



A Videotape
Directed and Produced
by Susan Slyomovics
and Amanda Dargan

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Henna Art
among Pakistani Women
in New York City



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Interpretative Booklet
by Susan Slyomovics



This booklet accompanies the
videotape "Wedding Song" and
a shorter version,
"The Painted Bride."

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Transliteration note: Capitalized letters represent retroflexes except for names which are conventionally capitalized; macrons = vowels; tilde = nasalization; underdots as in kh = voiceless velar fricative; over dot as in g = voiced velar fricative; 'c' = voiceless palatal affricate as in English "latch;" 'ch' = aspirated 'c'

Mehendi is the traditional art of decorating women's hands and feet with henna to celebrate weddings and other festive occasions. The word mehendi describes both the artist's medium, henna, and the process of creating and painting ornate designs. Over many centuries, the henna leaf, derived from an extraction of the Lawsonia tree, has been used for medicinal purposes, dyeing fabrics and decorating bodies. Our historical evidence dates back to Pharaonic times because recently excavated mummies attest to henna-tinted hair and reddish fingernails. Certainly the tradition of female henna-painters, who trace lacelike or geometric designs upon women's skins, continues as a practice throughout the Muslim world, the Indian subcontinent and wherever Muslim communities form.

For the modern Indian or Pakistani woman, once a wedding date has been arranged, decorating the bride is the occasion for a special celebration called the mehendi party. The night before the ceremony, the mehendiwalli or female mehendi artist, prepares the ground henna powder. She cleanses the powder of twigs and stems, sifts it and soaks it in a decoction of tea water with lemon juice (to impart a deep color) and sugar (to thicken the paste). Then she forms cones from rolled plastic sheets which she fills with spoonfuls of henna paste. The henna-filled cones resemble a confectioner's pastry tube and allow for controlled application of paste to skin. Designs for the palm are the most intricate and the sole of the foot is left bare.

The mehendi artist profiled in the videotape is Shenaz Hooda who lives in the borough of Queens in New York City. Her skill at improvising patterns of flowers, leaves, lines and circles, make her a requested and necessary figure at wedding parties for the growing Indian and Pakistani community in New York City. Shenaz came to New York City via Bombay, India and Karachi, Pakistan in 1980. She was not a professional mehendi artist in Pakistan but the growing South Asian community of Queens turned her pastime into a part-time profession. She has also appeared in many folklore and folk arts public sector programs such as the annual Queens Day festivals in Flushing Meadow, at elementary schools, at Indian community affairs, in commercial representations of Indian culture such as Bloomingdale's Festival of India (she was put at the make-up counter) or JC Penny's India Expedition promotional campaign.

When asked why she decorates only the bride's hands and feet, the mehendi artist, Shenaz Hooda, replied that formerly only the delicate hands and feet of the bride were visible to the world while the rest of the body was draped and veiled with cloth. Thus, the bridal body is either covered with cloth or with design. Hidden within the *mehendi* pattern, Shenaz paints individual letters to form the groom's name among the floral designs of the bride's palms. On the wedding night it is customary for the bride to ask the groom to search for the initials of his name hidden among the designs drawn on his new wife's hands. If he finds the name he is said to dominate the bride. If he cannot find the name, the bride rules the groom.



Shenaz Hooda applies makeup to the bride, Rubina Ali. Photo by Susan Slyomvics.

The painted mehendi lines become part of the surface of the body. Lines are raised in relief formed by the hardened henna paste. The design is left to set until the next morning with frequent applications of lemon juice. The longer the paste rests upon surface skin, the deeper the color and the more durable the artwork. Then the dried henna is scraped away and the bride avoids using excessive water on her hands and feet because water lightens and eventually washes away the color. The time that the design remains on the female skin is important because folk belief claims that if the henna-based design fades too quickly during the first month of marriage, it is communally remarked that the husband forced his wife to begin housework, to wash and to clean before the honeymoon was properly over. To earn henna longevity, however, the bride must remain still and submit to the lengthy process of henna hand-painting. For a period of twenty-four hours, from the beginning of the painting process which may also last several hours, until the next morning, the drying application of henna must not be disturbed. During this time, the bride cannot feed herself and her male relatives often take care of household tasks. Throughout the evening, the henna application is regularly moistened with lemon juice so that the process of dyeing the hand a deeper red continues.

In this videotape, the Hooda and Lakhani families celebrating the mehendi ritual belong to the Shia Ismaili sect of Islam. Also known as Seveners, they trace their spiritual lineage to Ismail, eldest son of the sixth Shiite Imam, Jafar al-Sadiq. Their current leader is Karim Agha Khan, the forty-ninth Imam and head of approximately fifteen million Ismailis scattered through twenty-five countries. The community in New York City consists of six hundred families supporting one mosque in Rego Park, Queens, with a second one in the planning stages. The largest concentration of Ismailis in North America is centered in Toronto, Canada, with eighteen mosques serving a population of twenty thousand.

“Wedding Song” begins with Shenaz Hooda’s arrival at the Lakhani family home in Rego Park, Queens, New York. The prospective bride, Rubina Noorani has her hands and feet hennaed by Shenaz to mark the occasion of her wedding to Shaukat Ali, a first cousin. The first song on the videotape is a traditional Urdu wedding song about mehendi:

Traditional Urdu Wedding Songs:

- | | | |
|----|---|---|
| 1. | I'll receive a letter from my home
From my friends with greetings
Write my beloved's name
On my hands with mehendi | āegā aise mē khat mere ghar-se
sathiyō kā le-kar salām
mehendī se likh do re
hāthō pe mere
mere sāvariya kā nām |
|----|---|---|

(‘sāvariya’ is literally “hero” or “beloved” and is the epithet for the Hindu God Krishna).

- | | | |
|----|--|--|
| 2. | Apply mehendi on my hands
Go quickly and bring my groom
Why are you sitting quietly? It's late isn't it?
Tell me when will my wedding be? | hāthō pe mere bhī mehendī lagāo
jaldī se jāo merā dulha le-ke āo
kyō baiThte ho cup hai der kyā
bolo merā kab hogā byāh |
|----|--|--|

Decorating the bride's limbs is the occasion for celebration and musical performance. Family and close women friends, with hands newly hennaed, dance and sing folksongs and riddles to the beat of the drum in order to divert the bride during the lengthy hand and feet painting. During Shenaz Hooda's henna party, the older women dance and sing a song in Gujarati praising the strength of the henna leaf:

- | | |
|---|---|
| Mehendi is sown at Madwi
Its color went to Gujarat
Mehendi color comes out strong | mehendī te wawī madwe ne āyno rang
giyo gujrāt ne
mehendī rang gujrāt lāgiyo re |
| The younger brother-in-law is a family pet
He tells his sister-in-law to color her hands
with mehendi
Mehendi color comes out strong | nāno degariyo laRko bhābhī rango tamārā
hāth re
mehendī rang lāgiyo re |

Shenaz Hooda applies mehendi to the feet. Photo by Susan Slyomovics.



Lyrics are sung in small intimate private gatherings by the bride's female friends and family. Traditionally men are absent. However, in New York City during the two mehendi parties of Rubina Ali and Shenaz Hooda that appear in the videotape, close male relatives were present. The Ismaili Shia Muslim community is not numerous and men have become part of the women's ritual.

Shenaz believes that the songs and dances keep the bride smiling. The words and music accompany the bride's surrender of her personal comfort because the mehendi designs must not be disturbed. At the same time the verbal artistry of their lyrics tease and mock the prospective groom and in-laws. The occasion is both sad and happy. After the wedding the bride leaves her family for a new environment. In the meantime it is her friends' task to cheer her spirits.

Urdu Teasing Songs

- | | | |
|----|--|--|
| 1. | Tell me something
Let's visit the in-laws' house for a few days | kuch to batāo |
| | If your mother-in-law has a stomach ache?
What should you do?
Pack your bedding and walk out | agar jab sās ke peT mẽ dard ho, to kyā
karnā cāhiye
boriyā-bistar bāndh-ke aur cal dena cāhiye
cand dinō ke vāste sasurāl jānā cāhiye |
| | If a burglar breaks into your house
What should you do?
Give him the key and go to sleep | agar jab ghar mẽ cor ā-jāe to kyā
karnā cāhiye
cor ke hāth mẽ cābī de-kar so jānā cāhiye |
| | If you can't find a porter at the station
What should you do?
Load the luggage on your father-in-law's
head and walk away | agar jab sTeshān par kūlī na mile to kyā
karnā cāhiye
susar ke sir par bistar rakh-kar cal denā cāhiye |
| 2. | Refrain: O God what should I do? I got Shaukat | māi kyā karū Rām? mujhe Shaukat mil gayā |
| | Verses: Everyone went to into the garden
Shaukat went along too
Everyone plucked flowers
Shaukat brought cauliflowers | sab log gaye baḡ mẽ
Shaukat bhī calā gayā
sab ne toRā phūl
Shaukat ghobī le—ke ā-gayā |

Everyone went to the restaurant
Shaukat went along too
Everyone ate chicken
Shaukat sucked the bones

sab log gaye hoTal mē
Shaukat bhī calā gayā
sab ne khāī murḡī
Shaukat haDDiyā cūs-ke ā-gayā

Everyone went to the swimming pool
Shaukat went along
Everyone went diving
Shaukat took a dip

sab log gaye *swimming pool*
Shaukat bhī calā bayā
sab ne mārī *dive*
Shaukat Dubkī mār gayā

Everyone went to the mosque
Shaukat went along too
Everyone knelt in prayer
Shaukat did a somersault

sab log gaye masjid mē
Shaukat bhī calā gayā
sab ne kiyā sijdā
Shaukat ulaT kar-ke ā-gayā

3. Refrain: O God may my sister be well

e khudā merī bahin salāmat rahe

Verses: Look at the mistake my father made
To such a fat boy he said yes
They are happy there but we are ashamed
He has little chance of becoming skinny

meri ābū ne kī ye kaisī galti
aise moTe laRke se "hā" kar dī
vo te vahā khush hāī sharmindā hāī ham
us ke paTle hone ke *chances* hāī kam

Look at the mistake my father made
To a black-skinned boy he said yes
They are happy there but we are ashamed
He has little chance of becoming fair-skinned

Pithi (turmeric paste) Ceremony

After the bride's hands and feet are hennaed, the pithi ceremony may take place immediately or, more traditionally in Pakistan, on the following day. The word pithi is the Gujarati term for the ceremony of turmeric paste. A white sheet is placed on the floor and a heart-shaped design with the bride's initials is traced on the sheet with colored rice. Traditionally a swastika of colored rice was drawn; however, in the United States, the Ismaili community changed the swastika to a heart. While this is not uniformly followed, enough members of the community are aware of the charged symbolism of the swastika as Nazi insignia and many wish not to be misunderstood.

Then the bride, attired in a yellow sari, is escorted by her mother or another female relative to the center of the room where she is seated on a chair which rests upon the innovative heart-shaped design. Family and friends approach the bride one by one. From a tray containing colored rice, a clay vessel, sweets (in America Shenaz used M & Ms), and a bowl of turmeric paste, each guest applies the paste to the bride's body, throws rice for good luck and leaves an envelope of money as a gift. The end of the pithi ceremony is signalled by the bride when she steps on and cracks open the clay vessel.

Ghari (vessel) Ceremony

After the pithi ceremony, the bride's sister or a female relative returns from the Ismaili mosque with a vessel of holy water that has been blessed. The vessel is beaded with a design in the shape of the swastra, or India swastika. Before the wedding ceremony the bride bathes in blessed water to purify herself. The holy water is brought by a close female relative. In the United States a young male cousin may be substituted when the bride's immediate family does not reside in New York. The bearer of the holy water appears at the door with a decorated vessel on his head and he is greeted with an Urdu teasing song:

I aimed and threw a sticky dessert (lit. ras gulla)
 The first dessert I aimed at my mother-in-law
 But I didn't do it
 I didn't do it
 I thought of her as an old lady
 And didn't do it

ras gullā gumāī ke mār diyo re
 pahlā ras gullā māī ne sās jī ko mārā
 choR diyo re (2)

usko buRhī samajh-kar choR diyo re

During Shenaz's ghari or vessel ceremony, her cousin Tasneem Chattoor, brings the holy water from the mosque. She is greeted with a religious Urdu song:

Refrain: The protection of the Holy Prophet
 Congratulations congratulations

rasūle pāk kā sāyā mubārak ho mubārak ho

Verses: Call the tailor to make clothes
 Which the bride will wear
 Congratulate the bride's mother

bulāo darzī banae joRāe
 jo dulhan pahen-kar jāe
 dulhan kī ammā se kah denā mubārak

Call the jeweler to make the jewels
 Which the bride will wear
 Congratulate the bride's father

bulāo sunār banāe zēvar
 jo dulhan pahen-kar jāe
 dulhan ke abbā se kah denā mubārak

Call the shoemaker to make sandals
 Which the bride will wear
 Congratulate the bride's brother

bulāo moṭī banāe sandals
 jo dulhan pahen-kar jāe
 dulhan ke bhaiyā se kah denā mubārak

Call the judge to recite the ceremony
 Which the bride will hear
 Congratulate the bride's sister

bulāo qāzī paRhe nikāh
 jo dulhan sun-kar āe
 dulhan kī bahin se kah denā mubārak

Puro (in-law exchange) Ceremony



The in-laws arrive bearing gifts to the bride's family.

"Puro" is the Gujarati word for the Urdu, "jihaz," meaning dowry. The women from the groom's family are greeted by the bride's mother who receives a plate of henna paste lit with candles and a jug of milk. Reciprocating, the bride's mother welcomes her new in-laws with sweets and she showers them with colored rice. Clothes and jewelry are passed among the wedding party and all the ceremonies are accompanied by teasing songs.



Henna is applied to the hands.

Song Battles

Satirical songs are exchanged between the men and women and between women from the bride's family and women from the groom's side as if to engage in friendly battle using verse forms. For example, Gulzar Chaudhari, a friend of Shenaz, initiates a battle of the songs with words that mock husbands according to their profession. Shah Nawaz (called Sean) Hooda, brother of the bride, responds with a song from an Indian film that urges his sister not to be afraid of the next day, her wedding day. Samina Ukani requests the drum and replies with lyrics that make fun of men. Then the bride's brothers, father and male cousin don veils to mimic women and their dances:

Gulzar's song:

Refrain:	Seven women friends are standing Loudly complaining again and again	sāt saheliyā khaRI khaRI fariyād sunāi garī garī
Verses:	One friend's husband was a postman Never be a postman's wife He never lets her sleep all night He stamps letters again and again	ek sahel kā miyā thā Dākiyā Dākiyā kī bīvī na banā kabhī rāt bhar mua sone na de Thappe lagāve garī garī
	One friend's husband was a shoemaker (lit. "from Kohlapour") Never be a shoemaker's wife He never lets her sleep all night He shows her slippers all night long	ek sahel kā miyā thā kolhāpurī kolhāpurī kī bīvī na banā kabhī rāt bhar mua sone na de cappal dikhāve garī garī
	One friend's husband was a drunkard Never be a drunkard's wife He never lets her sleep all night He shows her bottles all night long	ek sahel kā miyā thā sharābī sharābī kī bīvī na banā kabhī rāt bhar mua sone na de bo'āl dikhāve garī garī



Wedding songs accompanied by pots and pans.

Shenaz's younger bother, Shahnawaz replies:

Life is like a pleasing journey
Who knows what will happen here tomorrow?
Death has to come one day and it will
You lose life one day and you will
Don't be afraid of these things
Who knows what will happen here tomorrow?

zindagī ek safar hai suhānā
yahā kal kyā ho kisne jānnā
maut ānī hai āegī ek dīn
jān jānī hai jāegī ek dīn
aise bātō se kyā ghabrānā
yahā kal kyā ho kisne jānnā

Shahnawaz is answered by Samina Ukani who accompanies her reply on the drum:

Search for one and you will find thousands
Pretty faces are many
There are many roses in the garden
If you're not there it doesn't matter
If you're young so what?
If you're handsome so what?
Do you think you're god?

ek DhūDho milte hāī hazārō
husne wāle kam nahī
lākhō hāī gulāb gulistān mē
tū na ho to gām nahī
javā hai to kyā
hasīn hai to kyā hai
tū samjhā tū khudā hai

The male relative's in women's veils sing:

Remove the veil and show your face
We are the ones who love you
We are not strangers
We can even die for you
We are not some stranger

ye pardā haTā do terā mukhRā dikhā do
ham pyār karne vāle hāī
koī gair nahī
are ham tum pe marne vāle hāī
koī gair nahī

Sean, who is still wearing a veil, dances up to his sister Shenaz and sings:

My dear sister will become a bride
The regal groom will play an instrument
Dear brother will play an instrument
She will wear sixteen bridal adornments
She will put tika and she will put mehendi

merī pyārī bahin banegī dulhaniyā
saj-ke āēge dulhe rājā
bhaiyā rājā bajāe bājā
solah-singār merī bahin karegī
Tīkā lagegā aur mehendī lagegī

Song battles may take place not only between men and women but also between the women from the bride's side against the women of the in-laws party. Lyrics are playfully altered but the melody remains intact. After hearing a song mocking the groom, the in-laws announce:

Doesn't matter, whatever you say
We are still taking the bride away
Even if you call the groom dark or short
He is still going to take her away

Samina quickly sings back:

Sing something
Otherwise the other party will be the winner

māno hamārā ehsān hai laRki ne "ha" kar dī
laRkā tumhārā kuwārā rah jātā

Be grateful to us
Our daughter said yes
Your son would have remained a bachelor

Yasmin, who is related to the groom's side, retorts: "You're not family or friends — you're hired mouths." The groom's women have the last word as the time approaches when the bride will depart with the groom: "How come you're quiet? You don't have anything to say anymore?"

The Role of Songs



What is the role played by the songs and mehendi art performed by the Ismaili women? Both the bride's side of the family as well as the groom's side of the family now participate in henna painting, song and dance. In song, the bride is portrayed as civilized, Westernized, knowledgeable and powerful. The groom is the opposite, namely illiterate, gullible even criminal, forced upon the bride in an arranged marriage. Here are the lyrics of a Hindi song appropriated and revised by the New York city group from an Indian film entitled *Kubsurat* (Beautiful). The film is about younger sisters awaiting their turn to marry. They tease the eldest whose marriage has just been arranged. In the Hindi film the setting is the all-female comforting environment of the three sisters' shared bedroom. The younger sisters' song challenges the idea of a romantic married life:

Listen sister listen, let me tell you all the boy's qualities

he is a man of good family
but he stutters and is pock-marked
he chews betel leaf
but only after he drinks
he drinks but only when he plays cards
he plays cards but only when he steals
but every day he cannot steal
because half the time he's in jail
if he could he would break out of jail and run
if you whistle once he'll come running to you
his mother-in-law listens properly
but he is very dumb

Other songs may describe a bride's fear of her mother-in-law. In this Punjabi folk-song, the bride addresses the bridegroom with this chorus: "Come in front and face me." Verses are rhymed tercets and they are improvised with a different woman in mehendi performance taking her turn to create a new verse within the prescribed form:

Your mother made eggs
when I asked for some
I was beaten (come in front and face me)
Your mother made bread
When I asked for some
I was hit with a stick (come in front and face me)
Your mother made a sweet dish
when I asked for some
I was hit on the head with a spoon (Come in front and face me)

Or the bride addresses her own mother with this chorus line: "O mother, O mother, what type of a bridegroom is this?" The song is a series of familiar rhymed couplets on the theme of the sophisticated, possibly Westernized bride versus the country bumpkin groom. Again each of the women in the mehendi party performs new verses:



Weeding party. Photo by Susan Slyomovics.

When we send him mehendi
he thought it was chutney
when we send him suit material
he thought it was for a dhoti
when we send him perfume
he thought it was water

Refrain: Black black is the sky
The plane flies and flies
Away in the sky

the bride is educated but the bridegroom is illiterate
the educated bride reads the news
the illiterate bridegroom asks the news
the educated bride wears the watch
the illiterate bridegroom asks the time
the educated bride drives the car
the illiterate groom gives it a push
the educated bride wears sandals
the illiterate groom polishes them

Once I was a fashionable lady
Until I married a peasant man.
I asked him to buy me face powder
Instead he brought me white flour!
I asked him to buy me kohl eye pencil
Instead he brought me charcoal!
I asked him to take me to a movie
Instead he began dancing by himself!



The mehendi artist, Shenaz Hooda, becomes a bride. Photo by Susan Slyomovics.

during my three years fieldwork studying the wedding songs created for the mehendi ceremonies, I was interested in exploring the connection between performance and feminist theory. I asked the Ismaili women singers these questions: do songs constitute strategic devices, weapons which help a woman have a voice in the community and in choosing her marriage partner? Does this form of female expressive culture serve to create a female network system of covert influence based upon linguistic indirection and ridicule of the marriage partner, ridicule which the bride presumably would never do to the groom's face? I read to them what I had written:

"The performance of these songs occur at a rite of passage, a liminal event in which the participants change status. Liminal events, we know from Victor Turner, allow for such inversions, the momentary carnivalesque, temporary reversals in which the bride lampoons her partner in life. Inversions of the norm allow for parodic inflections of strong cultural values but the larger question remains: whether such thematically subversive but ceremonialized and socially approved inversions of social norms function finally to subvert or to resecure such norms? In performance, the Indian-Pakistani bride practices talking back to the groom in her own vocabulary, a vocabulary grounded in the notion of a female following the verbal improvisations of her female predecessors. The separateness of this particular female subculture, the songs passed down from woman to woman, at the very least attest to women who have traditionally cultivated accents of acquiescence in order to live lives on their own terms, even if only in the privacy of their thoughts."

When I finished reading, my women friends laughed and they commented that this was a very interesting and very serious analysis.

Videotape Credits

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