



## DAY'S DIARY

### Birth anniversary

Famous Bollywood music director, Rahul Dev Burman, popularly called RD Burman or Pancham da, was born on this day in 1939, in Calcutta

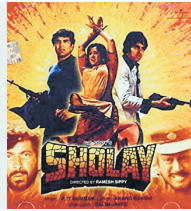
## MUSIC STYLE

He was known for introducing an upbeat, Western copied music that defined much of the music of the 1970s. This style has influenced music directors till date



## FIRST MUSIC

He learned to play the sarod and harmonica. He was only nine years old when he composed his first song *Aye meri topi* and his father, SD Burman, used it in the film *Funtoosh* (1956)



## COMPOSER

His professional career began in 1958 as an assistant to his father. He has composed music for films such as *Sholay* (1975), *1942: A Love Story* (1994) and *Masoom* (1983)

## Express Views on OTT releases this week

PG 4

When an uninvited virus becomes part of the wedding guest list, everything goes for a toss — not just for the families, but for wedding-makers too

# WEDDING BIZ TIED UP IN COVID KNOTS

● RK Srividya

**J**ab ladka ladki raazi, toh kya karega qaazi (when the boy and girl have agreed, then what can a judge do?). Apparently, a lot, if the judge is coronavirus. For many to-be brides and grooms, and their families, wedding plans for 2020 have hit a snag, thanks to COVID-19. But they are not alone. Also in the thick of this fray are wedding planners, hall owners, priests, caterers and photographers who are frantically re-inventing their craft to keep the show running. With social distancing rules and the state government imposing restrictions on gatherings at weddings to no more than 50 people, these wedding-makers are now staring at a big blip in their revenue.

## Marriage halls go empty

A quick Google search tells us that India hosts 10 million weddings every year. We leave the Math to you to guess the volume of manpower and resources engaged in this business. Varadarajan, vice-president of Federation of Tamil Nadu Thirumana Urimaiyalar Sangam (TUS) and secretary of Erode District TUS, says that even though weddings happen only for a maximum of 50 days a year, a *mandapam* owner has to pay seven kinds of taxes, give salary for staff, and foot the maintenance bill — all ranging from ₹1.5 lakh to ₹3 lakh per month. “So, it is an issue for us when customers change wedding dates. Some even expect us to return the advance amount immediately, which is impossible as all bookings get cancelled in a short span,” he says, explaining the economics.

With the mechanics of operations now changing due to the pandemic, Varadarajan believes that a recovery plan can be charted only with government support. “Considering the unprecedented crisis, the state should give us tax concessions, and ease norms so that we can resume services with all safety measures. In this regard, we have also sent a letter to the chief minister recently,” he shares.

Despite having zero business, some wedding hall owners continue to pay wages. “Unlike other service industries, we need only limited people, including a manager, supervisor, cleaner and watchman, to work in marriage halls. Many of them are like our family members. So, we continue to pay them somehow,” says Nandakumar, who owns a spacious *mahal* in Coimbatore.

The crisis has come as a big blow for people like Singai N Muthu, who are undertaking renovations. The president of TUS has taken a huge loan to modernise his Mani Mahal in Coimbatore. However, the works are unlikely to take off anytime soon. “Nearly 75 per cent of *mandapams* are inherited businesses and any loss incurred will directly affect the owners’ families. As the new rules now allow a maximum of 50 people to attend a wedding, some are opting for banquet halls in hotels over marriage halls. In this scenario, there is no business for another six months. So, the state should address our grievances and release a government order relaxing norms for halls with a minimum capacity of 500-2,000,” he pleads.

## Internet to the rescue

The restrictions have also forced wedding planners to think out of the box — or in this case inside the screen. Taking into account the current curbs, Mohan Babu, CEO of Hakuna Matata Events based in Chennai, has introduced a special

lockdown wedding package. Their recent online post specifying five services covered under this package has caught the attention of many. “The pandemic has affected at least 30 to 40 per cent of our income. But, we could manage the situation as most of our team members are freelancers. Besides, we started arranging Zoom birthday parties to make up for the losses. Some upscale clients prefer having online parties with their friends, where DJs will play over a Zoom call,” says Mohan, adding that some of his competitors have taken to making masks and sanitiser-dispensing stands to tide over the fund crunch.

## Virtual poojas impractical

With the new rules, weddings can now be conducted at home, and on video-calls, but how does one replace the role of priests, especially in Hindu weddings. Facing the lockdown heat is their entire fraternity. While some have adapted to technology by offering online services, however, financial prospects don’t look healthy.

For Venkatraman Iyer, the discomfort of online transactions, is just one of his many other worries. “The lockdown has made me feel like being caught between two worlds. In the Tamil month of *Vaigasi*, I have lost the offer to conduct at least 20 weddings. People talk about performing poojas over a video-call, but it is not a practical solution. Sometimes a technical glitch will make us compromise with the auspicious time; network issues are not uncommon and chances for the couple to not follow our instructions are high,” he elaborates.

## Food for thought

With the clamp down on large weddings, the catering industry seems to be staring at an empty calendar. A small-scale wedding caterer, Harikrishnan from Virugambakkam has run out of business since March. He claims to have incurred a loss of ₹12 lakh this wedding season.

“The lockdown has robbed the sheen off the wedding industry.

**Two decades into the catering business with an average of 40 orders a year, I never thought that my own kitchen will run dry of supplies some day**

—Harikrishnan, wedding caterer in Virugambakkam, Chennai

Two decades into the catering business with an average of 40 orders a year, I never thought that my own kitchen will run dry of supplies some day. In the past three months, there was not even a single order. Also, the fear of contracting the infection has kept me indoors, for money is insignificant before health. If curfews are the new normal, then it will prompt the disappearance of small vendors like me. Only those who had saved some money will survive the crisis,” he worries.

Losing 150 orders in a short period is no joke for ‘Idly’ Iniyavan from Chennai, who is also the Secretary of Tamil Nadu Samayal Thozhilalar Sangam. “We make no profit by cooking for 50 people. Even then, we continue to provide our services by taking utmost precautions like washing all utensils in hot water, and vegetables in water mixed with salt and turmeric. At the place of function, hand sanitiser bottles have replaced rose water and *chandana*. We also make water available with *neem* leaves and turmeric for the guests to wash

their legs before entering the *mandapam*,” he shares.

But that’s not all. Lack of business is now taking a toll on their mental health, too. “There are eight lakh *samayal kalaingyargal* in Tamil Nadu and many of them are dealing with depression without having two-square meals a day. Although a welfare association was set up for them in 2011, it has remained dysfunctional as the office bearers are yet to be appointed. So, the government should do the needful for the association and provide ₹10,000 aid for each member,” Iniyavan insists.

## Flowers let to wilt

The lockdown has also withered the flower business. “The pandemic has led to the closure of religious establishments, and Chennai flower market; cancellation of all foreign orders and curtailment of wedding size. At least 10,000 families rely on small-scale flower sales in Madurai. Even after relaxation of the norms, only 6,000 of them could resume work, which further declined due to a drop in demand,”

**Many farmers took to *elai vazhai* cultivation this year as its demand increased with the implementation of the ban on single-use plastics. In three months, I would have made ₹30,000-₹35,000 by selling seven or eight bundles (with 100 leaves each) of plantain leaves. With no takers, most leaves are wilting in the lockdown.**

—Mohan, Coimbatore-based plantain farmer

explains flower cultivator-cum-vendor Prakash, who is also the President of Madurai Flower Merchants and Commission Agents Association.

“Many clients prefer to decorate their *mandapams* using native flowers. Jasmine, in particular, used to be sold for ₹1,000 to ₹3,000 per kg ahead of *muhurtams*. But, the price spiralled down to ₹150 per kg during the lockdown, amounting to a loss of ₹1 lakh to 2 lakh per farmer. In my 40 acre farm, flowers were let to wilt in at least 10 acres,” he opens up.

## Saving staff first

Smiles have turned into frowns, and that is a worry for Ajay Ben, CEO of Chennai-based Zero Gravity Photography, whose job is to ensure that his clients’ happy moments are documented well. Catering to the luxury segment has not spared this company — which has 300 members and seven branches in India — from the side-effects of the lockdown.

“In the initial phase of the lockdown, we had to go for an 80 per

cent cost-cut. We also prioritised to save our staff engaged in the post-production works by providing 30 per cent salary a month. This could be done by postponing the settlement of most of our monthly expenses. So, hiring new people in this business climate is not an option for another 12 months,” he says. To ensure safety of his ten lensmen handling the shoots, Ben has made it mandatory for them to undergo a swab test once a week. He has also asked them to not eat food at weddings. With only two photographers per client, his package rates have spiralled down by 70 per cent. Only 15 of the 25 projects took off this wedding season. Photographers now consciously avoid showing picture preview to the clients.

For Thanjavur-based photographer Vivek, whose clientele mostly includes NRIs, the lockdown has crippled his business. “Most of my clients are from Canada and the USA and they are not planning to have the ceremony anytime soon in India. So, I have lost ₹5 lakh-worth business this season. Even when I

look for small-scale opportunities with event managers, they strictly consider photographers who are ready to take risks after undergoing COVID-19 test. So, I earned only a few thousands by doing two shoots in May,” he shares.

## Unforeseen responsibilities

Unlike other providers, Divya Lakshmi, owner of Chennai-based wedding gown boutique Juno Marie, claims to have had brisk business during the lockdown. However, issues like unavailability of fabric and courier service to ship her orders for *lehengas*, gowns and blouses cropped up. “Usually, we get orders for 30-40 wedding gowns this season, but it has decreased to a dozen during the lockdown as clients are cutting down on rituals. Meeting the deadlines was very challenging as gowns had to be made in-house with available material. As two of my staff members stay in COVID-19 hotspots, I had to find new tailors in the locality. Sometimes, I stitched the clothes,” she explains.

Divya is worried that brides are

ready to compromise on clothes but not with make-up and photography. “Brides’ choices keep changing with the extension of the lockdown. Some want us to be ready to change the measurements, as they worry about putting on weight before their postponed wedding finally happens. A few clients who wanted customised gowns (₹22,000 to ₹40,000) for each ceremony have now opted for renting them (₹5,000 to ₹7,000). The gowns on rent can be used only three times after dry cleaning. So, we will soon run out on that income as well,” she frets.

Keeping in touch with his customers online has helped actor and entrepreneur Gibran Osman, owner of Studio Bas which provides designer wedding costumes and customised shoes for grooms, to survive during the lockdown. “We make our clients take their measurements at home as per our directions and send us the numbers. Our tailors work on a rotational basis and it takes two-three more days to finish each order. The finished product will be couriered and the fitting issues shall be discussed over a video call. Our agenda is to survive and ensure our workers’ safety. So, it is okay to have only 20 per cent business this season,” he clarifies.

## Smart celebrations

Kanika Subbiah, founder of Wedding Wishlist, which provides online planning services for a smart and stress-free wedding, believes that the pandemic has opened the doors for smarter celebrations.

“Weddings rarely happened between March and April. Enquiries started coming only from May and we have hosted 12 weddings in June on the WeddingWishlist.com platform. Now, couples are realising that they cannot wait indefinitely to get married, and so they chose to host safe and waste-free weddings. We help them organise it through our virtual wedding platform,” she says. “But the biggest challenge is to ensure that our clients’ guests feel a part of the wedding and not miss out on social interaction. We do that by creating a website for each couple, which integrates their story, functions, gift choices (via registry), live stream and other information on virtual wedding. The site also has an usher option to engage the guests and provide them with a personalised experience.

The good news is weddings are an integral part of our culture, and couples are and will tie the knot, though with some adaptations. So even as we wait for the vaccine, for now, wedding-makers will have to sustain with small, intimate ceremonies.



ILLUSTRATION: AMIT BANDRE

## VENDORS' WOES

### MARRIAGE HALLS

Even though weddings happen only for a maximum of **50 days a year**, a *mandapam* owner has to pay seven taxes, give salary for staff and foot maintenance bill — **all ranging from ₹1.5 lakh to ₹3 lakh per month**

But despite having **zero business**, some wedding hall owners continue to pay wages.

### CATERING

Caterers report having incurred a loss of at least

**₹12 lakh**

Loss of marriage orders is taking a **toll on mental health**

Farmers suffer as no takers for *elai vazhai*

**50 NOT FEASIBLE**  
NUMBER FOR COOKING

## PHOTOGRAPHY

Photographers urged to take swab test once a week.

**Avoid eating food at weddings.**

Photographers now consciously avoid showing picture preview to clients.

**70 PER CENT** Wedding photography package rates spiralled down.

In some cases, only **15 of the 25 projects** took off.



## VIRTUAL POOJAS

With the new rules, weddings are now conducted at home, and on video-calls.

Priests, especially in Hindu weddings, are facing the lockdown heat.

Some have adapted to technology by offering online services, however, financial prospects, don’t look healthy

## INTERNET WEDDING

The restrictions have also forced wedding planners to think out of the box — or in this case inside the screen. Hakuna Matata events started arranging Zoom birthday parties to make up for the losses.



Expenses have been cut down to **one-tenth**.

## Online parties

Some upscale clients prefer having online parties with their friends, where DJs will play over a Zoom call. Wedding Wishlist, which provides online planning services for a smart and stress-free wedding, believes that the pandemic has opened the doors for smarter celebrations.

To ensure guests of clients feel they are a part of the wedding, a website for each couple is created, which integrates their story, functions, gift choices (via registry), live stream and other information on virtual wedding.

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## ALL GLOOM FOR BLOOMS

Price of jasmine has spiralled down to **₹150** per kg from **₹1,000 to ₹3,000 per kg**



Farmers now bear a loss of **₹1 lakh to ₹2 lakh**

Closure of religious establishments and **Chennai flower market**; cancellation of all foreign orders and curtailment of wedding size has withered the business of blooms.