

# Melodies of Celebration: Exploring the Role of Wanvun in Kashmiri Marriage Ceremonies

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## Abstract

For its scenic beauty, Kashmir is called the “Paradise on earth.” Its rich cultural heritage adds to its beauty and charm. Music is an essential part of Kashmir’s cultural legacy. A variety of songs are sung to adorn every celebration in Kashmir. There are different types of music in Kashmir, such as Wanvun, Rouf, Chhakar, Bachhi Nagma, Dhamaly, Lalnavun, Bhand Paethar, Ladishah, Leela, Sufiana Kalam etc. A number of books and articles have been written on Kashmiri music. This article focuses on wanvun associated with marriage ceremonies in Kashmir. It discusses the role of wanvun specific to various events and occasions of marriages in Kashmir. It also explores how the Wanvun sung in Kashmiri marriages not only reflect the joy and delight of the singers on these happy occasions but also how it depicts a variety of themes and ideas.

**Keywords:** Music, Wanvun, Celebration, Cultural Legacy, Customs, Tradition

Music is an art and an eternal force that shapes the human experience in ways that words often fail to capture. It is an essential aspect of every society and culture. “Plato viewed music as an imprint of the laws of nature in our spirit, both of which, in turn, possess underlying ideas” (Samama 40). Gilbert Galindo writes, “People have always found music significant in their lives, whether for enjoyment in listening, the emotional response, performing, or

creating.” He further says that music is not only pleasing to the ears and mind but also nurturing for the soul. “Music is basically a spontaneous creation, which gives expression to human instincts, sentiments and emotions with its universal appeal and potentiality to enlighten the soul” (Dhar ix). Kashmiri music is “deeply rooted in the cultural and historical tapestry of the region” and “holds a special place in the hearts of Kashmiris and music enthusiasts worldwide. Its significance lies not only in its melodious tunes but also in its role as a repository of Kashmiri heritage, identity, and emotions” (Wani 2). Sukhwant Kaur states that “Music is associated with almost all the functions and celebrations of Kashmiri society and culture.” (124) There are various musical genres in Kashmir, including Wanvun. Wanvun is a type of traditional Kashmiri folk music sung by women on various happy events and occasions. It was transmitted orally from generation to generation. Its authors are unknown. Women who learn and sing Wanvun sometimes introduce changes in it and therefore some couplets of Wanvun exist in many variant forms. Wanvun songs do not comprise lengthy stanzas. They consist of two lines, called Wanvun hur. Hur in Kashmiri means a pair. These couplets may or may not rhyme (Handoo). Wanvun is deeply rooted in centuries-old customs and hence is an integral part of Kashmir’s cultural legacy. Both Kashmiri Pandit and Muslim women sing Wanvun to grace their celebrations. However, they do not sing it in a similar way. Their style and tone differs. “Kashmiri Pandits sing Wanvun in Vilambit Lay (slow speed) whereas Kashmiri Muslims sing Wanvun in Madhya Lay (medium speed) (Nisa, et al 108). In her book, *The Traditional Music of Kashmir in Relation to Indian Classical Music*, Sunita Dhar writes that in Kashmiri Hindu families Wanvun would begin from the time a girl expects a child. She states that Hindu women would sing Wanvun on ‘Shran-sunder’ (a social function held on the seventh or eighth day after the delivery), ‘Zarkasaya’ (the first hair-cut of a newborn baby), ‘Kahanaethur’ (a ceremony held on the eleventh day after the birth of the child to christen him/her), ‘Yagnopavit’ known in Kashmiri as ‘mekhal’, ‘Garnavaya’ (house cleaning and

washing before a marriage ceremony), ‘Dapun’ (personal invitation of guests for the marriage), ‘Shran’ (bride’s or bridegroom’s sitting on stool and dripping milk, curd and bathing), ‘Masmuchravun’ (opening the braids of the bride), ‘Manzirath’ (the night when henna is applied to bride and groom), ‘Devgun’ (welcome to Vedic gods), ‘Yonya’ (holy fire), ‘Lagan’ (Kanyadaan) etc. (13-19). Kashmiri Muslim women would sing Wanvun on ‘Zarkasaai’ (the first haircut of a newborn baby) and Various events associated with marriage such as ‘Nishayn’ (engagement), ‘Saatnaam’ (in it the family finalizes and officially announces the wedding dates), ‘Nikkah’ (When the bride and groom sign the marriage contract), ‘Tamul tsarun’ (cleaning the rice for marriage feast), ‘Masmuchravun’ (detangling the hair locks of a bride), ‘Aab shehrun’ (bridal bath), ‘Manziraath’ (the night of applying henna to the bride and groom), the groom’s visit to the ancestral graveyard to recite Fatiha at the graves of his ancestors, ‘Yaniwol’ (the day when the groom and his family come to take the bride to her new home) etc.

On every occasion Muslim women start wanvun with the name of God in order to seek his blessings. They invoke God, prophets and saints, asking for their favours and blessings and inviting them to participate in their celebrations. Hindu women also seek the blessings of their gods through the songs. Thus the songs not only express the joy and delight of the singers and the family but also their faith and beliefs. Through Wanvun women praise the beauty of the bride and groom, pray for their happy future, and shed light on the events on which they sing Wanvun. Wanvun reflects the shared identity of Kashmiri people, promotes unity and gives insight into Kashmiri culture. The melodiousness of Wanvun enriches the ceremonies, adding to their beauty and charm. Every event in marriage, from engagement to bride’s farewell has specific wanvun appropriate to the occasion. The following examples of Wanvun sung in Muslim marriages highlight and illustrate its variety and specificity:

On every occasion Muslim women begin their Wanvun thus:

Bismillah kerith hemai wanvunui / Sahibo az walo sonuye [Here, the women sing that they will begin the wanvun with the name of Allah, and they call upon Prophet Muhammad (SAW) to grace the function with his presence.]

Nabi Soban hyotai sakhronui / Sakhrith aawai ghari sonuye [Here, the women sing that the prophet (SAW) began to get ready, and after getting ready came to the bride's home.]

Roshi roshi karsai poshi wathronui / Sahib aawai ghari sonuye [Here, the women sing that they will welcome the prophet (SAW) with flowers as he visits the bride's home.]

On Nikah women sing:

Asi peth Zati paak gov meherbanai / Nikhan panai aayi Sarkaar [[Here, women sing that God has been gracious to them, as Prophet Muhammad (SAW) himself has come to ask the bride and groom for their consent.]

During Masmuchravun (untangling the hair locks of the bride), women sing:

Mas muchravoi ruumai ruumai / Chakhai masoomai khoni lalvoth [Here, the women express their love and care for the bride. They address her, telling her that they will gently unbraid the strands of her hair and lull her in their laps, as she is very young and innocent.]

Wathvun karwoe niyaaz nazar / Behwun khezir begroye [Here, the women sing, telling the bride that as she stands, they will give charity in her name, and as she sits, they will distribute dates.]

Dokh di takiyas kihn nai parwaye / Rab-i-Jaleel chhi hamraye [As the women untangle the bride's hair, she feels sad, thinking that she now has to leave her maternal home. They sing, telling her to relax and not to worry, for the great God is with her.]

During bridal bath women sing:

Bismillah kerith aab shehroye / Ism-e-Aazam paroye [Here, the women sing that they will begin the bridal bath with the name of Almighty Allah]

Aab shehroye bali thazare / Hazrati Aliyin nazare [Here, the women sing that they will place the bride on a high pedestal and bathe her in the name of Hazrat Ali (AS).]

Mayi chani wanvaan hoori tai parye / Chavi sondarye aabi Kausar [Here, the women address the bride, telling her that in her love, houries and fairies sing, and they tell her to bathe with water from the River Kausar, which flows in paradise]

When henna is applied to the bride or the groom, women sing:

Maenz hai anmai ropyi ti aanas / Yihai aes Karbala wanas peth [Here, the women sing that they bought the henna for a rupee and a few paise from a shop in Karbala, which makes it sacred and auspicious.]

Maenz hai anmai pamper rangith / Mangith Rasooli Khodayas [Here, the women sing that they have bought henna tinted with colour from Pampore – a place in Kashmir known for its saffron cultivation – and they have prayed to Prophet Muhammad for this happy occasion]

Arshi wets maenz tai godi Shah Qasimas / Tasundi tobruk Mahrazas/mahrine [Here, the women sing that the henna has come from the heaven. It was applied to the hands of Hazrat Qasim (the son of Hasan ibn Ali) after his martyrdom. He was martyred at a very young age, before he could be married. Hence, the henna is considered holy and auspicious for the bride or groom.]

Assi yitan Fatim saeb aksi rumas / Assi che masoomas manzi raath [Here, the women invoke Hazrat-e-Fatima to come – even if only for a moment – to bless the mehndi ceremony of their beloved and innocent son/daughter with her presence.]

Maenze dulisi ande ande khesi / Walai panin masi lol barse [Here, the women address the bride's maternal aunt, telling her that the pot filled with henna is surrounded by bowls. She is invited to come and shower her love on the bride.]

Yihai chum Khanimol dua kertose / Waav kertose rumale [Here, the women sing on behalf of the groom's mother, saying 'He is my darling child – pray for him and fan him with a handkerchief.]

Ropi sinzi labi tai sonisind talav / Azhai aeshnavan aalo gov [Here, the women sing that the bride's house is beautifully embellished – with silvery walls and golden roofs – and that, on this happy occasion of marriage, friends and kinsmen are invited.]

Dili chov taarov rechmakhai heri / Bakhtaweri poshnai [Here, the women sing that the bride has been brought up with great love and care, and they pray that she may always be fortunate.]

When the groom visits his ancestral grave yard to recite Fatiha there, women sing:

Badi par faati baedbaabi bozi / Rezi rozi Zuljalal [Here, the women address the groom, telling him to recite Fatiha aloud so that his deceased ancestors may hear it and God may be pleased.]

Ati no kerzen aaye graye / Atti ho nozich jaye che [Here, the women address the groom, telling him to be careful in the graveyard, as it is a holy place.]

When the groom gets ready to visit the nearby shrines on the day of his marriage, women sing:

Athi both chal to Dargah tar to / Yath jamets karto doyi khera [Here, the women address the groom, telling him to perform ablution and visit the shrine at Dargah to pray for his people.]

When the groom leaves his house for the bride's house, women sing:

Niuk niuk ruud peov badaam waare / Lali drrav motor care keth [Here, the women sing that a light rain fell in the almond garden, and the groom went in a motorcar.]

When the groom comes to the bride's house, women sing:

Yizman beyi feri dalanas / Neri jananas posh chakhne [Here, the women address the bride's mother, telling her to wait for the groom on the front porch, in order to welcome him with flowers.]

Yizman beyi kanan lagi bale / Darmindar aayi heemale [Here, the women address the bride's mother, telling her to get ready and wear her earrings, as Dharmendra has come to take Hema Malini (This is a reference to a Bollywood hero and heroine, reflecting the influence of Bollywood on Kashmiri Wanvun)]

Asalamu alaikum sani mahrazo / Chani yini gah peo aalams [Here, the women greet the groom and praise his handsomeness, telling him that his arrival has illuminated the world]

Laila illallah lekhith darwazas / Godi periv adi atsiv halas manz [Here, the women address the groom and his companions, telling them to first read la illah illallah (there is no God but God) written on the door, and then enter the hall.]

Dewaan khanas saas masnad ha chi / Khas masnand ha chhi chani bapath [Here, the women address the groom, telling him that the hall has a thousand carpets, but a special one has been laid for him.]

Mubarakh kerto amis kori maaje / Yas hai yuth raaje aangan tsaav [Here, the women sing that the bride's mother should be congratulated, for such a good groom entered her house.]

Gaadi hund number chi one four zero / Heervini vento hero aav [Here, the women sing: the plate number of his vehicle is one-four-zero, tell the heroine that the hero has arrived.]

Tati draav suli tai yot wot zoone / Yousuf Habi khotuune aav [Here, the women sing that the groom left his house early, but reached the bride's house in the moonlit night. He is Yousuf (reference to Yousuf Shah Chak), who has come to take his beloved, Haba khaton.]

When the bride and groom are about to leave the bride's house, women sing:

Malinich kunzi kari maji hawalai / Adih neri werviki sawali [Here, the women address the bride, telling her to entrust the keys of her maternal home to her mother, and then leave for her in-laws' house.]

Wuni chakhai khuti pati khuti phereni / Rokhsath chi nai meleniye [Here, the women address the bride, asking her whether she is still moving from room to room. Hasn't she received permission to leave yet?]

Lal dedi saani chhi martabi ziyadai / Nout phut aab rod istaadai [Here, the women address the groom, telling him that the bride is a saintly lady. They compare her to Lal Ded and refer to a legend associated with the mystic poet. Once, Lal Ded was carrying an earthen pot filled with water; a stone was thrown at it, breaking the pot, yet the water did not spill – it remained as it was in the pot]

Chandi kui hewzes ti dilikui bewzes / Billah chui moul mouj mushrevzes [Here, the women address the groom, telling him to trust, love and care for the bride so that she does not miss her parents]

When the bride reaches her in-laws house, women sing:

Godi pari bismillah ruuh gasi tazai / Adi atsi werviki darwazai [Here, the women address the bride, telling her to recite 'Bismillah' so that her soul feels refreshed before entering her in-laws' house]

Chaer kehzi aayakh jumuhuk shab hai chhi / Tarrak nab hai chhi sholi maraan [Here, the women address the bride, asking her why she arrived so late, as it is a Friday night and the sky full of stars is shining bright. (This reflects the superstitious belief that on dark nights – especially Friday nights – evil spirits roam free and may harm or haunt humans)]

Chaer kehzi aayakh yithi anigate / Aadem chhati rechnai [Here, the women address the bride, asking her why she arrived so late on such a dark night. They pray that God protects her from the evil eye]

Chhoen kerith bethkhai roni damanas / Buth kerith Khanai Kabas kun [Here, the women address the bride, telling her that as she sat down, a sound emerged from the hem of her bridal dress. She sat facing Kaaba (The holy site in Saudi Arabia that is considered the House of God by Muslims and determines the direction of prayer)]

Soni sinzi sitsne pan chakhai taraan / Wuni chakhai praraan mohar tulnas [In Kashmir and many other regions, there is a ritual in which a bride, while leaving her paternal home, wears a veil that covers her head and face. Upon her arrival at her husband's house, the bride's mother-in-law lifts the veil to reveal her face, and gifts are exchanged between them. In this wanvun couplet, the women address the bride, asking her if she is threading a golden needle? If she is still waiting for the veil to be lifted?]

Yizman beyi ter kya lajye / Ker hai losis mohar tulse [Here, the women address the bride's mother-in-law, asking her why she takes so long to lift the veil from the bride's face, as the bride's neck has grown weary from her lowered gaze and the weight of the veil.]

In this day and age Wanvun singing is not as common as it was in the past. Nowadays women do not sing Wanvun on all the occasions on which it was sung in days of yore. Wanvun is now limited to only a few functions associated with marriage ceremonies, and even in these functions, it is not sung with the same passion and devotion as in the past. As a result, the range of contextual specificity of wanvun has decreased over time. There are various reasons responsible for the decline of the tradition of Wanvun such as changes in the ways of living, impact of the latest trends in entertainment, dearth of proper documentation, the oral nature of Wanvun etc. Tawseef Ahmad Wani writes, "the influx of external influences and the homogenization of culture due to globalization and increased connectivity pose a risk to the unique Kashmiri musical identity" (3). He further writes, "The transmission of knowledge, traditionally oral, is under threat with the passing of older generations of musicians, necessitating documentation ... Furthermore, the commercialization of music and the rise of

pop culture have led to shifting musical preferences among younger audiences, adding complexity to the preservation of traditional music” (3).

Although various cultural institutions and individuals work to revive the tradition of Wanvun and many seminars, conferences and workshops are held to teach the young generations the value and worth of such cultural practices, we cannot ensure their preservation unless and until efforts are made to preserve the language in which these songs are composed. In addition to that, proper documentation of Wanvun and promoting and encouraging the practice of wanvun in family gatherings and festive occasions can play an important role to restore its importance and to ensure that it remains a living tradition.

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