**A Traditional Indian Wedding**

Being from a very unorthodox Indian family I must say I was surprised when my brother announced that not only was he getting married in the Fiji Islands, but he was also going to have an Indian wedding. Nonetheless, in June of 1997, our family packed up and headed off to Fiji for the joyous event.

There are many different Indian religions each with their own cultures and traditions. My family, being Hindu, consider marriage a sacred institution where the couple becomes one in spirit. It is the 13th of 16 ceremonies in a person's life. It is a dedication to the Vedas, the oldest sacred texts of Hinduism which date back several thousand years. A Hindu man does not become his complete self unless he is married and has the support of his wife.

Before my brother and his fiancee were allowed to marry they had to receive blessings from the elders of each family. We traveled to their house to meet her parents and siblings. We were offered refreshments while our parents chatted to determine if they made a compatible couple. Once it was agreed that this was going to be an agreeable marriage, the engagement was blessed and rings were exchanged in the “Misri” (ring celebration). My brother and his bride-to-be adorned each other with beautiful garlands and our families exchanged traditional Indian sweets. The evening was completed with a dinner party for all.

Then the multi day celebration truly began. Hindu weddings are rich in color, tradition, culture and the sweet smell of incense. It consists of many Puja's (Pooja), a religious ritual that Hindus perform on a variety of occasions to pray or show respect to their chosen Gods or Goddesses. The prayers are made to the accompaniment of drum beating, horn-blowing, bell ringing and the chanting of Vedas.

The bride and groom remain separated in their own residences until the day of the wedding, each performing their own set of rituals. My brother's first ceremony was performed with the bride's father and other male relatives. They brought with them coconut and clothes as gifts and offerings to perform the Tilak Puja . During this ritual a pundit (priest) puts a mark called a teeka on the groom's forehead as a symbol of the rising sun. After this event was complete everyone celebrated with dinner and the men drank the traditional Fijian drink called "grog", which is made by pounding sun-dried kava root into a fine powder and mixing it with cold water.

The second day was filled with religious services. The first was a puja called the Mandap Mahurat . The pundit performs this puja to pray to Lord Ganesh and seek His blessings to dispel all evils and promote a successful, peaceful completion of the wedding ceremony. The second puja was the Grah Shanti (Worship to the Nine Planets). Ancient Indian studies reveal that various celestial bodies influence the destiny of an individual. During this puja, the Gods are asked to instill courage, peace of mind and the inner strength to the bride and groom to help them endure life's sufferings. After that was the Ghari Puja . This ceremony gives offerings of coconut, wheat grains, oil, betel nuts and turmeric. The mother and close female relatives of the bride planted a small stalk in the garden to celebrate the marriage.

The Shagun Ki Mehndi celebration was performed in the evening of the second day. We (the groom's family) sent henna to the bride, which was then applied to her hands and feet in a very intricate and beautiful pattern. Henna signifies the strength of love in the marriage, so the bride is supposed to leave it on as long as possible. My brother was pasted with a turmeric powder which is considered a beautification process . Guests at each residence celebrated with food, song and dance and (of course) more grog; it was a very festive occasion.

On the third day (the eve of the wedding), family and friends gathered with us to celebrate the upcoming nuptials (the bride had a separate celebration at her house). In addition to being a time to rejoice, it was a continuation of the Shagun Ki Mehndi celebration. My brother was again pasted with the tumeric powder (this has to be done 5-7 times) while everyone partied. There was an abundance of exotic food and delicious fresh tropical fruits and drinks (yes, more grog). Everyone gave their advice to my brother for a good, long strong marriage. Many toasts were made and party lasted until the wee hours of the morning.

The wedding, typically held at the bride's residence, is performed under a mandap , a decorated four pillared canopy. The brides outfit consists of a red sari heavily embroidered with gold thread. The red sari is to signify fertility. She accessorizes with traditional ornate gold jewelry. The grooms outfit can be a customary Sherwani (long tunic embroidered with gold thread) worn with Kurta pajamas, or a simpler dhoti and tunic.

The day of the wedding the bride and groom are required to fast. When my brother arrived at the site of the ceremony his future father-in-law washed his feet and performed another very small prayer in front of the Mandap called Dwar Puja . Then the bride's mother welcomed him with a colorful flower garland and led him to the mandap. After he was settled, his bride made her stunning entrance. She was very beautiful, her head covered with her sari and eyes down, she was led to the mandap by her maternal uncle (Mama), female cousins and friends. In some ceremonies the bride may be carried in a small carriage.

The actual wedding service is fascinating because the parents and close relatives of the couple also participate. The pundit chants mantras form the Vedas that were originally written in Sanskrit and there are many symbolic presences:

* **Fresh flowers –** to signify beauty
* **Coconut –** to signify fertility
* **Rice and other grains –** to signify the food necessary for sustenance of life
* **Ghee (purified butter) –** to feed the sacred fire
* **Kumkum (vermilion) –** red powder used for marking the forehead to signify good luck and to say that your soul (husband) is with you

Parental consent is required for the wedding to proceed. The bride's parents give their daughter to the groom (Kanyadana puja) by putting her right hand into his while reciting sacred verse. The groom's older sister (me) performs the Ganthibandhan (tying the knot) by pinning a ribbon to the couple to protect them from evil influences. This also symbolizes the couples bond. The groom holds the brides hand and they both take vows to love, cherish and protect each other throughout life. The [Hindu marriage ceremonies](http://www.beau-coup.com/hindu-marriage-ceremony.htm) can vary depending on different regions and according to family traditions.

Several hours later, after all vows were exchanged my brother and his wife agreed to be companions forever. The priest blessed the newlyweds and flower petals and rice were given to the guests to shower them with blessings. Then everyone gave their individual blessings, the marriage ceremony ended and the reception began. Guests were served an array of amazing curry dishes and once again we enjoyed the fresh tropical fruits and vegetables all prepared with a spicy twist. We were entertained by local men and women playing dholaks and harmoniums, traditional Indian instruments, while they sang “Sohar’s” (wedding songs) of celebration. The event was flawless.

During the reception, one tradition that I found very amusing was the Baasi-Jawari (taking of the shoes). The bride's sisters hid my brother's shoes and demanded money from him before they would return them so he could leave with his new bride. His best man, after some intense negotiation, was able to get them back without having to go into too much debt. It was very funny to watch.

The day after the wedding, the flowers that were part of the puja's performed by my brother leading up to the wedding, are taken and put in the ocean as a gift to the Ganga Ma , Goddess of Water. She is said to be the only accessible physical entity that flows from heaven and on earth and the offering is a hope for fertility.

I had an amazing time. Keeping with Indo-Fijian tradition, all the food and decorations were made by family members. All the offerings for the pujas were hand picked and all the love, warmth and hospitality we experienced from our new relatives was genuine. Being part of such a wonderful cultural event is definitely an experience that I want to remember for a long time to come.