trousseau, after her marriage, as she has entered a new life.

[fig.13]



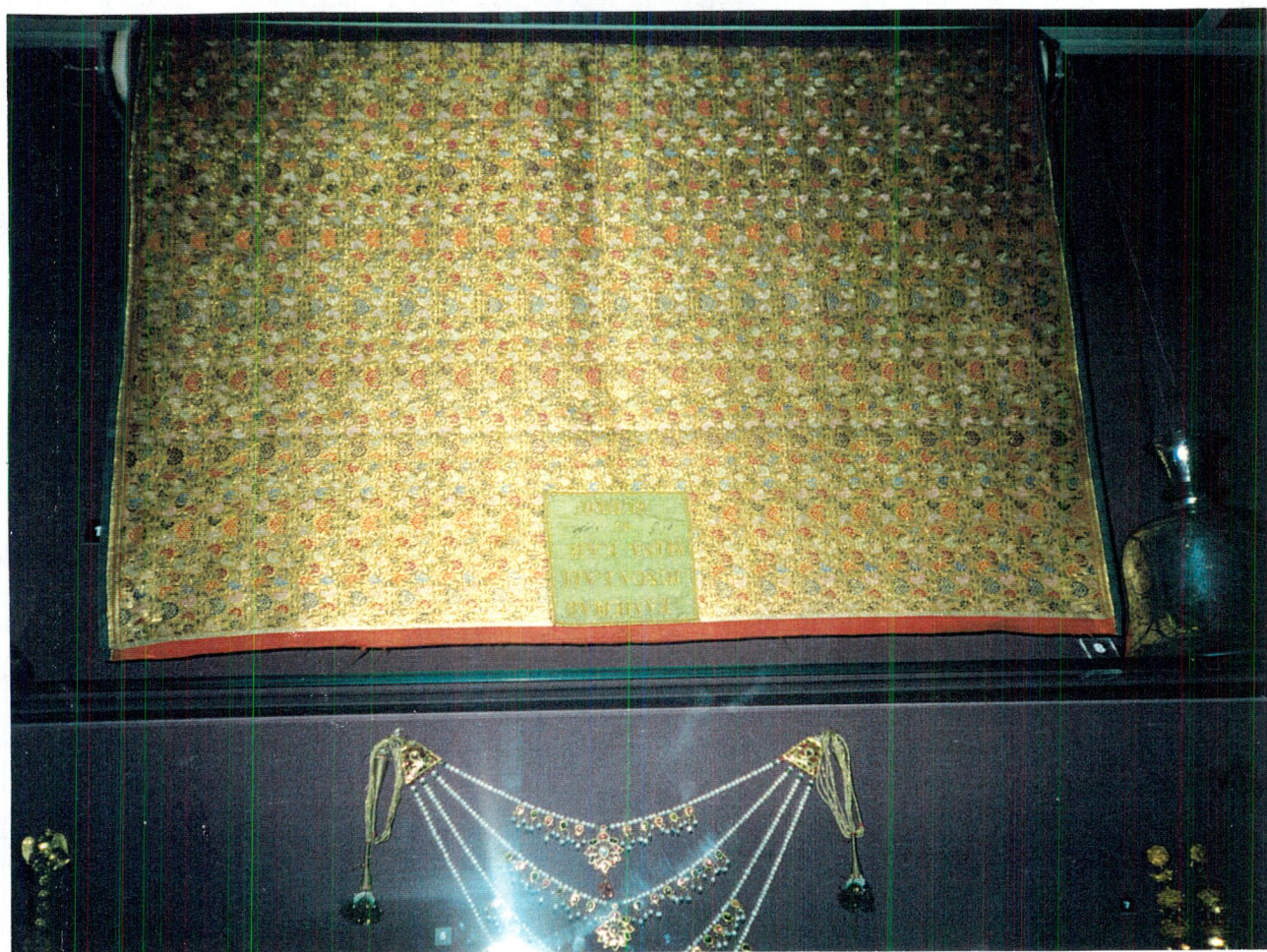
Hand-embroidered fabric, possibly part of a trousseau.

[fig.14]



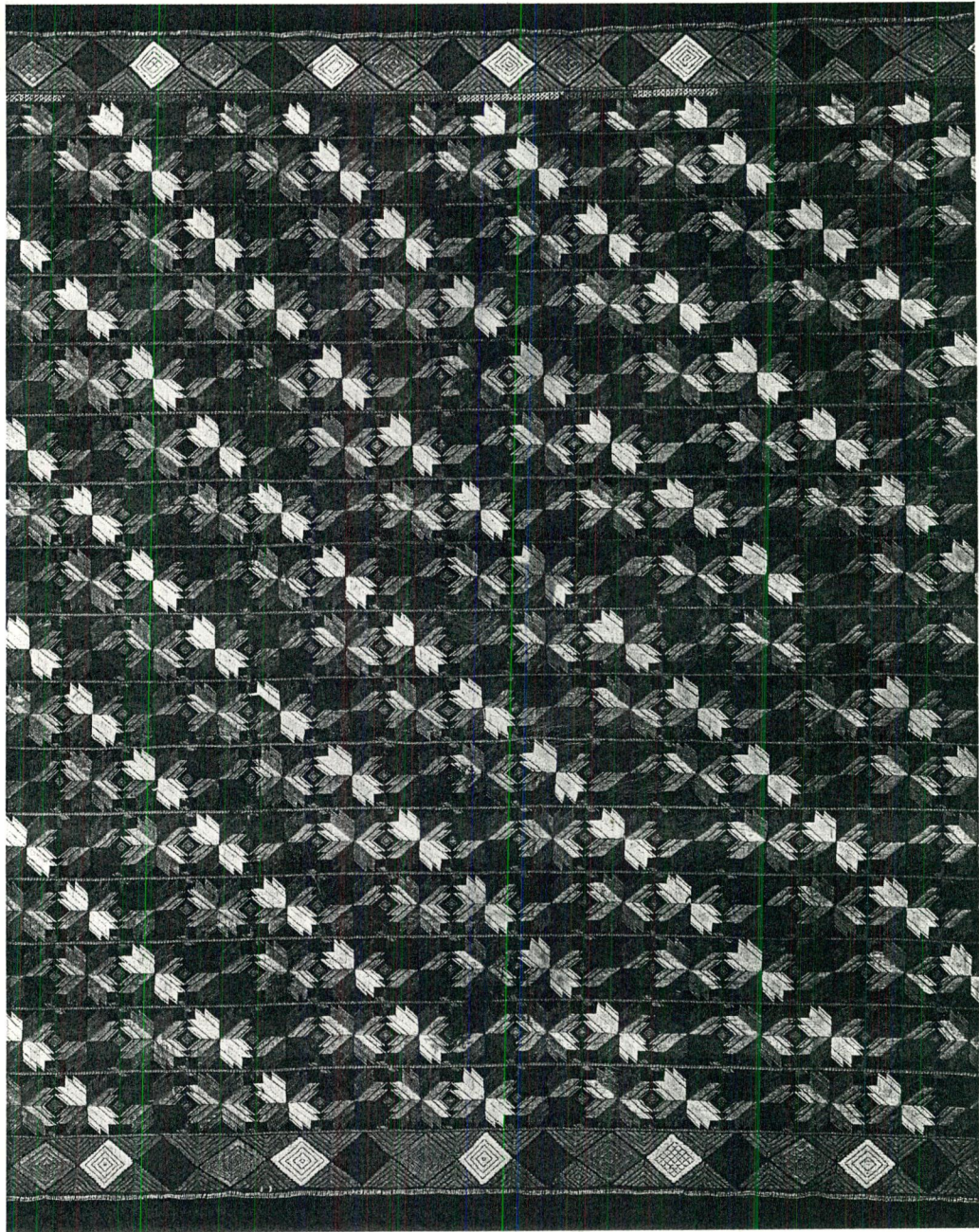
Hand-embroidered fabric.

[fig.15]

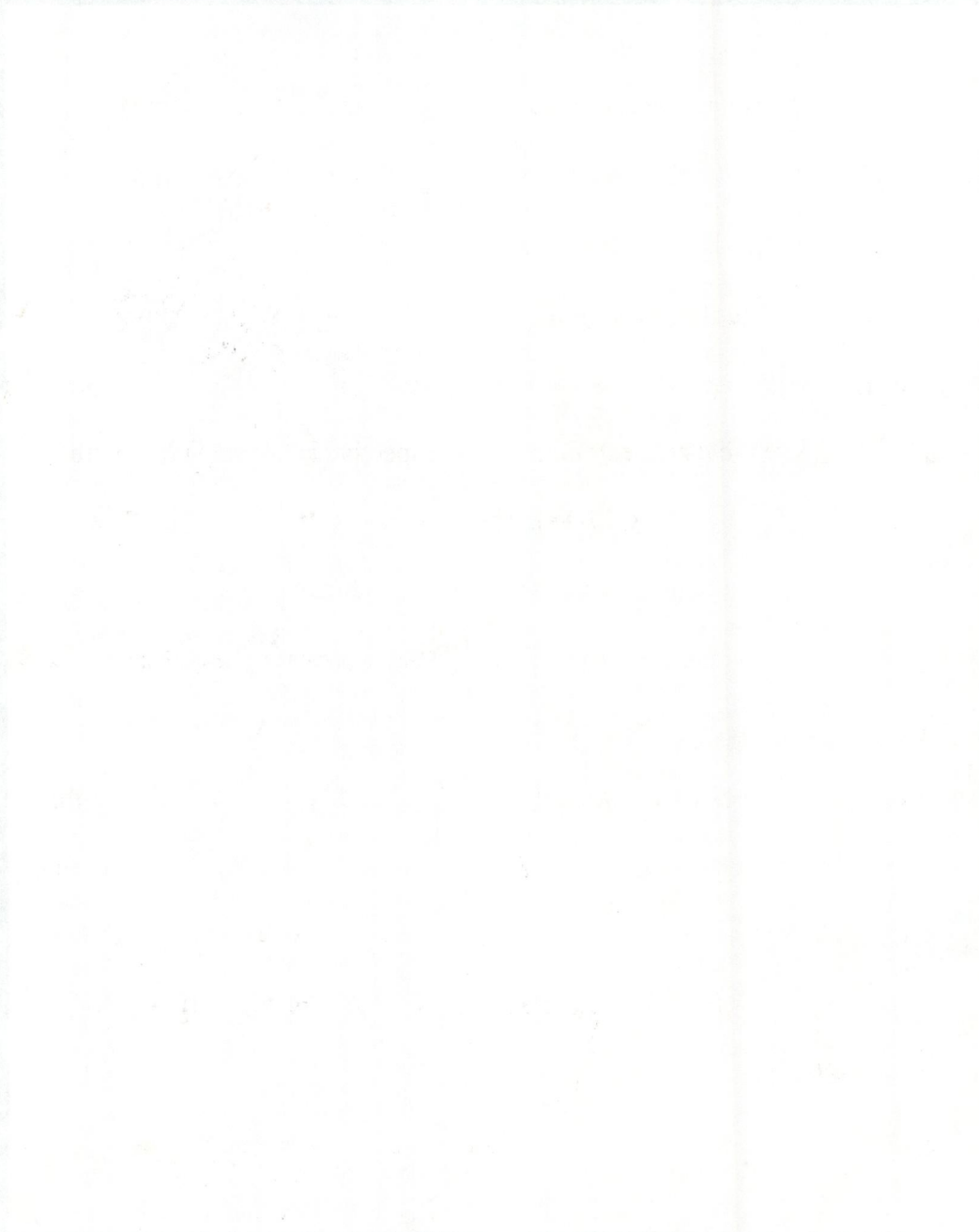


Hand-embroidered cloth with gold threads.

[fig. 16]



Embroidered Phulkari from the Punjab, possibly part of a trousseau.



sophisticated in its process. It was exclusively produced by the women of the Punjab and, initially at least, never for commercial purpose. Some of the younger generations have been inspired by the idea and are trying to emanate the process by other methods, such as hand-painting the fabrics. In the view of Khushwant Singh, “Sikh art like the Sikh people has taken root and diversified in unexpected ways in places as far-flung as they can possibly be from the original land of the Five Rivers. Yet it should claim them too as part of its tradition and heritage.”⁽⁸⁾ Khushwant Singh was specifically referring to a British Sikh woman, Sarbjit Natt, who hand-paints different traditional motifs onto chiffons and georgette. This is one way the traditional Sikh life is being modernised and revived, with different ideas.

Before the actual ceremony the prospective bride is marked with patterns on her hands and feet [fig.17-18]. The process is called ‘mendhi’. The markings are made with henna, a very ancient plant product with strong dying qualities. This ceremony is to beautify the girl and is an extremely old tradition, harking back to the tradition of tattooing. Flowers and other such Indian patterns are drawn onto the skin to create an intricate design [fig.19]. Much work goes into this process and is deemed to be an art form. Sometimes the patterns are painted quite far along the forearm, depending on the bride’s outfit and how far down it falls on the arm. In this way none of the skin can actually be seen bare, for modesty reasons.

Many castes and tribes of India use tattooing, men and women alike. Some believe it adds a fierceness and masculinity to a man’s persona. Others are not allowed to marry without being marked in some form. For women tattooing is mainly to beautify. It stretches across the whole caste system, however the higher the caste the lesser the amount of tattooing. Tattooing holds a strong tradition with the marriage of a young girl. As with the original ideas behind it, tattooing is also seen as a means

[fig.17]



Mendhi (henna patterns) painted onto bride's hands.

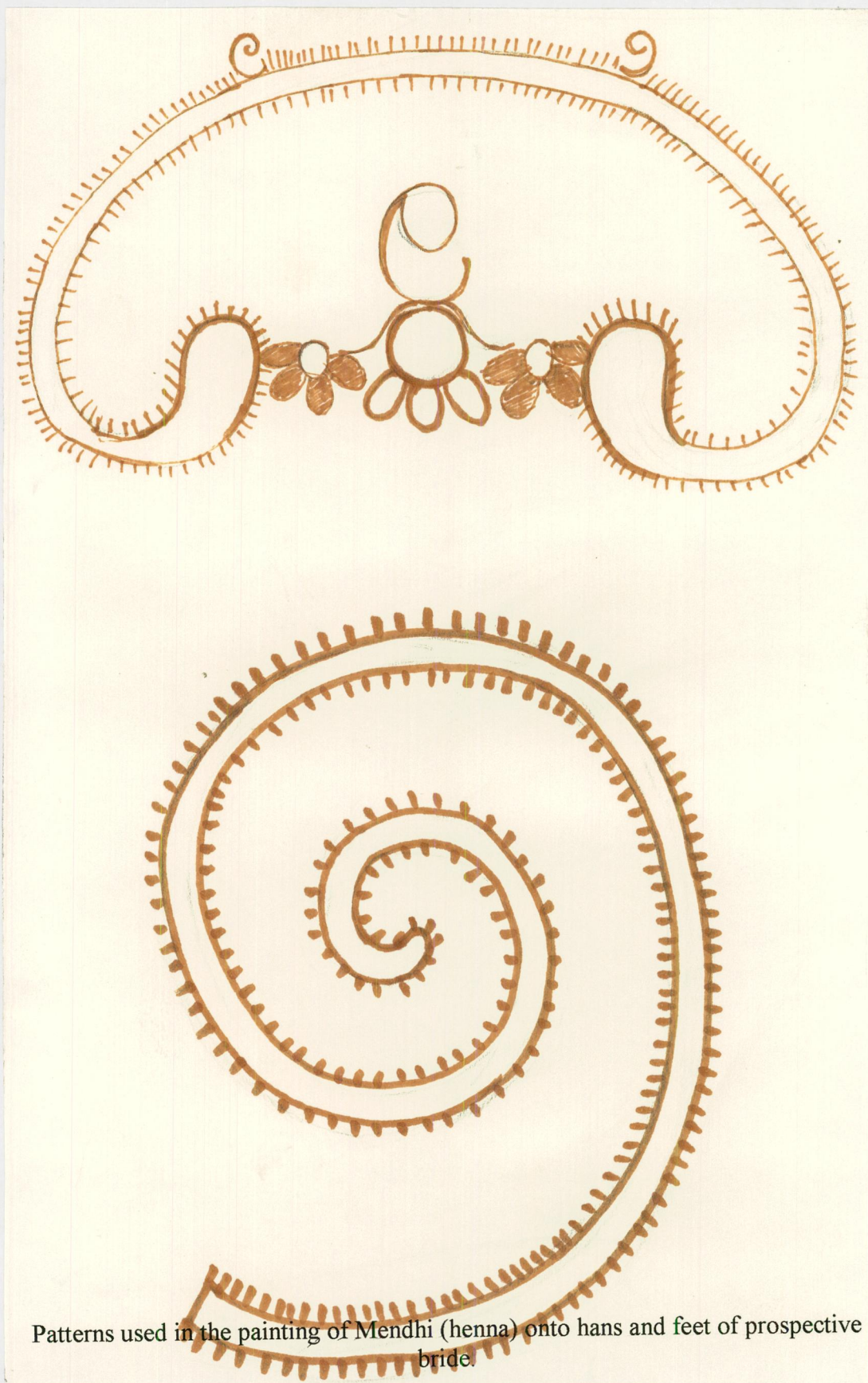


[fig.18]



Mendhi (henna patterns) painted onto bride's feet.

[fig.19]



Patterns used in the painting of Mendhi (henna) onto hands and feet of prospective bride.



of giving the bride an added beauty. This is seen in all walks of life, in the form of make-up. The day of marriage for a Sikh girl is a most important one, as it is for any bride. Therefore to look her best and enhance her natural beauty, she turns to a cosmetic, whether it be temporary or permanent. Tattoos, in the form of henna/mendhi are painted into the skin on any of the bare parts of the body, parts that might be seen on an everyday basis – the forehead, cheeks, chin, arms, legs, hands and sometimes the stomach or chest area.

“The traditional introduction of the custom is more or less connected with the religious beliefs of the people. It is said that Lord Krishna was in the habit of tattooing his four totems, the *sankh*, the *conch* (shell), the *chakra* (wheel), *gada* (mace) and *padma* (lotus), on the faces and limbs of his wives.”⁽⁹⁾

Quite possibly this Hindu tradition has been carried through into Sikhism, as many of the other traditions have. Of course, the symbols used have changed. For Sikh women in Britain nowadays, tattooing is not an option. In everyday life, society and work tattooing is not considered acceptable. In a Western society it might not be tolerated as it would in more traditional surroundings. However the idea of the tradition is still alive. It has evolved over the years with the painting of henna onto the hands, arms, legs and feet, taking the place of tattooing.

In an Indian wedding the sweetmeats are probably the most important foodstuff, apart from the Karah Parshad/the holy food. In traditional India whole areas around the courtyard or ground of marriage were covered with stalls and portable ovens. Here confectioners baked and cooked their wares. Most sweets were made from different variations of butter (ghee), flour, sugar and milk. Each were boiled or baked in various ways to produce different textures and tastes. A few spices or natural

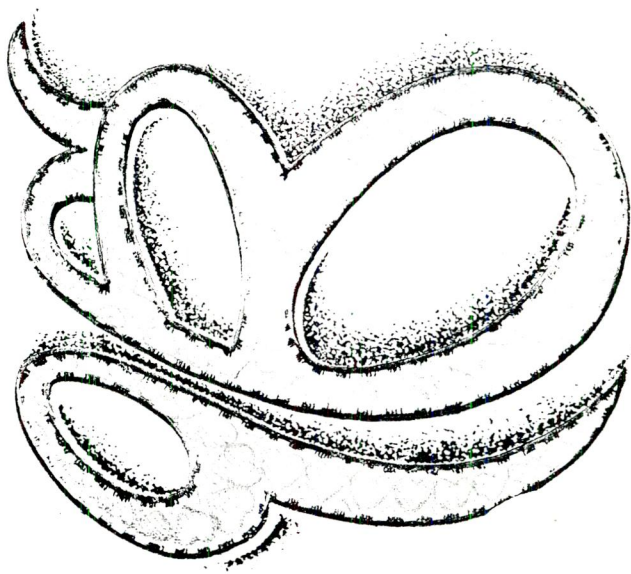
colourings, such as turmeric (haldi), could also be added.

Chapter 3

Before the festivities begin, many things have to be put into place and accomplished, as with any other culture's wedding. The list of things to do has probably grown over the years and shows the influence of British customs. Invitations must be sent on formal paper or cards, unlike former word-of-mouth invitation [fig.20-21]. The reception must be planned and hence catered for, the clothing bought and a day fixed with the Gurdwara, preferably to coincide with the registry office booking.

On the first day of celebration for the bride there is a ceremony for the ladies before the betrothal/engagement/Thaka takes place. This ceremony is called the 'ladies' Sanjeet' and occurs at the bride's home. It often takes place in the evening. The women have a singing session; they play music and dance for an hour or so.

A formal engagement is not actually necessary, but many like to include one. It adds to the pomp and ceremony of the occasion. It goes by the name of Thaka. If desired, it usually occurs at the boy's home. The girl's relatives visit, taking a kirpan and one rupee to the boy and present it to him in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib (the Holy book). Hence the boy's parents take a salwar suit (long tunic and loose trousers) and some gold jewellery to the girl. If unable to hold the Thaka in the groom's home, it sometimes takes place at the girl's home two days before the wedding. The groom's relatives visit and are welcomed to the house by the girl's father. The bride's mother joins by welcoming the groom's mother along with everyone else. The bride's brother has to sit to receive the wedding gifts into a red scarf (palla) on behalf of his sister, known as the 'Shagun'. 'Shagun' would also have been offered to the groom on a previous occasion. It consists of a ring, a Kirpan, some



ਮਤਿਗੁਰੂ ਦਾਤੇ ਕਾਜ ਰਚਾਇਆ ਆਪਣੀ ਮੇਧ ਕਰਾਈ ।
ਦਾਸਾਂ ਕਾਰਜ ਆਪ ਸਦਾਰੇ ਇਹ ਉਸ ਦੀ ਵਡਿਆਈ ॥

Cover of modern wedding invitation.



[fig.21]



● PROGRAMME ●

AT

Gurdwara Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha
142, Martindale Road, Hounslow, Middlesex.

Reception of Barat.....	9-30 A.M.
Tea & Milni.....	10-00 A.M.
Anand Karaj (Marriage Ceremony).....	11-00 A.M.
Lunch.....	1-00 P.M.
Departure of Doli from Residence.....	4-30 P.M.

No Gifts Please
Your presence will be appreciated

Wedding invitation programme.



sugar, dried dates and one rupee or either Sterling silver or notes for him. The girl's good luck 'Shagun' consists of a ring, other jewellery [fig.22], make-up, a Salwar suit, sweets, coconut and henna powder for the Mendhi/colouring of the palms in intricate patterns.

After these have been accepted, the boy's mother welcomes the girl into the family by hugging her. Then the sisters mix a little of the henna to place on the girl's hand; they also place a Bindhi (jewelled decoration) [fig.23] on her forehead. This is their way of showing their new sisterhood. After this a party begins and continues until all begin to flag. During this party the bride is upstairs, having her Mendhi painted on by a beautician or experienced Mendhi artist. Often she also does the bride's make-up on the actual wedding day. Nowadays and perhaps for a number of years the engagement has begun to include a ring in the ceremony. This is due to the Western influence, especially Christian, where a ring symbolises unity, an eternal bond between two people. This is an extremely relevant idea to the Sikh idea of a marriage, and yet shows the adoption of another culture's thinking through exposure to it. If done according to Sikhism, the Thaka should be held also in the temple or Gurdwara. The ceremony would be presumed more solemn, but probably much less practical as the Thaka and the wedding are generally held on different days.

The next day the bride's mother draws a square on the ground, crossed with diagonal lines and a central circle. This square is drawn with a mixture of spices, rice, flour and some water and is traditionally a Hindu ritual, but many still practice it. The bride comes out to the square, equipped with a smooth, wooden lat or board, the red scarf from the night before and a metal tray of flour and yellow paste. She then sits on the lat to ensure that the marriage will be fruitful. Her mother feeds her some flour from the tray. The yellow paste is rubbed into her skin, her face, feet, neck and

[fig.22]



Jewellery: earrings and neck ornaments, made with gold and precious stones, possibly part of bride's trousseau.



[fig.23]



Basic design of Bindhi (jewelled decoration), to be placed on or, more often, painted on bride's forehead.



arms as a type of purifying act [fig.24]. All the women present do this, while being careful not to interrupt her Mendhi [fig.25], which will only be rubbed clean that evening. Her mother then steps sideways over the flour pattern seven times and in the opposite direction three times. She then cleans the floor with water and her hands, probably one of the last things she will do for her daughter. Everyone then sits in a group while two people dip bracelets in milk and place them on the bride's arms. This is possibly a sign of fertility. She is then fed Parshad, the holy food. Decorations are hung from her wrists and more gifts placed in the red scarf (palla).

The wedding day arrives and everyone gathers at the Gurdwara (doorway to God). The Gurdwara are buildings reserved for prayer and for everyone in the community to gather to celebrate God. Sometimes in Britain they are converted cinemas or halls. Others have been built specifically for use as a Gurdwara. Besides the praying room, there is a kitchen and dining-room, known as Langar (the Free Kitchen). Here anyone can eat one's fill for nothing, as was set up by Guru Amar Das (1479 to 1574). Money does not exchange hands, possibly to prove that the caste system is no longer in existence. All religions are welcome to the Gurdwara, providing they respect the customs, covering the head and walking barefoot in the praying room.

The bride arrives first [fig.26] and waits in a separate room, with many of her friends and family walking in and out and photographs being taken. The groom meanwhile arrives [fig.27], to be met by a ribbon held up by the bride's sisters. The ribbon is also red. He cuts the ribbon with a scissors and enters the Gurdwara. The couple meets and exchange flower garlands, without saying a word [fig.28]. The code of silence is still there. The bride then returns to the room to wait while 'Milni' (sweet tea) is being served. After this the registry signing takes place, where the couple

[fig.24]



Cleansing ritual for bride before the wedding.

[fig.25]



Mendhi (henna patterns) setting on the bride's hands.

[fig.26]



The bride arrives at the Gurdwara (temple).

[fig.27]



The groom arrives at the Gurdwara (temple).

[fig.28]



The couple exchange garlands.



exchange vows and rings. This is the civil ceremony [fig.29].

The real ceremony is then about to start. The groom goes to the temple's prayer room, kneels before the Guru Granth Sahib (the Holy Book), offers some money and then sits cross-legged in that spot [fig.30]. The bride's father and his brothers pour sweets into the palla around his neck and place one into his mouth. Then the bride's father places a Kara on his right arm and then he is also fed Parshad. Consequently the bride's and the groom's fathers exchange garlands as a sign of friendship and union. The bride is then brought in, followed by her brother, sisters and male cousins [fig.31]. She sits beside the groom [fig.32] and then both have to stand once more with both fathers and the Granthi, for a blessing. The bride's father then passes the palla to his daughter to the tune of '*palla, tainde, lagi*', meaning 'I am tied to your garment'. The ceremony continues as the traditional one also had. At the very end sweetmeats are fed to the couple as they sit in front of the Holy book. The bride's parents, and then the groom's place garlands of flowers around their necks [fig.33]. After this all the bride's aunts and uncles, accompanied by their spouses, do the same [fig.34]. After that anybody who wants can go up to give a blessing. Many give money as a wedding gift or blessing. To end with the reception is held in the Langar (free kitchen).

[fig.29]



The couple exchange rings at the registry signing.

[fig.30]



The groom sits in front of the Guru Granth Sahib (the Holy Book).

[fig.31]



The bride enters, accompanied by some relatives.

[fig.32]



The bride sits on the left side of the groom.

[fig.33]



The bride's parents place garlands around the couple's necks.

[fig.34]



The bride's relatives also give their blessing.



Chapter 4

Some teachings of the Sikh faith suggest that marriage between different religions is not likely to succeed. The theory is that two people with different religious views follow a different ideal or way of life. Therefore both people are thinking on two different wavelengths. It is seen as a rather unsuitable environment in which to bring up children. Decisions must then be made with regards to the child's faith. Should he or she be brought up believing in one faith or another, in both or none at all? A lot of questions then need to be asked. Should a child have to go through this confusion? But then again, if two people fall in love with each other whom has the right to say or decree that they cannot marry? There are obviously two sides to the argument. Neither situation is perfect. The religious view is old, harking back to a time when it was seen to be wrong, by all, to mix with let alone marry one of another religion. It still exists, but is generally only strictly upheld in more traditional areas of India or very traditional families in Britain. Because in the Sikh community we see a strong belief in Sikh faith and its principles, many Sikhs still marry other Sikhs. Because the Sikh community is very closely-knit and quite largely concentrated in certain areas of Britain, there is a tendency to socialise within it mainly. This is something which is not by any means deliberate but however, evident. For marriages and matches to come about, the social circle in which one moves plays a large role in creating these situations.

“Sometimes traditions bend and become open to modern interpretation; sometimes the meanings are forgotten.”⁽¹⁾ Upon speaking to many different people of an older generation, I discovered something quite interesting. Very few of them believed that any of their traditions have changed. One in particular said to me, “What do you mean? Nothing has changed!” But it has, however subtle the change, so subtle

that no one has seemed to notice.

I asked one man why men no longer wore the traditional Indian dress suit at celebrations, especially at one's marriage. His reply was that it is just tradition, which is rather a contradiction in terms. Tradition should be the wearing of the Indian suit. This, he explained to me, was that everybody does the same and has done so for many years. Everybody wears the traditional British suit, so therefore everyone else follows suit. This is probably due to British Rule in India and its influence on the traditional way of life.

The time-honoured view was that the husband was the provider and the wife took care of the household duties. The husband also was relied upon to look after any monetary matters, no matter how small. In some cases, however, the situation is yet the same. It is usually only evident in India, but also in some very traditional families living in Britain. Many of these are of the older generation and possibly have only lived in Britain for a number of years.

In one particular case a girl, of a good and upstanding Sikh family with rather traditional values, was quite rebellious towards the idea of traditional marriage or traditional anything. She did not want to have anything to do with an arranged marriage. She did not believe in what they stood for or that they even worked. However after a period of time her views became quite relaxed about the subject and she probably thought no more of it. And then one day she met him, just another fellow at another Sikh gathering. They liked each other and continued to meet on the odd occasion, however socially. Then this is where the role of the arranged marriage came into play. The girl asked her sister to perhaps mention something to her mother, casually suggesting that a match might be a good idea. This would hopefully set the

proverbial ball rolling, which it did and now the two are happily married. Quite possibly she could see that as her parent's marriage was successful and so many others around her also had good working marriages, one for her could also work. This sub-conscious thought was also combined with the fact that it was actually she and her partner who decided upon the marriage in the first place. In allowing her mother to think that it was her idea, was a clever approach in getting her to agree to the situation. In this case the girl's father had little to do with the situation until the actual arranging had to be accomplished. This shows that nowadays the father does not necessarily have as much power as in earlier years when he arranged the whole match and Anand Karaj, beginning to end. Also it can be seen that some young people do view or learn to view the arranged marriage in a good light, identifying its benefits. Many, as the girl described above, use the idea to their own benefit and work within its confines rather conveniently.

There are various views on the arranged marriage. Most of the older generation believes strongly in the Sikh marriage, with no alteration. They agree that it works completely and that if one has a problem with it, one must cope or put up with that problem. It is one's religion and one must live by its rules no matter how strict. Some however take a more lenient view. They abide by Sikh rule and religion but also take into account that one must move with the times and the fact that we are surrounded by so many other cultures. They allow their children to choose their own life partners and then set up a match or betrothal. Some of the younger generation also agree with the idea of arranging a marriage. Maybe, in the long run, one's parents know more about the ways of life and who would be a suitable partner? In many cases one chooses one's own partner anyway and the arrangement is just a formality. However there are those who completely disagree with the arranged marriage. Some

think that if others want to go ahead with it, it is their decision, but they would not. In the case of an arranged marriage it is rarely seen that a couple know each other for a considerable period of time beforehand. Therefore the sceptics do not understand how one can spend one's life with someone one barely knows. Love is supposed to grow, but what if this does not happen? It is quite sad, as some of these young people would or could never tell their parents how they feel, for fear of hurting or upsetting them if they are staunch Sikhs.

Conclusion

Throughout my research of the subject, I have come to realise that there are many varied views on the Sikh marriage. Some might view the system as ideal and completely fulfilling their religious needs as a Sikh. On the other hand, there are many who do not hold it in the same regard. This group is also divided. Many uphold the tradition, but are not completely aware of its full meaning. Therefore one is going through a process, as something that must be fulfilled, because one believes in Sikhism and this is what is taught through the scriptures. Many do not understand fully the implications of some of the ceremonies or objects used within them. Also many of those raised in Britain do not completely understand the language of the scriptures. Hence one cannot comprehend wholly what one is being asked to do or the guidance one receives during the ceremony. Those to whom I spoke, on this matter, are regretful that they have not learned, but others simply do not care and have no interest in learning or understanding. It is seen as something that one must do for the sake of doing so or because one's parents expect it. Lastly there are those who have no regard for the arranged marriage whatsoever. They cannot see any advantage or value to the idea. They do not believe that one's parents or relatives have the right or power to decide on one's life partner. One particular person voiced the opinion that he could never marry somebody he did not love, even if the love is supposed to grow within the couple. This attitude comes from being brought up in a Western society, where the idea of love before marriage is common practice.

Should one have to give up one's religious ideas or practice to accommodate living in a culturally different society? Or can one successfully keep one's religious and cultural ideas intact? There has to be a tolerant attitude, on the whole, in society. In that way different communities begin to understand and

respect other cultures and ways of life. Therefore traditions can survive and hence, our society is a more interesting place. The Sikh marriage has survived and will continue to do so, judging from the number of people who still believe in it as an institution. It has changed in many respects, as most things in society do, when confronted by different ideas and beliefs. The Sikh religion represents a cross-section of a number of different teachings, and in that respect the coming together of those ideas was the first change and certainly not the last.

Footnotes

Chapter 1:

- (1) All dates referred to in this text are of the Christian Timetable.
- (2) McCormack, Manjeet Kaur, An Introduction to Sikh Belief, No.2, Middlesex, The Sikh Cultural Society of Great Britain, N.D. pg.1.
- (3) McCormack, N.D. pg.1.
- (4) Singh, Khushwant, Warm and Rich and Fearless, Bradford, Bradford Art Galleries and Museums, 1991, pg.19.
- (5) Miln, Louise Jordan, Wooings and Weddings in many Climes, London, C.A. Pearson, 1900, pg.340.
- (6) Miln, 1900, pg.339.
- (7) Singh, Patwant, Gurdwaras, In India and Around the World, New Delhi, Himalayan Books, 1992, pg.28.
- (8) Miln, 1900, pg.342.
- (9) McCormack, Manjeet Kaur, (Guru Amar Das Jee), The Sikh Marriage Ceremony, No.7, Middlesex, The Sikh Cultural Society of Great Britain, 1985, pg.4.
- (10) McCormack, (Guru Amar Das Jee), 1985, pg.4.
- (11) Heyman, Abigail, Dreams and Schemes, Love and Marriage in Modern Times, New York, Aperture Foundation Inc. 1987, pg.15.

Chapter 2:

- (1) McCormack, 1985, pg.1.
- (2) McCormack, 1985, pg.2,3.
- (3) McCormack, 1985, pg.5.
- (4) McCormack, 1985, pg.5.
- (5) McCormack, 1985, pg.5,6.
- (6) Biswas, A, Indian Costumes, New Delhi, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Government of India, 1985, pg.3.
- (7) Biswas, 1985, pg.3.
- (8) Singh, Khushwant, 1991, pg.43.
- (9) Joshi, O.P. Marks and Meaning, Anthropology of Symbols, India, Jaipur RBSA Publishers, 1992, pg.56.

Chapter 4:

- (1) Heyman, 1987, pg.15,16.

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