



THE STATUS-TRADITION PARADOX: A CONSUMER PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE ON CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY AND SOCIAL VALIDATION IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN WEDDINGS

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ABSTRACT

Indian weddings combine ceremonial practices, family obligations and public celebration, yet the motives behind preserving a ritual may not be identical to its visible form. Existing research has examined wedding expenditure as status signaling, but it offers a less direct account of how individuals distinguish cultural commitment from the pursuit of social recognition when deciding how to perform rituals. This conceptual article proposes the Status-Tradition Paradox as an analytical problem rather than an established historical shift. Through a focused narrative synthesis of scholarship on Indian public celebrations, impression management, self-determination and psychological ownership, it develops a provisional Ritual Motivation-Visibility Framework. The framework separates four analytically distinct motives-cultural conviction, relational obligation, social validation and visual performance and considers how audience visibility and decision-making autonomy may shape their interaction. It suggests that continuity in ritual appearance does not imply continuity in ritual motivation, and that public display does not automatically indicate the erosion of cultural meaning. Four propositions and an illustrative research design are offered for future empirical testing. The contribution is a structured vocabulary for examining why rituals are retained, modified or amplified in contemporary wedding settings without reducing families to a simple tradition versus show-off binary.

KEYWORDS

Indian Weddings; Ritual Motivation; Social Validation; Cultural Authenticity

INTRODUCTION

The public visibility of Indian wedding celebrations makes them an important setting for studying the relationship between cultural practice and social evaluation. Recent scholarship describes the coexistence of traditionality, commercialization and conspicuous consumption in Indian marriage culture (Ghosh, 2022; Kar & Tiwari, 2024). Research on Instagram-mediated bridehood also documents how wedding representations combine consumption, social distinctions and traditional imagery (Athira B. K., 2021). These studies establish relevant contexts, but do not by themselves determine why a family retains or stages any particular ritual.

This article begins with a narrower problem: two families may perform an outwardly similar wedding ritual while attaching very different reasons to it. One may regard the ritual as a meaningful expression of belief; another may consider it an obligation to relatives; a third may foreground how its performance will be interpreted by guests. Such motives may also coexist within a single household. The proposed "status-tradition paradox" therefore refers to the possibility that visible continuity of tradition conceals variation in the psychological reasons for its performance. It is not a claim that Indian weddings have uniformly become less traditional.

The article asks: How might researchers distinguish commitment to a ritual's meaning from the desire for social approval when the same action can satisfy both? What role might anticipated audiences, family expectations and personal agency play? And how could such distinctions be measured without treating elaborate weddings as inherently inauthentic?

RESEARCH APPROACH AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

This is a conceptual article informed by a focused narrative reading of recent scholarship published between 2020 and 2026, not a systematic review or an empirical investigation. Sources were selected for their relevance to contemporary Indian weddings, public performance, social norms and status consumption. No comprehensive database search, formal screening protocol, or primary data collection was conducted. The proposed categories and propositions are the author's conceptual synthesis and require empirical testing.

Kar and Tiwari (2024) examine conspicuous consumption and sustainability in the Indian wedding industry; Athira B. K. (2021) studies digitally mediated bridal performance; and Ghosh (2022) analyses how tradition and consumer culture coexist in representations of Indian matchmaking. Research on status consumption in Indian luxury markets provides a related, but not wedding-specific, account of how social visibility and status aspirations shape consumer behavior (Husain et al., 2022). Taken together, these sources motivate but do not

validate the proposed distinction between ritual meaning and presentation. The four categories below are original analytical propositions, not constructs established by these studies.

THE RITUAL MOTIVATION-VISIBILITY FRAMEWORK

The proposed framework differentiates four motivations. Cultural refers to performing a ritual because its symbolic or spiritual meaning is personally valued. Relational obligation describes performance primarily to maintain family relationships, honor elders, or meet perceived expectations. Social validation denotes concern with the respect, prestige or approval that an audience may confer: Visual performance refers to arranging the ritual for its public presentation, documentation, or aesthetic legibility. These are analytic dimensions, not mutually exclusive types of people or weddings.

Two contextual conditions may alter how these motives are expressed. Audience visibility concerns whether the ritual is private, witnessed by close kin, publicly staged or digitally circulated. Decision making autonomy concerns the extent to which those involved feel able to retain, modify or decline the practice. A highly visible ritual may still be experienced as an obligation. Accordingly, neither visibility nor expense can serve as a stand-alone measure of authenticity. Research on social normative influence in consumer contexts further supports treating social expectations as a question for investigation rather than as an assumed cause of behavior (Pristl et al., 2021).

TABLE – 1 PROPOSED ANALYTICAL DISTINCTIONS

Dimension	Illustrative Question
Cultural conviction	Would this ritual matter without spectators?
Relational obligation	Whose disappointment is anticipated if it is omitted?
Social validation	Whose approval is expected from its performance?
Visual performance	Would its staging change without recording or display?

These questions are proposed interview prompts, not validated scales. Responses may reflect multiple motives and should be interpreted in context.

CONCEPTUAL PROPOSITIONS AND DISCUSSION

Proposition 1: Ritual continuity and motivational continuity are separable. The repetition of a ceremonial form across generations does not by itself demonstrate that its participants attach identical meanings to it. A study could compare explanations for the same ritual among couples, parents, and older relatives.

Proposition 2: Audience salience may increase presentation-oriented

motives without eliminating cultural conviction. If guests or future viewers are highly salient, participants may adapt timing, staging or documentation. The empirical question is whether such adaptation changes the ritual's felt significance, rather than whether adaptation occurs at all.

Proposition 3: Perceived autonomy may moderate the experience of tradition. A ritual undertaken with personal endorsement may be experienced differently from the same ritual performed to avoid conflict or disapproval. This proposition adapts motivational theory to a collective ceremonial setting and requires direct testing.

Proposition 4: Disagreement over ritual choices may reflect conflicting motives rather than a simple opposition between modernity and tradition. One participant may prioritise spiritual meaning, another family harmony and another public presentation. Treating these as separable priorities could help researchers interpret negotiations without assigning moral superiority to any one participant.

Together, the propositions suggest that "authenticity" should not be inferred from visual modesty, expense, adherence to a prescribed format or the presence of cameras. Instead, future studies could investigate the relationship between participants' stated meanings, perceived freedom to decide, and the anticipated audience. The framework also recognizes that public recognition and cultural commitment can coexist, and that their interaction may affirm a sense of belonging.

KEY OUTCOMES AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The article's outcome is conceptual, not statistical. First, it identifies a distinction between what a ritual looks like and why it is performed. Second, it proposes four motivational dimensions that may coexist. Third, it specifies audience visibility and autonomy as potentially relevant contextual conditions. Fourth, it offers propositions that can be challenged or refined through research rather than treating the status-tradition tension as a settled social trend.

An empirical next step would use semi-structured interviews with couples and family members about selected rituals, followed by a survey testing whether the four dimensions are distinguishable. Researchers could present matched scenarios in which ritual meaning is held constant while audience size or public documentation changes and examine how motivations and perceived authenticity differ. Such a design would need careful attention to regional, religious, caste, and socioeconomic diversity, as well as the possibility of socially desirable responses. No claims about the prevalence of these motivations in India can be made from this article.

CONCLUSION

The proposed Status-Tradition Paradox shifts attention from the visible grandeur of Indian wedding to the motives accompanying the performance of tradition. Recent scholarship documents the coexistence of cultural practices, conspicuous consumption and mediated wedding identities (Athira B. K., 2021; Ghosh, 2022; Kar & Tiwari, 2024), but this does not establish that cultural commitment and social recognition are mutually exclusive. The Ritual Motivation-Visibility Framework offers a provisional way to examine conviction, obligation, validation and performance alongside audience visibility and perceived autonomy. Its contribution is a set of testable distinctions, not a claim of demonstrated psychological effects.

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