

Marriage Maestros

India's famous big fat wedding now demands high end innovation. These are the people who make it happen
BY AEKTA KAPOOR

THERE'S A tectonic shift at work in the luxury services industry—and it's all to do with Rahul and Seema's Jaipur wedding this winter. Like tens of thousands of other high net worth couples, they have only one criterion for everything to do with their once-in-a-lifetime nuptials: "We want something unique. Something different. Price no bar." And like a genie released from slumber, their wish has set the wheels of innovation turning in the minds of creative professionals and entrepreneurs across the country. Leaving their jobs or adding new wedding segments to their existing businesses, these whizzes have embraced the glitzy new *shaadi* challenge with aplomb. Weddings, they promise, will never be the same again. (Except that they will. And that's the whole cha-ching idea, isn't it?)

While weddings in India have always driven big-ticket expenses across socio-economic segments, the nation is getting younger and more wired than ever before. Fifty per cent of the population is below 29, so there are plenty more unions coming up—which only translates to greater development and demand in wedding-related services in years to come. And amongst the rich—who unarguably set the trends when it comes to keeping up with the Bhatias—wedding hosts have upped the ante for creative expression, leading to a sudden spurt of imaginative service professionals. So much so that even bigwigs from unrelated industries have jumped on to the band-*baja*-wagon.

Google the Goods

What's the first thing a young urban couple does when they set off on their journey to happily ever after? They whip out their smartphones and Google-search everything they need to know—from wedding theme ideas, to gifts and favours suggestions, to bridal-wear designers, to the best planners and *mehendi-walas* in their budget. Here's where wedding websites come in. From individual blogs to Indian offshoots of global giants with millions of hits per month, this is an arena no one's getting enough of.

"The Indian wedding industry is estimated to be a staggering \$38 billion—the economy of a small country—and growing at the explosive rate of 20 to 25 per cent a year. If there is one thing that's entirely recession-proof, it's the Indian wedding industry," marvels Apoorv Kalra, founder of the popular portal *BollywoodShaadis.com*, which gets over 1.5 million visitors per month. An MBA graduate from the University of Texas, Dallas, Kalra founded the site in 2012, cashing in on the need of the hour "for a wedding planning portal that could



"A young bride is aware that no matter how exciting and diverse, a trousseau belongs to its time"

Nisha Kundnani





An Indian wedding at the Bellagio, Las Vegas

MILLI GHOSH/MEMORIES IN MOTION

not only help couples find the right vendors for their wedding but also keep them updated with top wedding trends in India.” No doubt inspired by the top search terms in Google Trends (‘wedding website’, ‘wedding shopping’, ‘wedding professionals’ and ‘wedding planning guidance’ if you must know), he has now tied up with over 8,000 vendors across the country who pay to be seen by the right ‘heavy-spending audience’—some have even earned contracts for over Rs 1 crore through visibility on the site. He plans to launch a US version of the site soon.

While Kalra gazes westwards, the West looks to India to spread wings. In January last year, *WeddingsOnline.in* was launched as a sister concern to *WeddingsOnline.ie* (Ireland), which sees 5.6 million page views per month across the UK and Ireland. “New-age couples-to-be are flooded with ideas about how weddings should be; so much so that they

are clueless about what to do,” says John Kenny, director, *WeddingsOnline.in*. “This is where we come in to help. Our blog features real weddings with inspirational stories of real brides and grooms, where they shopped, the vendors and suppliers they used. We also help families with information about competitive rates and reviews about vendors,” he adds.

A similar business model is followed by popular Indian wedding sites *WeddingSutra.com* founded 14 years ago by Parthip Thyagarajan and *WedMeGood.com*, the brainchild of Mehak Sagar Shahani, an ex-economist turned beauty blogger, and her MBA husband Anand Shahani. “We are a curated portal,” says Mehak, “so each vendor listed, each real wedding showcased, each image on our site has been carefully hand-picked. We try to feature stories and weddings across styles and budgets—from featuring the wedding of a bride who wore sneakers

on her big day to talking about minor elements that can help personalise one’s events without costing much.”

Weddings have gone digital in other ways as well. You’ll also now find sites to help you build your own personal wedding site—the online version of a wedding invite. These have easy-to-create formats to give your guests far and wide a complete run-down of your upcoming celebrations. Most of these are free but if you have Rs 10,000 to 50,000 to spare, you can also get the Times Group’s new offering: the Alive Wedding Card. This ‘augmented reality’ card turns your invite into a multimedia experience on mobile, and lets you add on videos, maps and reminders. If you want to go a step further and spam your guests all the way to D-day, you can get a politician-style voice recording sent out to them from time to time, or download one of the scores of mobile wedding apps created for photo

sharing and ‘guest management’.

Once the research is done, most families go happily insane selecting the perfect wedding invite. Just cards won’t do any more—and digital invites won’t appeal to the *ammās* and *babajis* in the family. No, you need boxes in the shape of vanity drawers, cages with metal belts wrapped around them, heirloom textiles and embroideries, mint-flavoured Belgian chocolates, marzipan from Estonia. And there are people who’ll get it done for you, at a price. Vivek Sahni went from designing logos for MNCs to scrutinising personal art collections as inspiration for a client’s wedding invite. Ravish Kapoor injects humour on demand into his famous creations. EDC (Entertainment Design Company) appeals to royalty around the world, including Bollywood. And Meerut-born NIFT (National Institute of Fashion Technology) gold medallist Puneet Gupta brings an African safari to your home in the guise of a two-foot wide wedding trunk-invite.

“The wedding was being held in South Africa, hence the theme. It contained a pair of binoculars; you could turn the knob to view the different events. There was also a book detailing all the functions, and some food items,” smiles the Delhi-based designer, who has authored

India’s first book series of wedding-invite design trends. Gupta’s cards go from Rs 250 to Rs 1 lakh per card. “The invite is the trailer to the wedding—no one wants regular paper cards anymore. The price depends on the materials used. Some are made of silver, of course.” Of course.

The Bride Wore... Fuchsia

What will I wear? It’s the top question on any bride’s mind, more so when budgets are limitless, choices are flummoxing, and knowledge about the right styles is limited. What you need is a stylist or personal shopper. And fashion professionals are only too happy to help. Delhi-based fashion consultant Shirin Saluja and marketing maven Parul Gupta launched their styling consultancy Little Black Book in 2013, adding trousseau styling to their repertoire earlier this year. They curate and coordinate outfits for just about everyone in the family for every event. With a styling budget of Rs 50,000 onwards, they help brides get “something versatile that can be teamed with anything later. For instance, a *lehenga* skirt can be teamed with a tank top or a gold-silver *choli* in the future,” says Parul. “We advise brides on the little details people often overlook, such as not wearing a low-neck blouse since you’ll end up bending several times over the holy fire, or wearing comfortable platform heels and flattering lingerie.”

A similar tweak of profession took Nisha Kundnani from styling editorial shoots in fashion magazines to setting up Bridélan, a bridal styling service. “A young enterprising bride is aware that buying clothes is always a transitory thing and no matter how exciting and diverse, a trousseau belongs to its time,” says the Mumbai-based stylist, who often works with NRI brides. “I guide them to spend on smart pieces that can be used as separates. It is quite dated to give numbers to trousseau fragments—21 *salwar* suits, 51 saris. That doesn’t happen anymore. I also advise them not to overdo ‘Indian’ in their trousseau; a modern girl living in LA or Ludhiana realistically wears Indian once in a while and goes back to the boardroom and needs Western wear for her everyday work wardrobe,” she says. Kundnani is pleased that even conservative small-town fami-

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PUNEET GUPTA INVITATIONS

Umaid Bhawan
Palace, Jodhpur

SEPHI BERGERSON/FOTOWALA

As a wedding photographer, Sephi Bergerson's wedding shoots range from Rs 1.6 to 2 lakh for the first day

lies have become more accommodating about what the bride wears. "I was once shopping in Mumbai with a bride from Surat. Her future mother-in-law couldn't properly pronounce the names of designers and, yet, was so forward thinking that she let her daughter-in-law try out a fashionable midriff-baring crop top with a lehenga."

The Plan of Action

If you're really looking to one-up the Singhania's, you'll definitely need the

services of a wedding planner. These aren't your typical party organisers. These are large companies of event managers who take weddings from family events to grandly orchestrated Bollywoodian shows at castles and resorts around the world, with a star or two thrown in. Meher Sarid, who organised the Bachchan wedding of the previous decade and Gautam Gambhir's wedding in this one, worked for several years in the hospitality and airline industry as trainer and designer before joining hands with her hus-

A stalwart in the arena for over a decade, wedding consultant Neeta Raheja chartered a special flight for 225 guests to attend an engagement ceremony in Phuket this year. According to her, wedding planning has evolved immensely since the early days. "Initially, people didn't know what a wedding planner's role was. The planner was the 'outsider' and outsiders weren't very welcome in family affairs!" she laughs, adding, "Now, however, when family members are all working professionals, they pre-

Hotels, Resorts & Palaces. Their Timeless Weddings division specialises in bespoke weddings, honeymoons, anniversaries, renewal of vows, and even proposal settings at any of their 93 hotels around the world. The hospitality giant hosted the Vogue Wedding Show—a curated exhibition featuring the most luxurious wedding services—for a second time this August.

"The destination wedding market has matured," says Harris, "and we have 110 years of experience in going beyond expectations." That could mean fireworks going off on cue just as the girl accepts the boy's proposal on a private ferry ride on Lake Udaipur. It could mean Sufi singers producing a diamond ring mid-song at Gol Bungalow, in the iconic Taj Falaknuma, Hyderabad, even as the gentleman asks the lady, "Will you marry me?" It could mean giving a complimentary suite for the harried bride to take a nap before the wedding (most hotels give one during or later). "We believe we are part of the family," says Harris, mentioning a recent pat on the back she received from a bride's father after a well-orchestrated *sangeet*. "I asked him why. Was it the opera? Was it the play based on the couple's romance? Was it Sting's performance? Was it the 150 bite-sized flavours of *halwa* hung in the air? The food was exceptional that night, I had to admit. But no. The bride's father said it was the personal butler who stood by the groom all through the evening, holding his jacket, his champagne glass, his personal belong-

ings, while the groom danced without a care. *Jamai-raj khush, sab khush* (if the son-in-law is happy, everyone's happy)."

The Wedding Story

What is a wedding without millions of photos doing the rounds for days and years later? This is your one opportunity to be the star of your own show, and no fashionable couple worth their Pradas would miss the opportunity to be immortalised in a YouTube film. Enter the filmmakers and 'candid' art photographers. They give you your 15 days of fame and make you a celebrity in Facebook and Flickr albums for posterity. You can run in slo-mo around trees if you like, and they will Photoshop all those acne marks too.

These people come from diverse backgrounds—none of them to do with weddings, really. Mumbai-based Vishal Punjabi went from working in Shah Rukh Khan's Red Chillies Entertainment to making movies of real-life besotted couples. Delhi-based Yasmin Kidwai went from making international award-winning documentaries to dabbling in *shaadi* stories. Chandigarh-based Aarti Kapur Singh went from print journalism to starting her own wedding film company. And US-based filmmaker Mili Ghosh teamed up with her husband Sid to capture opulent million-dollar affairs across the world for wealthy NRI families.

Israeli photojournalist Sephi Bergerson had just completed a book on the street foods of India when his friend asked him to shoot her sister's wedding

in Kerala. And so, in 2007, he discovered the awe and splendour of the great Indian wedding, and has been hooked since. To date, the Goa-based photographer has shot dozens of Indian weddings around the world and is publishing a book, *Behind the Indian Veil: A Journey Through Weddings in India*, next year. With charges that go from Rs 1.6 to 2 lakh for the first day (the remaining days are cheaper), he's now one of the formidable names in wedding photography, a list that includes Badal Raja, Prakash Tilokani, Vinayak Das and Mahesh Shantaram.

But even after hiring all these storytelling wizards, your wedding story doesn't end here. You need trousseau packers like Vandana Mohan—those clever people with crafty fingers who create boxes with satin bows and organza ribbons and Swarovski crystals to pack all those gifts in. You need wedding choreographers like Shiamak Davar, who will teach the whole extended family a fixed set of moves for the *sangeet* or cocktail evening. You need food artists and caterers who do French *hors d'oeuvres*, Greek salad and Italian *ciriola* to perfection. You need pundits with stage presence who make a performance out of a *puja*. And you'll need accountants to fix those books when all the give-and-take is done and over with.

Take a breath. You still have to plan the honeymoon. ■

Aekta Kapoor is a Delhi-based writer specialising in fashion and lifestyle

"Something versatile can be teamed with anything later. A lehenga skirt can be teamed with a tank top or a gold-silver choli" Parul Gupta



band Sunny to launch a wedding events company back in 1998. She now creates her own décor and floral art for some of India's most opulent affairs. Ferns N Petals, India's first chain of fancy florists, have now added FNP Weddings to their laterals, partnering with some of the biggest names in luxury wedding planning from around the globe. Sushil Wadhwa, founder of the Platinum World Group, plunged into destination weddings from MICE events when he realised it was definitely the more lucrative of the two. A sample service at one of his weddings includes an acrobat flying down from the sky suspended from a helium balloon to give the couple their engagement rings.

fer to save time by hiring wedding planners. It's almost a necessity these days." So lucrative is the industry that top fashion designers such as JJ Valaya, Rohit Bal and Ashima Leena have taken the plunge into wedding venue décor, and travel major Cox & Kings has set up a new segment dedicated to luxury camps for intimate weddings.

If you've got your wedding venue finalised, and if it happens to be one of the oldest names in the hospitality industry like the Taj, you are in pretty safe planning hands already. "We do not just facilitate weddings, we become a part of your life," says Deepa Misra Harris, senior vice-president, sales & marketing, Taj



ANAND GOGOI