



## Mass marriages

Mass marriages in India have been taken place for a long time. However, mass marriages were not accepted by all members of society, especially the rich. The practice lacked the social respect and was looked down upon as a means for only those who were not well to do. Mr Shantilal Muttha and his activists understood that a mass marriage was a powerful tool to bring about a change in the Jain community and its age old practice of grand wedding ceremonies and excessive spending expected from the family of the bride. Most often the wedding of a daughter left a huge financial burden which, Mr. Muttha felt strongly about. He set about to remedy what he considered to be a social evil and his missionary efforts had far-reaching consequences that have left a permanent impact on the society.

It is very interesting to know how the idea of mass marriages emerged in Mr Muttha's sensitive mind. He was a student of a Jain boarding school in Beed district of Maharashtra for 4 years. Boys from the boarding school were called upon to serve as waiters and do other work during the marriage festivities of the rich Jain families who would donate Rs.500 to Rs.1000 to the boarding school for the services of its students.. During these occasions he got to observe the ways of those rich, their waste of food, the unnecessary and lavish expenditure and the show-off, which made him angry and upset. He could see that all this was just for maintaining the so called 'status' in the society. Yet the not so well-to-do wanted to emulate the 5-10 percent of rich people in the community and most often were compelled to meet the never ending demands of the families of the groom. When he completed his graduation, he tried to protest against this attitude of rich people but was ignored and did not get support just because he was not rich that time.

During 1980-84, he concentrated on his business and decided to use his own money for the social service work related to marriage issues. He decided to inspire people to go for mass marriages as a way of reducing expenditure, instead of just protesting against rich people. There was negative response from people for his efforts on mass marriages. An advertisement was given in the newspapers. He roamed for a year in various places out of Pune to convince people. But sadly got no response. As per the advices given by some people he first decided to get his niece married in a mass marriage. Some of his friends joined him in this activity. They started arranging marriages first and then convince them to go for mass marriage. After going through lot of pain and efforts, they could convince 25 couples to get married in a mass marriage including his own niece and her in laws. They decided to organize this mass marriage in a very

systematic and proper way so that the maximum number of people would come for the mass marriage and the idea of mass marriage would get prestige and status. The main aim of organizing a mass marriage in the Jain community in Pune was to reduce the lavish expenses of getting married and also to get poor and rich Jain couples married in the same pandal so that poor people would consider mass marriages respectable and acceptable.

Systematic and disciplined planning and organizing was done right from printing a giant invitation cards with the names of all 25 couples to the actual arrangement of wedding ceremony, food for thousands of guests and their stay in Pune. The news papers gave good coverage to the event and everyone praised the organizers for managing the event so well. Since the 25 Jain couples belonged to poor, middle-class and rich families, the idea of mass marriage got the prestige and status, which Mr Muttha wanted. And the mass marriage of 25 May 1986 was a great success.

Instead of going to each and every house of eligible brides and bridegrooms they then decided to hold a "vadhu-var palak melava" on 17<sup>th</sup> August 1986, which was planned as a gathering of eligible brides and bridegrooms along with their parents. They received a very good response for this 'melava' and also for the next mass marriage of 51 Jain couples held on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1987. With this success they decided to hold mass marriages in district towns so that the concept of mass marriages would take roots at the grass-root level. Mass marriages were organized for the Jain community at Ahmednagar, Jalgaon, Dhule and Amravati.

An unbelievable response was received for a big challenge of arranging mass marriage of all communities. Again the same efforts, disciplined planning and management, support from the society made the mass marriage of 625 couples held on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1988 on S.P. College, Pune a great success. Of the 625 couples, nearly 300 were tribal couples, some of them sent by Mrs Anutai Wagh from Thane and Kosbad districts including nearly 47 castes and religious communities and 23 Jain couples.

Like in the Jain community, mass ,marriages began to take place in the Agrawal, Maheshwari, Teli, Tamboli, Shimpi and Koli communities and even in Sikh community at Nanded. The concept of mass marriage has spread across Maharashtra in a big way. Thus the path-breaking social reform campaigns on marriage-related issues begun by Mr Shantilal Muttha in 1984 are followed up by BJS during the next two decades.

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