

A Zoroastrian Wedding Ceremony

Marriage : A Zoroastrian Sacrament

Marriage is considered to be a divinely ordained event in the life of a Zoroastrian for it is said that God revealed to Zarathushtra, that not only is marriage a righteous act but it is a commitment which makes even the earth feel joyous and happy (*Vd.3.2 SBE Vol.4 p 23*). The nuptial bond is seen as both a contract as well as a sacrament which, when enacted through the marriage ritual, brings together a union between the couple in both the physical and spiritual worlds. Thus marriage in Zoroastrianism is a religious duty to be undertaken by the priests as well as the laity. "Verily I say it unto thee, O Spitama Zarathushtra, the man who has a wife is far above him who lives in celibacy..." (*Vd.4.47 SBE Vol.4 p 46*).

Highlights of the Marriage Ceremony

The marriage ceremony may be divided into four parts:

1. The *Nāhn* Ritual.
2. The *Āchu Michu*¹ Ritual.
3. The *Hathēvāro* Ritual.
4. The Marriage Ritual.

The *Nāhn* Ritual

Before the commencement of the actual wedding ceremony, both the bride and groom undergo a process of purification (*nāhn*) which ritually cleanses and prepares them to receive the blessings and strength from the divine world. After the *nāhn* ceremony is completed, the couple is said to be ritually ready to be wedded by the priests. Thereafter, both the bride and groom dress ceremonially in their respective traditional attire.²

1. Traditionally, the word is spelt as *Aⁿ cāhuⁿ Michhuⁿ*
2. According to custom, the groom wears a traditional Parsi white overcoat (*dugli*) and a pair of white trousers. He also puts on a specially designed hat (*Guj. paghdī* or *feāh*). The bride is usually dressed in a white sari with silver or gold embroidery woven into it. She also partially covers her head with part of the sari draped over it (*Guj. sor*). In Zoroastrianism, the colour white is regarded as a symbol of purity and hence its importance on all ritualistic occasions. Traditionally, the jewellery worn by the bride is given to her by the groom's parents.



Iranian Jewellery (c 7th century B.C.)

The *Āchu Michu* Ritual

The lady members of the respective families carry two silver salvers (*Guj.ses*) which are of particular interest, as contained in them are items of ritual importance.

The first tray (*Āchu Michu*) contains:³

Items	Intrinsically symbolic of
Egg	The life giving force
Betel leaf and areca nut (<i>Guj.pan-sopari</i>)	Suppleness and strength
Unshelled almond (<i>Guj.badām</i>)	Virtue
Sugar crystal or sugar biscuit (<i>Guj.bātāsa</i>)	Sweetness
Dried date (<i>Guj.khāarak</i>)	Resilience
Coconut	The inner and outer worlds
Dry rice	Abundance
Rose petals	Joy
A beaker of water	Purity, perfection



The second tray contains:⁴

Items	Intrinsically symbolic of
Silver cone (<i>Guj.sopāro</i>)	The allegorical mountain of sweetness from which the good spirits are believed to descend
Sprinkler (<i>Guj.golābdān</i>)	The receptacle of happiness
Vermillion container (<i>Guj.pigāni</i>)	The receptacle of holiness
Sugar crystals or sugar biscuits	Sweetness
Green leaves	Nourishment
Grains of rice or wheat	Abundance
Pomegranate	Immortality
Pistachio nuts	Firmness
Silver and gold coins	Wealth
Coconut	The inner and outer worlds
Garland of flowers	Joy



Iranian jewellery (8th - 6th century B.C.)

3,4. Information about the items used and the symbolism thereof have been gleaned from the oral tradition.

Prior to the *Āchu Michu* ritual, the groom, his witness and the priest, all do their respective *kūstī*s in order to remind themselves of their commitment and allegiance to the Zoroastrian tradition. Upon the completion of the *kūstī*, the groom stands beside the stage whilst the bride's mother faces him and performs the *Āchu Michu* ritual which is believed to be of Indian origin. First, she takes an egg in her right hand from the *Āchu Michu* tray and rotates it seven times in a clockwise manner over the groom's head; she then breaks the egg on a stone placed to the right of the groom's feet.

The clockwise rotational gesture over the head of a person is believed to have a two-fold significance. First, the clockwise gesture is deemed to generate an energy which permeates into the celebrant. Secondly, this movement ensures the symbolic penetration and transmission of the intrinsic goodness of each item used, from the spiritual into the psychological world in which the ritual experience should be felt by the participant. The seven rotations are symbolic of the seven Bounteous Immortals who represent the key attributes of God, and who are deemed to be the guardians of the seven physical creations in this world. The heptad of the Bounteous Immortals is ritually invoked in order that they may enter the body of the celebrant through this rotational gesture. Upon the symbolic goodness of the various items having ritually entered into the person, what remain are the dregs and hence the items used are either broken or cast down to the right and left of the groom's feet.

Next, the bridegroom's mother takes the betel leaf, areca nut, dried date, almond and sugar crystal, all together in her right hand and the same rotational procedure is followed as before. Thirdly, the coconut is rotated over the groom's head and it is then broken on the stone placed to the right of his feet. Afterwards, a few grains of rice and rose petals are taken out of the tray and the remaining rice and rose petals are wetted in the tray, which is then

rotated over the groom's head as done earlier with the other items. The mixture is then cast down to the left and right of the groom's feet. The handful of dry rice is finally showered over the groom as a token of invoking blessings.⁵ The groom is then garlanded and given a fresh coconut to hold. A vertical mark with vermilion powder is made in the centre of his forehead. The red pigment is symbolic of the sacrificial blood that was shed by the ancient Indo-Iranians as an act deemed to represent the well-being and spiritual sustenance of their souls. The groom then steps onto the stage with his right foot and awaits the arrival of his bride.

The bride also goes through the same ritual procedures as undergone earlier by the groom. Upon the completion of all the preliminary rituals, the bride steps onto the stage and sits opposite her husband-to-be, ready for the solemn yet joyous marriage ceremony to begin. The priests, respective witnesses and close family members, all stand on the stage which is bedecked with flowers, lights and other decorations. A traditional oil lamp as well as an incense burner are kept burning to add to the religiosity of the ceremony.

The *Hathēvāro* Ritual

In this part of the marriage ritual a cotton sheet is held vertically between the bride and groom by the witnesses and other family members standing on the stage. The officiating priest then takes the right hand of the groom and makes him hold the right hand of the bride, under the vertically held cotton sheet. The priest then winds a cotton thread three times around the clasped hands of the couple and gives them a handful of rice to hold in their respective left hands. The hand clasp of the couple, bound by the thread, is a symbolic gesture of the promise and commitment that

5. The showering of dry rice over a person is the usual Zoroastrian practice of ritually invoking blessings on all auspicious occasions.

the bride and groom have volitionally chosen to make to each other. The thread wound three times over their hands represents their allegiance to be compatible in thought, word and deed. The officiating priest then begins the invocation by chanting the following words:

Ba nāme yazad bakhshāyandeh bakhshāyashgar meherbān.....

In the name of the Lord, (who is) benevolent, the giver of blessings and the bestower of kindness.....

The prayers continue as the priest invokes blessings upon the couple for the virtues of righteousness, victory over enemies, strength, wisdom, good health and for a happy married life. The same thread which was wound around the couple's clasped hands is then wound seven times around their chairs in a clockwise manner, whilst the priests chant one *Ahunavar* for each encirclement. By this act of encirclement, a consecrated area is created naturally in order to generate greater spiritual togetherness between both the bride and groom. Upon the completion of the seventh *Ahunavar*, the cotton sheet between the couple is removed and almost instantly the rice held by the bride and groom is thrown at each other.⁶ The removal of the cotton sheet signifies that the separation that hitherto existed between the couple no longer exists, as they are in the process of being united in matrimony. The officiating priest then gathers together the seven threads and ties a knot around them. The knot is symbolic of the interdependence and harmony reflected within the seven creations of God. Next, smouldering frankincense in the incense burner is brought to the couple as a gesture to remind them to extend an invitation to the spirits of their ancestors who, it is believed, continue to maintain a link with those living in the physical world. The bride's chair is swivelled around in order that she then sits alongside the groom, facing east.

6. The one who throws the rice first is believed to win the race of love.

The Marriage Ritual

The all-important marriage benediction (*Guj. Ashirwad*) is then recited. The two priests stand before the couple and the officiating priest invokes the blessings of the Wise Lord, Ahura Mazda. He chants, "May the Creator, the Omniscient Lord, grant upon thee, progeny of sons, and grandsons, plenty of means to provide yourselves with heart ravishing friendship, bodily strength, long life and an existence of a hundred and fifty years...." During the ceremony, the priest asks the witnesses as well as the couple to confirm that the nuptial bond is taking place with their acceptance and consent. Throughout the invocation, the couple is showered with rice at short intervals as a symbolic gesture to enhance the health, wealth and harmony between the couple. The bride and groom are urged to lead a righteous life in order to be happy, for everlasting happiness is promised to the person who recognizes and affirms the highest truth for its own sake. Upon the completion of the main benediction, the *Ashirwad* is repeated in Sanskrit. This ancillary convention developed in India where the marriage benediction was translated into Sanskrit in order to enable the learned of the land to follow and participate in the ceremony.

The marriage ritual ends with a final short benediction known as the *Dōa Tan-Dōrōsti* in which the priests ask for happiness, virtue, wealth, good health and a long wedded life to be bestowed upon the couple. Upon the completion of the formal wedding ceremony, the bride and groom exchange rings. The marriage is solemnized once again in the last night watch (*Ushahin gāh*) of the same day.

Before the marriage, the bride and groom were two people living their own separate individual lives. After the marriage, they become united through the sacred nuptial bond and are on the verge of beginning a new life together. It is appropriate then that this ceremony should be repeated in the last watch of the day so that the bride and groom wake up to herald the dawn of a new life as husband and wife.