

THE UMBERACHA PANI CEREMONY AT AN EAST INDIAN WEDDING.

(The significance is purity & fertility)

One of the important rituals of an East Indian wedding is the 'umberacha pani' ceremony on the eve of the wedding day. In earlier times, before piped water from lakes was introduced, the only source of water for daily use was the village well. Our ancestors discovered that wherever the umber (wild fig) tree stood, it was a sure sign that they would find water and so they dug a well in its vicinity.

It encouraged them to set up fields to grow paddy and other agricultural produce to make a living! The ripe umber is the only fruit that is also a flower and has a cluster of tiny seeds, which eventually spread around giving life to new plants, a sign of fertility! Water from this village well is collected for the bride or groom at around midnight and taken home to have a bath before going to the church to get married in the morning. That time is chosen because it is the beginning of a new day, a day when the bride or groom will get married and also because the water is clear and free of any sediments and pollutants which have settled down, a sign of purity, unlike during the day when villagers continuously use and disturb the water.

PROCEDURE OF THE CEREMONY.

Before going to the well, family members, cousins, relatives and friends are invited at the home of the bride or groom and they all gather in the 'mando' (pandal), which is specially erected next to the house for this and other related purposes because wedding rituals, before and after, lasted for more than a week then. At a specified time, the invitees first go to the village Cross to give 'maan' (thanks, respect) to God accompanied by an East Indian band or a ghoomat (hand held drum) in tow and return to the mando playing traditional music. A few announcements are then made for the evening's proceedings. The band continues to play. Then to set everyone in the mood, warm khimat (spiced country liquor warmed in a cupata) is served in chavnies (little cups of china) and depending on how many 'ghots' (pegs) one has had can be seen from the way maities, paitues (aunties, uncles) and others, age no bar, get into the mood to dance to the thumping beats and tunes of the 'music makers'.

The old custom of 'moiya' (barber) then starts. The mama (uncle) of the bride or groom is the first to sit for a shave followed by other males! A towel is placed around their shoulders and a supra (made of dried palm leaves and used to winnow harvested rice with husks) in which, papries, suparies, pan (beetle) leaves, an egg and rice is placed next to the barber. It is also meant to collect money from the ones having a shave for the barber's services! A traditional East Indian song is sung with the accompaniment of the ghoomat!

Soot mixed with soap water for shaving, slippers for mirrors and brooms as fans are used in a very hilarious atmosphere as male members sit for a shave. Then finally it is

the groom's turn. He has to sit on the mama's laps. The supra with the contents is placed on his head and he is made to turn full circle three times and a song "Moiya baislai (barber is sitting) to shave 'Johnny' balu (the groom)..." The singing is now at its crescendo and everyone wants to play a part. After he has finished, a paste of the white of an egg is spread on his face and left overnight. In addition to this in the morning a mixture of coconut juice and a pinch of saffron is applied on his or her body. This refreshes the skin to make him look like a naya naya (new) navra!

The entourage then proceeds to the village well to draw water before mid-night. An uncle is seen serving fresh, warm khimat in chavnies. A song 'Naye navrila (or navra) pania la geli...' (they are going to get water from the well for the bride, groom) is sung. The bridesmaid or the sister of either the bride or groom carries the tamaan (copper vessel). The bride or groom does not go to the well.

Once at the well a few rituals are followed. They may differ from village to village. A coconut is broken to thank God and to give 'maan' (respect) to the well, their lifeline. Coconut water which is untouched by human hand, a sign of purity, is poured into the well along with some rice, the staple food of the villagers grown around it. The bride or groom is considered 'pure' before getting married! Papries, which are slightly sweetened, are roasted on dry leaves and served to give the ritual an element of happiness. Water from the well is then drawn carefully and is filled in the tamaan. A mango tree branch is placed in the vessel. To the villagers the mango tree is sacred and they give 'maan' (respect) to it because its dry wood burns steadily for a longer period with uniform heat in the preparation of traditional East Indian dishes in earthenware! The fresh broken leaf has an aroma that gives one a feeling of being close to nature and the branch restricts the water to 'wave' out when carrying in the vessel to the house.

The band again starts playing and the entire entourage returns to the house dancing all along the way. At the house snacks, more liquor, singing and dancing continue until dinner is served after which all disperse and return to their respective homes.

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