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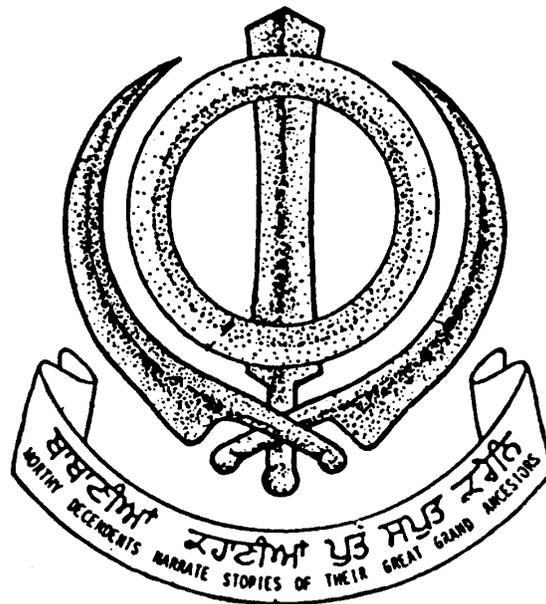
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Prof. Dr. Harnam Singh Shau
Principal Project Investigator
U G C. Research Project on Sikhism
605, Sector 16 Chandigarh.

The Sikh Marriage Ceremony



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The Sikh Marriage Ceremony

Mrs. P. M. Wylam

The Sikh ceremony of marriage, which is called **Anand Karaj**, has been current among the Sikhs since the time of Guru Amar Das (1552), though the **Lavan**, or four marriage hymns were composed by his son-in-law and successor, Guru Ram Das. In India, this form of marriage was legalised in 1909 by the passing of the Anand Marriage Act. Because of the social and domestic eminence accorded to the parents, it is regarded as a duty for them to arrange for and actively contribute towards the marriage of their offspring. In this way, this custom is followed by the Sikhs, especially in India. Sometimes, the marriage is arranged without the couple having met one-another and the nuptials are performed on the faith of the choice of the respective parents. However, in modern times, and particularly out of the area of the villages, a meeting between the pair is arranged and their individual agreement to the marriage is sought. 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.

In **Prem Sumarag**, a book on Sikh Code of Conduct, it is said: "When a girl attains maturity, it is incumbent upon her parents to look for a suitable match for her. It is neither desirable nor proper to marry a girl in tender age. The daughter of a Sikh should be given in marriage to a Sikh home. If a man is a believer in Sikhism, is humble by nature and earns his bread with honest means, with him a relation may be contracted without question and without consideration for wealth and riches. If he be a God-fearing man, the parents should marry their daughter to him upon God's faith. God-willing, their daughter will have all happiness and her parents will reap great satisfaction ... whatever arrangements the parents make for a marriage should be well within their means. They should not imitate ostentacious people. This is incumbent upon both sides. One who conducts the ceremony of marriage should not accept any gratification for it."

A formal engagement is not absolutely necessary, but if the parties so desire, the betrothal ceremony takes place at the boy's residence, where the relations of the girl go, taking with them a kirpan for the boy and one rupee which is handed over to him in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib. The parents of the boy take to the girl a present of a dress and a gold ornament. Perhaps under Western influence, it has now become almost customary to give a ring. It is deemed to be more in keeping with the spirit of Sikhism, however, to go together in a Sikh temple, where the same ceremony is conducted. The effect of it is a binding engagement of the couple witnessed by their relations in the most solemn manner.

When marriages are held in India, the ceremony takes place with pomp and pageantry. The bridegroom attended by his relations and friends proceeds to the bride's home town or village. A day or so before their arrival, all the maternal and paternal relations of the bride gather at her house. In the West, this gathering of the clans is deemed unnecessary and burdensome and is often omitted. After suitable prayers have been said, the **Braat** (or Bridegroom's party) sets off, in order to reach the bride's home by the evening. There it is welcomed, feasted and entertained by the bride's family. The groom and his entourage spend the night there because the marriage ceremony is arranged for the following morning, generally at an early hour. Following the singing of the Asa di Var, the Guru's morning hymn, relatives and friends of both the families assemble in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib. The marriage need not necessarily take place at the Gurudwara (Sikh Temple), but it may be conducted at the bride's home or any other suitable place where the Guru Granth Sahib has been duly installed in the proper manner. Any good Sikh (man or woman) may officiate at the ceremony, and usually, a respected and learned person is chosen. After the singing of Asa di Var and if time permits, some other hymns appropriate to the occasion, the groom is seated before the Guru Granth Sahib. After that, the bride comes and takes her place on his left.

The officiating person, having ascertained that the parties are Sikhs and that the couple have unequivocally agreed to be married, asks the couple and their parents to stand while the rest of the congregation remains seated. He then prays to God Almighty, invoking His blessing for the proposed marriage and begging His grace on the union of the couple. This connotes not only the consent of the bride and the bridegroom, but also of their parents which is given publicly. The parties then resume their seats, and a short hymn follows:

“Before undertaking anything,
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."

The officiant then gives a speech addressed particularly to the couple, explaining the significance of the Sikh marriage: "The Sikh Gurus had a very high regard for the state of marriage, and they themselves entered into matrimony. They insisted that marriage is not merely a civil or social contract, but that its highest and most ideal purpose is to fuse two souls into one so that they may become spiritually inseparable. Because the Sikh Gurus believed in the equality of women with men, they enjoined that women also should be taught a sound knowledge of their religion, so that by having common religious knowledge, the couple would be better able to cultivate the same basic aims in life and thus achieve harmony of outlook. A married couple should not find too much difficulty in achieving true and lasting love through a deep spiritual bond on union. The marriage hymns, or **Lavan** describe the progression of marital love between the husband and wife, and at the same time, the love and longing of the human soul for God. The four verses represent the four stages of love: **first**, the preparation and justification for the state of marriage which is encouraged and supported as the best state of life for a Sikh. It repudiates the idea that a religious person who dedicates his life to God should remain single. The **second** verse describes the first feeling of love when the bride has left her old life behind and begins the new life of partnership with her husband. The **third** verse describes the bride's (or the soul's) detachment from the world and outside influences, when she becomes more deeply devoted to her husband and wishes to live only for him. The **last** verse tells of the most perfect love and devotion when no feeling of separation is possible between the two. On the purely spiritual plane, it would be as if the soul has reached complete union with God and has found perfect joy of His love. The couple is asked whether they have taken **Amrit** (Baptism). If they say no, then they are asked to pledge to take Amrit as soon as possible.

The man and woman who undertake marriage according to the Sikh rites are expected and urged to strive after this ideal state of marriage. On the husband's part, this is to be achieved by his love and respect for his wife; his recognition of her individuality and

equality as a human being and life-partner. He should have nothing but kindness and consideration for her; and in his role as head of their joint household, he should guide and support her. On the wife's part, complete union is to be achieved also by her love and respect for her husband; her loyalty and support in all his life's aspirations, in the sharing of his joys and sorrows; and the willing harmonising of her mind and her thoughts with his, whether it be in affluence or adversity.

The two are to strive towards perfect and happy union on all planes of life: the physical plane, the material, intellectual and emotional plane and the spiritual plane. Only in spiritual union is complete happiness and satisfaction to be found. A man and woman who live together with no spiritual love for each other are not truly married, according to the Sikh Gurus. Guru Amar Das gave the following advice on marriage:

"The bride should know no other man
Except her husband, so the Guru ordains.
She alone is of good family,
She alone shines with light
Who adorned with the love of her husband.
There is only one way to the heart of the beloved:
To be humble and true and to do his bidding;
Only thus is true union attained.
They are not man and wife who only have physical contact;
Only they are truly wedded who have one spirit in two bodies.
Ask the happy one by what ways they have the beloved.
They answer, by sweetness of speech
And the beauty of contentment.
A loaf of dry bread and bare earth for a bed
In the company of the beloved, is full of happiness.
Let humility be the word,
Resignation the offering,
The tongue be the mint of sweet speech.
Adopt these habits, dear sister,
Then you will have him in your power.
Another person's property, another man's wife,
Talking ill of another, poison one's life.
Like the touch of a poisonous snake
Is the touch of another man's wife."

After this lecture on marriage, the officiant asks the bride and groom to signify their assent to the marriage, if they are prepared to accept the duties and obligations just described. They indicate their assent by together bowing before the Guru Granth Sahib. Then the bride's father places a garland of flowers on the Guru

Granth Sahib, and garlands the bridegroom and bride. He also places one end of a saffron-coloured scarf in the groom's hand, passing it over the shoulder and placing the other end in the bride's hand. Thus joined, the two will take the sacred vow.

Then follows a short hymn:

"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."

The Guru Granth Sahib is then opened and the first verse of the **Lavan** is read from it by the officiant. The same verse is then sung by the musicians to a set metre while the young couple slowly circumambulate the Granth Sahib. The groom leads in a clock wise direction, and the bride, holding the scarf, follows as nearly as possible in step. When the couple reach the front of the Holy Granth, they both bow and take their respective seats. The officiant then reads the second verse. The singing of each verse and the attendant circumambulation are repeated for each verse of the **Lavan**. During the last verse, the congregation throws flowers and petals on the pair as a sign of happiness and by way of congratulations. The ceremony is concluded with the customary singing of the six stanzas of the **Anand** followed by the Sikh Prayer (**Ardas**), in which the whole congregation joins. The culmination of the ceremony is a reading of a verse from the Guru Granth Sahib at random, and then the congregation is served with the sacred food, (**Karah Prashad**).

LAVAN—THE MARRIAGE HYMN OF GURU RAM DAS

Arrangement by P.M. Wylam

1. 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.

6.

2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.



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Please write to:-

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10 Featherstone Road,
Southall, Middx. UB2 5AA.
Tel: 01-574 1902

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