

CONSUMING ‘CANDIDNESS’: CONTEMPORARY WEDDING PHOTOGRAPHY PRACTICES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This essay maps how wedding rituals and the performance of those rituals have played out visually in the past and how the emergence of digital photography has visibly altered the understanding and practice of wedding photography in India. The gradual phasing out of the traditional wedding video-wallah and the standard frontal shots have given way to Photoshopped, colour corrected images, ready for consumption as coffee-table books. Drawing their theoretical gravitas from the practices of journalistic and fashion photography, contemporary wedding photography practices offer an exciting inquiry into the re-imagining of wedding photography in the lives of the Indian middle-class. Additionally, this essay also reflects on the changing figure of the bride - candid wedding photography now seems to position the bride as a free-floating signifier, occupying the space of ‘the bride’- a symbol standing in for all brides. This essay argues that the bride within the photograph does not seem to belong in it, and suspended from reality, exists in the realm of fantasy. Another emerging phenomenon within the changing visual discourse of wedding photography is also the ‘joy of sharing’ and the joy of ‘demonstrating joy’ through online social networking sites where celebrity wedding photos and every day social media users’ photos exist in the same universe, speaking to each other, and referencing similar ideas of love, marriage and conjugality. Subsequently this essay also explores the process of self-representation and the pleasure of sharing these images on social networking sites such as Instagram. Related to these concerns is also the fact that changing technology and contemporary digital culture has brought into focus how our lives are increasingly played out online, the digitalization of our shared memories and the impact of digital technologies on our daily lives.

Keywords: Wedding photography, Video-wallah, Bride, Joy of Sharing

INTRODUCTION

Out of all the transitions to modernity, greater accessibility to the camera has had, and continues to have, an enduring impact on the culture and conduct of weddings. As Monger (2004) describes the intrusion of the camera in the space of the wedding, he reveals that for the elite in the twentieth century, hiring a photographer was a matter of privilege and a marker of wealth and status. However, those who did not possess the means to hire a photographer would often go to a studio after the wedding, to memorialise and record it, often re-enacting the wedding outfits and other paraphernalia. With photographic equipment and technology becoming more portable and easier to operate, wedding photographers became ubiquitous and perhaps even central to the wedding itself.

“Rest your arm, be natural, don’t look into the camera, just be yourself”

“Don’t hold hands like that. Ok just play with her hair. Yes good!”

These instructions did not come from the location of a film shoot. It was little after 3 pm, and a couple was trying hard not to look into the camera or worse get conscious by its presence. They were at Firoz Shah Tomb in Delhi where Nevile photographed the couple (Nitish and Saloni) for their pre-wedding shoot. The couple had planned to hire Nevile for their wedding and other ceremonies. While many people in India remember or remember having seen and experienced the omnipresent and persistent ‘*wedding video and photo wallah*’ in most weddings, the new age wedding photographers work quietly in the background, capturing ‘candid’, ‘natural’, and ‘artistic’ photographs of wedding rituals of the modern-day couples (these terms have been used by the couples interviewed for this study).

Not limited to metropolitan cities, the phenomenon of ‘candid’ wedding photography by professionally trained photographers is fast gaining currency in a country where an average Indian wedding

could cost anywhere from US\$ 5 to 50 million or 50 lakhs to 5 crores (Indian rupees) (Trivedi, 2012). Brosius (2010) in her exploration of the Indian middle-class writes about weddings as an important site where social practices, positions, and relations can be meaningfully studied and understood. Highlighting the importance of spending the ‘right’ amount of money at a wedding, Brosius also reveals that increasingly the question of the *amount* of money spent, is superseded by *how* it is being spent, and by extension how symbolic capital gets generated and accumulated (2010, 269). In the context of Hong Kong, it has been argued that wedding photography responds to the changing social context and that an investigation on how weddings are visualized will help us understand how wedding rituals as well as meanings of marriage and family have changed with time (Cheung, 2006). In a nuanced ethnographic study of weddings and wedding videos in north Kerala, Abraham (2010) probes questions of love, conjugality, marriage rituals and their performance at the intersection of photo and video technology. She discusses how they interact, shape and speak to each other, in the process of transforming the ideas around weddings itself. Mahesh Shantaram, a well-known wedding photographer has penned his experiences as a documentarian of contemporary Indian culture in a fiction novel, set in the backdrop of a wedding night. Translating his first-hand experience from the theatre of weddings, he describes the fantastical roles often assumed by the bride and groom, the Bollywood-like opulent sets and the emerging wedding culture of India predicated upon unrestrained, conspicuous and flamboyant consumption (Shantaram, 2018). In his meditative work on the social life of photographs in India, Pinney (1997) outlines the functional and symbolic roles played by photography in India, by sharing the entangled relationship between photographs and larger cultural practices, the expectations from the face and the body in photographic traditions, how photography comes to stand as an evidence of the subject’s internal and external state, and how a space gets constituted, thereby creating a visual reality which goes on to circulate with other images.

Similarly, this essay sets out to trace the seamless co-option of the grammar of documentary, journalistic and fashion photography and its idioms of ‘candid’, ‘natural’ and ‘defining moment’ into the contemporary practices of wedding photography in India. In doing so, this essay attempts to map how wedding rituals and the performance of those rituals have played out visually in the past and how the emergence of digital photography has visibly altered the understanding and social practice of wedding photography in India. The gradual phasing out of the traditional wedding video-*wallah* and the standard frontal shots have given way to Photoshopped, colour corrected images, ready for consumption as coffee-table books. Drawing their theoretical gravitas from the practices of journalistic and fashion photography, the contemporary wedding photography practices offer an exciting inquiry into the re-imagining of wedding photography in the lives of the Indian middle-class. Additionally, this essay also reflects on the changing figure of the bride - candid wedding photography now seems to position the bride as a free-floating signifier, occupying the space of ‘the bride’ - a symbol standing in for all brides. This essay makes an attempt to argue that the bride within the photograph does not seem to belong in it, and suspended from reality, exists in the realm of fantasy. Another emerging phenomenon within the changing visual discourse of wedding photography is also the ‘joy of sharing’ and the joy of ‘demonstrating joy’ through online social networking sites where celebrity wedding photos and every day social media users’ photos exist in the same universe, speaking to each other, and referencing similar ideas of love, marriage and conjugality. Subsequently this essay also seeks to explore the process of self-representation and the pleasure of sharing these images on social networking sites such as Instagram. Related to these concerns is also the fact that changing technology and contemporary digital culture has brought into focus how our lives are increasingly played out online, the digitalization of our shared memories and the impact of digital technologies on our daily lives.

This research project originally began in December of 2011, with the tentative emergence of new-age wedding photographers in India. Over the next few years, I interviewed wedding photographers in Delhi,

Bengaluru and Mumbai, who identified themselves as ‘candid’ photographers. The bulk of this paper owes all the arguments to the field work conducted during this period, and hence forms the background to this study. However, in 2018 and 2019, I conducted interviews with six wedding photographers from Delhi. Interviews were also conducted with two traditional wedding photographers who had been in the profession for almost twenty years. By traditional studio photographers I refer to the largely obtrusive and orchestrated style of photographic practice, which would include posing, and direction from the photographer. Through the candid wedding photographers, I interviewed five couples from Delhi, before and after their wedding. All of these weddings were love-alliances and not arranged marriages. Most of the couples had known each other for at least a year before they decided to get married. Interactions with the couples involved in-depth semi-structured interviews. In addition to the interviews I also made use of participant observation method for three weddings where I accompanied the photographers. My methodological approach included informal interviews and direct observation. I had the opportunity to interview the couple before the wedding and then observe them during the various wedding ceremonies. Most of my interviews with photographers took place in-between wedding shoots, in their homes, cafes and workspaces, and some interviews were also done via videocall and telephone. Data for this study was collected in Delhi between July 2018 and February 2019. My interviews were pre-dominantly conducted with male photographers. This is not to suggest that female wedding photographers do not exist. In fact, this is an emerging field for professional female photographers, considering how the operation of this business has also shifted online. Additionally, unlike traditional wedding photography, which has hitherto been a male domain, candid wedding photographers project themselves as artists, projecting and positioning their aesthetic values and taste as artists, and not merely as service providers. This has opened spaces for women to practice the profession. During some of my casual conversations with female photographers, it emerged that they differentiated their practice from male photographers by emphasizing on the absence of the male gaze, without objectifying and commodifying the bride. Due to accessibility issues during my field research, I could not interview female photographers or accompany them on their shoots, however I do hope to do another study with them in the future.

“Idhar dekhiye please, yes now smile!” (Please look this way, yes now smile!)

The new-age ‘candid’ wedding photographers are not interested in just documenting the wedding. They look for moments. Like the close-up shot of the groom feeding the bride lovingly. All one sees in the shot is luscious, bright red lips and a silver fork with a piece of *paneer tikka* (cottage cheese) stuck in it. If it were not for the context, one could mistake that photograph from a food/culinary photo shoot.

Wedding albums in earlier times were meant to document the wedding in entirety. From the beginning to the end, one could map the number of people who attended, how they were dressed, what they ate, how they danced, when and how they gave the *sagan* envelope (gift cards or money) slyly, what the kids were up to and when the bride was making a face as her jaws jammed from the constant smiling.

Raman, a traditional wedding photographer explained how he is different from a candid wedding photographer. He explained that his task was to show what happens in the wedding in totality. For instance, when the bride enters the venue, he has to be alert or for the *jaimala* (exchange of garlands) he needs to be ready to document every moment. He also shared that clients often wanted shots of people eating as they wanted to ensure and document that guests were well served.

The images Raman refers to ultimately make their way into wedding albums. These heavy weddings albums are lugged out of the cupboards and dusted to revisit the wedding. One could go back in time to look at

standard frontal shots of every activity. Most of the important rituals such as the ring ceremony, the applying of *sindoor* and the tying of the *mangalsutra* are requested to be done twice by the photographers since they are not captured well when done the first time around. Raman explained that many times they miss the decisive moment of the *sindoor* shot and often ask the groom to do it again, pause and pose. Similarly other rituals are also done again to get the 'perfect' shot.

Traditional wedding photography is considered simplistic, usually done by a local studio. It is also interesting to note that most parents would make the decision and approach studios for hiring them for their children's weddings. Rarely have the couple in the past made the decision to hire a photographer to cover their own wedding. Wedding photographers are remembered as people who come in twos or threes with big flashlights, making people stand in line to photograph them. The primary idea being complete documentation of the wedding.

Felix, a seasoned candid wedding photographer shared that as a child he could never differentiate one wedding album from another, all blending into one another, much like a factory line. It is believed that the visual language of standard photography has evolved from the older stand-in-line format of photographing with box cameras and perhaps later the addition of studio lights was the only change. By and large photographers chose to stick to a very safe way to shoot due to the limited film rolls and hence kept it quick and simple. Raju explained that unlike with digital photography now, earlier they had a budget to stick to, which usually would be 36 photos in a film roll, and they would not use more than 3 rolls for an event. He shared that they could not innovate much and at the end all creativity was reserved in the post-processing for the collage page of the album.

“Make it candid, natural and glamorous!”

This is a single line brief Nevile received from a couple that was set to get married in a couple of months. Nevile points out that the earliest influence of photo-journalism on wedding photography practices came from working journalists who moon-lighted as wedding photographers over the weekend for commercial considerations in the West. The growth of photo-journalistic/documentary style of photography has also grown with the rise of digital photography in particular. Digital cameras perfectly match the speed, quality and low expense per shot. This perhaps can explain why the contemporary wedding visual culture is heavily influenced by the aesthetics of portrait journalism, fashion photography and documentary practices. The new breed of photographers now insists on capturing moments as they occur, without intervening, to keep everything natural. These terms are extremely familiar in journalistic and documentary photography. In fact, many photographers also like to call themselves 'Wedding Photo-journalists'.

Juhi, a young wedding photographer based in Chennai explained over a telephonic call, that the concept of 'candid' photographs emerges from the need to make a wedding look beautiful, paying complete attention to the details, and post-processing the photos, to enhance their effect. An increasing number of photographers that I interviewed emphasized on their dislike towards the way in which weddings have been captured in the past. For them it's not about documenting the wedding from the beginning to the end or to capture the rituals in entirety. The photographs are no longer meant to be a step-by-step replay of the wedding. Felix points out that they don't prefer to intervene, and rather prefer to continue clicking without obstruction, letting events unfold as they happen.

While this largely explains the broad way in which they approach wedding photography now, there is a shift in the grammar of it as well. Departing from the standard frontal long shots, photographers now

tend to take more liberty with their creativity. Bijay shared that in the last decade, there was a deflection point where clients started asking for something different, offering artistic freedom to photographers, often referencing Western photographers whose work was more akin to wedding reportage.

This was probably also the time when the term 'candid' became a rage and there was a surge in people's demand for candid photographs. Most photographers agree that candid is anything which is natural, not manipulated or posed. One could perhaps question the whole premise of 'candidness' itself. Can being 'candid' not be a state of performance? In an attempt to be natural is 'candidness' not orchestrated? While most photographers deny that these photographs are contrived or manufactured, my observation in Suhana and Amir's wedding revealed something interesting. In many instances while the couple did not have any instruction to pose, they felt a sense of being gazed at, and perhaps even internalized that gaze.

Poister (2001) in a discussion on the meaning of family photographs has argued that photographs are deceptive in the sense that they suggest that they are showing us a ringside view of reality, or a peek into peoples every day real lives, because of the assumptions around photographic truth. On the contrary, he argues that photographs can often lie, when the subjects of those photographs begin to learn how to mimic how to pose or even internalise what photographic practice and convention would consider a 'good' photograph. Echoing this, Felix offers that while earlier it was important to look into the camera, now it has become important not to. Referencing celebrity photographs, he adds that it should look that the subject does not want to be photographed. Suhana echoed this when she shared that while she consciously did not look into the camera, at the back of her mind she was very acutely aware of being photographed, and in some ways, she was aware of how she was coming across, making sure to present her 'good' side profile and expressions.

Many candid wedding photographers also half-heartedly agreed that they come to expect certain shots in weddings, predicting when they would occur, and at times anticipating them as well. While this does not take away the credence of candid wedding photography attempting to change the visual grammar of wedding photography it does in some way break the myth of unmediated 'candid' wedding photography.

Photographers also remarked that with increasing exposure from the Internet, many of their clients were aware of the kind of pictures they wanted but could not give a clear brief other than saying that they wanted something 'different'. Perhaps influenced from the pictures of their friends living abroad and the work of other photographers, people looked for a more natural documentation of their wedding. To that end, the grammar of candid wedding photography hence continues to borrow from architecture, travel, food, fashion photography and photojournalism. From my experiences in the field, a couple's wedding shoot now begins, as in the West, right when the bride starts to get ready at home or a salon. Standard 'candid' images, which are apparently not staged, include close-up shots of the bride's jewellery, her eyes, her lips, her footwear, her ring and various other elements in and around her.

SPATIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE WEDDING

The location of the wedding is perhaps one of the most important considerations during a wedding shoot. Since it serves as a background for most photographs, couples are extremely conscious of what the background connotes or communicates about the wedding and about them. Wedding venues are carefully chosen, planned and decided in advance. It is imperative now that wedding photographs have a narrative which gets weaved with the location of the wedding. Couples want a theme and a story that gets reflected through the photographs. Nevile shared that during a wedding shoot in Punjab in the groom's ancestral home in a rural village, he made it a point to demonstrate via his photographs, the meeting of the traditional and the

modern, and emphasizing on the theme of immortal love in a rustic backdrop.

Like in the West, the concept of engagement photographs has also found its way in India, however it is appropriated as a pre-wedding or a post-wedding session. Most photographers offer the pre-wedding or post-wedding shoot as a complimentary gesture, which involves a shoot of 3-4 hours in a day. Typically, these shoots take place in a location which the couple chooses. Popular locations include outdoor spaces such as a beach, old forts, parks and the poolside etc. Srinivas shared how he had booked the pool at Taj Hotel for their post-wedding shoot, as he and his bride wanted the photographs to speak of their lifestyle. Bhandari (2020) in her richly detailed ethnography of marriage and the Indian middle-class discusses the emerging visual image of the couple, reflective of Bollywood stories, television and web-series. The modern couple, as she argues, is focussed on their own “interpersonal dynamics” more than anything else, with the absence of the family clearly visible from their narrative (Bhandari 2020, 109). Similarly, in the context of Taiwanese weddings and the photographing of the bride in particular, Adrian (2003) reveals that when the bride and groom get photographed alone, framing out family and extended relatives, it ceases to be a family affair, firmly positioning the bride and groom as a modern singly operating unit, removed from family dynamics and pressures of kinfolk.

The pre-wedding shoot sometimes helps the couple and photographer to get to know each other and perhaps also get comfortable with the camera. Photographers also use this as an occasion to see the best way in which the couple can be photographed, their chemistry and also their story. The pre-wedding and post-wedding shoot also called the ‘lifestyle shoot’ is done with the aim of reflecting a day in the couple’s lives, how they spend their time, where they live, what they like to do in their free time etc. The shoot sometimes also includes props. Neville shared how they use props, like wine bottles, champagne glasses, a vintage bike or car, to imaginatively and creatively photograph the couple, helping them in constructing their idea of love. Often these locations and props are also suggested by the couples, depending on what they want to communicate through those photographs.

The spatial visualization of the wedding venue in wedding photographs continues to construct the ideas of love, conjugality and prosperity in highly specific ways. My middle-class and upper-middle class respondents did not hesitate in booking venues specifically for such lifestyle shoots. What the venue connotes in terms of its class value was extremely significant to them. Nitish and Saloni were careful of what they wore, how they looked and whether their pre-wedding shoot communicated that they were a sporty couple who loved seeking adventures. These images also represent an idea of ‘togetherness’ or ‘courtship’, which were never visible in traditional wedding albums. The pre-wedding shoot is perhaps one of those few times when the couple can legitimately demonstrate love and affection without the label of being married. These images are comparatively relaxed, informal and far more intimate.

In another conversation with Juhi, we discussed the source of these images or more importantly, the precursor to these aesthetic choices and codes present in the photograph. She suggested that these images seem to be imported from greeting cards, set in the realm of fantasy, largely obscure but signifying romance and togetherness. Photography, as a major medium for representing place and landscape within its frame, has embodied certain discourses and has often served as a “pre-text” for consumption (Lee, 2010). In the frame we see a physical space that is a translation of what the photographer’s gaze has captured. His gaze also constructs the space in some way and is also conditioned by the spatial discourses. These discourses in fact define what is the social or aesthetic value of that space, making us believe that this is a place one must aspire to visit or belong to. Hence couples carefully choose locations of their pre-wedding shoots to ensure that it communicates their lifestyle, their choices and their class position.

CULTURAL PRODUCTS IN CONTEMPORARY DIGITAL CULTURE

Innovations in digital technology have an important bearing on how we capture, consume and archive photographs. For wedding photography in particular it plays an important role and can help understand how 'candid' wedding photography partly grew because of the digital revolution. Additionally, the way wedding photographs are now consumed and archived is closely linked with how contemporary digital culture has changed the ways in which we store, retrieve and memorialize photographs in general, and wedding photographs in particular.

Now photographers don't need to set-up studios and can easily work from home or other shared spaces. Most photographers claimed that the physical studio is a thing of the past and most of them prefer to work from their private spaces where they book clients and edit pictures on their own machines. Photographers now also choose to create their portfolios online and market themselves through their Facebook/Instagram pages or their websites.

Earlier viewing wedding albums was an activity riddled with rituals. If the album was being brought out, one had to be prepared to spend some hours discussing, debating, reminiscing and laughing over them. The earlier slip-in albums were a treasure trove of memories and had a range of other practices around them. The retrieval of those memories required patience. They were a register, a play-by-play of what transpired at the wedding. Digital technology has visibly altered the act of photo viewing and sharing. Photographers now provide digital, edited, enhanced, and colour corrected Photoshopped images to the clients in a compact disk, flash drive or uploaded on Cloud. These are then downloaded and stored as virtual memories in hard disks and personal computers. Many photographers also provide raw unedited files to their clients as well, since only a small percentage of photographs are enhanced and edited.

Since most of the photographers now market themselves through their pages on Facebook/Instagram or websites, they make it a point to constantly update and engage with online users about their upcoming wedding shoots. The privacy settings of these posts are set to public, which means these are accessible to anyone with or without a Facebook/Instagram account. This raises some very serious questions on commercial photography and issues of privacy. Most of the photographers engage clients after a verbal agreement and the absence of written contracts or agreements, points towards the lack of a privacy clause. Many couples do not bother to question whether the photographs will be used by the photographer for marketing purposes. The very few who do, make it a point to put it down on paper.

The concerns of online privacy are also linked to the sharing practices of social media posts and pictures by the bride and groom. The couples that I interviewed were very clear on how they would go about their photo-sharing practices by mounting their photographs online. How they visualized their wedding had an important bearing on the kind of photographs they wanted which in turn was influenced by how it would look to their friends when they shared it on social networking sites such as Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook.

The process of fashioning themselves as the couple who had it all was straddled with the stress of self-presentation which revolved around the issues of how they looked, where they were photographed, what would their photographs connote etc. What they exhibited was the 'joy of demonstrating joy' online. The idea that their happiness is validated after sharing it on Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook and is contingent upon the quality of comments and the quantity of 'Likes' it receives, is the most intriguing aspect of how wedding photographs operate as cultural products in contemporary digital culture.¹ Most couples admitted to

sharing or planning to share their wedding albums with their friends, colleagues and family online to seek their endorsement. Some strategies included using a hashtag which would be a contraction of the bride and groom's name, countdown social media posts (number of days to the wedding), making the bride and groom's friends share pictures, posts and stories on social media on their behalf rather than doing it themselves, among others.

While evoking the concepts of memory and history in many ways, it is visible how the Internet has provided an affective space for assembling an archive of visual experiences, memories and emotions. The documentation and presentation of one's own life online has then become a process of building individual and collective memories. Couples choose to carefully pick how their wedding photographs represent their lives online. Their choices of what to wear, where to marry and how to look continue to be dictated by the eventuality of their photographs finding their way on the Internet. Two of the couples shared that there was a lot of social pressure to have 'natural' and 'candid' photographs of their wedding and that it was assumed that they would share these photographs with their friends online. Dictated by the demands of how wedding photographs are now supposed to look, a few revealed that they succumbed to the demands of hiring candid wedding photographers.

While candid wedding photography offers modern expressions of love being played out visually, it would be useful to look at the visual cues in these photographs. It is important to interrogate how notions of modernity, class, gender, love and marriage are circulated in and around wedding photographs. Uberoi (2008) in her analysis of bridal magazines and the construction of the bridal figure, speaks of a time when the bride and the groom aspired to look like the individualised images of the magazine spreads, but in real-life documentation of the wedding, that visual space had to be shared with family and extended kin network. However now the couple is framed in more personal and individual ways. The modern, educated and working couple is framed outside of the family. Additionally, the visual stereotypes of wealth communicated through the photographs are perhaps a signifier of status for the newly married couples who aspire for that opulence in real life. The media coverage of celebrity weddings in popular culture at large has also played a huge role in influencing how couples visually imagine their own weddings. Couples admit to giving careful attention on how the wedding venue will be decorated right from the colour of the candles or lights to the kind of flowers and their arrangements and even the chair covers and the tablecloths. All these elements have an important bearing on how the wedding photographs would eventually look like and speak of wealth, visually.

CONCLUSION: COMMUNICATING MODERNITY, CLASS AND GENDER

The couples I interviewed identified themselves as middle-class and on an average spent anywhere between INR 20-30 lakhs (US\$ 25,000 to 35,000) on their wedding (in the year 2018-2019). The photographers I interviewed charged anywhere from INR 1 lakh to 5 lakhs (US\$ 1,200 to 6,000) for covering the whole wedding (in the year 2018-2019). This does not include printing of wedding albums or coffee-table books, which would increase the cost. Most coffee table books start from INR fifty thousand and can go into lakhs (US\$ 800 and upwards) depending on where they are printed, quality of paper used, number of pictures and the scale of photo-editing and enhancement required. Neville shared that one of the couples was willing to get their coffee-table book printed in Singapore for it offered better colour and quality control.

From my fieldwork it seemed evident that wedding photographs were not just for memorializing an event, but were also increasingly seen as an investment by couples and families. Many photographers argued that for the couple at the day of the wedding, there is very little time to notice or experience the festivities. It is only in the photographs that they get to re-live the wedding, and experience it again. Wedding photographs

then are a tangible and physical evidence of how the wedding looked like, the décor, the finer details of the wedding, the rituals and the emotions etc.

In their aspiration to embrace all things modern, couples are actively looking for a representation of their marriage which signals that they have arrived globally. However, many of them continue to also negotiate with the demands of their parents who still want traditional wedding photographers to cover the wedding in entirety. This tension was evident in how the couples were actively choosing not to identify themselves with earlier visual representations and were constantly trying to disassociate themselves and their wedding from the burden of being ‘traditional’.

As a fertile ground for examination of various aspects of culture, contemporary practices in and around the wedding provide with larger cues of how social life is organized. The discursive enunciations in and around weddings that permeate contemporary popular culture show how wedding photography is structured around dominant beliefs on what is beautiful, glamorous and ‘real’. Couples and photographers continue to be inspired from celebrity images of fashion and advertising in their quest to construct their own ideal images. Additionally, the democratisation of photographic technology - devices and practices in the form of prosumer and portable cameras, such as those of the smartphones - have also demystified photographic practice, making it banal, and also part of the every day.

Weddings are perhaps the most traditional aspect of a society and governed by highly ritualized, regulated and organized practices. Wedding photographs are not just a simple register of memories. The contemporary approach to wedding photography signals the embracing of modernity, however the weddings in themselves continue to be rooted in practices, which are highly ritualized and organized traditionally. A close examination can help tease out how this photographic culture places an accent on voluntary/compulsory nature of sharing and demonstrating joy online. This sharing of particular kinds of images, often conform to the dominant standards of what is considered aesthetically beautiful. This also points out to how the visual memorializing of weddings, while signalling a departure in style, treatment and technology, continue to naturalize gendered relations, by describing and representing brides either as shy and coy ‘princesses’ waiting for her suitor or venerated as goddesses or a deity, encompassing the ideals of how brides are supposed to be.

The image of the bride has undergone a change, and she seems to transcend from her traditional location wherein she is now an emblem of how a bride is supposed to be. In candid wedding photographs, the bride occupies a transformative space, she is no longer just an individual, and her close-ups and shot composition award her a liminal quality, which robs her of her individuality, and makes her a floating signifier, which points to the concept of the ‘bride’. The signifier however is unstable, vulnerable to the slippages between ‘the bride’ and the personhood of the woman in the photograph. This slippage is visible when one moves from looking at the photographs individually, as a stand-alone text to the photographs as part of a wedding album, the visual registry of the whole wedding.

While the rituals and practices of the wedding continue to operate in the same way as they did before, now the representation of those practices in the form of candid images, construct and frame the idea of the ‘modern couple’. The changing style and grammar of wedding photography suggests more individual expressions of love sans the family’s presence; however, it continues to obliquely refer to hegemonic structuring of gender relations and ideas around love and marriage. In these candid images the bride and groom have no control on how they are framed since they are not supposed to look into the camera. Hence it is the photographer who frames the couple, lensed by his own aesthetic judgment. The techniques are new,

the locations are exotic, cameras are advanced and framing more innovative, however the power relations between both the genders continue to be structured according to and reflect the dominant beliefs around love, marriage, conjugality and class.

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