

THE WEDDING SAND IN KNUTSFORD (CHESHIRE, ENGLAND) AND THE WEDDING SAND (बलि) IN INDIA.

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The subject of this paper has been suggested to me by a recent book by Mrs. Ellis H. Chadwick entitled "Mrs. Gaskell, Haunts, Homes and Stories."

Mrs. (Elizabeth Cleghorn) Gaskell (*nè* Miss Stevenson) was a lady novelist of the last century (1810-1865). She lived in Knutsford in Cheshire. She had a brother, who was a sailor and who is said to have come to India, "where he somewhat mysteriously, and without any apparent motive, disappeared, and all further trace of him was lost."¹ She was married to Rev. William Gaskell in 1832, at Knutsford Church. The death of her only son at the infant age of 10 months, caused her great grief, and her husband, in order to enable her to forget the grief advised her to write for the public. This event in her life, led to make her a public writer.

The above-named book, which gives an account of her varied life, was published in 1910, on the occasion of the Centenary of her birth. Therein, the author, while describing her marriage ceremonies, thus speaks of a peculiar custom, prevalent at Knutsford in Cheshire, which reminds us of a similar custom in India greatly prevalent in the Bombay Presidency.

"There were great rejoicings in the village on the day of the wedding, and Miss Stevenson's neighbours and friends were proud of the bride, who had spent nearly all her life in their village, and they were glad that she was now only going sixteen miles away to the city of Manchester. Describing the quaint

¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. X., p. 104.

customs of Knutsford, Mrs. Gaskell writes : ‘ one is the custom, on any occasion of rejoicing of strewing the ground before the houses of those who sympathise in the gladness, with common red sand, and then taking a funnel filled with white sand, and sprinkling a pattern of flowers upon the red ground. This is always done for a wedding, and often accompanied by some verse of rural composition The tradition about this custom is that there was formerly a well-dressing in the town, and on the annual celebration of this ceremony they strewed the flowers to the house of the latest married bride ; by degrees it became a common custom to strew the houses of the bride and her friends, but as flowers were not always to be procured, they adopted this easy substitute. Some people chose to say that it originated in the old church, being to far out of the town for the merry sound of bells to be heard on any joyful occasion, so instead of an audible, they put a visible sign.’¹

As related by the writer of Mrs. Gaskell’s biography, the local historian of Knutsford thus referred to the custom in 1859 :—

“ Wedding-cake, wedding-gloves, and wedding rings are familiar to the whole nation, but wedding sand belongs pre-eminently to Knutsford alone.”² He then thus described “ the oldest tradition respecting the sanding ” : “ The chapel of ease which stood in the Lower Street, had one small tinkling bell, and that out of repair, probably cracked, so that its tones jarred on the joyous feelings of a wedding morning. The bells of the parochial chapel were too far off, and on the occasion of a wedding, the plan was introduced of announcing it to the neighbours and to the town generally, by sweeping the street before the door of the bride’s father, and by garnishing it with a sprinkling of sand. At first the sanding was confined to the bride’s house, but in process of time innovations crept in, and her friends in the other houses, partaking in the neighbourly joy, partook also in

¹ “ Mrs. Gaskell, Haunts, &c.” by Mrs. E. H. Chadwick, pp. 186-87.

² *Ibid.* p. 187.

the observance ; their houses too put on the bridal adornments, and, looking clean and bright, shared in the festivity of the day." ¹

According to Mrs. Chadwick, the writer of Mrs. Gaskell's biography, 'The Countryman's Ramble' thus describes the custom.

"Then the lads and the lasses their turn-dishes handling,

Before all the doors for a wedding were standing ;

I ask'd Nan to wed, and she answered with ease,

'You may sand for my wedding, whenever you please.'"

Mrs. Chadwick thus speaks further on the subject of the custom :—

"Flowers, too, are scattered and bound up into garlands on occasions of rejoicing, to show honour to some nobleman of the land or to receive a sovereign when he visits among his people. For the same purposes, brown sand and white sand are employed; and when our late Queen, as Princess Victoria, and her mother, the Duchess of Kent, visited Knutsford on their way from Chester to Chatsworth, 'the universal adornment of the pavement and the streets occasioned great surprise and afforded much pleasure.' George the Fourth, when a guest at Tabley Hall, is said to have been much amused with the sanding devices. There is another tradition in Knutsford about the origin of sanding, which dates still further back. It is said that King Canute forded a neighbouring brook near Knutsford, and sat down to shake the sand out of his shoes. While he was doing this, a bridal party passed by. He shook the sand in front of them and wished them joy, and as many children as there were grains of sand. Sanding is still kept up at Knutsford at the May-Day festivities, when the pavements are decorated with beautifully traced designs in red and white sand.

¹ *Ibid.* pp. 187-88.

“On the day fixed for the Coronation of King Edward the Seventh, in June, 1901, there was a sanding competition in Knutsford, and very many artistic designs were displayed on the roads.”¹

From this long description of the custom, based on various authorities, we gather the following points about the tradition of the origin of the custom.

1. The origin of the custom of strewing the wedding-sand at the door of the bride's house, is to be found in the coincidence of King Canute crossing the Knutsford brook and shaking the sand out of his shoes, at the very time, when a bridal party was passing.

2. The parochial church being far away from the village for the villagers to hear the Church bell on a wedding or other joyful occasion, they resorted to the plan of announcing the joyful event to the town “by sweeping the street before the door of the bride's father and by garnishing it with the sprinkling of sand.

3. The origin of the custom is found in the origin of the ceremony of well-dressing, on the annual celebration of which, “they strewed the flowers to the house of the latest married bride. By degrees it became a common custom to strew the houses of the bride and her friends, but as flowers were not always to be procured, they adopted this easy substitute.”

What we gather from these traditions is this:—The custom began with some kind of flower-decoration, which began at a favourite well of the town or village and ended at the house of a lately wedded couple. The village well was always near and dear to their heart, and was, therefore, sacred in their eyes, because it supplied them with drinking water. Not only the question of their health, but of their very life and death was connected with it. They, therefore, showed their reverential

¹ *Ibid.* pp. 188-89.

feelings towards it by flower-offerings, which took the shape of flower-decorations. A lately-wedded couple was the next important thing which concerned the villagers most. So, on their return from the annual ceremonial visit to the well, they first went to the house of the couple with their flower offerings, and decorated it. Thus, flower-decorations came to be associated with a marrying couple and their house. Flowers being not easily procurable at all seasons, a substitute was used. The use of sand as a substitute began in the time of King Canute, who, on entering into the town, shook the sand out of his shoes, and, at the same time blessed a marrying couple who happened to pass from there.

Now, this Cheshire custom reminds us of the Indian custom of sweeping the door fronts of houses on wedding and other joyful occasions and of strewing them with lime and other coloured powders.

This custom is known among the Parsees as *ચૈાડ પુરવઠા Chowk purvâ*, lit, to fill up the *Chowk* i.e., the square before the house. It is a custom prevalent among the Hindus, and the Parsees have taken it from them. As in the Cheshire custom, the house fronts are swept clean and then strewed over with white calcium powder. Many Indian families, and among them Parsees also, observe this custom every day and strew the door front with the powder after sweeping it clean every morning and evening. On happy occasions like those of marriage, Naojote, (investiture with sacred shirt and thread), birthday and on grand holidays, that custom is especially observed.

The words "*Chowk purvâ*" suggest one or two ideas about the houses in Bombay. Formerly many a house had its own *Chowk* or compound. It was this compound that was strewed (lit. filled up) with the powder. In the case of houses that had no compounds the strewing had to be done on the threshold of the house. The principal powder that was used and is now used for the purpose is, as said above, the white powder of

calcium, known as ચોકનો ચુનો. Powders of various other colours especially red also were used. The powder also has latterly been called ચોક by some.

The original object of the custom seems to be a kind of decoration. Flower-decorations of a simple type, assuming the form of a *toran* or an arch-like string of flowers, are common in Indian houses. The custom in question also seems to be the remnant of a kind of decoration of the fronts of houses. Many an Indian lady takes great pleasure in decorating the front of her house by strewing these powders in various artistic ways. We had a beautiful exhibition of this art from the hands of Hindu ladies in our Old Bombay Exhibition, held on the occasion of His Majesty's visit to India. I remember with pleasure many a pleasant morning when I was a boy of about seven or eight when I used to get up with my good mother early in the morning on Diwali Holidays. During those holidays, she generally devoted two or three early morning hours, with a bright lamp burning before her, to these decorations with powders of various colours. The designs of the decorations were, a cradle, a child's shirt (જબલું) a *shigram* with a horse, a palanquin, etc. Such artistic decorations have now almost disappeared from among the Parsees. The only relic of the custom we now see—and there is hardly a Parsee household where it is not seen even now—is that of strewing the door fronts with white and red powders through holed tin boxes bearing some devices, especially that of a fish.

The following lines in some of the Parsee songs show, that the custom was, as it were, embodied in the social life of the people.

In a Naojote song, *i.e.*, a song sung on the occasion of investing a Parsee child with the sacred shirt and thread, we hear :—

માતી સરખા ચોક મારી અગીઆરી પુરાવો;

માતી સરખા ચોક મારે દરવાજે પુરાવો;

અરજીએ પુરાવો, ઝાસરીએ પુરાવો.

Translation.—Get the Agiary (*i.e.*, the Fire-temple where a part or the whole of the Naojote ceremony is performed), strewed

with the pearl-like powder. Get my door-front strewed with pearl-like powder. Get my down floor and the steps of my house strewed.

The words, भोती सरभा थोड, *i.e.*, pearl-like powder-decoration, used in this song, may be simply a songster's exaggeration, or perhaps they suggest that very rich persons were believed to use, on rare occasions of joy, powdered pearl for the purpose. This belief is seen in the Gujarati proverb गभे तो घरभां भोतीना थोड पुरे. The proverb is meant to indicate that, if one is rich and is so inclined he may get his own private house strewed with powdered pearl, but on ordinary public occasions he must resort to the use of the common simple method.

In the above account of the Cheshire custom, we read that, according to their tradition, the people resorted to the custom of strewing the front of the house with wedding sand, to announce the joyful event of the marriage to the town. The following lines in a Parsee song also show, that the Indian wedding sand or powder (थोड) was also taken as a sign or symbol to announce the happy occasion of marriage.

हमारां वेहा लयां धर केम न्णुलींम्मे ?
ज्मासरींम्मे भोतीना थोड, भादेव भोतीना थोड.

Translation.—How are people to know that our houses have the occasion to celebrate a marriage? (By seeing) Powdered pearl decorations on the steps (of our houses). (By seeing) Powdered pearl decoration on the marquee (erected on marriage occasions).

The following lines also refer to a similar idea:—

सहवेणुा वेरायां केम न्णुलींम्मे ?
ज्मासरींम्मे भोतीना थोड, अरुकांम्मे भोतीना थोड.

Translation.—How are we to know, that good (auspicious) words (of marriage songs) are uttered (in this house)? By the powdered pearl decoration on the house steps and on the down floor.

The following lines show, that the custom was not confined to weddings only, but that it was extended to other joyful occasions.

આવું રૂઠું આંગણું, બાઈ! છાંતણું છાંતવો રે.
 આવું રૂઠું આંગણું, બાઈ! ચોક પુરાવો રે.
 ત્યાં ગેરીઆ રમારો રે.

Translation.—Madam! You have such a fine compound. Get it be sprinkled with water. Madam! You have such a fine compound. Get the front of the house decorated with powder. Let Geriâs¹ be played there.

It is said that in some of the Gujarat villages, the poor people use the grain husks (છુદા) for their house-front decorations.

Now, the question is, what is the origin of the Indian custom? I have asked several persons about it, but have not found a satisfactory reply. The various origins, attributed to the Cheshire custom of wedding sand, suggest, that in India also, it was a kind of decoration. The decoration, at first, was that of flowers. These flower decorations, latterly gave place, side by side with themselves, to this powder decoration.

I am told, that among some Hindu families, the following custom still prevails: The ladies make these sand or powder decorations before the fronts of their houses and then place flowers on these decorations, uttering the words of Sitâ and Râm. They do it on joyous occasions and on religious holidays. This custom gives it a somewhat religious signification. Anyhow, this custom wherein flowers are strewed, shows, that the modern custom of strewing sand or powder is a remnant of a former custom of flower decoration and that it was considered as a religious custom. Thus, we, see, that both the Indian custom and the English (Cheshire) custom had, at first, the signification of a kind of flower decoration. The Parsees have latterly been using in these decorations some words signifying the supplication of Ahura Mazda's help.

¹ Geriâ is a kind of play played with sticks by Hindus on merry occasions, especially during the Divali Holidays.

I remember having seen, at the Paris Exhibition of 1899, in a side show, an European lady, tracing artistic decorations on the ground with her fingers with some kind of powder—a process spoken of here as Chamtna Chowk (चमटीना चौक) *i.e.*, strewing the ground with powder by means of the tips of the fingers. I do not know, whether the show exhibited the type of any custom of decoration prevalent in any part of France, or whether the lady had imported it from India or England. On comparing the two customs—the Cheshire and the Indian—we find the following points to be common.

1. The original idea was that of some kind of flower decorations.

2. The flower decoration extended to favourite wells. In Cheshire and in other parts of England, it was known as well-dressing. In Bombay and Gujarat, it is called (कुवाने वाडी भरवणी) *kuvânê vâdi bharâvvi*, *i.e.*, to get a garden prepared for the well. This custom of well-dressing, has a good deal to do with the belief in well-spirits. Formerly there was a similar custom of adorning the marrying couple or other children who participated in the marriage rejoicings, with flower decorations. The phrase, वाडी भरवणी which was used for a well-dressing, was also used for children.

3. The custom was not confined to weddings. It had extended to other joyful occasions. The late Queen Victoria's visit to Knutsford was an occasion for a display of this custom. Here in India, the front of many an Indian house was strewed with the powder and decorated with flowers, on the occasion of the late visit of His Majesty and on the Durbar Day.

4. The sand-strewing is accompanied by flower decorations on house fronts.