While ‘Gramming’ a Wedding in India: Media and the Reproduction of a ‘Bridal Femininity’

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This paper examines the changing wedding scenes and performance of bridehood in India in a post-liberalisation period. The study, based on a digital ethnography, explores the changing wedding practices by considering the role of digital media in circulating and reifying the image of an emergent bridehood, tethering it to the ideology of consumption as well as distinctions based on social categories like gender and religion. It looks into the possibility of a scheme that goes beyond the narrative of ‘uniformisation’ in explaining the changes manifested in the performance of bridehood in the Eastern and Western regions of India, with an expansion of social media practices in the recent years.

Keywords: bridehood, social media, Instagram, weddings.

A review of anthropological literature on the prescriptions for marriage and associated practices in India would suggest, that there is an agreement on a gender-based difference and oppression reproduced by prescriptions on bridal body and bridal ornamentation. Having said that, one can locate reconsiderations regarding the existing meta-narratives on the working of certain social categories and hierarchies in India (Kapur, 2009; Nandy, 1998), particularly since the 1990s, the period following the economic deregulation. But rather than a complete neglect of these categories, such works emphasise how liberalisation, economic deregulation and digital mediascapes (Yoon, 2019) have facilitated a re-enactment of these hierarchies; in the way hierarchies are prescribed and experienced, particularly in the ‘intimate’ contexts. I argue, that the role of media in general, and digital media in particular become significant in this context.
This study, based on a digital ethnography\(^1\) considers the Instagram pages of wedding photographers, jewellery and clothing stores from the Eastern and Western regions of present-day India to explain the changing landscapes of bridehood and gender norms in these regions.

I argue, that Instagram and its digital media space, primarily as a photo sharing application and social media platform, furthers a performance and circulation of an ‘Emergent Indian Bridehood’ constituent of two core, but mutually inclusive, characteristics in the recent years.

Firstly, a performance of bridehood facilitated by the new media, or Instagram in this case, is tethering to the consumer-market, where consumption stands central to the identity/identities aspired and moral desirability highlighted. Secondly, there are emerging standards for both the bride and the groom and their attire as one can trace from these posts; i.e. along with an effort for a ‘traditional look’, there is a display of proximity to the ‘global’ with gender-specific variations. In this paper, I use the word ‘consumption’ to refer to any “activity involving the selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any product or service” (Campbell, 2005: 102). While a wedding refers to a major event or a ceremony associated with marriage, the latter refers to the ritualistic dimensions that are reflective of the purpose of the union (Smith, 1997). I will also be referring this event or ritual to an Institution in this work, considering it as an “organized apparatus”, “that assists in the functioning or reproduction of a society” (Augustins, 1991: 398).

**METHODOLOGY**

Instagram pages were chosen by considering the follower base and the regulations on access. Instagram images of ‘Hindu’ weddings from only certain states belonging to the Eastern (Odisha and West Bengal) and Western (Gujarat and Rajasthan) regions (according to administrative categories) are considered for this study. Only pages with a follower base crossing 1K from these regions were selected, from which certain pages were chosen randomly for this analysis. Only Instagram pages providing public access to their images constituted the universe of this digital ethnography, which was carried out using the Instagram handle of the author between August, 2018 and August, 2020 for images shared during the same period. An analysis of these images (descriptions are provided along with the images) is done through a semiotic approach, where I have focused on the language, symbols, signs and icons (Fedorov, 2015) in the image, in order to understand the meanings in the media texts. The scope of this study is limited to visual still images, not the videos and short videos on Instagram. This discussion,

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\(^1\) “An offshoot of ethnography, digital ethnography is a method of ‘representing real-life cultures through combining the characteristic features of digital media with the elements of story’” (in Kaur-Gill and Dutta, 2019: 2).
will attempt to discern queries on the nature of visual messages Instagram as a social media and photo sharing application conveys, when it comes to dominant social values on gender and other social categories. Similarly, I will be examining whether one can trace the presence of a new ‘wedding -ideological complex’ with these social media sites becoming significant in the selection of ‘bridal looks’. A major part of this paper is taken from the M. Phil Dissertation titled ‘Gender, Marriage and Material Aesthetics in India’ I submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi in the month of January 2021.

SOCIAL MEDIA, PHOTO-SHARING AND THE INSTAGRAM APPLICATION

Providing a description on the significance of digital and social media platforms are critical to this discussion, since they have evolved into a spatially, linguistically and culturally unbounded public sphere (Bohman, 2004). I have chosen the media space of Instagram for two major reasons. Firstly, it allows for sharing of the videos and images selectively, through an availability of filters for editing and sharing (Lim and Yazdanifard, 2014). No matter whether it is an image of a candid or a constructed moment, an element of ‘selection of the best of oneself’ is inherent to Instagram posts, which is very much manifested in the case of wedding photography. The second reason is associated to this. With an effort to reduce an excess of information, an excessive response sharing is also limited in Instagram, where long sentences, a variety of emoticons etc., can’t be used by the followers when compared to other social media applications.

INSTAGRAM REPRESENTATIONS OF BRIDE AND BRIDELHOOD

My observations on Instagram images of brides from the Eastern and Western regions of India can be explained as follows.

THE STYLE- CONSCIOUS and ‘desiring’ BRIDE

Ingraham, in his study on White weddings and its dynamic ideological complexes, explains the nature of bridal imageries circulated through wedding magazines (Ingraham, 2008). According to him, the portrayal of a style-conscious bride is very crucial to the visual documentation of wedding practices brought in or fostered by the Neo-liberal market. As noted by Sonwaney and Chincholkar (2019: 35), a ‘paradigm shift’ has happened in the Indian retail industry and buying behaviour in the case of wedding apparels. They write:

...with time, choices of Indian brides and other family members are also changing and now they are looking for more customized, unique, branded and luxurious solutions. Brides are more experimental and do not hesitate to try something new but at the same time brand conscious too. Bollywood movies, social media, celebrity weddings, aware-
ness related to fashion and current trends and various makeover programs intensified their aspirations and demands and not only brides but grooms are also fashion and style conscious.

To mention the cases of certain Instagram posts I had considered for this analysis, one can find how a bride’s identity is portrayed as associated with the brand as in the case of titling a bride as ‘Sabyasachi Bride’ (Image 1), ‘Brides of Kalkki’ (Image 2) (Both are clothing brands from India), etc. While most of these bridal images and accompanying messages stress on ‘bride’s selection’ of a particular brand, colours, materials etc., the identities of a consumer or persons related to that consumption and the identity of bride are converged and shown as one. I would argue, that along with presenting the bride and her appearance as a ‘whole’, the specifics of each ornament are given importance in the visual documentation of the wedding, when it comes to the Instagram images of brides.

Image 1

![Anisha Bafna wearing a Sabyasachi outfit, with the text Anisha Bafna A Sabyasachi Bride]

Source: Instagram.

This aspect of ‘consumption’ and display of status of a propertied class is mediated through the settings of this application. Two of such means are ‘Tagging’ of people and places and backdrop selection. Rich, Haddadi, and Hospedales (2016) based on their study analysing the Image-Hashtag association in the case of food images argue, that through this, either a contextual information or sentiment is being evoked for a user by the one to post it. Rauschnabel, Sheldon, and Herzfeldt (2019), in their study on the use of hashtags (Use of # symbol) on social media maintains, that it functions as a means to structure the content or the post,
which is the case with how documentation of brides is happening in the regions I have mentioned. Along with that, their study identifies certain motivating factors including amusing, organising, designing, confirming, ‘trendgaging’,2 bonding, inspiring, reaching, summarizing and endorsing, that necessitates a digital circulation of images.

Image 2

Here, I want to elaborate on the factors that stand immediate to the idea of bride as a consumer and ‘brand conscious girl’. Hashtagging becomes a way to state the bride’s belonging, her engagements with different brands, wedding professionals and to highlight the degree of bonds with each one present in the wedding scene.

This is the act of endorsing, where the bride is identified with a brand, person or an ideology she wants, or is supposed to enact. This too can be referred from the Instagram images shared by wedding photographers of these regions. Such endorsements cover the kind of ‘bridal femininity’ which the image proposes to represent, i.e., representation of the bride’s class or caste identities. Here, one can

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2 A term combining the concept of engaging and trending topics (Rauschnabel et al., 2019: 479).
notice how different agencies or people who were sourced for the wedding, like the wedding planners, caterers, bridal make up studios, etc., become indicative of one’s class status and bride or her family’s ‘taste’ of choice.

The above-mentioned factors for hashtagging could also be observed, when one takes the case of tagging of places or geo-tagging, where the possibility to identify the location with a ‘hyper-local geographical area’ (Flatow et al., 2015: 127) is explored and a statement of one’s class or reference group is visualised. This could be understood in the case of ‘destination weddings’ and their documentation. Some of such locations I found as geo-tagged include Laxmi Vilas Palace in the state of Gujarat, Castle Kalwar, a heritage stays in the state of Rajasthan, Lotus Eco Beach Resort in the state of Odisha (Image 3) etc., which can be considered as possible markers of distinction based on one’s class identity.

To brief the portrayal of a bride and the backdrop of Laxmi Vilas Palace as shared on the page of a Ranu Mistry (Image 4), a wedding photographer from Gujarat, she is seen wearing an attire considered to be wedding wear of upper caste Hindu

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3 Locating a specific, small geographical area with high precision (Flatow et al., 2015).
women in Western regions of India which includes an upper garment called *pathia* or *kachli, kurti*, a lower garment called *ghaghra* and a veil called *Odhna*. While considering the composition of this image, any ‘asymmetry’ associated with the portrayal of bride and the backdrop in terms eliteness is dismissed. It is interesting to note, that the making of bride as a ‘historical subject’, through the use of backgrounds like that of a palace or similar buildings built in the historical periods, especially pre-British periods, enables a ‘Hinduness’ or ‘Indianness’ to be invoked.

Image 4

This is again visible in the case of wedding jewelers and dress designers. The ‘Heritage Bridal’ (Image 5) project by wedding jewellery and dress designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee, the bridal jewellery collection by Kalyan Jewellers named ‘Polki: A Royal Reminiscence’ or ‘Muhurat wedding jewellery’ (Image 6) etc., create referential bridal imageries, and social media facilitate a circulation of such images.

Similarly, a representation of bride’s taste for ‘classy’ products is evident through the presence of vintage objects in the background and the bride’s preference or the couple’ for products like vintage sandals by Mochi, trousseau boxes for jewellery, etc. As Cassidy and Bennet (2012) have rightly pointed out in their study on the trend towards vintage fashion in UK, along with many other
functions, they help the consumer to mark one's individuality and distinction from the mass-produced products by fast moving trends.

Image 5

Source: Instagram.

Image 6

Source: Instagram.
Rajesh Gupta in his work on ‘Wedding Tourism in India’ brings in a similar argument by linking wedding aspirations, class factor and spaces (Gupta, n.d.). According to him, urbanism has become central to wedding aspirations in weddings in India, where wedding destinations with visual cues of a ‘rural India’ is less preferred. This goes with my reading of the Instagram images of wedding and wedding destinations in these regions. According to Gupta (n.d.: 14-15):

Travel determinants and motivators of wedding namely farm houses, resort location, international destinations, star category of hotels and also the grand services offered in them acts as a severe pull factor that motivates the invitees and plays an important role in decision making to initiate a destination or urban grand wedding. Such motivators and reasons are replacing the traditional tourism… hence defining a Wedding activity as an urban tourism have no impurities. An Indian communal or destination wedding mainly emerging from an Urban region takes the shape of Urban Tourism.

Bride and Her Symbolic Performance of Gender-Specific Acts

In her paper titled ‘The Wedding as a Reproductive Ritual’ Rebecca Burch (2019) explores the wedding rituals and objects to explain their symbolic significance with reference to its reproductive goals across cultures. According to her, wedding, as an event symbolising and legitimising the biological reproduction could be noticed from the food, where seeds and grains are used, use of flowers, almonds etc., to shower the bride and groom (as in the case of 18th century Jews in Poland), use of three-tier wedding cake in Catholic weddings (Sullins, 2017) and similar objects. But, in the case of Instagram images I have consulted, one cannot see these objects and rituals symbolising female fertility or reproductive heterosexual marriage retaining the very same denotation when it is translated to visual documentation and other circulation techniques facilitated by the social media. This was the same case with analog photography or other means used to capture and circulate images, which asserts the premise, that there can be a dilution, reconfiguration or modification of the ritual process and their meanings with devices for visual documentation, which is the case with above-mentioned aspect as well.

Symbols related to virginity and chastity is another element Burch engages with, while considering the gender related aspects of a wedding. ‘Reluctance of the bride’ or resistance to her husband are some of the ways through which this ideal is displayed. The author cites similar examples from India, where Rajput women are given instructions not to look happy during the wedding, seclusion of the bride from her own male relatives etc. Ellen Junn in her study on how love, marriage and sexuality are portrayed in the media examines the Walt Disney animated family films to understand the nature of intimacy depictions since 1990s. Her study argues how media in general have portrayed women as sexually subservient and “objects of sexual advances by men” (Junn, 1997: 6). But, what one can notice from the Instagram pages of some wedding photographers would be compliances as well as negations with regard to this. The ‘to-be- bride’ that appears on Instagram images does not conform to the
norms regarding ‘reluctance’. The ‘Save the Date’ photography and changing notions of wedding as the only event, legitimising a male-female union in terms of physical proximity etc., thus need further investigation in terms of the changing discursive practices on gender and female sexuality. As Alvares (2018: 657) argues, these bridal images, circulated through the social media, do enforce a neoliberal culture that demands a “hypersexualised performance of femininity”. As I have mentioned before, wedding photography tries to make negotiations in the presentation of a bride. She is, thus, shown as adhering to, and willing to perform the rituals and values of one’s caste, religion etc., and at the same time, she celebrates her belongingness to certain values identified with that of modernity. Such values and identities include autonomy of the woman, an educated and modern woman, a woman who is knowledgeable and exposed to the ‘outer’ world; or a reversal of the gender norms of dominant-submissive, reluctance norms etc.

Image of a couple kissing in save the date posts of weddingfocusphotography from Gujarat (Image 7), a bride and groom cheerfully shown with wine bottles and glasses as I could see from the posts by jaipurweddingphotographers from Rajasthan (Image 8), etc., can be cited as examples.

Image 7

Source: Instagram.
Another aspect I could notice from these images, would be the making of a ‘disciplined bridal body’. As Paula Saukko and Lori Reed (2010) have argued, the wider social regimes play a significant role in shaping one’s relation to his or her own body; which is a social structure supportive of neo-liberal ideologies on consumption, in this case. Though there is no negation of practices regarding gender and health available in the wedding media, one can definitely discern that it is those practices and preparations linking body, beauty and femininity that are being highlighted in these Instagram images.

Another site that can throw some light into this would be, the nuances in the bridal make up, i.e., the colours, colour contrasts, luminance etc., selected for the beauty products used for the bride. For instance, the significance of lipstick in expressing one’s choice, privilege, morality etc., has been something on which feminist scholars have written a lot on (Gurrieri and Drenten, 2019). When one considers studies based on other cultural contexts, it becomes apparent, that global discourses on colourism reflect in the production and use of cosmetics. Cynthia M. Frisby observes in her study on colourism and cosmetic industry observes, though is a difference in the foundation shades, with higher number of shades being available for the ‘light to medium skin tones’, one can notice certain changes (Frisby, 2019: 49-50). She notes:

Beauty brands are starting to positively serve the female consumers and have clearly made the availability of shades for darker skin tones more accountable. It may also be implied that imbalances in shades may be shrinking and that the progress documented in this study may also suggest that women of color will find darker shades.
When it comes to an ‘online staging of femininity’ with regard to the bodily norms, one cannot find a complete negation of culturally prescribed notions of body images and practices for desirability, like a fair or medium complexion, wider hips and breasts, large eyes, red lips etc., for the bride, though they are subjected to time and region-specific variations.

Rachel Wood (2016) argues, these moments of a ‘body project’ and requirements for self-improvements are posed by a Western Neo-liberalism. She also mentions, how ‘preparations’ like weight-losing or waxing become crucial in the achievement of a ‘desirable’ surprise out of a female body. So, my efforts to locate gender and its intersection with disability within the frame of wedding photography was limited by absence of ‘disabled bodies’.

Similar to what Brooke Edin Duffy argued, in her work on Women’s magazines in the context of US, there is a celebration of ‘authenticity’ in the representation of women in magazines and other media, what Hugo Schwyzer calls as ‘authenticity advertising’ (Duffy, 2013: 133). Duffy posits, that a trend is on the making, where the ‘realness’ of the woman is represented through the presence of women belonging to different age groups, races, sizes, body types etc., while the consumers also perform the roles of content creators, spokespersons etc. When one has to read these Instagram images on the basis of Duffy’s observation, a negation of such ‘realness’ particularly in the case of the bride’s body could be noticed. This gives rise to a significant question, i.e., what are the ‘standards for a bridal body’ as one can draw from these images?

There are two aspects to the answer. Firstly, rather than any locale and community specific standards, a bridal body project shall be adhered to multiple standards. Thus, the body of a bride should be something that fulfils a ‘neoliberal aesthetics’ that tethers to a ‘Traditional Hindu Upper Caste Bride’ along with that of what I would call as ‘Bridal Others’ or how a bridal look is defined in distinct cultural and geographical locations. Thus, s desirable body would be the one that fits into what is identified to be a ‘traditional’ bridal look and bodily and ornamental prescriptions from other cultures (mostly wedding gowns by brides in the Western countries) are also desired.

Secondly, in the visual definitions of a traditional bridal look and its corresponding bodily prescriptions, particularly in the case of Western states, a dilution of any ‘locale specific’ prescriptions could be observed. Instead of any such ‘locale specifics’, an aesthetics is emerging, which reifies a set of bodily and ornamental norms which was historically present among the upper caste groups in the geographical areas which can be termed as ‘Northern and Western parts India’.

In the case of brides from the Eastern states of West Bengal and Odisha, one can find differences with other parts and among themselves in the use of clothes as well as jewellery.

Nevertheless, such differences can be premised only when it comes to the ‘look’ espoused by the brides during ‘essence of vivaha samskara’ or ‘most significant rituals of the wedding sacrament’ (Achari, n.d.: 15). This includes “holding hands (pāṇi-grahaṇa), fire-oblations (homa), going around the fire (pradakṣīṇa) standing on a mill-stone (aśmarohaṇa), offering puffed-rice into the fire (lāja-homa) and the taking of seven steps (sapta-padi)” , or its regional variants.
Regarding the prescriptions for bridal clothes, the images I have consulted do not show any deviation from a Colour Red for the bridal wear (though exceptions could also be noticed in certain cases). Along with the performance of a ‘sexual modesty’ (Johnson and Foster, 2007), the emerging dressing aesthetics allows the female breast to be a ‘spectacular aesthetic object’ (Gripsrud, 2008: 210), and condones assertions based on ‘young vs old woman’. In the case of lehengas (bridal wear), either in the case of the ones worn for the event with core ritual significance or related rituals or both, one can notice a visual signification of the bride’s upper body. This is mostly done through partitions between lower and upper body parts or through visible cleavages. According to Khan, Javed, and Mercer (2015), an ‘aesthetic cleavage’ symbolises feminine beauty along with one’s wealth and social stature. Similar is the case with the waist and other body parts, which should satisfy the demands of a new visual aesthetics and its standards.

Similarly, the selection of a bridal lingerie is significant, which shall ‘go with’ the bridal wear. As Gadhvi (2015: 40) explains in her thesis on the designing of bridal lingerie in the Indian context:

> The design process starts with the mood board which depicts the mood of Indian women and her emotions on the wedding day. The next stage is inspiration board, inspirations from old movies has been taken which shows the beauty of Indian women in clothes and jewellery then the exploration of designs and reaching to final design.

Coming to the jewellery of the bride, while gold jewellery is worn by brides from West Bengal and Orissa during the most important ritual(s) of the wedding, brides from the western states are shown wearing jewellery with precious stones and other metals. The auspiciousness of ‘red’ bangles (Untracht, 1997) is another aspect one can discern from these images. In other rituals like Haldi (where the bride’s body is applied with turmeric paste and other oils), Mehndi (wearing of henna on hands and legs) etc., use of floral jewellery in plastic or metal ornaments were found.

These Instagram images allow one to surmise on a democratisation of colour and designs of these jewellery and clothes, facilitated by the visual media and visual presentations, where the ‘authenticity’ of the metals or stones used in the jewellery or fabric of the clothes (if the brand name is kept unknown) remains unknown to the viewer. As Mehrotra argued in her study on the use of Gold in India, the use of fashion jewellery, costume jewellery or jewellery with an ‘aesthetic’ significance (Isas Departmental, Dec 15, 2015) are definitely some of the emergent ornamental practices in the context of weddings in India. The argument put forth by Sasha Newell (2013), on the ‘public secret of performative display’, becomes significant in this context. She observes in her study on the use of American and European brand-name sportswear, that how an ‘anxiety’ is always present and visible over the authentic value and imitative value of an object. The author notices how through an act of ‘bluffing’ or a ‘masking ritual’, a ‘brand image’ is procured, not necessarily through ‘brand authenticity’, where any effort to mark social distinction is more about getting documented digitally.
and ‘aesthetically’, rather than the authenticity of the materials. Thus, the changing dimensions of jewellery as an object of visual aesthetics, the value of jewellery as the bride’s streedhan,4 etc., are aspects that are to be further explored through explorations on intersections between visual media, material culture and gendered wedding practices.

**The Bride Defined by Her Bridesmaid**

Along with the dilution of locale or community specific attire as I have discussed, a new culture of ‘bridesmaidhood’ (Bridesmaid refers to the “female friends or acquaintances helping a bride at a wedding” (Kim and Lee, 2014: 861) is seen surfacing. The authors in their study on the fashion styles of bridesmaids’ dresses, based on the movie ’27 Dresses’ argue, that like the bride’s dress, the bridesmaid’s dress also represents an aesthetic value linked to nationality and tradition. They also argue that in the pursuit of presenting a ‘harmonious wedding’, a complementarity between the bride’s attire and the bridesmaid’s attire is desired. The accompaniment of female friends or relatives with the bride is something one can notice in the weddings across cultures as they argue. And as Payal Bahl has noticed in her study on the booming ‘wedding industry’ in India, in the pre-wedding, main day and post wedding ceremonies in India one could see the bride being accompanied by her female friends or female relatives. This could be seen in the case of the Chooda ceremony,5 the Mehndi ceremony etc., in the case of Hindu upper caste brides in the Eastern, Western and even the Northern states of the present-day India (Bahl, 2010), which can’t be essentialised for their links with the new liberalisation of the economy. But, the ‘new’ demands and a wedding mood defined by the presence bridesmaids, their attire, poses and belongings are an ‘invention’ of the neoliberal ideologies; mediated by visual symbols of distinction. Here, I want to bring in the case of a “Bride-to-Be”, shared by a wedding photographer from Rajasthan (Image 9). In this image, the bride is shown in the company of her bridesmaids, who are in similar dresses, which can be considered as an indication of their identity as urban and educated women. It is to be noted, that rather than in rituals like Haldi or Mehndi, were traditionally one find the presence of female acquaintances of the bride, this is a moment ‘created’ for photogenic suitability where the ‘childish’ bride is spotted with her

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4 Streedhan can be interpreted as “the dowry often took the form of immovable assets such as land, and this property was considered women’s own. As concepts around property changed, dowry increasingly took the form of moveable assets, such as gold. The conversion of property to movable capital allowed for the control of capital to move easily from a woman’s father to her husband or parents-in-law, and women no longer held control of this property” (Wright, 2020: 442).

5 “The ceremony was performed by the parents of the bridegroom as these bangles were gifted by them to the bride” (Kalaiya and Sharan, 2016: 209).
company. The background also ensures a visual harmony between the theme, participants and the background with a ‘letter D’ in the bride is shown as slanted.

Image 9

Source: Instagram.

**The Bride As a ‘Micro-Celebrity’**

A review of anthropological literature on social media images of brides and bridal ornamentation suggests that certain themes have remained at the core of such discussions. For example, Cradduck (2018), in her study on wedding planning and influence of social media in the context of UK, explains how ‘sharing moments of progress’ of wedding preparations on social media has become a new perquisite for registering one’s ‘big day’. Similarly, Preston (2014) notes in his study, that these ‘instant group communication’ by certain social media platforms facilitates communication between the bride and others like the bridesmaid or kin that can speed up the selection and planning of ‘wedding appearances’.

Sharon Boden in her study on the development of a new consumer in the case of wedding culture in Britain observes, and terms this identity of a bride as ‘super bride’ (Boden, 2003). She writes, that a duality of reason/emotion is being operationalised in such weddings, where the bride has to negotiate between the roles of a ‘project manager’ and an ‘emotional childish fantasizer’. She observes

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6 Baudrillard in his collection of essays titled ‘In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities or the End of the Social’ argues that in mass communication, any imperative for rational communication is being resisted. According to him, through these means of communication, a spectacle or a meaning is given to the audience, where the signs and content are idolised in a spectacular sequence. Any ‘dialectic’ of such meanings are refused and the spectacle serves to be the ultimatum of the meaning of message (Baudrillard, 1983).
how weddings are stages for ‘invention of traditions’ and to highlight desirable cultural references, which can be also noted in the case of wedding images I have consulted for the purpose of this study.

Similarly, my analysis highlights how the observations made by Khamis, Ang, and Welling (2017) in their study on social media platforms and a ‘micro-celebrity’ culture, do correspond to the case of bridal photography and circulation in the context of India. Their study emphasises how this is vitalised by a ‘neoliberal individualism’, where one should be ‘distinct’ and ‘visible’ mingled with what the authors would call a ‘media surplus’, where there is a saturation of ‘so much’ for the viewers. The authors bring in the idea of a ‘selective-self presentation’ as it was explained by Goffman (1978), where the articulation of one’s subjectivity is largely determined by the audience.

What I could surmise from the images consulted here, is the making of every bride into a micro-celebrity, and such a look is a ‘complex’ activity involving both the human labour and immaterial labour. In this process of capturing moments from a wedding, the subtleties of such frames become significant (like trails of costume, the preparation of body, etc.) where one’s class identity, importance of consumption etc., are highlighted. Here, as I could observe how media or social media is becoming an ‘expert system’ for the audience as a reference to replicate, with prescriptions with respect to the bride’s body, bridal wear and the ‘vibe’ of the environment which is accomplished through the technical features of social media applications like Instagram.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THIS ‘WEDDING IDEOLOGICAL COMPLEX’?

Chrys Ingraham (2008: 78), in his work on the portrayal of heterosexual marriages in the context of the United States, discusses the concept of ‘wedding ideological complex’. It can be defined as those numerous sites of popular culture which “work as an ensemble in creating many taken-for-granted beliefs, values and assumptions within social texts and practices about weddings”. Such sites, he writes, include “children’s toys, wedding announcements, advertising, film, television, bridal magazines, jokes, cartoons, music”, etc. According to him, there’s a romantic portrayal of weddings, marriages and heterosexuality enabled by the popular media, whereas the consequence underlined by these images remain unnoticed, which is a ‘transnational capitalist patriarchy’.

When one places this concept to understand the nature of bridal imageries circulated in the popular media, one can find this ideological complex as heterogeneous. There’s an inclusion of elements like heteronormativity, image of the bride as wife-to-be and mother-to-be, traditionalism, etc. Along with that, the bride is also the representative of a ‘modern’ woman, someone who is informed by the discourses of feminist ideas (as it is celebrated in the popular media). But what I found common in both these cases would be a celebration of consumption, as I have already mentioned in the previous sections, rather than objects and rites symbolising gender hierarchies. And as Suri Ratnapala
(2003) has argued in ‘Moral Capital and Commercial Society’, one can see how the manifestation of a commercial desirability gets associated with a moral desirability. Thus, one can find these elements of a wedding industry involved in the making of a bridehood, that is symbolic of a ‘market-oriented’ feminism (Kantola and Squires, 2012); which is accommodative of symbols, that celebrate an ‘empowered’ woman, consumer subjectivities and an ideology of consumption (Knights and Sturdy, 1997).

The Instagram posts by designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee on his TV show ‘Band Baajaa Bride’ can be cited as an example (Image 10). The post (the show as well), does highlight this aspect of consumption. Though I don’t want to draw conclusions on the popularisation of new moralities attached to marriages in general and bridehood in particular, the construction of such moralities is quite visible. Though this new morality, which include pre-marital cohabitation, ‘revolutionary woman bride’, etc., get validated through several popular media spaces, wedding remains to be the ‘big day’ in a woman’s life. Weddings continue to validate the institution of marriage, where performance of bridehood becomes one of the most important aspects in the performance of femininity (Leonard, 1980), with new moralities being attached to it.

Image 10

Source: Instagram.
WHO CAN BE THE SPECTATOR HERE?

Laura Sullivan (1997: 196), in her paper titled ‘Cyberbabes: (Self-) Representation of women and the virtual male gaze’ argues that one could observe a ‘desire’ in the cyberspace, which is the “men’s” desire for a never-ending supply of images of women’s bodies to consume visually”. She also mentions, how the electronic age is ‘concerned’ with ‘bodies’ in general, and leave the question ‘whose body’, to be explored by future studies. To quote her:

…males still “own” women’s bodies to a large extent in the digital economy of images. Now, these men get images of women from magazines (from porn to fashion magazines) and scan them in, displaying them for the visual pleasure of other men all over the world (1997: 196-197).

What I could gauge through from my analysis is the visual portrayal of a ‘female bride’ and a ‘consumer bride’, contingent to other elements of social differences and hierarchies, like region, religion, race etc. Image based communication through a social media space, in my opinion, transgresses social differences and barriers in aspirations. This becomes more apparent when we consider the ‘advertising’ function of these Instagram pages and posts. As Patterson, O’Malley, and Story (2009: 17) have argued:

Women (and men) are persuaded to devote their energies to improving their bodies, thereby maximising their exchange value and ‘[w]e can begin to see how bodily attributes function as currency, securing further rewards and serving as a valuable resource’…. Such commodification is supported by the body-maintenance industry where youth, beauty, health and fitness become sources of embodied capital.

This could be premised in the case of ornaments as well, where the crucial concern is about inviting and satisfying a ‘gaze’ that looks for references for one’s wedding. Wedding thus becomes an event to establish an identity, which is aspirational as well as embodied, covering categories of gender, class, and region. Coming to the aspect of caste, one could definitely decipher ‘markers’ of one’s caste identity, through what I call a ‘project heritage’ through the use of ‘traditional’ or hereditary ornaments, an invoking of caste names etc. But as I have argued in the previous sections, certain artefacts that symbolised the elite or upper caste status have now become accessible through consumption.

CONCLUSION

This emergent Indian bridehood as I have tried to locate in this paper is based on the visual portraits of the bride and wedding. This study has not discussed how social structure mediates the circulation and reception of these images shared via the social media. There are changes happening to the wedding scenes in India, interfered and facilitated by the social media platforms. But, whether to
categorise this emerging ‘bridal femininity’ as something contingent to those aesthetic demands of neo-liberalism or a Brahminisation among caste Hindus and others or both, is something that need be studied by exploring interacting points of gender with other categories.

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