

David Dennen
February 2008

David Goes to a Wedding

As some of you know my Guruji's daughter got married recently, and some of you were also hoping for an interesting report about the wedding. Well...that's not completely possible in the sense that may have been hoped for. But I'll write about it nonetheless.

As many of you probably know the wedding of a daughter in India, besides being a big deal, is also rather complicated and expensive. Guruji told me last year that it was estimated to cost over 10 lakhs—around US\$25,000. Besides the money there are a large number of ceremonies that need to be observed, as well as other random activities. Guruji, as the father of the bride, had to hand deliver all the invitations—600 of them. So in the week or two prior to the wedding he spent most of his days riding around on the back of a motorcycle delivering invitations one by one (during one of my lessons before the wedding he said to me pitifully: “Life is miserable”). Also, after the fourth night (when, if I remember correctly, but correct me if I'm wrong, the marriage is traditionally consummated), the bride's family must deliver to the groom's household some ridiculous quantity of homemade sweets—I think he said 100 or 200 kilograms, but that can't possibly be right—who could eat that much? My point is, it's a lot of work.

The wedding ceremony and reception, the parts that I was invited to, were held on Friday. I had emailed my teacher Ratna (at Evergreen) beforehand to ask some advice about what I should bring for a gift, and if there was anything else I should know. Part of what she said—and I'll exaggerate her words a bit—was that there is often a lot of drinking at Oriya weddings, and so if I drink I should try not to make too much of a fool of myself. As it happens there was no alcohol at this wedding. But as anyone who is reading this should know, by no means do I need alcohol to make a fool of myself.

In fact the whole ceremony and reception were more chaste than I might have expected. No raw egg fights or wild, interminable dance parties like I used to witness in Chicago. One of the things I always used to find interesting in my previous line of work was trying to gauge the bride's and groom's reactions to each other, as these were often arranged marriages. You got a range of reactions from awkward discomfort to pleasant camaraderie. Here though it was difficult to tell since I wasn't being paid to stick my video camera in peoples' faces. But they seemed like a fine couple. Guruji later described the groom as being “very presentable.”

I was the only foreigner at the ceremony, although three Belgian girls who work with the older daughter came to the reception. In general, people seemed to be excited that I was there—although the people nearest to me may have been less than thrilled. I was pleased when a young lady I had been admiring sat next to me during the ceremony; unfortunately someone decided to pass around flimsy, plastic cups of scalding hot tea, which I promptly managed to spill all over myself, the old lady in front of me, and the cute but unfortunate girl next to me (I still don't really know what happened—it's all kind of a blur). Then as I was cleaning myself up from this debacle I noticed I had a cracker sticking out of my shoe. I thought I had dropped it on the floor earlier, but apparently it had managed to lodge itself against my ankle at the top of my shoe, jauntily visible for all to see—a true sign of class if you know what's what. And so, feeling like a barbarian who had wandered into tea with the Queen (David smash tea! David put food in shoe!), I slunk away to sit by myself.

Despite my ineptness I cut quite a dashing figure, if I do say so myself. Guruji had bought

me a very fine Oriya/Punjabi style suit, and I had gotten myself some new Indian shoes; as I walked through Bapuji Nagar towards the auto stand on my way to the reception I was literally stopping traffic. People in my neighborhood, at least, have kind of gotten used to me and don't normally take much notice of me anymore. This new look of mine, however, was too much for them: as I walked down the street, each person I passed literally stopped what they were doing to watch me, their faces expressing some mixture of shock, humor and—I like to think—awed admiration.

The ceremony was quite nice. Despite the many times I've seen Hindu weddings I can never quite remember what happens: there's a fire, and stuff gets thrown into the fire, and rice gets thrown at stuff, and there are coconuts, and people shove food into the couple's mouths, and their hands get tied together, and there are exchanges of money—not in this order of course. It's all very complicated and takes a long time. It was nice not to have to be holding a camera for the whole thing.

The reception later that evening was pleasant as well. Many people came to greet the newlyweds and, more importantly, to eat. Eventually I wandered into the room where the bride and groom were “on display” to give them my gift. I surveyed the situation, attempting to decipher the protocol. It seemed simple enough: walk up, hand the bride your gift, say something in Oriya (I'll probably skip that part), do a polite little nod with your hands together, walk away. I waited until what seemed like an auspicious moment and then began my approach to the newlyweds. As I got within range, however, I perceived that the groom—who previously had always remained sitting—was beginning to arise; and at this cue the cameramen turned on their lights and raised their cameras. Alarms began to sound in my mind: “Warning! Warning! Unforeseen movement! React! React!” And then we were shaking hands, the groom saying “Thank you for coming.” I looked at him dumbly, trying in vain to comprehend this peculiar situation. It seemed I was standing at the nexus of the universe, East and West somehow having lapped each other: an Indian in a sleek, Western-style suit attempting to act like an American, greeting an American in traditional Indian garb desperately trying to comport himself like an Indian—our respective cultures refracted back at us through the lens of the other—mankind chasing its own tail. I stood there awkwardly for a moment before muttering an absurd and bewildered “thank you” (what could I possibly be thanking him for?). Then somehow I repeated myself a few times for good measure, just to drive my point home; finally, at a loss and realizing I wasn't making any sense, I handed my gift to the bride, attempted some sort of polite Indian gesture, turned and walked away in a daze (David smash social etiquette!). Despite having attended dozens of weddings I've only ever been a guest once, when I was a kid; I guess I've never considered what you would say to someone who has just gotten married, much less what you would say to someone who has just gotten married in India, much less what you—as an American dressed like an Indian—would say to someone—specifically an Indian dressed like an American—who has just gotten married. And for some reason I truly never thought I'd be in a position to talk to the groom, who I had never seen up close before. But it's a good thing those cameras kept following me around.

So then I ate dinner and milled around a bit. A few musicians were there who I recognized (Keshab Chandra Rout was quite impressed with my outfit, which made me happy), but no one I could really have much of a conversation with. The last part of the evening I spent sitting quietly next to Guruji's older brother—like a couple of old toads on a log we were—and carrying on my weird silent relationship with Guruji's maid (really the only member of Guruji's “family” I ever see, besides his young grandson who, like all small children, seems to be everywhere all the time).

And so—my various buffooneries notwithstanding—the day went rather smoothly. The

marriage was a success, no one was drunk, everyone had fun, someone (i.e. Guruji) was stuck with a very large bill, but that's none of my business. Now let us never speak of this again.