



The Indian Perimeter

CULTURE

Getting Married in Pakistan

Arranged marriages are common in many parts of the world. Although the practice is starting to weaken, it continues in Pakistan and the rest of South Asia. Ramla Warek Ali was 16 years old and had just completed her schooling when she was told that she would be the bride of Urfi Jafri, a young businessman in Karachi. Here, at 17 and shortly after her wedding day, she describes the highly traditional ceremonies and what she expects of life as Urfi's wife.

When my mother first told me I was to be married I thought she was joking. But then I realized that she was serious and I cried because I knew I would be leaving my home. Marriages in Pakistan are different from those in the West, where couples make their own decisions. Here it is always a surprise and there is no time to plan for the future.

The first time I saw Urfi was after our parents had discussed our marriage and arranged our first meeting. Three months later our families announced our engagement and we started going out together, but always with one of my sisters as a chaperone.

When Urfi's mother first saw me she thought I would make a good wife for her son: mothers in my country have a duty to look for a bride for their sons.

The wedding ceremonies lasted over two weeks. First I stayed inside the house, seeing only my family, and during this time I wore special mustard-colored clothes. . . .

The next ceremony was *Mehndi* [a reddish-brown dye made from the leaves of the henna plant is applied with a small stick], when my family visited Urfi's house while I stayed home, and Urfi's family came to my house the following day, while he stayed home. The day they came to my house they touched my hand symbolically, with *Mehndi*. Later my palms were decorated with it. It took a long time to apply and many hours to dry, so my family had to feed me! *Mehndi* fades in a few days, but the decorations are all part of the wedding. During this ceremony I wore yellow clothes. For the wedding ceremony I wore a white dress, *Gharara*.

Next came *Nikah*, when the priest asked me, through a relative, if I would marry Urfi, and he was asked the same question. The contract was written and the amount of dowry [a money or property marriage gift] agreed upon. The amount varies, but it is usually between 25,000 and 100,000 rupees [\$1,750–\$7,000].

After the *Nikah* ceremony Urfi took me back to my parents' house and then followed a week of pre-marriage ceremonies. These ended in *Rukhsati* [departure], when Urfi came in a decorated car and sat in a special place. I

was then taken to him. After *Rukhsati*, Urfi's family gave a *Valima* [reception] for all our guests.

I shall now follow the ways of Urfi's family. Traditionally, I'm just his property, but times are changing. Although the two of us had no say in the first place, we are in love. I was brought up to believe that men must be obeyed, but I shall also try to help and guide my husband.

I have to get used to my new life with Urfi's family. At first I will be treated like a queen, but after a week or two I will be helping the women with the chores. That's a wife's job.

From "Urfi's mother thought I would make a good wife" (retitled "Getting Married in Pakistan") from *We Live in Pakistan* by Mohamed Amin. Copyright ©1984 by **Hodder and Stoughton Limited**. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. What is the *Mehndi* ceremony?

2. Name three ways in which traditional marriage in Pakistan differs from most marriages in the United States.

3. In what three ways are weddings in Pakistan like weddings in the United States?

4. What hints does Ramla provide that she does not accept the traditional role of a wife in Pakistan? What parts does she seem to have accepted?

Activity

Imagine that you are a young person in Pakistan who has just been told that you will soon be married to someone who has been chosen for you. Write a journal entry that expresses your feelings about this development.