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Value Metamorphosis: Investigating the Impact of COVID-19 on Indian Weddings as a System

Hemul Goel, Aditya Sharma and Sanika Harshe

Indian weddings are an extensive affair. Multiple *performers* come together to witness the union of two families displayed amid various elements that become markers of their social status. The entry of the pandemic has acted as a force upon the pandemic, changing the values associated with Indian weddings. Looking at the wedding as a system we discuss the pandemic's transformative impact that has catalysed a shift away from a culture of conspicuous consumption. It is imperative to study this phenomenon as it affects consumption patterns and design trends. We begin by mapping the system and recognising key stakeholders who are subject to face the challenges posed on social gatherings due to the pandemic. Qualitative research methods were used to collect data from these stakeholders who showed how values had evolved. These findings form the premise of further inquiry into designing a system that would help retain these values once these restrictions are removed.

Keywords: Conspicuous consumption, Indian wedding, COVID-19, pandemic, values

Reflection question: How is COVID-19 leading to the emergence of emotional and experiential value conflicts amongst Indian weddings?

Introduction

In contemporary times, Indian weddings seem glittering and performative, however, this wasn't always the case. They were a communal event, wherein two families would come together to celebrate the union of the couple with home-cooked food in communal spaces decked up with eco-friendly elements of decor created by local craftspeople. The estimated worth of the Indian wedding industry is USD 50 billion¹, second only to the United States.

What brought about this transition? (Kapur, 2009) discusses the impact of Bollywood in cementing the idea of the big fat Indian wedding from a simplistic homely affair to a "Bollywoodized" one where "rituals mediated by the media are enacted." Weddings are multi-day affairs with various rituals spread across venues that come with extensive guest lists featuring the extended family, distant relatives, colleagues and friends.

Going by current standards, an average Indian spends about one-fifth of their lifetime earnings on the wedding of their children.²

The wedding industry in India has been touted as recession-proof, yet the unthinkable happened in 2020³, when for the first time in decades, the industry - along with its allies - was hit by high rates of unemployment and losses. The pandemic came as an external force, challenging the existing structures and creating tensions between the various stakeholders and the values they uphold.

¹ **Digital Classifieds In India 2020**, 21 September 2016, A study by KPMG in India & Google

² **Digital Classifieds In India 2020**, 21 September 2016, A study by KPMG in India & Google

³ The global economy plunged into its deepest contraction in living memory in April-June 2020 as COVID-19 took its toll. In India, real GDP fell by a record low. Gold prices remained elevated as heightened uncertainty continues to boost its safe haven appeal. - **Monetary Policy Report – October 2020, Reserve Bank Of India**

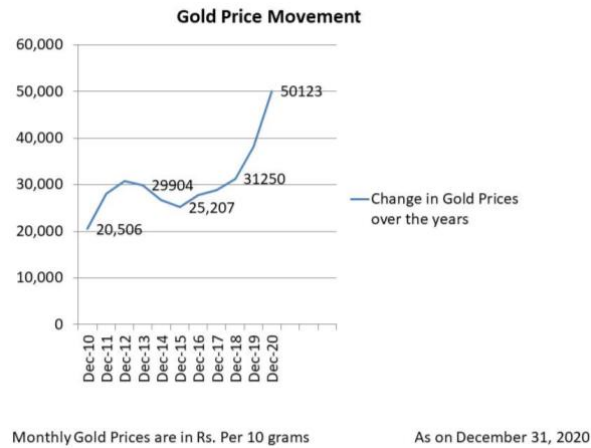


Figure 1. India is the largest market of gold in the world. A graph depicting the change in gold prices over the years, in the Indian market (Source: Reserve Bank of India)

The study aims to understand the transformative impact of the pandemic on Indian weddings and its implications for future events. In the following sections, we will look at the Indian weddings as a system, wherein we (i) offer a brief review of the literature associated with the wedding as a site of values (ii) describe an ongoing study understanding the value conflicts in weddings before and during the pandemic (iii) discuss initial findings from primary investigations and (iv) describe the future direction of research.

Background

Values are socially approved desires and goals that are internalised through the process of conditioning, learning or socialisation and that become subjective preferences, standards and aspirations (Mukherjee, 1949). The work described in this paper, based on Veblen's definition, of conspicuous consumption⁴ considers it to be a notable value of Indian weddings. Indian weddings have developed into a socially acceptable site for signalling wealth and status through conspicuous consumption. Renowned sociologist Patricia Uberoi remarked that Indian weddings are, "the most visible site of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste." This emphasis on conspicuous consumption as a value is internalised through vehicles like popular culture, mass media or even social media that attaches an aspirational value to it. This form of consumption comes at various price points across the income spectrum - while the expenditure for the nuptials of Asia's richest person's daughter stood at USD 100 million⁵, people in rural India with humble roots spend at least, an average of four months of household income (Bloch, Rao & Desai, 2004).

In Indian weddings, conspicuous consumption as a value is expressed by the *performance* of the wedding as a spectacle. Different *performers* come together to render a *performance* of the events, rituals and even that of the self. Schechner (2017) defines performances as actions, interactions and relationships between the performers and the audience. Schechner (2017) further discusses the concept of props, denoting the different elements used to display wealth. In an Indian wedding these props include both macro and micro details beginning from the invites, venue, food, gifts exchanged to more humane elements like the bridal entry, and the guests themselves. Bhardwaj (2020) takes it a step further, stating, "The prop used in this performance becomes a yardstick for measuring the standard of performance itself." It is the scale of display that is used by the audience to ascertain

⁴ In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men, wealth must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence" (p. 24). By social custom, the evidence consists of unduly costly goods that fall into " accredited canons of conspicuous consumption, the effect of which is to hold the consumer up to a standard of expensiveness and wastefulness in his consumption of goods and his employment of time and effort" (p. 71). Veblen, Thorstein. The theory of the leisure class: An economic study of institutions. London: Unwin Books, 1899; reprinted New York: Dover Publications, 1994

⁵ This \$100 Million Indian Wedding Will Put *Crazy Rich Asians* to Shame, Time, 2018, P R Sanjai and Anto Antony, Retrieved May 10 2021

the social status of the hosts. The success of any performance is based on the interactions and dialogues between different elements. In his work on performance, Deighton (1992) expounds upon performance as an act undertaken not just for the consumer but for their audience as well. Though not a part of the roles, the multi-day event becomes the *stage* for these interactions to play out. We demarcate the *performers* based of the *roles* they undertake in a wedding.

- **The Actor:** The active *performers* around whom the event is oriented including the bride, groom, families and close friends.
- **The Audience:** The passive *performers* that *consume* the affair including extended families, friends, colleagues and guests invited for this display. Bloch, Rao & Desai (2004) discuss the difference between the notion of individuality in India, stating, “An Indian is defined not just by his or her accomplishments and character, but also by their circle of acquaintances and friends.” It’s this peculiarity about the Indian idea of individuality that creates extensive guest lists as people use the wedding as a site to illustrate their social prowess by displaying their connections.
- **The Facilitator:** Wedding planner, designer, entertainers, photographers and the wedding industry that banks on the display of wealth that makes the Indian wedding market the second largest in the world.

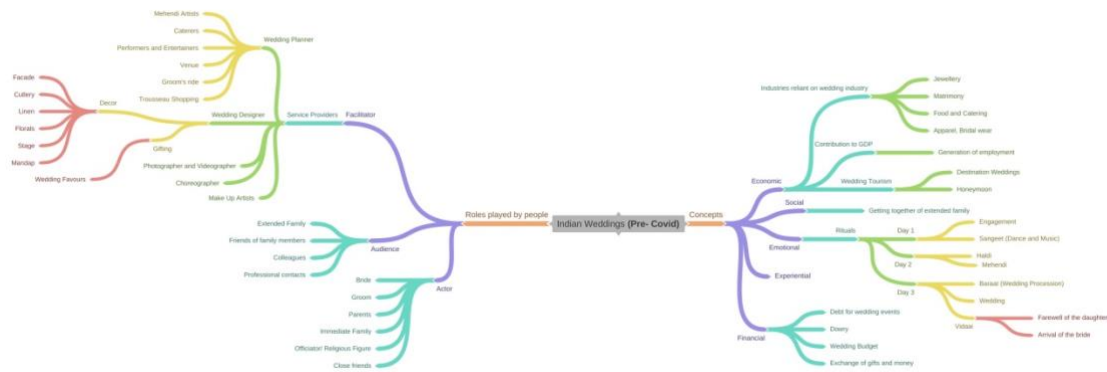


Figure 2. A map portraying the system of Indian weddings before the COVID-19 Era

Against this canvas, the pandemic came about as a force that challenged the pre-existing system of the Indian wedding. Restrictions included shutting wedding venues, banning gatherings, closing markets and limiting wedding guests. These conditions forced the *performers* to seek out conscious consumption as a possible solution for pandemic weddings. Willis and Schor (2012) have stated conscious consumption includes choices that consider “the larger context of production, distribution, or impacts of goods and services.” They further add, “Conscious consumption choices may include forgoing or reducing consumption or choosing products that are organic, eco-friendly, fair trade, local, or cruelty-free.” In the weddings held during the pandemic, the restrictions on vendor availability along with those mentioned above, left *performers* with no choice but to manage with locally available or self-created (Do It Yourself (DIY)) resources. Adhering to this perspective, we wish to understand the impact of the pandemic on its ability to displace the value attached to conspicuous consumption with that of conscious consumption by investigating (i) the qualities associated with conscious consumption, (ii) the tangible and intangible elements associated with conscious consumption, and (iii) the usage of this collective knowledge to further the trend of conscious consumption in Indian weddings.

On-going Study

Building on existing work, we have established the values attached to Indian weddings. The study deepens the understanding of these old and new values by investigating the qualities attached by different *performers* to these values. We ascertain this by observing the vocabulary used by the different *performers* in defining these events.

Additionally, a preliminary visual research was undertaken to explore the intangible and tangible elements emerging from the pandemic weddings.

During the course of the introductory qualitative study, the following *performers* belonging to the middle class income group⁶ from Tier 1 and 2 cities of India were interviewed (i) 5 brides and grooms, (ii) 2 parents of the bride or groom, and (iii) 3 virtual guests. Questions asked included their idea of an ideal wedding, the emotional as well as tangible experience of the actual wedding, and memories from the event. Interviewees contributed visual material in the form of pictures and videos documenting the various artefacts they attached emotional value to from the wedding. A preliminary survey was also conducted with 8 wedding planners to understand the industry perspective regarding the emergence of conscious consumption due to the force exerted by the pandemic.

Bride 1 discussed her dreams of a destination wedding marred by the pandemic forcing her to settle for a small ceremony at home. She felt having an intimate wedding allowed her to be in the moment. “We did a Zoom link on the wedding morning, which was sent by the parents to different people. We did miss out on a couple of people and felt bad about it but in the circumstances we got married in, it didn't matter. So many people are around in a normal wedding that it gets overwhelming and (you are) obligated to respond to people, you just focus on you,” she explained.



Figure 3. A collage depicting the experience of a pandemic wedding. Clockwise from left: Bride 1 interacts with her wedding guests virtually after getting married in the living room of her house; An image of the virtual *sangeet* (an Indian wedding event) organised by the friends of Bride 1 that went viral on social media; A wedding guest's idea of recreating the real life “experience” of the event by viewing it with a group of friends using Zoom and Instagram Live.

Bride 2 shared how it was important for her parents to have a large event but she was glad that did not happen. She said, “If there are a lot of people, it is difficult to attend to them. You want to give them good hospitality, but if you have a tighter budget, you can't.”

Bride 3 was relieved that due to the pandemic, the parents let the couple make most of the decisions, “We got to marry in our dream church, with our close friends and family. This would have never been possible if we had, say about 2000 guests. We would have had to settle for some other church.”

⁶ According to most organizations, like the World Bank and the Organization for the Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), people living on less than US \$2 a day are considered poor. For those in the middle classes, the earnings typically lie in the range of US \$10 to \$100 per day, as expressed in the 2015 purchasing power parities.

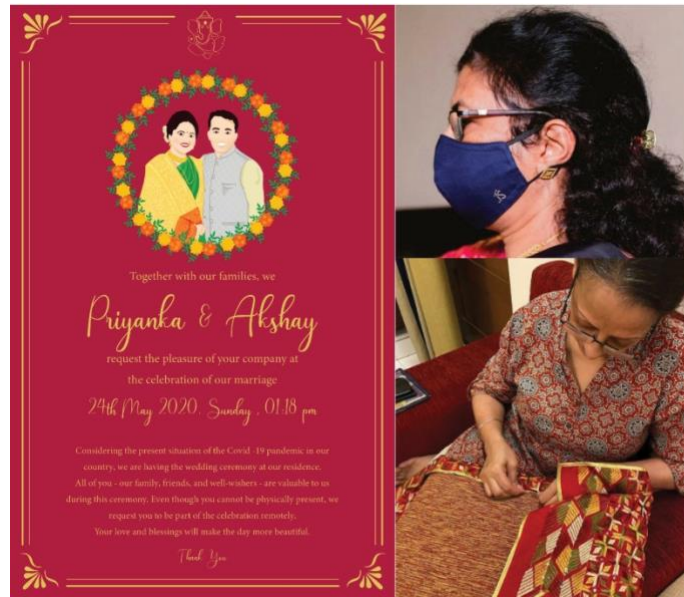


Figure 4. Clockwise from the right: Bride 3's mother hand-embroidered the masks for guests with the couple's initials, Bride 1's mother hand-stitching makeshift cushion covers for her daughter's home wedding, the invitation made by Guest 1 for her best friend's wedding

Groom 1 stated that a wedding in pre-COVID-19 times would never be as personal for him because he has a big extended family that would have to be invited.

Groom 2 mentioned that they did not give much thought to what they wore for their wedding because there was no one to “*see them in that finery.*”

All the guests who attended weddings virtually said that they were very immersed despite the many technical glitches in the live streams. Some of them got misty eyed and chose to watch it together in a group in order to create an experience for themselves.

Parents of a bride mentioned how they had always wanted a big wedding for their daughter because it is a social obligation. In retrospect, they felt the wedding was a very relaxed and personal experience for them because they had the time to cherish it instead of attending to guests.

In addition to the *actors*, the *facilitators* - who are a part of the wedding industry at large - also recognised the shift created due to the pandemic. When it came to describing pre-pandemic weddings, the wedding planners used terms like “extravagant,” “wasteful,” “big fat,” “dreamy,” “lavish,” “experimental,” “fad based,” “west inspired,” “elaborate.” In contrast, terms like “simple,” “personalised,” “intimate,” “private,” “local,” “eco-friendly,” were used to discuss weddings held during the pandemic.

While “intimate,” and “personalised,” were used repeatedly by different wedding planners, the same adjectives were also utilised by the actors and the audience to describe the weddings - a clear indication of the intimacy experienced by different types of performers when they were relieved of the pressure to put up a spectacle.

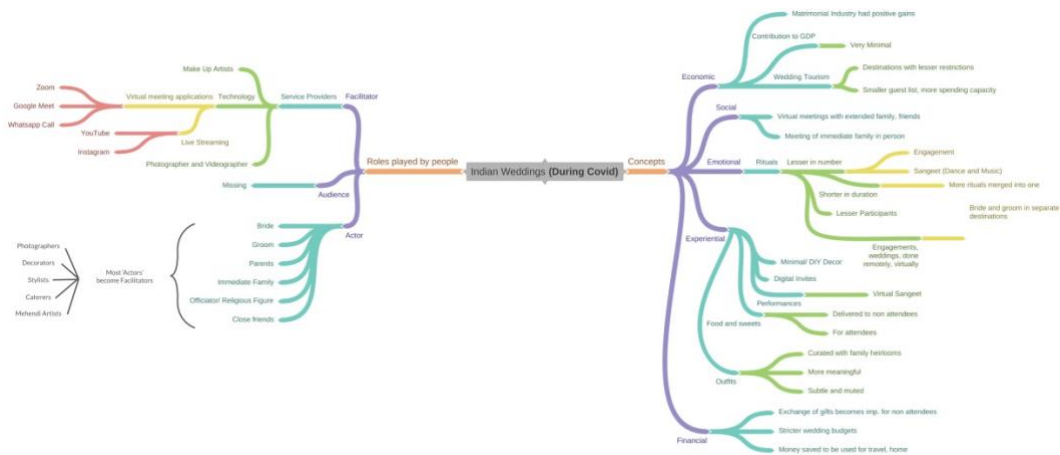


Figure 5. A map portraying the changes in the system of Indian weddings during the COVID-19 pandemic

Findings and Implications

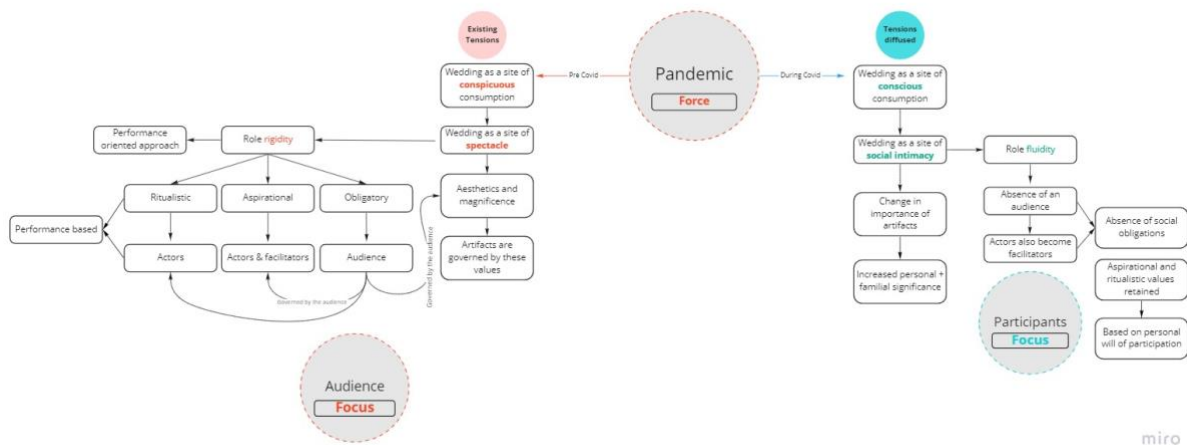


Figure 6. A flowchart depicting the COVID-19 Pandemic as the force that diffuses existing tensions in Indian weddings before and after the pandemic

This paper discusses initial findings from an on-going study. On the basis of the interactions with performers across the spectrum, values linked to a new class of weddings based on conscious consumption can be identified. These values have emerged as a common trend and are meant to inform the experience of performers and the event in a post-covid world.

- **Intimacy:** Post-covid, the lack of pressure to put up a spectacle and the minimal conformity to roles led to the creation of a newfound experience of intimacy at Indian weddings. Instead of catering to social obligations, couples along with their families were present in the moment, with the *marriage* taking precedence over the wedding.
- **Personalisation:** Family, friends and the couple DIY-ed various aspects of the wedding, leading to the development of new artefacts. While Bride 1 used her mother's old *saree* for the wedding (elevating the garment to a sentimental value), Bride 3's mother hand-embroidered masks with initials of the bride and groom for every guest. Actions like these not only deepen the experience of intimacy but also fall under the realm of emotionally durable design, developing long-term relationships between people and objects.

- Mindfulness: The experience of mindfulness for the *performers* extended beyond their ability to be in the moment towards the very choices they made regarding the wedding. Downsizing⁷ the wedding also downsized the waste that comes with the event(s). Though unintentional, the reduction in scale is an environmentally and economically sustainable choice.

Conclusions and Future Directions

The on-going study aims to understand the development and retention of newfound consciousness in the Indian wedding system. In this paper we have reviewed the theoretical ideas that formed the basis of our arguments, discussed the pre-pandemic as well as during-pandemic values attached to Indian weddings and proposed the values that need to be retained in order to expand the idea of conscious consumption in the system of Indian weddings. However, what happens when an external force like covid-19 recedes - do people go back to old ways of organising these events? The on-going study will continue to (i) document the changes in the wedding as a system by studying more cross-sections of the population, (ii) examine more values attached by performers in an Indian wedding and (iii) devise a system in which these newfound values can be retained by performers in future weddings in order to facilitate conscious consumption.

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⁷ On an average, an Indian wedding hosting 400-1000 people results in around 3 tonnes of waste and in some cases even more," informs Veena Balakrishnan, who planned her own wedding as a 'zero-waste' celebration after reading some startling facts on the waste that Indian weddings generate. - **Make your wedding a low waste affair, Times of India, January 2020**