

SECTORAL UPDATE

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Real to Reel: The grand canvas of Indian weddings is the stuff that makes dreams. Real-life couples now play out their fantasies in reality and on celluloid for eternity.

PHOTO BY JAWAD MIR



PHOTOS COURTESY KNOT IN FOCUS

WEDDING INDUSTRY

Big Fat Indian Wedding

Indian weddings in their new avatar are more luxurious and extravagant, spawning a whole new industry. **BY RAVI SAGAR**

Nothing seems to dampen the fervour of the Indian wedding industry. Its glitz and glitter continues to dazzle, riding out the recession and the tough economic ride with all its pomp and show. In fact, from all accounts, Indian weddings are only getting bigger and fatter.

In March 2013, Taj Group of Hotels of Indian Hotels Co. Ltd unveiled its survey of the Indian wedding industry titled *The Taj Wedding Barometer*. The company's purpose in undertaking the survey was to tap the business potential of the industry. In a media interaction, the Taj spokesperson was quoted as saying that the company, which was exploring various avenues of growth, had never looked at weddings, a recession-proof sector, as a product. But Taj was now focussing on weddings as an opportunity, and a rather huge and growing one as the survey estimates the value of organised Indian weddings at ₹100,000 crore (US\$ 16.34 billion), growing 20 per cent year on year.

Old Wine in New Bottle

Though the extravaganza of Indian weddings has a historical perspective, the renaissance that it has been undergoing in the past few years has given rise to a new industry occupied mainly by a young and new category of service providers and professionals that fulfill rather evolved demands. Take for example, Apoorv Kalra, Founder, BollywoodShaadis.com and WeGettingMarried.com. It was while pursuing a management course in the USA that Kalra noticed the lacunae in the wedding market. "I saw how difficult it was to find the right wedding vendors to pull off an Indian wedding. There were match-making/matrimonial websites like Shaadi.com, Jeevansaathi.com, etc., that helped people find the right partner, but what next? How to start the wedding planning? Most people are clueless. This was the opportunity and to fill this gap, BollywoodShaadis.com was born."



“Wedsites act as a one-stop solution for weddings, right from finding vendors to getting expert advice in the form of articles.”

—Apoorv Kalra,
Founder, BollywoodShaadis.com and
WeGettingMarried.com

In India, the wedding day is thought to be the most important day of a person's life and no expenses are spared to make it as lavish and extraordinary as possible. Parents start saving for the day right from the time of their child's birth. However, with lifestyle changes

infringing on time, "there was a need for a wedding planning portal that could not only help the soon-to-be-married to find the right vendors for their wedding but also keep them updated with top wedding trends in India," says Kalra, who set out to meet these needs.

Kalra, who pioneered the concept of wedding portals in India, explains the reasons for the success of 'wedsites', "Apart from streamlining the otherwise chaotic process of planning a wedding, wedsites act as a one-stop solution for weddings, right from finding vendors to getting expert advice in the form of articles."

The right mix of trend, advice and technique for making the D-day perfect has been the reason for the phenomenal success of Kalra's wedsites. "In just two years of inception, BollywoodShaadis.com has now grown to one million unique users per month. We have more than 3,000 wedding vendors across India who are registered with us and are generating good business from us on monthly basis. BollywoodShaadis.com is now India's biggest wedding planning site as per Alexa and comScore," Kalra informs.

His other portal, WeGettingMarried.com, is an extension of BollywoodShaadis.com. Kalra explains its purpose, "Through this website couples can create their own personal wedding website. In today's busy life, people seldom have



▲ **In Focus:** The traditional ceremonies are now larger than life with cameras rolling in the background.

time to personally visit and invite relatives for the wedding. Since majority of the people are connected through the net, what better way to invite guests but by a custom-made wedding website?”

Couples can include photos, event details, etc., and send the website address as an e-invitation to their guests. This personalised, time-saving and eco-friendly concept of sharing the wedding story has been a great hit. “We already have more than 7,000 members who have created their personal wedding website through WeGetting-Married.com,” informs Kalra.

Kalra estimates the Indian wedding industry to be a staggering ₹2,38,298 crore (US\$ 38 billion), the size of “the economy of a small country and growing at the explosive rate of 20 to 25 per cent a year”, and says, “Informational resource portals are here to stay for a

very long time, especially in the wedding planning domain.” His confidence is based on a deep analysis of human psychology. “It is quite interesting when you look at it this way. Though people search information on the internet, they rely on human recommendations only, preferably expert advice. Luckily, we have social media websites that make it possible to integrate human interaction with technological prowess.” His website does exactly this with his panel of expert advisors meeting the needs of the brides who log on to “seek answers to many of their urgent questions”.

With his finger on the pulse of the wedding market, Kalra has planned out his future vision. “By the end of the year, we will be launching Bollywood-Shaadis.com in USA. Soon after that, we will begin working on the UK ver-



“I saw the opportunity in the wedding industry that was undergoing a slight change with young people looking for something fresh.”

—Jawad Mir,
Founder, Film-Style Weddings

sion. Within about three years, we hope to cover every country with a large population of Indians, such as Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Australia, South Africa and Canada. While expanding overseas, we plan to continue to add more and more cities and states in India to our website.”

The Bigger the Better

The Taj Group with its 100-year history of opulence and aesthetics is known as a dream wedding destination for the elite. It has hosted over 3,000 weddings that had an average 350 guests. Today’s weddings are bigger with 500 being the average number of guests. At the lower end it is 251, but the guest list could go up to 1,000, according to its survey.

If the guest list is getting longer, the menu is not far behind. Guests are being served between 5–15 cuisines,

The Old Order Changeth

The average budget for a middle class Indian wedding is estimated to be ₹21.32 lakh (US\$ 34,000). The last few years have seen many trends mushrooming in terms of wedding spends done by the middle class:

Hiring of a wedding planner: Though this industry existed five-six years ago, this trend was limited to the upper middle class but now even middle class couples are open to hiring wedding professionals to plan their wedding instead of letting friends and family pitch in. Couples are now knowledgeable about the fact that wedding planners streamline the entire preparations and let the couple, their family and guests enjoy the wedding.

Hiring a professional choreographer: Not very long ago, the *sangeet* was an occasion when the ladies of the family, usually on the girl’s side, came together to sing and dance to fortune-bearing songs. This too has changed in the last few years, as Bollywood movies have had a great influence on people. Couples now hire choreog-

raphers who can charge ₹1,000 to 10 lakh (US\$ 15.94 to 15946.42) an hour as a package for all wedding dance performances!

Professional Catering services over

Halwais: An average middle class wedding up to a few years ago had a local *halwai* churning out the dishes for the wedding menu. This too has disappeared with the streaming in of professional caterers. The usual Indian cuisine is now replaced by at least three types of cuisines (and 25 dishes) at a middle class wedding.

Choice of wedding trousseau: People are now aware of brand trends and what a celebrity is wearing, and they want to wear it on their wedding too. Earlier, an outlet in Rajouri Garden, Chandni Chowk or Karol Bagh used to be a one-stop shop for budget wedding *lehengas*. But now a typical trousseau spend, even for the middle class, is a minimum of ₹2 lakh (US\$ 3189.28), going up to ₹15–20 lakh (US\$ 23919.63 to 31892.84) amongst the upper middle class, hence raising the bar for expenditure.

SOURCE: BOLLYWOODSHAADIS.COM



▲ **Happy Feet:** Professional choreography adds a Bollywood touch to the Sangeet Ceremony.

▶ **Princess Weds:** Weddings now hark back to the royal nuptials of India.



▲ **Designer Bride:** Trousseaus are now made to order by the best names in the industry.

with south Indian and Chinese topping the fare, says the survey.

As India has the largest youth population (a nation of 1.2 billion people with a median age of 24 years), predictably, the marriage industry is set to profit the most as more and more tie the knot. According to estimates, in the next 10-12 years, around 40 crore Indians will be tying the knot. The per capita income of the country is set to grow three times in the next 20 years and the over 400 million and expanding middle class with rising disposable incomes, is further adding to the lustre of the industry.

As parents try to resurrect a wedding day fit for the Indian royalty of yore, with no expenses spared, the Indian movie industry, with its big fat wedding sequences, is adding to the trend. Weddings are thus becoming week-long affairs with all the elements of dance and drama thrown in.

Understandably, everybody is readying for a bigger bite of this wedding pie.

Getting Organised

Till recently, a wedding was a strictly family affair, managed by a family elder with the younger members working under his guidance. But now, the professional manager or the wedding plan-



PHOTOS COURTESY KNOT IN FOCUS

ner minutely orchestrates each detail, from the *mehendi* (henna) ceremony, the bride and groom's finely matched attire, to the flower decoration, to the food and decor.

Candice Pereira, Co-founder and Creative Head, Marry Me – TheWedding Planners, says, "We do everything from start to finish." This includes, "From the venue bookings, stationery, design and decor, photography, videography, F&B, gifting, trousseau shopping and packaging, entertainment planning, and so on...right to honeymoon planning," Pereira lists out the services. Since different clients need differing levels of involvement, Pereira's outfit first provides consultation to understand their level of involvement "as every wedding is very different to the other", she adds.

For Pereira, who belongs to a family that has been in the hospitality and wedding business for more than three decades, hospitality management was a natural career choice. Her entry into the relatively new wedding planning territory began after she moved back to India upon graduating. "I, along with my partner, Jarret D'Abreo, realised the need for wedding planning in here. I have always enjoyed entertaining, planning, organising and decorating. And I especially loved weddings, having experienced them from a young age as my parents were in the business. Jarret D'Abreo has a background in corporate and events industries and that helped a great deal too," explains Pereira.

Weddings in India are by nature lavish affairs, says Pereira explaining the vast canvas of Indian weddings. "We

plan all kinds of weddings from a one-day wedding to a week-long celebration. The maximum number of events we have planned for one wedding has been nine which were back to back! We have also planned very private weddings for just the family (sometimes even just the couple!) to weddings with 4,000 guests. Since most Indian weddings have many different events, there is usually a need for different themes to keep each event different to the other and interesting. Destination weddings especially are gaining popularity with beach weddings and palace weddings

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—Koval Bhatia,
Founder, A Little Anarky Films

topping the list.”

Kalra agrees, “The trend of destination weddings is picking up really fast.” Talking about the locales of choice he adds, “The most preferred Indian destinations for weddings are Goa, Jaipur, Udaipur, Jodhpur and Kerala. Among foreign locations, Thailand, Dubai and Hawaii are mostly chosen by Indian couples.”

In India “Weddings are huge!” Pereira says and the reason for weddings becoming extravagant affairs, according to Pereira, is the fact that “a wedding is possibly the biggest and most important party or event you will throw in your life. In India especially, we as a culture, love entertaining! Weddings are definitely getting more elaborate with more attention paid to details.”

Decoding Indian Weddings

Weddings are indeed a fascinating affair in India and are called ‘Big Fat Indian Wedding’ for reasons. On an average 10 million weddings take place every year. The Indian wedding industry is estimated to be a staggering ₹2,38,298 crore (US\$ 38 billion)—the economy of a small country—and growing at the explosive rate of 20 to 25 per cent a year. The average budget for a middle class Indian wedding is estimated to be ₹20.76 lakh (US\$ 34,000). Each year, around 2,000 high-end weddings take place in India. These are multi-day extravaganzas that defy the western imagination, complete with pyrotechnics, performances by gyrating Bollywood actors and international music stars, and thousands of invited guests. The upper-middle and rich classes are estimated to spend upward of ₹6.27 crore (US\$ 1 million).

The bride’s jewellery at an average high-end wedding in India will have pieces which are ₹6.27 lakh to 25 lakh (US\$ 10,000 to 40,000) each, with an overall budget of about ₹1.25 crore (US\$ 200,000) for jewellery alone. At the weddings of ultra high net worth individuals (HNIs), jewellery pieces of ₹3.14 to 6.27 crore (US\$ 500,000 or US\$ 1 million) would not be surprising.

Today’s weddings are not just about designer clothing and food, they involve additional costs in terms of elaborate sets/themes, marquees, innovative bride/groom entry, heavily embellished wedding invitation cards, etc. A simple thing such as bridal mehendi application is now an industry worth ₹5,000 crore (US\$ 797.32 million). There are dedicated malls like the Wedding Souk in Delhi, spread over one acre with over 100 shops, and companies like GE Money India providing “auspicious” personal loan, exclusively for weddings.

SOURCE: BOLLYWOODSHAADIS.COM

This has also meant rising awareness and need for wedding planners in one’s once in a lifetime event.

Asked if the wedding planner concept has evolved in India, Pereira exclaims, “Definitely!” She elaborates that when she entered the industry most people weren’t too familiar with the idea. “There were event planners who managed certain areas like entertainment and decor for very large scale weddings. However, other than that, most weddings were managed by the families or maybe the office team.” According to her, things have changed so much that now almost every wedding feels the need to have a wedding planner, especially if it is a destination wedding.

Pereira calls it a necessity, and adds, “A planner will not only handle the stress of the wedding, but also ensure good access to reputed vendors, great rates with vendors, a good sense of aesthetics and managing and coordinating the entire wedding. This leaves the family to sit back and enjoy their own wedding, which has not traditionally been the case.”

The 3D Dreammakers

With so much effort and money going into making the Indian wedding a dream come true, another profession has been flourishing quietly on the sidelines and taking the shape of an industry—wedding filming. Koval Bhatia was just 23, with a Masters in Mass Communication from Jamia University, when she floated A Little Anarky Films. Amour Wedding Films, an exclusive wedding films division of A Little Anarky, captures the dreams of couples on celluloid for eternity.

Throwing light on the evolution of the wedding filming industry, Bhatia says, “This trend started two–three years ago, as more and more people gravitated towards the concept of sharing experiences and being an active part in what they share. The stories one shares, the experiences one goes through have acquired newer dimensions, and weddings are perhaps the

most intense such experience for a lot of people. It makes sense, therefore, to capture them as beautiful, shareable stories rather than flat archives.”

From a single-woman outfit where she would script, shoot and edit her own videos, today A Little Anarky Films has grown into a 15-member team with a plush space in Hauz Khas Village and a beautiful 2,500 sq ft studio. It has some of the most enviable clients on its list including Harley Davidson, Ford and Discovery Networks.

“Parallel to this, Amour was a low-key affair to begin with and we would mostly shoot friends or acquaintances,” says Bhatia. The growth of their off-shoot branch has been such that today they are usually booked around 8–12 months in advance.

Gone are the days when wedding videography made all films look a boring replica of one another. “Weddings in our country are usually all about the family. Since all families have their own rich histories, their own dynamics and foibles, each wedding film stands apart from the last,” says Bhatia. And to give each film its distinct flavour, Bhatia and crew “try and get acquainted with the people we shoot, get a sense of who they are and design our films to represent their uniqueness.”

Canada-based wedding filmmaker Jawad Mir, primarily a filmmaker, started a company called Sky Blue Productions in 2001 offering a variety of services including corporate films, music videos, commercials and wedding films. He entered the niche wedding filming sector in 2006. “I saw the opportunity in the wedding industry that was undergoing a slight change with young people looking for something fresh, and thus Film-Style Weddings came into being,” he recounts his tale.

Mir started with filming around two dozen weddings a year, but scaled down the numbers over the years for strategic and quality reasons. “Now we film a little over dozen weddings every year around the world.”



▲ **Candid Eye:** The camera captures true emotions even as it spins a fairytale around the celebration.

For Mir, the journey that started with the wedding of a couple, Sapna and Shawn, that he says pushed them, as well as the trend in the south Asian wedding industry, has been great. Mir made a concept film for the couple called *Main Aur Mrs Verma*.

Wedding photography has today metamorphosed into a highly skilled niche profession and occupies around 5 per cent of the ₹1,88,130 crore (US\$ 30 billion) wedding market, says Anand Rathi of Knot in Focus, a top-notch wedding filming company. “For bigger weddings the percentage expenditure is in the range of 7–8 per cent of the total budget. These are big numbers that are encouraging for skilled artists to take this up as a career option,” adds Rathi. The other reasons for the trend catching fire according to him are affordability of digital photography instruments and education about “candid” photography. “Thanks to social media and internet in

general Indians started to see what the wedding photography trends are like in the west. Hence, came the awareness that wedding pictures don't need to look the same as they looked a generation ago.”

Mir also feels that it was essentially the revolution of DSLR cameras that presented better quality as well as discreet approach to capturing wedding films that started the trend.

A common thread running among these wedding industry players is that most have jumped into the fray as a matter of choice. Kalra, Bhatia, Mir and Rathi and his partner Abhinav Sah all chose to enter the industry at an opportune moment. Anand studied engineering and MBA because he knew he could master them but he says, “I studied photography, because for the first (and only) time in my life, I had fallen hook line and sinker for something I was never intended for.” For Abhinav, a

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Director's Cut: Script reflects life story and the director does his bit to make it larger than life.

techie, “Photography happened when I first picked up a camera in 2005 while working for Disney in Bangalore. It grew from a thought to a full blown hobby. And slowly, I started shooting commissioned work for friends from the industry. “When one fine day a friend asked him to shoot her wedding in 2009, it “was the start of my love with shooting emotions,” he adds.

Today, the Knot in Focus team comprises an office team which includes editors and website managers and shooting crew of photographers, cinematographers, production line, assistants and on-location editors.

Rathi says they shoot not just “picture perfect but poster perfect” films. To be exclusive and non-repetitive is a conscious exercise for them. “We hone our skills every day,” Rathi adds. To keep up their uniqueness when not shooting weddings, the duo is reading up on newer techniques, brainstorming on shoot ideas with the team and shooting non-wedding stuff, for it provides a fresh perspective.

Rathi’s wedding films are like Bollywood films with trailer, poster and even customised songs. The execution is also like a film. The films are of variable length from 20 minutes to two hours. “It all depends on the content

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—Anand Rathi,
Co-Founder, Knot in Focus

that we get and the story that eventually comes out,” says Rathi. He adds, “For a full day of coverage with all the bells and whistles (albums, pre wedding shoot, film, trailer, candid pictures, etc.) our charges are in the range of ₹3 lakh to 6 lakh (US\$ 4783.93–9567.85).”

Knot in Focus works all over India and at popular international wedding locations for Indian weddings. “Within India we have shot extensively in Jodhpur, Udaipur, Jaipur, Goa, Delhi,

Kolkata, Bengaluru, etc. Internationally, we have shot in Thailand, Dubai, NYC, etc.,” Rathi elaborates.

Mir, who covers high-end weddings, travels the globe including Nigeria, United Kingdom, France, the US as well as India for wedding filming. He finds capturing the true element of each wedding a “very challenging task. A new location, other than your typical banquet hall, also helps us tell a story differently from a visual standpoint. But if we are in a situation, where there is a typical banquet hall involved, we try to make a film theme. It could be based on an emotional speech by the bride’s father or a creative *Joota Chuppai Rasm*, (shoe hiding of groom’s)” he adds.

Mir’s company introduced what he calls concept wedding films that are just making an entry into India. “They are separate and independent of wedding films, fictional or non fictional, featuring the couple, with their story or certain elements of their interests. These are used to introduce the couple at the reception,” he elaborates.

For Mir, equipment is a secondary element in the entire filming process that involves a lot of planning on the production side. “We utilise steadicams, helicams, black magic cinema cameras and RED Epic for our wedding films,” he adds.

Talking about the technicalities involved Bhatia adds, “A wedding film typically needs three-four cameras, a crew of six-eight people and a lot of other equipment like sound recorders, lights, cranes, tracks and the works. Some of our clients even ask us to do aerial filming now.”

Bhatia who charges around ₹1.5–2 lakh per day and takes assignments all over the country says, “We are aiming for international wedding films now.” The larger-than-life Indian wedding spans the globe with non-resident Indians making it an occasion to celebrate their roots with their families and friends. It is certainly a big fat global Indian wedding industry with players enjoying the *band, baja* and *baraati*. ■