

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## An “Arranged Love” Marriage: India’s Neoliberal Turn and the Bollywood Wedding Culture Industry

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*In the last decade of the 20th century, coinciding with India’s economic deregulation, the Hindu wedding became a core attraction in popular Indian cinema. Weddings in real life, in turn, became more elaborate organized by a wedding industry, which professionalized and commodified work that was previously done by an informal economy or outside of it by members of the family. Evoking the Frankfurt School, this paper locates the big wedding as a product of the emerging Bollywood culture industry and its ideological redefinition of nationalism/citizenship as both acts of consumption and the re-enactment of patriarchal and caste-based identities. Challenging the explanatory power of the notion of hybridity and its rejection of “totalization” narratives, the paper asks for a reconsideration of the meta-narratives of class and gender, capital and patriarchy to understand the ways in which global capital is most intimately experienced and lived.*

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Whether made in India or abroad, the big fat Bollywood wedding has become a trademark attraction of contemporary Indian culture. A trend started by films such as *Hum Apke Hain Kaun/Can You Name Our Relationship?* (Sooraj Barjatya, 1995) and *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge/Those With Heart Will Take the Bride* (Aditya Chopra, 1995), the trend has migrated internationally via films such as Mira Nair’s *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) and Gurinder Chadha’s *Bride and Prejudice* (2004). In turn, real weddings have become increasingly spectacular egged on by a newly emerged wedding industry into which the Bollywood form has seamlessly merged. **Celebrity weddings add fuel to the fire. Reportedly, British model Elizabeth Hurely’s diamond encrusted wedding sari cost £4,000, while the tiny gold balls dangling from leading film star Aishwarya Rai’s wedding sari were—in the tradition of the maharajas—distributed to the “poor.”**<sup>1</sup> In a perceptive review of Mira Nair’s *Namesake* (2007), Stuart Klawans commended Nair for directing the film, particularly the wedding scenes, with “the

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instincts of a hostess,” a comparison which indicates the extent to which staging a wedding as a cinematic attraction has blurred into staging its real counterpart as a film-in-the-making.

How might we understand this reinvention of tradition at the very moment India is supposed to have broken away from history to emerge as a power in the global economy; this assertion of ethnic identity in the midst of an unprecedented presence of global brands and the “discovery” of Indian cinema, specifically Bollywood, as a national icon at the most radicalized moment of its globalization? While it is easy enough to see this as just another instance of the hybrid nature of global culture, it will be my argument that the Bollywood wedding is a specific class-based gendered response to India’s turn to neoliberalism. In other words, the metanarratives of capital and patriarchy can explain what on the surface appears to be a paradoxical or freewheeling postmodern intermingling of opposites/differences. The big Bollywood wedding—its conspicuous consumption dictated by the need to individuate oneself, to package and present oneself as a globalized Indian who flamboyantly embraces “tradition” as a matter of choice—is symptomatic of a neoliberal subject governed by a regime of consumption where, in order to show that one has “arrived,” every event, including something as conformist as a wedding, must be presented as uniquely individual.

At the outset, it is important to clarify that I am not using the term Bollywood, as is often done in popular discourse, to refer to the entire gamut of Indian popular cinema. Rather, following Rajadhyaksha (2004), I use it specifically to describe a particular genre of glossy “family-centered feel-good films centered on romantic stories” which emerged in the 1990s and crossed over into North America and the UK to become the cultural icons of a globalizing India. This genre is at the heart of what can quite appropriately be called the Bollywood culture industry; marketing a cultural style which extends beyond cinema to an entire range of cultural production, across media like video, television, and print, to lifestyle markers such as fashion, food, and decor. Promoted by both the Indian government and business, its basic commodity/brand is a playful postmodern reinvention of “Indian culture” as an extravaganza of consumer culture often built upon certain familiar Orientalist or nostalgic tropes. For instance, the New York Association of American Advertisers recently hosted the *Bollywood Ball* (2007) in the Tata’s new acquisition, *The Pierre in Manhattan*, setting it up with such “trendy Bollywood” delights as hookahs, henna, and palm readers. The *India Everywhere* campaign (Confederation of Indian Industry, 2006), launched by the Indian Government at the World Economic Forum, Davos, 2006, earned the following praise from the magazine *India Today* (February 13, 2006):

The difference with earlier attempts to promote India was stark. This time, it was Bollywood music and spicy food, a clear signal that India needed to, and was, changing its act and presenting the modern face of the country.

The term “culture industry”—evocative of the Frankfurt school—holds a great deal of explanatory power, in my view, in the way it foregrounds cultural production

both as a means to make profit and create subjectivities amenable to capitalism. The wedding is a star attraction of the Bollywood culture industry and can offer us an insight into the emerging culture of neoliberalism; into how the political and economic changes set in motion by economic deregulation are enacted, experienced, and invented in everyday life.

But first, the phenomenon itself. The wedding, more specifically the Hindu wedding, has become a significant addition to the attractions of popular Hindi cinema fitting easily into an aesthetic (Gopalan, 2002) mode of production (Pendakur, 2003; Prasad, 1998) that emphasizes a multiplicity of cinematic elements over the narrative economy of the classical Hollywood narrative. The Bollywood film, however, has taken this multiplicity and subjected it to what Bharucha (1995) calls a “ruthless” and “claustrophobic” leveling of narrative and dramatic possibilities. These films, according to Bharucha, have no arch villains, antagonisms, conflicts, or the moral universe of the Hindi film in which the battle between right and wrong is played out with intense emotional melodrama. While such a sweeping assessment does not account for the varying degree of complexity across these film texts—for example, offer the kind of insight that close readings can bring—Bharucha’s thesis about the flattening of narrative as an aesthetic pattern is, in my view, right on the mark. To identify patterns across texts does not imply a dismissal of the emotional responses films can evoke in different audiences—to adequately understand the latter would require a different kind of study. What a study of patterns of representation can offer, however, are insights into the contradictions and trends of the dominant imaginary. In films such as *Vivah/Wedding* (Sooraj Barjatiya, 2006), *Mujh Se Shaadi Karogi/Will You Marry Me?* (David Dhawan, 2004), *Kal Ho Na Ho/Tomorrow May or May Not Be* (Nikhil Advani, 2003), *Kabhi Khushi kabhi Gham/ Sometimes Happiness Sometimes Sorrow* (Karan Johar, 2001), *Mere Yaar ki Shaadi hain/My Friend’s Wedding* (Sanjay Gadhvi, 2002) and *Kuch Kuch Hota Ha/There’s That Certain Feeling* (Karan Johar, 1998), the wedding is a core element and attraction of the narrative. *Vivah* narrated the romance and trials of a young couple as they advance from an arranged marriage to the wedding itself. The plot stretches into a 3-hour celebration of the various steps involved in arranging a wedding, presenting the traditional wedding as a pure and innocent act of faith between two families and individuals. *Mere Yaar Ki Shaadi Hain* was loosely based on *My Best Friend’s Wedding*, except in this case it was the man who realizes his desire for his friend at her wedding and gets her. Along the way to its resolution, the film lingers on various wedding ceremonies, including an affluent bachelor’s party—replete with disco lights, costume, and unabashed sexualized innuendo. In *Kuch Kuch Hota Hain*, an 8-year-old plots to get her widowed father married to his old college friend who is by now engaged to someone else. So we get to see her engagement with one and wedding with another. The protagonist of *Kal Ho Na Ho*, upon realizing that he has a fatal form of cancer, sets about making the woman he loves fall in love with and marry another. *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* about the separation and final reconciliation of a father and son on account of the son’s refusal to marry the woman chosen by his father, nevertheless, throws in a lavish

wedding and a *kurva-chauth* (ritual fast undertaken by wives for the well being of their husbands).

Even more than cinema, television soaps revel in the wedding cult celebrating it with daily regularity, resuscitating rituals better forgotten, such as *Jamai Puja/Son-in-law Worship*, or *Muh Dikhai/Seeing the Bride* for the first time. Shows like *Teen Bahuraniya/Three Daughters-in-law*, *Ghar ki Beti Lakshmiya/Daughters Are Goddesses Lakshmi*, *Kasam Se/I Promise*, *Maayka/Mother's Home*, and *Saat Phere/The Seven Steps (of the Hindu Wedding)* which are set in large extended families, punctuate their already loose plots with celebrations of the married couple around festivals and seasons all year long, often in synch with the actual festivals. These television families constantly remind viewers of the numerous festivals that mark the traditional Hindu calendar, celebrating them in grand style in homes which come equipped with altars that would outdo many public temples. Domestic space in these serials is thus colonized by religious symbols, predominantly Hindu, against which these television families enact their internal dramas, both big and small. Desecularizing private space in this way inscribes religious/caste identities as primary, marking all including religious minorities by religion.

Real weddings, in turn, are Bollywoodized, enacting and inventing rituals mediated by media and advertising. For instance, wedding sites, such as IndianWeddingSite.com encourage their clients to view Bollywood films for inspiration, including designing outfits, staging festivities, and choreographing dance numbers. Wedding planners and coordinators, like Regal-Weddings.com, offer wedding packages evocative of Bollywood plots, such as this stage-managed elopement from a feudal era building, all made possible by modern conveniences such as hotels and airports:

Mandawa is a beautiful market town of the colorful Shekhawati region. It is famous for the castle now converted into a heritage hotel & the fresco paintings. One can plan an elope from the hustle of city life to get married in a Village setting. Closest Airport is Jaipur.

For a transnational class, whose eyes are turned outwards, the marriage between tradition and modern conveniences is clinched by international brand recognition. In the following ad, the approval of the *Brides* magazine confers distinction, to use Bordieu's (1979) term, to the "world-class Indian consumer" a term which has gained much currency in recent years:

Devigarh Fort Palace is located 27 Kms away from Udaipur. *Brides* has recommended Devigarh for an exotic and lavish Wedding. Witnessing the changes for more than 2 centuries stands the Devigarh Palace echoing memories of the Royal past (sic).

Then, there is the out-and-out Bollywood wedding. Planners suggest entire weddings around a Bollywood theme, e.g., a star or a movie. For the ultimate spectacle and those with deep pockets, a film star may be invited to perform at a wedding—Shah Rukh

Khan, the reigning star, is known to charge 10 million rupees for a 2-hour appearance and a dance number (*Deccan Herald*, 2007). While Bollywood sets fashions, trends, and devises rituals it is also in the business of direct spin-offs. For example, Tanishq, a jewellery brand owned by the Tatas (known for their cars), launched its *Paheli Collection* with the film *Paheli* (Amol Palekar, 2005). This was, perhaps, the first film in which jewellery had its own line. Right after the opening credits appears the intertitle “Jewellery designed by Tanishq.”

Bollywood has also entered into the wedding business more directly. Ramoji Film City has a wedding wing which serves as a “one-stop shop” for all aspects of wedding planning. From designing sets, offering entertainment and hospitality, including putting up guests and driving them around, the studio can also perform the wedding ceremony itself. Wedding-Regal advertises:

You can choose from a variety of magical venues for your wedding, each unique and breathtakingly beautiful. Whatever the settings, we ensure to make your wedding a dream wedding - Perfect to the last detail. Choose from these spectacular wedding venues. . . Taj Mahal, Mayfair, Pool Side, Lake View Garden, Moghul Garden, Sun Fountain, Leg Garden, Dream Valley, Majestic Garden, Sierra Garden, Eureka Entry Plaza, Eureka Central Court, Princess Street, B. S. F. Halls, Terrace Hall or a bus stop.

Not only does the studio offer to organize the mise-en-scene, it also promises to film the wedding in a way that would outdo Bollywood itself:

With the world’s largest film studio, expert photographers and complete film crew at your disposal, make the silver screen weddings look pale in front of yours. (Ramoji film city).

For those who want an alternative approach, there is the documentary-style video offered by Anoli Patel, whose production company *Shadi story/Wedding Story* also directed the Discovery Channel’s series on Indian weddings. Each wedding film costs between \$20,000–\$50,000 and justifies its price on the claim that each film is an artistic project which rejects formulaic Bollywood style to show the uniqueness of each wedding. The filmmakers weave in interviews with relatives and also perform reenactments, such as taking the couple to the college where they had first met (Nirali).

In keeping with the hyper-visible neoliberal economy, the wedding industry has brought in new occupations unknown prior to the 90’s, commodifying what was previously part of an informal economy or a familial ethic: Wedding planners have replaced the experienced family relative, and professional DJs the filmy aunt or uncle who entertained everyone. Other jobs have become professionalized and specialized—photography, catering, wedding cards, decorations, beauticians and henna artists, and entertainers. It is this industry which has brought us spectacles such as dessert menus with forty choices, decorations including orchids flown in from Thailand, brides making entries through diaphanous moons, and entertainment provided by Spanish flamenco dancers, or belly dancers. According to a report

(Das, 2005), the minimum budget for a middle-class wedding is now \$34,000 while the upper-middle and rich classes are known to spend upward of \$2 million, not including cash and valuables given as part of a dowry. Spin-offs of this industry have included discounts by Samsung, Sony, LG, and other appliance makers during the wedding season; “auspicious” personal loans offered by GE Money India; and wedding malls and bridal exhibitions held in India and abroad.

Now, weddings in India have always been major affairs, celebrated as crucial events in an individual’s and family’s life; a means of establishing class status, and passing property within the patriarchal family in the form of dowry, typically given by the bride’s family to the groom’s and indicating the end of the daughter’s rights over the assets of her parental home. The confluence between popular Indian film music and the wedding is not new either—while film songs draw on folk songs sung at weddings they have also been easily assimilated into weddings. What is new, however, is the scale of the wedding and the display of wealth that has accompanied it; an unabashed departure from an earlier Gandhian-Nehruvian embarrassment around conspicuous consumption in a predominantly poor nation. Bollywood has played an important ideological role in validating this move.

The incessant replays of spectacular weddings and happy playful families celebrating traditional rituals in plush homes has turned, as Uberoi (2006) and Bharucha (1995) discuss, affluence into a traditional and even spiritual value. These Bollywood families are blissfully free of financial worries—middle-class fathers in films such as *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* and *Vivah* marry off their daughters to the wealthiest households with fanfare served by happy servants dressed in ethnic chic. It is a harmonious world where dowries are gladly given but not taken. In *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* the bride’s father offers a TV set, diamond jewellery, an imported car, and a VCR but the groom’s family refuses to take them because, as the patriarch of the groom’s family declares, they came nowhere near the real “wealth” they were taking with them, i.e., the daughter-in-law.

The dowry list recounted in *Hum Apke Hain Kaun* recites items which had become standard in the 80’s; a period during which the then-Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, started to relax restrictions on consumer goods, enabling the rise of a middle class keen on consumption (Fernandes, 2006; Varma, 1999). Rajiv Gandhi’s government lowered taxes on imports, particularly automobiles, and goods previously characterized as luxury items, such as color televisions and refrigerators. It was this period which saw a substantive increase in dowry demands and its accompanying practice of in-laws harassing young women for dowry even after the marriage. In its most brutal form, the harassment culminated in the murder or suicide of young women in their marital homes. For my generation, who entered college in the early 80’s, and particularly those of us who were radicalized in the Marxist-feminist movement, the big wedding was repugnant, the very opposite of romance: It enacted women’s humiliation as property and the means of acquiring more property.<sup>2</sup> Consequently for us, rejecting the traditional wedding in favor of a civil ceremony—or in its entirety—was the way to assert individual autonomy and our politics.

This, then, brings us to what is truly new about the contemporary big wedding phenomenon; it is a return to tradition, but a return driven by and representative of a neoliberal subjectivity. The neoliberal subject is a product of the free market insistence on privatization of resources and its concomitant ethic that the individual expresses her/his identity through choices made in the market. These market-produced choices become means for the neoliberal subject to invent, package, and present oneself, thus driving and being driven by a market in consumer goods that is relentless in the pursuit of novelty. This retraditionalization is encapsulated in the oxymoron, a “traditional designer wedding.” The lead in designing these contemporary inventions of tradition is taken, not by the grandmothers and grandfathers, but by the brides and the grooms who are shouldering the burdens of organizing these weddings which, for most, still have to be done within a budget. Designing one’s own wedding, i.e., expecting to make it uniquely reflective of one’s personality would be incompatible with a traditional orientation in which the wedding was one of the significant rituals which marked the individual’s entrance into the social. For the young men and women, in particular those from the middle class, who fancy this assertion of individuality it involves a great deal of work. Recognizing the work it takes to consume, online wedding magazines like *Nirali* follow up the to-do lists with sanctimonious advice to not get flustered and to remember “to bask” in your special day. It is a disciplinary regime which disguises the sheer conformity and work involved in consumption by passing it off as a matter of choice and self-expression. The neoliberal subject is regulated not by covert force but by stress, the stress of asserting individuality and style, through the consumption of market-produced goods; goods which, for the middle class, can be acquired only through a relentless regime of work and earning money. The neoliberal proclivity towards self-exhibition and display, however, gets grounded here into family and community, class and caste, saving it perhaps from the vacuous wanderings of the postmodern subject of advanced capitalism. This socialization of the individual towards the social is, however, not driven by tradition. Rather, it is achieved by a regime of consumption which asks young men and women to prove themselves through the choices they make in a climate marked by privatization and marketization.

As elsewhere, the market has granted a certain recognition to women and the young on account of their invention as consumers. Women are invited to treat themselves to cosmetics and cars, and this ethos of autonomy has also generated fears and panic around the sexual autonomy of women. The big wedding is a happy resolution—the threat of unbridled sexuality is domesticated by marriage, with the wedding itself acting as a kind of carnivalesque play of sexuality. Borrowing from folk tradition, the songs in these wedding films are bawdy, allude to sexual relations between in-laws, such as brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, and express a raucous appreciation of sexuality. Yet, at the same time, the songs in these films are tame compared to those in the gangster films. In fact, these films go to great lengths to advertise themselves as “clean, healthy, family” entertainment as opposed to the broader sexualization of consumer culture which is seen as an undesirable side effect of

economic deregulation. The songs, Uberoi writes, are “sanitized” and order restored as the bride is sent off to her marital home with everyone appropriately in tears.

In *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, when the protagonist is asked what kind of marriage he would like—an arranged or a love marriage—he replies, without a moment of hesitation, an “arranged love marriage.” The pact between patriarchy and capital—the limited opening up of sexuality by consumer culture and its containment within patriarchy—could not have been expressed in a pithier phrase than this one. The “arranged love marriage” is a match between families of equal social status where sexuality is sublimated in the acquisition of goods and the maintenance of traditional hierarchies; where free market meets the hierarchies of caste, class, and gender; and all contradictions of capital are happily resolved by a voluntary return to patriarchal tradition.

Women are prepared for such an arrangement through numerous calls to combine the tradition with the modern, the ethnic with the global. What follows is an example, a kind of fashion manifesto for the “girl next door” which appeared in *Femina* (Rodricks, 2007, p. 88), a women’s magazine:

The girl next door will be the intelligent one. Completely shunning any fashion in any form, she will find the balance between respect for the ethnic, a touch of adventure, technological development and vintage rag-picking. The message will be clear. I picked this myself. I put it together myself. I dress for myself. Her USP will be a connection forged between opposites. Indian values/international value, distilled to perfection. From her spray on lip gloss to smudged on kohl, expect the new citizen of the world.

Some have seen this mixing of tradition and modernity as an example of hybridity, a notion that has gained much currency in explanations of the cultural changes that have accompanied the late 20th century wave of capitalist globalization. According to Chakravarty (1993, p. 55), *Hum Apke Hain Kaun* (in spite of its consumerist values), “reversed the effects of the global invasion on our culture, implicitly asserting the permanence and stability of all institutions of our traditional culture that are now under severe threat—the joint family, patriarchy, the traditional qualities of the image of the Indian woman, and also, the nation.” For Nayar (1996, p. 86), the emphasis on family and tradition in Indian cinema serves to successfully diffuse “*all tension between oneself and one’s immediate family, and between one’s immediate family and one’s future spouse*” (p. 86, italics in original) Hirji (2005) sums it up:

Bollywood has managed to arrive at a compromise that allows it to assert and affirm traditional values for fans within India and across the diasporic community without becoming mired in what seems like an increasingly fruitless (my emphasis) attempt to deny the significance of all-pervasive symbols of Westernization.

The central opposition here is assumed to be that between “Western” culture and “ours,” with ours represented by family and tradition, imagined as free of any



internal conflicts—of class or gender—and resilient enough to absorb the threats of the former which too is imagined as a homogenized bloc. The view is a reassertion of a form of cultural nationalism where the nation becomes increasingly identified with Hinduism.

The notion of hybridity, as proposed by postcolonial theory, also echoes this “nationalist” view although its intent is not to assert the cultural superiority of Indian tradition but to insist on the inability of capitalist hegemony to subsume all that stands in its way. Critiquing the Frankfurt School and the Cultural Imperialism thesis for their “totalization narratives,” Mazzarella (2003, p. 37) advances Homi Bhabha’s notion of “third space” and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “generative gap” at the heart of the commodity. Both reassert that capital can never completely control the meanings generated by the commodity. If this were the case, Mazzarella quotes Chakrabarty, “there would be no room for enjoyment in the rule of capital, no play of desires, no seduction of the commodity.” (Chakrabarty, n.d., 28. Cited on p. 20). Bhabha’s (1990, p. 6) ode to cultural hybridity reads like a Mastercard or Visa advertisement promising seamless access to the goods and experiences of the world to the discerning world traveler:

America leads to Africa; the notions of Europe and Asia meet in Australia; the margins of the nation displace the center . . . the great Whitmanesque sensorium of America is exchanged for a Warhol blowup, a Kruger installation, or Mapplethorpe’s naked bodies.

Drawing upon the postcolonial notion of hybridity, Kraidy (1999, p. 472), among others, has advocated the term glocalization to help reformulate “intercultural and international communication beyond buoyant models of resistance and inauspicious patterns of domination.” Faiza Hijiri (2005) cites Kabir (1999, p. 95) in support of her argument about the glocal moves of popular Hindi cinema:

Western culture and glitter are very attractive. So *Maine Pyar Kiya* and *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* offer the solution: a happy marriage between the two worlds. I can have everything offered by modernisation, and still hold on to family values and tradition at the same time.

In this discourse, even popular Bombay cinema, that industrialized media industry driven by profit, has come to stand for some innate Indianness, a forum for defense against modernity (not capital). Nandy (1995, p. 235) elaborates:

. . . when much of the oppression and violence in society is inflicted in the name of categories such as development, science, progress, and national security, there has grown a tacit demand for a different kind of political attitude towards cultural traditions. However much we may bemoan the encroachment of mass culture through the commercial cinema, the fact remains that it is commercial cinema which, if only by default, has been more responsive to such demands and more protective towards nonmodern categories.

These “nonmodern” categories or the “innocence” with which Indians met Western colonialism is for Nandy (1983, pp. ix, 108) the innate Indian ability “to live with cultural ambiguities and to use them to build psychological and even metaphysical defences against cultural invasions” (1983, p. 108). Popular Indian cinema, for Nandy (1998, p. 13) then, “creates a space for the global, the unitary, and the homogenizing, but does so in terms of a principle of plurality grounded in traditions.” The plurality of tradition that Nandy sees in Indian cinema reinforces religious/ethnic identity as a primary identity.

In fact, a defense of the otherness of Indian cinema, its aesthetic of heterogeneity/the masala film or the culture that surrounds its receptions can turn into a refusal to discuss its ideological functions—surely a central element of film theory and criticism. Drawing upon poststructuralism and its disavowal of universals, postcolonial theory can and does turn into a culturalism which, Sarkar (1997) and Ahmad (1995) explain, divorces itself from any consideration of economic formation and, therefore, celebrates both hybridity and cultural specificity. More specifically, in terms of the discussion at hand, if on the one hand, the Bollywood wedding can be seen as an expression of hybridity or cultural negotiation it can equally be held up as instance of cultural assertion against foreign cultural invasion unless one brings into the discussion the metanarratives of capitalism and patriarchy. After all, whether performed as a consumerist extravagant designer wedding or an “arranged love marriage,” the Bollywood wedding’s reinvention of “tradition” can easily be appropriated into the religious nationalist project of retaining privilege and wealth in class- and caste-based patriarchal households.

Ultimately, the Bollywood wedding culture industry is grounded in the contradictions confronting the Indian middle class: It must assert its membership in a transnational bourgeoisie while retaining patriarchal and caste-based hierarchies at home. Reinventing tradition as a way to assert cultural superiority, Sarkar (1997, p. 107) clarifies, is not new to middle class formation: the propensity to combine ‘material advancement’ with ‘spiritual autonomy’ was common for middle class formation under colonialism in the 19th and early 20th century—particularly for those upwardly mobile sections who benefitted from collaboration with colonialism. Then, as now, Sarkar (2000) adds, it created a way to come to terms with dependency by asserting cultural or religious superiority; an assertion premised on the celebration of home and women as autonomous of colonialism (2000). It is now resurrected in the celebration of the large affluent Hindu joint family home as a private temple where Indian tradition and culture remains thriving and unchanged; a “portable institution” (Uberoi, 2006, p. 183) which can exist anywhere or simultaneously in several places on the globe. Affluent homes, weddings, and traditional rituals provide the mise-en-scene for validating the culture of spending and high living; a fantastic backdrop which serves as an object lesson in consumerism for a middle class, which, in turn is held up as the poster-child of neoliberalism.

Consumption is in capitalism primarily a private affair—after all, one’s ability to buy depends on the depth of one’s pocket. Under neoliberalism, economic

growth is measured in terms of the increase in private consumption; a switch which Fernandes (2006) indicates has transformed citizenship into acts of consumption, the acquisition of laptops, cars, cosmetics, mobile phones, and CEO lifestyles. In order to accumulate profit, capitalism must incessantly privatize spaces of consumption eroding the socialized spaces of consumption, such as public health, education, or transport. The new architecture of neoliberalism, including its imaginary spaces, is driven by the necessity of producing exclusive and guarded spaces where image and reality, commodity and spectacle can constantly feed into each other. The spectacular wedding, both real and imagined, is but a symptom in such a trajectory of privatization which includes the air-conditioned mall and the five-star hotel policed by private security guards and surveillance cameras.

The obstruction in the path of a full-scale neoliberal transition is exactly this contradiction: while the spectacular image of the spending Indian pans the marketing screens the real spending has to take place in heavily guarded private enclaves guarded by the very class which is a threat to such consumption. The alarm bells were recently sounded by none less than the current Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, the man under whose leadership as finance minister the “reforms” were initiated in 1991. Singh recently called for restraint in the “vulgar display of wealth” around weddings, which, according to him, “insult the poverty of the less privileged, is socially wasteful, and plants seeds of resentment in the minds of the have-nots.”<sup>3</sup> Of course, he was condemning the vulgarity of the *display* of wealth and not the wealth itself or its defense by equally vulgar displays of power. Private armed guards are fast becoming a regular feature of upper middle-class weddings. The cruel irony and flammable spark latent in a lavish wedding, supposedly a celebration of the union of two individuals and families, guarded by an armed underclass is not a hybrid but a contradiction, an explicit manifestation of the unstable foundations of contemporary capitalism.

It is true, as Mazzarella and Chakrabarty claim, that there is much that escapes capital’s homogenizing reach; a point central to Marx’s dialectical understanding that the new comes out of the ashes of the old, or that the seeds of destruction are internal to capital. However, the “generative power” against capitalism lies not in the commodity but in antagonistic social relations that underlie the production of affection and family as commodity. Perhaps, in these celebrations of weddings, of rituals that mark the life cycle and seasons lies a yearning for another sense of time; another subjectivity not tied to the capitalist logic of using time efficiently towards producing profits or accumulating experiences and distinction. Rituals that mark life’s rites of passage connect the individual to the community, human to nature, and place life at the center of human society. The Bollywood wedding industry, however, packages this yearning for noncommodified forms of affective relations, the celebration of life markers with family and friends—selling it, instead, as a means to tame the profound upheavals that have accompanied the shift to neoliberalism and its erosion of public space by reinstating class and gender hierarchies through the culture of the commodity.

## Notes

- 1 It is not that opulent weddings are new to Bombay cinema or the hyper-visible lives of its star members. What is new about these contemporary weddings, I hope to show, is a reinvention of tradition enacted as choice and marker of identity.
- 2 Dowry was one of the main issues in the women's movement of the 80's. Campaigns against dowry included street theater, oaths taken by young women to refuse dowry, social boycott of families known to take dowry, and systematic surveys which established the link between the death of young women in their marital homes and domestic abuse related to dowry. These efforts led to the passing of a law which requires the immediate arrest and investigation of all the members of the woman's marital home if she is brought to a hospital with burns or other fatal forms of injury.
- 3 *Indian Express*, North American Edition, June 1st 2007, p. 5. Speech delivered to the Confederation of Indian Industry, May 23, 2007, New Delhi.

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