

Shi'ite Culture in Kashmir Valley: A Study in Marriage Practices

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Abstract

The Shi'ite culture in Kashmir valley doesn't present a much different picture when it comes to marriage practices, from the Sunnis there. Like Muslims of valley and other Indian states, Shi'ite Muslims of Kashmir valley too practice an elaborate set of rites and rituals while solemnizing a marriage contract. The impact of Pandit culture becomes easily visible from the rituals and practices the Shi'ite Muslims perform while contracting a marriage. The Shi'ites of Kashmir valley seem to be part of a wider cultural complex, shared by all people belonging to that region as a whole. The present paper attempts to present the holistic picture of these rituals and practices that have become part of Shi'ite culture in Kashmir valley. The paper is based on primary data, collected through the tools of data collection like participant observation, interview and case study.

Key Words: *Shi'ite, Kashmir, khandar, rituals, practices*

Introduction

In Kashmir valley, Shi'ite minority community like Sunni majority community considers *Khandar*/marriage an important institution of Islamic culture. In essence, Shi'ite Marriage is not different from other Muslim sects. Shi'ites of Kashmir too show strict adherence to the tenets of marriage laid by Islam. The law of incest, payment of *mahar*, rule of polygamy, field of spouse selection, laws of divorce and widow remarriage, all distinguishing Islamic notion of marriage from non-Islamic notion, are strictly followed. In terms of marriage rituals and practices also, the two communities are not much distinguishable, however, both couldn't be sighted even at a distance from what is prescribed by Islam. In marriage practices, Shi'ites, like other Muslims seem to be part of a wider cultural complex shared by all people belonging to that region as a whole, and what this cultural complex prescribes to its practitioners goes against the tenets of Islam at many places.

Islam does not prescribe any elaborate set of rites and rituals for solemnizing a marital knot, the most important ceremony prescribed being the *Nikah* ceremony and giving of *walima* feast in its simplest form is also recommended.

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Imtiaz Ahmad,(1976) observes that though the Nikah ceremony, prescribed by Islam for sealing a marital union between two persons, is uniformly observed by Muslims in India, its social and religious significance gets underscored by the series of other ceremonies imbibed from the Hindu culture, that occur side by side to it. Same can be summarised of the Muslim marriage in Kashmir where the impact of Pandit¹ culture becomes easily discernible from the elaborate set of rites and rituals practiced by Muslims in general and the Shi'ites of the valley in particular. The rituals and practices are so elaborate that we need to caption and studied them under three categories. These include:

A. Practices before *khandar*: *There are number of ritual practices performed by Shi'ite Muslims of Kashmir before the actual day of marriage. These may include:*

Initiation of negotiations

Earlier mate selection among Shia's of Kashmir used to be in the jurisdiction of *moal/mouj* (parents) and *zithe* (elders) of the family only. However, now-a-days a belief in the joint selection by parents and children is gradually replacing that monopoly and the cases of individual selections (i.e., selection by children themselves) are not rare. Among Shi'as of the valley, initiation of negotiations starts from the boy's side. The Initiation of negotiations is usually done through a *manzimyor*/go-between, who may be a professional in the field of match-making. He brings the two families in contact for establishing the conjugal knot between the two. In many cases, close relatives or friends of the would-be couple themselves work for the match-making. A professional *manzimyor* gets remunerated from both the parties for the knot he gets tied.

Istikhara and Sitar Bhagnai

Istikhara means seeking opinion and goodness of Allah. Shia's strongly believe in performing *istikhara* i.e., asking exalted Allah for his opinion whenever they intend to do an important task. In the process of mate selection, if one or both the parties end up in dilemma i.e., whether to tie the particular marital knot or not. In such a case one or both the parties would approach a *moulvi* to perform the *Istikhara* and find out what Allah wishes in that particular case. The *moulvi* would give the parties a green or red signal depending on what comes out of the *istikhara* he performs. Some people would also try to explore *sitar bhagnai*/zodiacal compatibility of *ladke*/boy and *koer*/girl for their marriage. The ritual being

un-Islamic has been imbibed from the Pandit community of the valley. If the *sitar*/stars show compatibility, the *ladke* and *koer* are tied in to marital knot.

Thaff traven/ pyalas travun:

Thaff traven/ catch-hold or *pyalas travun/* putting in the cup is the first ceremony after both the parties agree upon entering in to conjugal kinship. In this ceremony one or two or more elderly members from the boy's side visit the girl's side where they are served tea or full *wazvan* feast. Then one of the guest puts an envelope with 101 or 505 and now-a-days 1011 Indian rupees inside, on the plate containing *pyale*-cup or simply gives the envelope to the bride. In many cases some gold ornament is also presented to the girl. The two parties become *soni*/in-laws after this ceremony

Nishani/ Engagement

Nishani/engagement is completed in two phases. First the Boy's side visits the girl's side called *Nishani*, second the girl's side visits the boy's side called *hazirkhan*. *Nishani* can either be *nabad nishani/laket nishani* (little engagement) or *nikah nishani/baed nishani* (big engagement). In case of *nabad Nishani*, only engagement is done in which boy's family visits the girl's side and present gold ornaments, monetary as well as non-monetary gifts, clothing including both bridal and non-bridal to the girl as a token of love.

Nikah/baed nishani

Nikah ceremony may take place before or on the actual day of marriage. In this paper we deal with its occurrence before marriage. *Nikah* ceremony is held at bride's house, but the festivities take place at both the houses. At The night before *nikah* ceremony *maenz/mehndi* ceremony takes place at both the houses. The close friends of *mahrin*/bride dye her hands and feet with *maenz/mehndi/henna*² and the friends of groom apply *maenz* on his right hand's little finger. All this takes place amidst singing of *wanvun*-Kashmiri folk songs by the female folk. Next day, the day of *nikah* one person from the bride's side visits the groom's house with *maaz diktchi*- mutton and chicken filled copper vessel. On the same day a party from the groom's side visits the bride's house with *Maeve Majmeh*- big round trays filled with sweets, candies and dry fruits and also with *jaidadh*/gold jewellery and *vardhan*/clothing for bride. The party of many includes one *Maulvi* also, who officiates the *nikah*. The groom however does not accompany the party. The party is received at the bride's house amidst singing of *wanvun* by the women folk. The party is showered with sweets and candies. The elderly

males from both the side negotiate the conditions of marriage contract. The three most important conditions of the contract to be settled are:

Amount and mode of *mahar* payment

The groom being absent on the occasion is represented by his *wali*, usually his father or guardian, who negotiate the amount of *mahar* with the *wali* of the bride, usually her father or guardian. The bride and groom have very little say in deciding the amount. The mode of payment may be *moajjal*/paid instantly at the nikah ceremony itself or *muwajjal*/deferred to the near future. Generally a part of the *mahar* is paid *moajjal* and the rest *muwajjal*. Then a *vakeel*/advocate who could pronounce the *Sigha of nikah*³ is chosen. The *vakeel* is a usually clergy who may be or may not be present at the ceremony, or he could be the accompanying *maulvi* also. The amount of *mahar*, its mode of payment and the name of the *vakeel*, the parties agree upon are written on the *Nikah namah*/marriage document by the *maulvi*. Then the consent of the *mahrin* sitting in the bridal attire is sought by the *maulvi* after loudly reading the conditions of the contract written on *nikah namah*. The bride shyly gives her consent and puts her signature or thumb impression on the *nikahnamah*. The audience collectively recite *Salawat*⁴ on Prophet and his progeny and seek their blessings for the couple. The women enthusiastically keep singing *wanvun* of religious nature. The *nikahnamah* is then signed by some responsible persons as the witnesses of the contract. The groom's side then distributes *nikah-sheerni*/sweets among people present there. The guests are served with the traditional *Wazvan* feast. The guests present gifts to the bride as a token of love. The groom's family presents *jaidadh*/gold jewellery and *vardhan* to the bride. On returning back, similar affirmation is then sought from the groom by the *maulvi*. The *nikahnamah* is then taken to the *vakeel* to pronounce the *sigha of nikah* and sign on it.

Hazirkhan

Hazirkhan ceremony includes the first visit of the boy's house by the girl's family. The family members and close relatives of the bride visit the groom's house along with *haziree*/gifts and presents for the groom, his family and even for his secondary and tertiary kins. The gifts for the groom usually include a complete shaving kit, garments, a watch, pair of shoes, groom slippers, golden ornaments including one or more rings, a chain, a tie pin and a brooch for the coat. The *Hazirkhan* also consists of the *maeve majmeh*- big round trays filled with sweets, candies and dry fruits.

Visitation on festivals

Both the families keep visiting each other except groom and bride. These visitations are marked by the exchange of gifts between the families. During the course from *nishani* to marriage, a number of such visitations are made by both the families. The various such occasions are; religious festivals, social occasions like marriage, a birth of a child or a tragedy in the family, seasonal occasions like *wandhe suit/wandhebhog* (winter present) for girl by boy's family that comprises of warm clothes, shoes and *kangri*⁵ for the bride. However, this *Kangri* now-a-days is being replaced by the room heaters, blowers, and electric blankets. Also every year with the advent of *Muharram*⁶/ the annual month of mourning for Shi'as, the boy's family may visit the girl's family with the *muharram bhog*/muharram present consisting of black clothing for the girl, she is supposed to wear during the mourning rituals.

Doh ganden/ Fixing of Marriage Day and date

Unlike Sunnis, each day and date is not equally auspicious and recommended for marriages in Shi'as. The prescriptions and proscriptions for fixing day and date for marriage are much elaborate. Generally Shi'as of Kashmir hold marriages in the months of *Rajab*⁷, *Shabaan*⁸, after the tenth day of *Id-ul-Azha*⁹ and the second half of *Rabi-ul-Awwal*¹⁰. Shia's denounce marrying during the mourning months of *Muharram*, *Safar*¹¹, in first eight days of *Rabi-ul-Awwal* and on the death anniversaries of fourteen infallibles and other members of the house of the Prophet. Like other Muslims, Shia's also avoid holding marriage in the month of *Ramazan*¹². Shi'as do not marry on last two or three days of every lunar month. It is not recommended for a Shi'a to marry on the days of *Qamar dar aqrab*¹³.

Saat Naam

The boy's side visits the girl's family with *saat naam* /document of dates fixed for marriage. Along with the *saat naam*, is usually a *zaen*/basket filled with *maeve*, *maenz*, *mushketujidabba*¹⁴ for the girl. A gold ornament is also presented. For the women folk, *maenz* to put on bride's hands should come from her *waeriuu*/husband's home.

Marriage Preparations

Marriage preparations soon start at both the houses. The preparations include; finalising modalities with *Waza*/cook, *Pujji*/butcher for supplying meat, *kandur*/baker for *Kulchi* and *Sheermal*, shopping of the items required for ceremony like spices, edible oil and

dry fruits for *wazvan* feast, *vardhan anun*/ buying clothing for the couple and other family members. Other important preparatory ceremonial rituals include *ziun chatun*/ cutting of fuel wood for *wazvan* feast *tomulcharun*/ cleaning of rice and *dapni nerun*/ initiating formal invitations.

B. Practices at the time of *khandar*.

Menhdi raat/ Maenzi raat-the night of henna

The festivities at both the houses reach to their zenith at *maenzi raat/mehndi raat*/the night of *henna*, in Kashmiri *Khandar*. Hustle bustle starts around in the morning itself when preparations and their executions begin. The *vasta waza*/head cook along with his men builds *verre* (wooden fireplace) for cooking of grand feast *wazvan*. The *maazwoal*-meat dealer comes with the flock of sheep the *pujji*-butcher starts slaughtering them to make meat available for the *waza*. The *tentwael*/camping agency erects *sayiban*/tents and the house decorator starts decorations. The ladies engage in cleaning of vegetables for the *waza* and making *Lipton chai*-sugar tea and *kahwe* available for the whole day. The *pechhi*-guests, including *rishtedar*-relatives, *hamsayi*-neighbours and *doss*-friends start showing their presence to help in the preparations and be part of the ceremony. The women burn *Izband*¹⁵ in *kangri* and wish *mubarak*/felicitations to *yezeman/yezeman bayi*¹⁶. Many families organise a congregational recitation of *Quran* or some *dua*-supplication on *maenz raat*. This is to invoke the blessings of Allah for the would-be couple through the *vaseela*/intercession of *Ahl e bayt*-the progeny of Prophet *Muhammad*. The *mahrin* takes the ritual bath, puts on bridal attire and her *yasse*/friends prepare her for the *maenzi raat*. The groom too remains busy with his own preparations, being assisted by his friends. All the invited assemble in *sayiban*/tent for *wazvan* dinner. After the lavish ceremonial *wazvan* dinner, friends of *mahrin* decorate her hands and feet with *maenz*, making eye catching intricate designs. This is a very enervating task as the bride has to remain vigilant and in a single posture for hours until the girls finish the exhaustive decorations. At *mahraraz*'s house, his close friends or brother or cousins wash his hands and feet. Then *maenz* is applied on little finger of his right hand only. Nowadays, this *maenz*-dyed little finger is wrapped in the monetary denominations of 100 or 500 or 1000 by groom's *panun tolle*-close relatives and friends. All this takes place amidst the singing of *wanvun* exalting both *mahrin* and *mahraraz* and praying for their prosperous future.

Yenniwoal/ Marriage day

Yenniwoal/actual wedding day is a busy day for both the families. The day at bride's house is earmarked for reception preparations of the *baraat*/groom's entourage. The preparations include cooking of grand feast for the *baraat*, preparing of *salad* and *chetin-chutney*, filling of refreshment baskets and erection of a separate *white house* for the *baraat*.

At the groom's house, *yenniwoal* is a more eventful day. In the morning, *salle mohniuv* comes from the bride's side with the formal invitation for *mahraz* and his entourage. For the *mahraz*, the busy and frantic schedule starts with ceremonial shaving of his beard and *maskasun*/haircut in the morning itself, followed by a ceremonial bath. The women keep singing *wanvun* until *mahraz* would complete the ceremonial bath. The bride also takes the ceremonial bath called *aabshehrun* assisted by *heryasse*/friend or *benni*/sister. The *mahraz* dressed in a *kurta pyjama* leaves for the local *maqbarah*/graveyard to recite *fatiha*¹⁷ and pray for the peace and salvation of his deceased relatives. This practice is called as *fatiyas nerun*. The *mahraz* accompanied by his friends visit local *astan*/shrine to recite *fatiha* there also. While visiting *Imambada*, the *mahraz* recites *fatiha* on *taazi*, *alam*, *shabih* and other symbolic representations of the memories of the Karbala battle. This is followed by visiting houses of close relatives and friends on their request, for a glass of *sharbat* or a cup of *chai*. The *mahraz* is showered with *mithayi*/candies and sweets and receives gifts at each house. After day's long hectic schedule, full swing preparations start in the evening for leaving of *baraat*. The friends of *mahraz* help him to put on his nuptial attire, a *sherwani*-nuptial gown and a *pagadi*-nuptial garb. The *salleri* groom's entourage includes his close relatives, friends, neighbours and family members. The *mahraz* leads the cavalcade and sets for bride's house.

Welcoming *baraat*

The groom's party is given a warm welcome at bride's house. The women sing *wanvun* exalting *mahraz*. Flowers, sweets, candies and coins are showered on *mahraz*. He is garlanded with *ropyimaal*-garlands of money and *poshmaal*/garlands of flowers, by family members and relatives of *mahrin*. The *salleri* are made to sit in a decorated hall or white house and the *mahraz* is made to sit on *masnand*¹⁸ a specially adorned seat, facing *Qabila*/Kabba. In case *nikah* has not been performed till this time, the ceremony then starts soon after the *baraat* reaches the bride's house (see *nikah* ceremony above). And if *nikah* had already been performed, then starts the extravagant *mahraz saal* feast. *Mahraz saal* stands as the most extravagant among the *wazvan* feasts served in a marriage. The famous *wazvan* served among

many are *rista*, *rojan josh*, *tabak maaz*, *daniwal korma*, *aabgosh*, *marchewangan korma*, *gushtaba*, *yakhen*, *sik kabbab*, *dhani phoul*, *meithi maaz*, *kokur*, *waza palak*, *ruwangan chaaman*, *mujji chetin*, *daniwal chetin*, *phirni* etc. It is hardly possible for a person to eat up his entire share. Now it has become a practice that extra dishes are packed in well adorned polythene bags prearranged by the bride's family and taken along with by each *salleri*. After the lavish dinner, starts the presentation of trousseau to *mahraz* by the family members and relatives of *mahrin*.

Rukhsati-Departure of Bride

After having done with feast, *mahrin* gets ready for new home. Her close friends help her wear *burqa* that had come with *vardhan* from her *Waeriu* side. However, the *burqa* culture is gradually being replaced by *lehnga*. The moment of her *rukhsati* fills the ambience with emotions, tears rolling down from her each kin's eye and all trying to console her and pray for her prosperous married life. The whole ladies camp becomes emotional. The ladies in their *wanvun* remind and caution *mahraz* that how much careful he should always remain for *mahrin*. The cavalcade starts for *mahraz's* home. On the way back, *mahraz's* friends stop his car at any bridge crossing, and demand *Kadletaar*/money to cross the bridge from him.

Reception of mahrin at Groom's house

The cavalcade reaches *mahraz's* home where *mahrin* is received by former's close female relatives. She sits on *masnand* with her head down, surrounded by women folk; all singing *wanvun* and waiting for *mohar tulin*-veil lifting ritual, a formal welcome ritual, her *hushh*/mother in law is supposed to perform. The *hushh* burns *izband* and showers flowers, sweets and candies and coins on *mahrin*. She then lifts the veil, kisses *mahrin* on her cheeks and forehead. This is followed by exchange of gifts between the duo- *hushh* and *noshh*. The *hushh* usually gives a gift in cash but receives a golden ornament called *hushh kaent* from *mahrin*. It is worth underscoring here that the *hushh* doesn't perform *mohar tulin* ritual in case she is a widow. In such a case, the veil of the bride is raised by some other female relative viz. sister or maternal or paternal aunt of groom and after that *hushh* takes the ritual further on. The women keep singing *wanvun*, welcoming and praising *mahrin* and seeking blessings of Allah for her. After sometime, *mahrin* is taken to groom's room for *shab e zafafa*-the night of consummation. The room is specially decorated for the night.

C. Rituals and Practices after *khandar*

KahweKhabar

Next morning, the bride's family sends a present called *kahwekhabar* to their daughter. The present customarily consists of a *Samavar*¹⁹, *sugar*, *tea*, *green cardamom*, *cinnamon* and some sweets, but new items are being added slowly and gradually in this ritual also. The *Kahwa khabar* was customarily used to be presented by *maam*-maternal uncle of *mahrin* and thus was also called as *maam khabar*. The purpose of sending *kahwa khabar* lies in sending felicitations for the successful consummation of the marriage by the couple.

Walima/Wathal

Walima is the feast given by the groom's family on the next day of marriage. It is called *wathal* in Kashmir. The groom's family invite close relatives, sometimes the bride's family also on this feast. Though both the *mardhe sabb*/men feast and *zanaan sabb*/women feast are given, the feast is specially meant for ladies as the bride is the centre of focus on this day. The guests give gifts to both *mahraz* and *mahrin*.

Satim/ seventh day

Earlier this ceremony was practiced on the seventh day, but nowadays after the third or fourth day of the marriage. In this ceremony, a party consisting of *mauleun*/parental family members of *mahrin*, and other relatives and friends visit her *Waeriuw*/in-laws' house to fetch her back. The party brings along with them a huge cache of trousseau for the bride. These gifts are called *khabar* and usually consist of various household items, electronic goods, gadgetry and more traditionally a *trame sanduk*²⁰ etc. The party is served a lavish feast, almost equivalent to *mahraz saal*. The *mahrin* then leaves for her *mauleun* after asking for the *duerukhsat*/permission from her *hushh*/mother in law and *haherbaab*/father in law. The *mahraze* either accompanies his wife, or is separately invited on the next day to his *hovur*/in laws house. The couple returns back after staying there for few days. The system of ceremonies and functions from both the sides comes to end after *phir saal* ceremony, when the couple is invited again by the bride's parents after few days of *satim*/seventh.

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¹ Hindu community of Kashmir valley

² *Maenz* is a dye prepared from the plant *Lawsonia Inermis*, also known as the henna tree or the mignonette tree

³ A set of phrases and sentences recited at the time of *Nikah* to give religious and legal cognizance to the contract

⁴ Allah's blessings on Prophet and his progeny

⁵ Traditional kashmiri fir pot

⁶ 1st month of Islamic calendar in which grandson of the Prophet was martyred along with his 72 companions in the battle of Karbala, Iraq in 680 A.D.

⁷ 7th month of the Islamic calendar

⁸ 8th month of Islamic Calendar

⁹ Eid of sacrifice hold on 10th day of 11th month of Islamic calendar every year

¹⁰ 3rd month of Islamic year

¹¹ 2nd month of Islamic year

¹² 9th month of Islamic calendar, the month of fasting

¹³ when the moon is in the constellation of Scorpio

¹⁴ Incense sticks

¹⁵ Burning *Izband* (*Peganum Harmala*) is part of both Hindu and Muslim cultures in Kashmir. According to folklore, smoke from izband seeds fills the ambience and wards off the evils and an evil eye. It is used at ever auspicious moment

¹⁶ On marriages, the father of *mahrin/mahraz* are called as *yezeman* and the mother as *yezemanbayi*

¹⁷ Recitation of surah Al-Fatiha the 1st Surah of Quran followed by three times recitation of 112th surah Al-Ikhlās

¹⁸ Masnand is a raised place with usually mattress for groom and bride on marriage.

¹⁹ Famous kashmiri copper kettle

²⁰ A tin box full of copper utensils