

A Study of Evolving Marriage Traditions among Muslims in Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract

This article explores the multifaceted nature of marriage traditions among Muslims in Jammu and Kashmir, examining their evolution from historical roots to contemporary dynamics. It explores the interplay of tradition, modernity, and identity in shaping matrimonial practices within this culturally rich and diverse region. Drawing on historical analysis and contemporary research, the study traces the historical trajectory of marriage customs in Jammu and Kashmir, stressing the fusion of indigenous traditions with Islamic principles following the region's conversion to Islam in the 14th century. It highlights the adaptive nature of marriage traditions, which have evolved in response to socio-cultural dynamics, including urbanization, globalization, and conflict. Through qualitative research methods such as purposive selection, participant observation and thematic analysis, the study engages with recently married individuals from diverse backgrounds to capture nuanced insights into contemporary marriage practices. It examines shifting trends in mate selection, with a growing preference for love marriages driven by increased educational attainment and autonomy among individuals, as well as the influence of globalization on inter-regional and transnational marriages.

Keywords: Marriage customs, change in marriage customs, marriage among Muslims, evolution of marriage customs

Introduction

Marriage, as an institution, is deeply implanted in every culture's social fabric, mirroring a community's values, norms, and traditions. In the panoramic expanse of Jammu and Kashmir, nestled amidst the snow-capped heights of the Himalayas, the institution of marriage among Muslims has experienced a complex evolution, shaped

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by historical legacies, contemporary realities, and the dynamic interplay of tradition and modernity. The region's diversity of ethnic backgrounds has caused cultural characteristics to spread throughout many religious communities. Hindus and Muslims coexisted in a synchronous cultural system before the 1990s that was distinct from that of mainland India and the Pakistani nation, which is mostly Muslim (Khandey, 2019). Muslims living in Asia account for over 60 per cent of the world's total Muslim population (Hefner, 2003). This study investigates the multifaceted nature of marriage traditions among Muslims in Jammu and Kashmir, exploring the factors driving adaptation and transformation within this essential aspect of social life. According to Roy (2005), historians studying Islam in India have found a wealth of evidence showing that Muslims there participated in a variety of activities. To understand the current landscape of marriage traditions among Muslims in Jammu and Kashmir, it is crucial to delve into the region's rich historical tapestry. The history of Jammu and Kashmir is marked by a fusion of cultural influences, owing to its strategic location along ancient trade routes and its status as a melting pot of diverse ethnic and religious communities. With the advent of Islam in the region during the 14th century, marriage customs underwent a substantial transformation. Islamic principles of *nikah* (marriage) and *sharia* (Islamic law) became integral to the matrimonial practices of Muslims in the region, laying the foundation for a unique blend of indigenous customs and Islamic traditions. Despite adopting Islamic principles, indigenous customs such as *Wazwan* (traditional Kashmiri feast) and *Mehr* (bride price) continued to thrive, highlighting the adaptive nature of marriage traditions in response to changing socio-cultural dynamics. Prophet Muhammad said, "The most esteemed individuals in my country are those who marry and carefully select their life partners, while the least esteemed are those who avoid marriage and remain single" (Nuri 1987).

In recent decades, Jammu and Kashmir has experienced rapid socio-economic and demographic changes driven by urbanization, globalization, and educational accomplishment. These transformations have had a profound impact on marriage practices among Muslims, reshaping conventional roles, expectations, and rituals. One significant trend is the increasing level of education, particularly among women, which has empowered individuals with more fantastic agency in mate selection. The rise of educational opportunities has led to a shift towards more autonomous marital choices, challenging the dominance of arranged marriages in the region. Furthermore, economic prospects beyond the confines of Jammu and Kashmir have facilitated inter-regional and transnational marriages, fostering cultural exchange and the emergence of hybridized matrimonial customs.

In addition to internal socio-economic and political factors, globalization has also played a substantial role in shaping marriage traditions among Muslims in Jammu and

Kashmir. Increased connectivity and access to information have facilitated the exchange of ideas and practices across borders, influencing how marriage is perceived and practised in the region.

The spread of digital technology, in particular, has changed the matrimonial landscape, with online platforms offering a new avenue for matchmaking and spouse selection. These platforms have expanded the pool of potential partners, allowing individuals to connect with others beyond their immediate social circles and geographical boundaries. Moreover, social media has provided a platform for expressing personal values and preferences, influencing the criteria used in mate selection and the negotiation of marriage contracts.

In a nutshell, the institution of marriage among Muslims in Jammu and Kashmir is a dynamic and evolving phenomenon shaped by a myriad of historical, socio-economic, and cultural factors. From blending indigenous traditions with Islamic traditions to the impact of contemporary realities such as education, migration, conflict, and globalization, marriage traditions in the region continue to undergo adaptation and transformation. By delving into the complexities of marriage customs among Muslims in Jammu and Kashmir, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the intricate interplay of tradition, modernity, and identity in shaping matrimonial practices in this culturally rich and diverse region. Through a nuanced examination of historical precedents and contemporary realities, we hope to contribute to a deeper insight into the evolving nature of marriage customs in Jammu and Kashmir and its broader societal implications.

Study Area: This study will focus on three districts of Jammu and Kashmir: Baramulla, Bandipora, and Kupwara, with a clear focus on the Muslim population. These districts were chosen due to their cultural importance and demographic composition, providing a diverse representation of marriage traditions within the region. Care will be taken to ensure that the respondents picked for the study are recently married individuals, allowing for an understanding of contemporary marriage practices.

Research Methodology

The research has concentrated on comprehending the evolving marriage traditions among Muslims in Jammu and Kashmir, employing a mixture of purposive selection, participant observation and thematic analysis. Twenty interviews have been conducted with recently married Muslims living in selected districts to gather qualitative data on marriage experiences. By leveraging the researcher's local knowledge, participant

observation has provided an additional understanding of cultural nuances. Interviews were taken in the respondents' native language, using open-ended questions to encourage the sharing of perspectives. Data has been transcribed into English for analysis, ensuring confidentiality and informed consent. Thematic analysis has identified patterns and themes, offering a deeper understanding of marriage traditions. Ethical policies, including informed consent and confidentiality, have been strictly adhered to to minimize any potential risks or discomfort to participants.

Findings

Marriage is called *khandar* in the Kashmiri language (Habib, 2022). The groom is known as

Mahraaz (king) and the bride is known as *Mahrin* (Queen) in the local language. Over the years, many changes have occurred in the marriage customs among the Muslims of Jammu and Kashmir, and I took this assignment to document some of the changes that I and the people of Jammu and Kashmir have observed. Jammu Kashmir, being the Muslim majority area adherent to Islam, thus follows the Islamic sharia (Islamic codified laws) in almost all religious matters. Marriage, being one of the important institutions in the Islamic view, is also guided by these codified laws. However, it has been observed that with time, people have moved away from the original practices and have added their own customs in their own style, which are called *biddat* (new addition) by most Islamic scholars but these rituals and practices continue among the Muslim population.

The first thing which occurs and thus marks the beginning of the marriage process is to find a middleman (*manzimyoor*) who was assigned a task to find a suitable match for a boy or a girl (unmarried/widower/widowed) and very rarely a man marry two, three or four women which were otherwise permitted by the Islamic traditions. It has come to our notice that the prospective bride or groom finds their own match nowadays. One of our respondents narrated that "Love marriage is more preferred over arranged marriage because people want better compatibility in their relationships earlier parents were not thinking about compatibility or understanding. It was just a ritual to shed their load off from their shoulders." After a hard toil by the family and the middleman when both parties feel that they have no issues in giving the hand of their daughter or a boy, parties from both sides visit each other's home to see a boy or a girl, and if they find the families compatible with each other, they give a nod for the marriage.

After finding a proper match, the members from the boy's side visit the prospective bride's side to ask for the hand of their daughter officially and are offered *chai* (tea)

or *batte* (rice) upon having tea or food, the older member who visits the bride's side offers money or gold, which is put into the plate/cup, and this custom is called (palas travel) in the Kashmiri language. The most preferred ornament presented by the groom's side is a golden ring, which is put on the finger of a prospective bride by the closest relative from the boy's side. Earlier, there was no such custom of offering jewellery. They just took the oath called *Khuda Rasool* (oath taken in the name of Allah and Prophet Muhammad). This custom is called *catchment*.

Some families also do the catchment process in a park or a hotel where the prospective couple wear a ring to each other. These things have taken place recently and have not been found in the past. If Eid comes amidst the catchment and marriage, both parties have to exchange *Eidi* (Money given on Eid) or some other gifts; this tradition is known as *Eid Bogh*. The money which is offered to either the prospective bride or the groom is presented in a closed envelope. The next step in this process is called *Nishani* or *Pachil* (Engagement). In this ritual, a large number of gifts and golden ornaments are exchanged, and both parties are served a sumptuous feast known as *Wazwaan*. The bride's side sent a basket full of roasted chickens whose numbers vary from twenty-one/thirty-one/forty-one or fifty-one along with the golden coins and earrings which are given as a gift by the bride to her mother-in-law. Again, this custom does not exist in the previous era.

After the engagement is done, the family members of both parties sit together and decide on a date for marriage, which is often chosen by an Islamic cleric. Certain factors are kept in mind while choosing the dates for marriage like *Eid*, *Ramadhan*, and *Muharram* are avoided. Moreover, Planting and harvesting seasons are also avoided by those people who are associated with agriculture. After the date is chosen for the wedding, the preparations for the marriage begin at both houses. The preparation for marriage begins with the winnowing of the rice, finding a *waza* (chef), buying lambs or other animals which are certified halal by the Islamic scholar, finding an Islamic scholar for the Nikah ceremony, buying new clothes locally known as *wardan* and other necessary items. The number of dresses used to be four or five and poor people could hardly afford one or two for their wards, but at present people even buy more than fifty, amounting to a huge burden on the parents and poor people find it very hard to manage because of the evolving trends in the marriage institution. A day before *mehndiraat*, a ritual known as *Malmaenz* is found among the Muslims; during this rite, the bride's hair is let down, which is locally known as *Mas travun*; during this rite, the hair of the bride is greased with the oil and braids are made by the women especially a closer one. Additionally, in some cases, the elder brother of the bride applies *ghee* to her hair. During this entire course, Kashmiri folk songs are sung by relatives and neighbouring women. This ceremony is concluded by untying a

bride's hair, locally known as *Mas Muchravun*. This ritual is also known as the *haldi* ceremony because *haldi* (turmeric) is also applied to the face, arms and legs of the bride. The next night is the night of *Mehndiraat*; this is done just before the day of *Nikkah*. In the Kashmiri language, this is known as *Maenzraat*, where *Maenz* means henna and *raat* means night. This evening, the groom's family sends young girls to the bride's house with henna for her to apply. After applying henna to the groom's little finger, his relatives and friends wrap it in cash notes of various denominations, a modern twist on the historical use of paper instead of money. Throughout the night, traditional folk and wedding songs are performed by women at both homes, followed by the distribution of small packets of henna and candy. Nowadays, Bollywood music fills the late hours of the *mehandiraat* with young people dancing. A newer tradition involves cutting a cake in both households and distributing it among the relatives present. The groom now delivers the bride's cake along with the henna on *Mehandiraat*. Meanwhile, Kashmiri cooks (*Waaza*) are busy preparing dishes for the next day. These traditions were not found in past marriages, which used to happen before 30-40 years ago. Marriage was then a very simple affair, but it has become so complex at present that people who have less economic means find it almost impossible to do these things. It has also come to our notice that people some people also hire a transgender man or a *bach kout* (a male dancer with an inclination towards femininity); they dance and sing the whole night and people enjoy the show. People who are well versed in the religious teachings of Islam do not take part in these gatherings and they also do not approve of this thing at their home.

On the wedding morning, the bride bathes (*aab sherun*) and prays for a good married life while the groom gets a haircut and a facial from a barber. The morning is dedicated to preparing for the afternoon feast, known as *Waazwan*, hosted by both families based on their economic status. Guests dine on special copper plates in groups of four, enjoying dishes like mutton, chicken, and various vegetables, reflecting the feast's cultural significance. Again, some changes have been observed here, for example, rich people prefer to serve their guests separately and not in a *trami* (a large copper plate in which four persons can eat at a single time), and the number of varieties has been significantly increased. It's a communal event where guests bless the couple with prayers, gold, cash gifts, and other items, while each family member has a specific role, including keeping records of gifts for future reciprocity.

After lunch, the groom's family traditionally visits the bride's family, though now only a few close relatives accompany him. The bride prepares to leave her home, usually at night, bidding farewell to her family with traditional melodies. Upon arrival at the groom's house, he is greeted warmly, particularly by his future mother-in-law, who presents him with milk and gifts. The groom may wear either a Western suit or a

traditional sherwani, and the Nikah ceremony takes place in the presence of a Muslim cleric, sealing the marriage contract. The ceremony includes mutual consent and the exchange of Mehr, a payment from the groom to the bride.

Afterwards, a lavish feast called *Maharaz Saal* is served to the groom and his guests. The bride then says an emotional goodbye to her parents (*Rukhsati*) and joins her husband permanently at their new home. She is traditionally dressed in Kashmiri attire or a contemporary dress like a lehenga. The veil is lifted by her mother-in-law in front of other women, symbolizing her acceptance into the new family. Gifts are exchanged between the bride and her mother-in-law, and she may be accompanied by a friend or foster mother for a few days to acclimate to her new surroundings. Earlier, Palanquins and horses were used to carry the bride from her house to her new house, but at present, cars are used, which are usually driven by a friend or a close relative of the groom; the couple used to sit at the back of the car. Nowadays, this trend has also been shifted; grooms drive on their own accompanied by the bride, who also sits beside her on the front side of the car.

Some families observe the Islamic tradition of Walima, hosting a large feast for relatives and neighbours instead of serving lunch on the wedding day. While Islam emphasizes simplicity in weddings, Kashmiri Muslim rites incorporate cultural elements, demonstrating a blend of tradition and innovation. This unique marriage process in Kashmir deviates from strict Islamic guidelines, with ceremonies like Al Ijab Wal-Qabool, Mehr, and Walima forming its core. A few days after the bride bids farewell to her parental home, her family pays her a visit to ensure her well-being, a custom known locally as Khabar Heth. During this visit, both she and her in-laws receive gifts in the form of cash, sweets, and fruits. The bride's parents host a special feast called *Fir Saal*, inviting their in-laws and the newlyweds, along with the groom's closest relatives. Guests are treated with utmost elegance and hospitality.

Following the feast, the groom's family members depart, leaving the newlyweds alone for approximately seven days. After this period, the couple, accompanied by the bride's family, returns to their home with gifts and, if requested by the groom's family and accepted by the bride's, a dowry. The new daughter-in-law is expected to present gifts to her in-laws, with the mother-in-law receiving jewellery or clothing, locally known as Hash Mond, and her sister-in-law receiving gifts referred to as Zom Dej. Also, sweets and bread are included in the gifts, distributed among the family members.

Now that the bride, previously restricted from working or performing household duties, is allowed to partake in the daily life of her new family, she can begin anew with a fresh identity in a different social setting. The other changes which have occurred are the increase in time duration between *Nikah* and *rukhsati* increase in demands from both sides; marriages in the past were mostly based on the same class,

but people look at the class during the present time instead of the caste, middleman's job has become more systematic some middleman even carry a well-maintained diary in which there's a full detail of the person who wish to tie a knot, they match the requirements and take the decisions accordingly. One most important issues which need to be discussed is the number of unsuccessful marriages, the numbers are rising to an alarming level. Extramarital affairs are exposed due to the advent of mobile phones; earlier, if anyone had an affair, it was known to only a few, and it was also difficult to verify, but with the facilities of the internet, people keep talking over the phone or WhatsApp which increased the risk of being caught, and people keep on checking their spouse's phones to see if they are loyal to their partners. Nothing remains static so is the institution of marriage.

Discussions

The research article thoroughly explores the evolving marriage traditions among Muslims in Jammu and Kashmir, a region known for its rich cultural heritage and complex social dynamics. The study delves into the historical roots of marriage customs in the region, tracing their evolution through centuries of cultural amalgamation and Islamic influence. It then examines the contemporary landscape, analysing the impact of socio-economic and demographic factors on marriage practices. One of the study's notable findings is the shifting dynamics in mate selection, with a growing preference for love marriages over arranged unions. This trend is attributed to increased educational attainment, particularly among women, which has empowered individuals to seek compatibility and autonomy in their marital choices. The influence of globalisation is also evident as inter-regional marriages become more common, fostering cultural exchange and hybridised matrimonial customs.

Globalisation, facilitated by digital technology and increased connectivity, has further reshaped the matrimonial landscape. Online matchmaking platforms and social media have expanded the pool of possible partners, allowing individuals to transcend geographical boundaries in their search for companionship. These digital platforms also influence the criteria used in mate selection and the negotiation of marriage contracts, reflecting the evolving intersection of tradition and modernity. The study's methodology, combining purposive selection, participant observation, and thematic analysis, provides a robust framework for understanding the complexities of marriage traditions in Jammu and Kashmir. By engaging with recently married individuals from diverse backgrounds, the research captures nuanced insights into contemporary marriage practices grounded in local context and cultural specificity. The findings

emphasise the dynamic nature of marriage customs in Jammu and Kashmir, shaped by many historical, socio-economic, and cultural factors. From blending indigenous traditions with Islamic principles to the influence of globalisation and conflict, marriage traditions in the region continue to evolve in response to changing realities. Through a nuanced examination of these dynamics, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between tradition, modernity, and identity in shaping matrimonial practices in this culturally rich and diverse region.

Altogether, the research article provides valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of marriage traditions among Muslims in Jammu and Kashmir, highlighting the adaptive resilience of these traditions amidst socio-economic, geopolitical, and cultural transformations.

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