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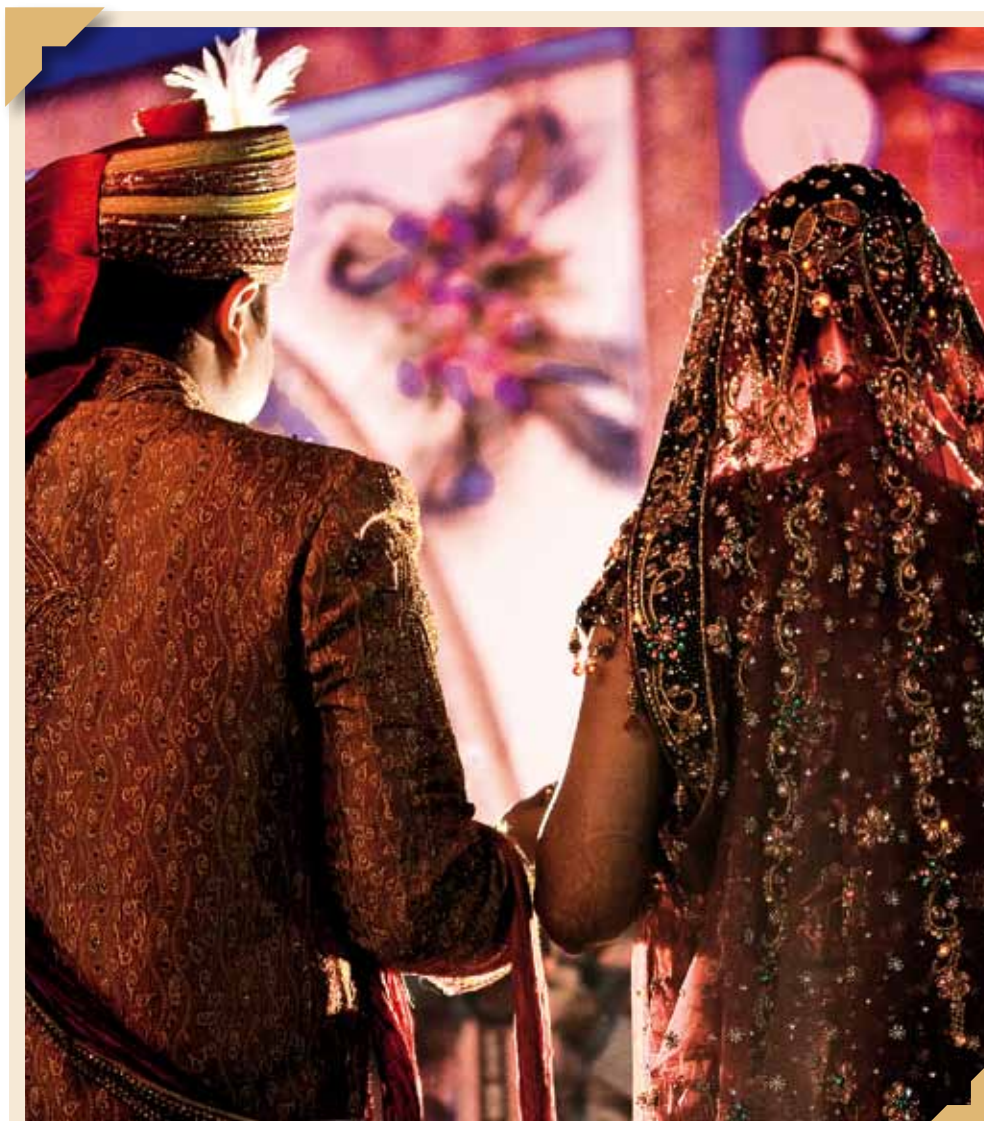
LAST BUT NOT LEAST

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Band, Baaja, Business

Indians spend \$25 billion a year on weddings. Planners, chocolatiers and even software makers are gatecrashing the party, says Anumeha Chaturvedi

PHOTOGRAPH BY KAPIL KASHYAP





In the 2010 film *Band Baaja Baaraat*, whose protagonists run a wedding planning agency in a dilapidated market in Delhi, the story plays out against the backdrop of the ground realities of the business. It is not all fantasy: these days, even those who want simple weddings, such as Himani Dalmia, scion of a well-known Delhi-based business family, hire a professional wedding planner.

“Ours is a business family, but we are also well known in the art and academic world,” says Dalmia, whose father is Chairman of Dalmia Continental. She wanted a simple, traditional wedding, planned mostly by family members. But she also roped in Bangalore-based Lakshmi Rammohan, a friend and founder of Dreamweaver Weddings, a wedding planning agency. “Lakshmi previously worked at the Olive Bar & Kitchen in Bangalore, and had handled some of our events there,” says Dalmia. She figured that getting professional help would allow her relatives more time to enjoy the event.

Rammohan has planned 11 weddings so far, mostly for middle- and upper middle-class families, with budgets ranging from ₹7 lakh to ₹1 crore. She charges a non-refundable ₹20,000 fee for initial estimates, and says the rest of the fee is less than 15 per cent of the wedding budget. “It is heartening that even people who spend ₹7 lakh on a wedding want a planner,” says Rammohan. Hiring professional planners, then, is no longer the preserve of industrialists and stock

market hotshots.

Mumbai-based Candice Pereira and Jarret D’Abreo, who started a wedding planning agency called Marry Me four years ago, say they have worked on budgets ranging from ₹10 lakh to a couple of crore, for weddings in Mumbai, Goa, Chandigarh and Britain. Its fees start at ₹2 lakh, and its owners say they expect business to grow at 15 to 20 per cent a year. They plan to open offices in Delhi, Goa and Rajasthan.

Like Dreamweaver Weddings, Marry Me provides 360-degree solutions for all things nuptial, including venue, food, accommodation and even rides from the airport. “It is a question of organisation,” says Rammohan. “We can make ₹7 lakh work better. A family would follow the trial-and-error method, but we tell you how to prioritise.”

“In today’s world, with everyone being so busy, having a wedding planner assist you each step of the way is a necessity,” says Pereira.

Meher Sarid, one of the country’s first wedding planners – she started out in 1992 – says business is booming as aspiration levels are rising. In 2002, she started Wedding Art, a unit that fabricates decorative structures. “Like the technology industry, this space is evolving,” she says. “Acceptance was a barrier when I started, but now verticals are emerging as separate industries, such as gift wrapping, montage photography, and moment makers, or those who make 15-minute wedding videos,” says Sarid. Among her recent clients was Delhi-based cricketer Gautam Gambhir. Sarid handles only two to three large-scale weddings a year.

THE BIG FAT INDIAN WEDDING



\$25b

The estimated size of the Indian wedding market



30%

The estimated annual growth of the industry



10m

The number of weddings every year in India