

Mass weddings: Social service, social crisis too

LITTLE CHOICE Regular feature in villages, but look beyond lens of philanthropy and mass weddings are an offshoot of agrarian crisis, with poor left with no way out



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AMLA SINGH WALA (BARNALA): Kulwinder had been engaged to a village lad for almost two years. Her father, a daily-wager, was helpless in front of circumstances. Finally, on February 24 this year, when the wedding took place, it was a lavish affair.

More than 25,000 guests came in, singers performed and apart from several MLAs and cabinet ministers, Chief Minister Prakash Singh Badal was himself present to give his blessings. Kulwinder was among the 121 brides who got married in a mass wedding ceremony organised by a local Akali leader.

The phenomenon of mass weddings of girls from rural and urban working class families — organised by the urban rich — has come up in a big way. Even a number of clubs in small towns, charitable and religious organisations, moneylenders' associations, NRIs, NGOs and politicians are conducting such weddings.

Malkeet Singh Keetu, a former MLA from Barnala, claims he has conducted 352 weddings of poor girls in 150 villages around Barnala so far.

A close associate says they



■ Former Barnala MLA Malkeet Singh Keetu claims he has conducted 352 weddings of poor girls in 150 villages. But, admits an aide, in a setup where marrying off a daughter from home is a matter of pride, they still come across cases where people seek aid but refuse to be part of mass weddings. VISHAV BHARTI/HT

Earlier, if some poor family was unable to get daughter married, the entire community, including farmers, would come together to help. Mass weddings are reflection of crisis among rural labourers

ZORA SINGH NASRALI
Farm labour union leader

began doing this while giving "shagun" on the weddings of poor girls. "We realised there were so many girls in villages who had to wait to get married just because of poverty."

But Zora Singh Nasrali, president of Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union, feels the issue should be looked beyond the lens of philanthropy.

No such concept existed till the late 1990s. It arrived along

with the agrarian crisis, when high mechanisation of agriculture considerably reduced work days.

"Earlier, if some poor family was unable to get their daughter married, the entire community, including farmers, would come together to help," he says.

He feels all this is a reflection of the crisis among rural labourers. "And now politicians are making political capital out

of it." Keetu, on the other hand, says he has been doing social service for the past 40 years. "Mass marriages came in recently. In all these years, I have done so many other works also."

Nasrali points out that in normal circumstances, marrying off a daughter from home is a matter of pride for a farm labourer. Unlike the farming community, there are very few occasions among the working class where they can celebrate with relatives and the community. Wedding is the most prominent.

However, in case of mass weddings, at times even the in-laws of girls have been seen making them realise that their parents couldn't even marry them off from home.

Though only the extremely poor (most of them Dalits) come to Keetu for marriages, his associate says they still come across a number of cases where people seek financial aid but refuse to be a part of mass weddings.

"Despite extreme poverty, they feel ashamed in marrying their daughters off from some other place instead of home. They request us to give the stuff, which we can't," he says.

Chamkaur Singh, a sweet-maker from Kulwinder's village, is one such example. He first refused to accept when his in-laws (from Barnala) asked him to tie the knot in a mass wedding a year back. "The ceremony was going to take place in my village only. That meant there would be no baraat. I had been to baraats of so many friends, now it was my turn to return," he says.

He feels it was an embarrassing way of getting married. But some influential relatives intervened and convinced him, explaining the situation of the girl's father.

The truth is that poverty has forced a large section of people to accept this new social order. Sinder Kaur, mother-in-law of Kulwinder, first got her daughter married in a mass wedding function two years back. So when Kulwinder's father shared the idea of a mass wedding, she immediately agreed. "We know what poverty is. My daughter was also married in a similar way," she says.

Sinder Kaur is thankful to Keetu but at the same time expresses helplessness. "It was impossible for us to manage on our own. Otherwise, why would we not have done it on our own and celebrated the occasion with brothers and sisters?"

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