

# Gujarati Weddings

## MARRIAGE THROUGH THE AGES

### Gujarati Rituals

The Gujarati community are a lively lot who celebrate all festivities with magnificent splendour and glamour. All over the world they take pride in celebrating their festivals such as Navaratri and dance the night away in Raas Garbha... So when it comes to weddings, the Gujarati celebration can go beyond imagination!

The article below briefly highlights some of the traditions and customs observed and in modern time fine tuned to suit the occasion.

### The Wedding Prelude

#### Chandlo Maatli-Acceptance of Alliance

The chandlo is the announcement of the acceptance of the alliance between the two families and the consent of the bride and groom to come together in matrimony. Like most of the other Indian communities, the father of the girl starts looking for a husband for his daughter, as soon they are in their twenties (Olden times even younger!). Chandlo is the tika and maatli is the clay container in which sweets were packed in the olden days. The bride's father and four other male members visit the groom's and give him a shagun (a blessing symbolised by a token sum of money). This is when an astrologer normally fixes the wedding date but these days many do not look at these aspects and the date is often decided between the two families.

#### Mehendi, Garbha & Dandia-The Henna Ceremony

This is an intimate gathering of the bride's female relatives and close friends few days before the wedding. Mehendi (henna) applied in the fine patterns on the palms and feet of the bride. Songs specific to the occasion are sung. On the evening of the mehendi family and friends gather together dressed in the traditional finery and sing and dance the graceful garbha and the men join in later for the energetic dandia raas.

### Just Before the Wedding

#### Mandva Mahurat-Constructing the canopy for Wedding Rites

A day before the wedding, the blessings of Lord Ganesha are sought on the ground on which, the wedding canopy will be installed. Though family and close friends attend the mandva mahurat, only the women of the household observe the puja. The pujari performs a brief puja at the shrine inside the house then puts tika on the foreheads of five men from the family. He goes on to give them a small stick with nada Chari (red thread) wrapped around it. The men link their hands and carry this to site of the mandva and embed it into the earth. This stick is symbolic of one poles of the mandva, which will support the canopy. In modern times, the venue or wedding provider will take care of the stage setting and décor aspects for the bride quite easily.

#### Pithi-Beautification Rituals

A shrine is arranged with a picture of Lord Ganesha. The bride sits on a bajat (low stool), palms upturned. It is prerogative of the kaaki (paternal uncle's wife) to mix the pithi (a paste sandalwood powder, herbs, rosewater and German mogro (a type of perfume)). She then arranges the pithi on a decorated platter and has it blessed by the priest. The women of the household apply the pithi on the bride's skin.

### On The Wedding Day

#### Mameru – Bride being led by her Maternal Uncle

The bride receives gifts from her mama (maternal uncle). The custom of mameru originated centuries ago when there were no legal rights existed for daughters. When the girl grows up and gets married, the mama/family members comes with the mameru consisting of clothes, jewellery and other gifts items including the traditional paanetar (silk wedding sari-usually white with red border) and choodo (ivory bangle-now replaced with acrylic or plastic). The mameru ceremony takes place one day before the wedding but these days held on wedding day itself for convenience prior to other guests arriving. Once all the guests are seated -the maternal uncle escorts the bride to the Mandap often with a grand entrance and music played as a theme.

## Varghodo-The Groom's Procession

On the wedding day, the groom, dressed in all his finery, carrying a katar (small dagger) prepares to leave for the venue as an old custom. The priest gives the groom's sister a small bowl wrapped in cloth and containing coins, on which the Hindu Swastika has been etched. She rattles this over her brother's head to ward off the evil eye and to warn him that though he is getting married, he must not forget his sister. The groom's father's sister-in-law (chachi) garlands him and gives him a cluster of flowers. After being blessed by all he mounts a richly caparisoned mare and leaves for the wedding venue accompanied by his relatives and close friends. In UK, the groom arrives by a procession with many family cars following to the venue.

## Jaan or Phokhvu-Gesture of Understanding

### Var Ponke-Welcoming the Groom

The bride's mother receives the groom and the procession at the entrance of the wedding venue. She performs the traditional aarti, applies the kumkum and rice on his forehead. The clusters of flowers given him earlier by his aunt are now exchanged for a coconut decorated with red thread.

This interesting ritual involves the groom with their relatives arriving at wedding venue with grand entry often with Dhol players. Before the groom enters the venue, there is a little ceremony of laganya –one or two little boys related to the groom taken to the Mandap to welcome them and give gifts. Next the much awaited Groom makes his entry! The groom's prospective mother-in-law blesses the groom and performs a small ritual to ward off the evil eye before he steps into the entrance of the venue hall. She also tries to pinch his nose as she reminds him that he is the taker since he will be taking her daughter away and they are the givers. The Best man here attempts to block mother-in-law and this ritual is a little mischief played in a fun-way.

## Kanya Agamana

The bride is led to the Mandap once the priest announces for Kanya to be present. She will make her grand entry accompanied by maternal uncle (mama) and other family members. In the Mandap there is an antarpad (curtain) which separates her from the groom. Traditionally this concept was applied in arranged marriages as the groom would be meeting the girl for the first time! These days, not the case at all but custom is still carried on.

## Kanyadaan & Hastamelap-Entrusting the daughter

One of the most important wedding rituals is kanyadaan. It is a ceremony, in which the bride's parents wash the groom's feet and give his daughter's hand to him in the hope that he will take good care of her. The bride is considered to be a form of Goddess Laxmi and the bridegroom is considered to be Lord Narayana. Kanyadaan is performed in front of the sacred fire, facilitating the pious union of the boy and girl as the curtain is lowered. Hastamelap ceremony involves joining of hands and blessing the couple and the tying of the groom's shawl to the bride's saree to indicate union of two souls. This ritual is Chheda-Chhedi.

## Conforming the Wedding Vows

### Varmala & Madhuparka-The Couple Exchange Garlands

Varmala involves the exchange of garlands between the bride and the groom twice. First time, the groom is on a higher platform than the bride, while, the second time, they are at an equal level. In the madhuparka ceremony, groom's feet are washed. Also, he is given honey and milk to drink. While this ceremony is going on, the bride's sister tries to steal the groom's shoes, known as Juta Churai and in return get gift back. These days this little ritual has become a contest between two families as to who gets the shoes!

## Mangal Pheras & Saptapadi – Circumventions around the Sacred Fire

Pheras are rounds that the couple takes around the sacred fire, as the priest chants mantras by the groom that expresses his genuine and heartiest desire to seek his wife's loving support. In a Gujarati marriage, there are four mangal pheras, which represent Dharma (righteousness), Artha (monetary accomplishment), Kama (energy and passion in life) and Moksha (liberation from everything in life). Saptapadi are the seven steps that the couple walks together and takes vows which each step indicating true companionship and life-long partners. As they go around the sacred fire, the couple are showered with rose petals from close family members.

The bride and groom garland each other signalling acceptance of this partnership

Once the main rituals are conducted, other relatives and friends offer blessings to the couple and wish them for their new future followed by photo sessions and lunch or dinner that has been laid out.

## Vadava Vanu-Bridal Send Off

In the Vidai ceremony, the bride bids farewell to her parents and relatives. She boards a specially decorated car along with her husband. Then both move towards their home, with a new life awaiting them.

## Reception-Post Wedding Celebrations

This is an event borrowed from the West and is not mandatory. The reception can be as simple or as elaborate an affair as desired. The purpose is to introduce the newly wedded couple to all relatives and the social circle. It is an occasion of merriment, when all the near and dear ones come to bless the newly wedded couple and give them gifts.