

METROPLUS



From sanitising cities to tackling locusts, drones spring into action

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This digital exhibit captures lockdown through art and poetry

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Venkat Prabhu's cop avatar in *Lock Up*

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Dance in a virtual *sangeet*. Bless the couple through private online rooms. How virtual weddings are becoming the go-to option for couples in this new normal

Knot online now

SRINIVASA RAMANUJAM

Ulageswari R is a dreamer. She has always wanted to have a lavish wedding, one with thousands of friends and family taking part in elaborate ceremonies.

She was engaged to Sivavallinathan A in February, and they were to be married on June 10. They had even booked Chennai's popular multi-purpose hall, Kalaingar Arangam, as their wedding *mandapam*.

But then, the pandemic and ensuing lockdown arrived. Ulageswari and family had to re-think their options. They decided to retain the wedding date, but changed the venue to their residence on Chennai's East Coast Road. A friend was roped in to help with decorations in their parking area.

When they tied the knot, there were 30 in attendance, in person. But several hundreds joined in virtually, through a special app and website that they had created with the help of Chennai-based Wedding Wishlist.

"I have no regrets, and it was a beautiful four-hour ceremony during which we did not rush through rituals. Nor did I have to keep smiling at random people throughout," recalls Ulageswari, an ENT surgeon whose low-key online wedding also cut her expenditure to one-fifth of her original budget.

Hers is the first of 'virtual weddings' in her family.

Elsewhere, across Chennai and other parts of India, it is a phenomenon fast catching up.

Kanika Subbiah, Founder of Wedding Wishlist, vouches for that. Her company had zero requests for weddings in March and April, months during which everyone was unsure about the way going forward.

Things picked up in May. "Couples started realising they could not wait indefinitely to get married; the answer lay in hosting celebrations that were safe and waste-free," says Kanika, whose company helped in putting together 14 virtual weddings in June and about 20 in July.

For this month, they have a lineup of almost one virtual wedding a day.

Caught in the web

Families planning these weddings are increasingly leveraging technology. But that comes with its own challenges: couples began to miss the social interactions with guests, one of the best parts of any Indian wedding.

"Live stream only allows passive viewing, but with virtual weddings, we try to deliver the entire wedding experience online. The couple's website becomes the

virtual hub, the online version of '*shaadi ka ghar*,' she adds. In addition to watching a live webcast, guests can also attend online parties, share photos with other invitees and partake in pre-wedding functions like bachelor parties and bridal showers.

All this might seem easy for people clued in to technology, but not for those, for whom the word 'online' is still a bit foreign. That is where the role of a usher, priced at ₹4,999 per wedding, comes into play.

Tanvi Saraf of Wedding Wishlist has already played

that role for six weddings now. She was the equivalent of a person who welcomes guests at the reception, in a pre-COVID wedding. "I give guests a sense of the flow of events, so that they know what to expect. Even as there is a live stream happening, we

create separate virtual rooms for different sections of the guests, so that nobody is lost. When you have 200 guests on a Zoom call, most of whom you don't know, it becomes a little uncomfortable to talk to all," says Tanvi.

Her job also entails hosting guests in separate virtual rooms, with people they can converse with. "I also help elders who might not be too tech-savvy but are very interested in watching the proceedings."

Music on the house

One of the first things that Tarini Arun Kumar and Raashid Navlahi, based out of Bangalore, thought about when putting together their wedding was the music it would feature.

"We're both big fans of Bollywood music. We imagined all our friends abroad and family coming in, and

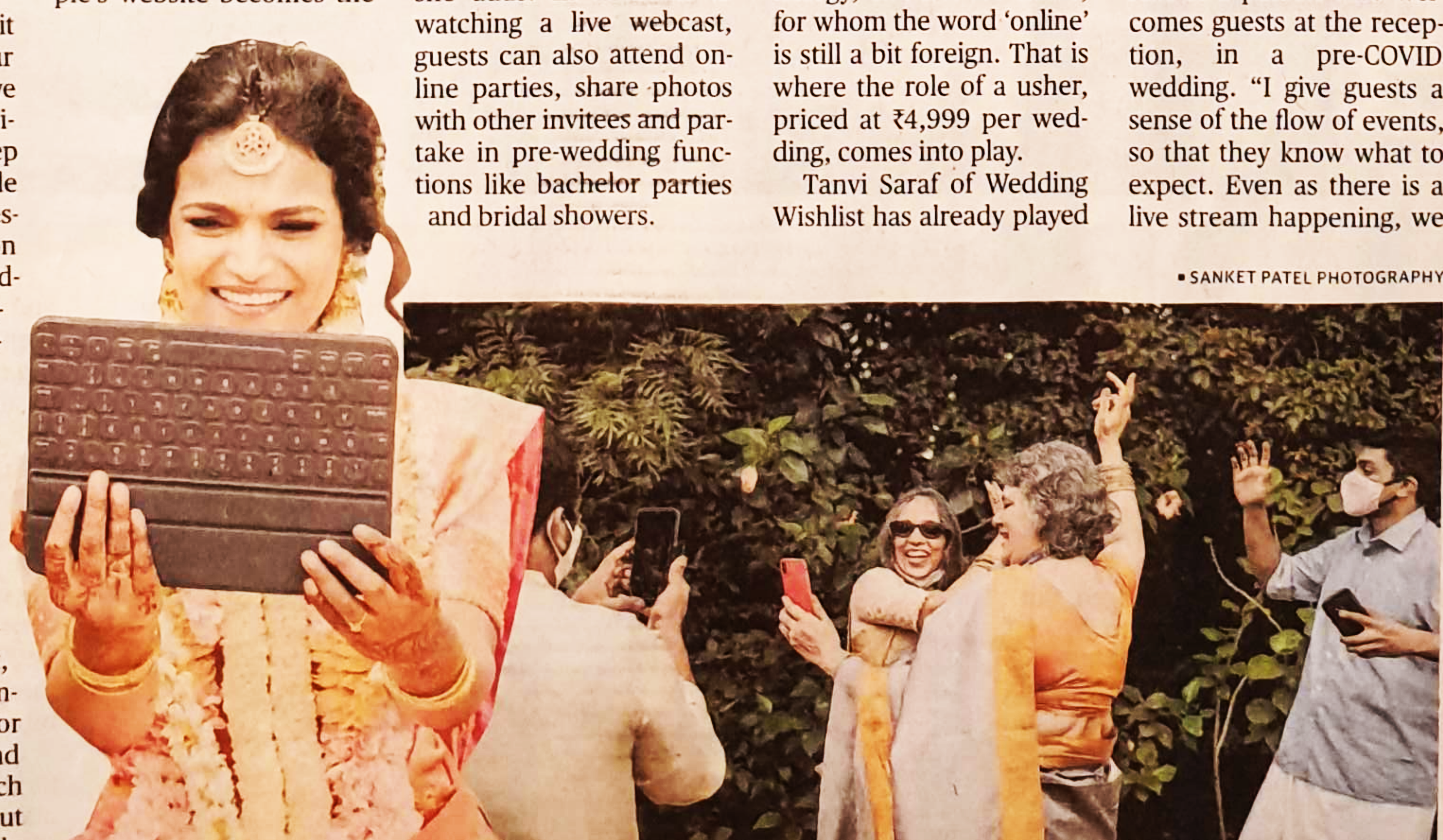
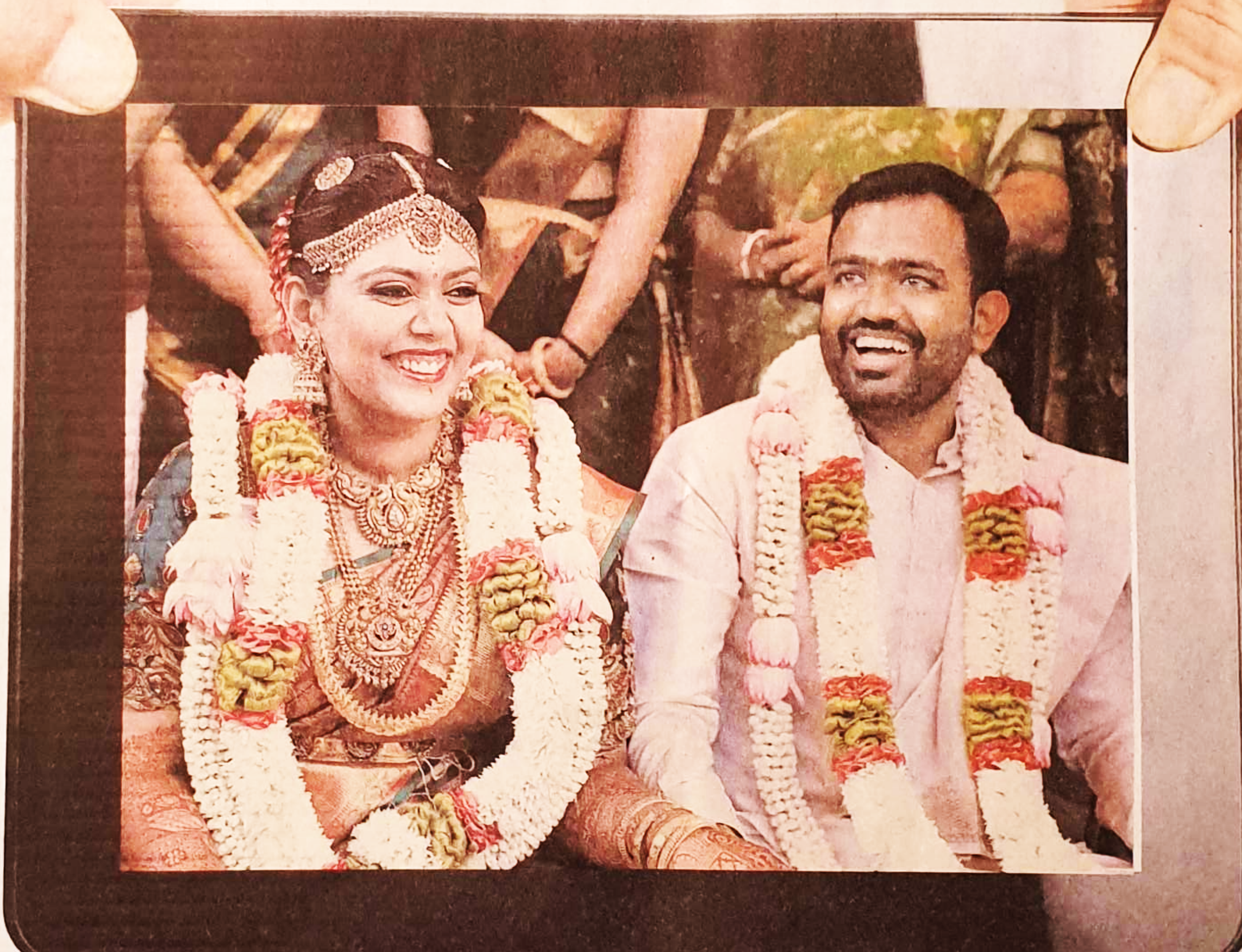
Net result Ulageswari and Sivallinathan; (below) festivities during the Tarini-Rashid wedding bash • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

having a big party," recalls Tarini, who works in the spirits industry.

That was not to be due to the lockdown. But the virtual *sangeet* they put forth a week before their wedding in June, more than compensated for it. "I thought it would be just a virtual get-together, but I was surprised to see that some friends had roped in DJ Jasmeet from Bangalore for it. He suddenly popped on the screen, had a fun DJ-like background and played for a solid hour."

The music, which included popular Bollywood numbers like 'Chogada' and remixes of 'Channa Mereya', not only got the couple dancing but also their 40-plus friends from across the globe who had joined them virtually. "It was as if we were all together. It was crazy," she exclaims.

Chennai-based 'Kalyanamalai' TV Mohan describes these changing times in the wedding industry as "revolutionary". Known for his Tamil matrimonial 'Kalyanamalai' on Sun TV – a show that introduces prospective brides and grooms accompanied by their parents – Mohan says, "Connections between family members and the creation of new families are necessary to help us stay in touch with the human in us. Virtual weddings, which are on the rise now, are helping families experience this in ways we didn't even think was possible a few years, or even months, ago."



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