

# Vendors grow with Indian population

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large, upscale events in which guests eat, carry on traditions, and dance during a series of celebrations that stretch over several days. In Indian culture, a wedding is considered to be the most important event in a person's life. Wedding guest lists often exceed 500 people, according to vendors.

Summer is a particularly busy season, starting with Memorial Day weekend.

"It's the kickoff for the busiest time for Indian weddings," said Pritesh Gandhi, general manager for Waterford Banquet and Conference Center in Elmhurst, which hosts about 100 Indian weddings each year, the bulk of which take place between Memorial Day and Labor Day.

Gandhi said couples planning Hindu Indian weddings gravitate toward Memorial Day weekend because the extra day works well for the traditional wedding itinerary, which calls for one night of a *mehndi* party, when a bride and her family apply decorative henna designs on their hands and feet; a second-day *garba*, or night of traditional dance; and a third-day wedding ceremony and reception.

Other Indian couples choose summer dates after consulting with priests who identify certain dates as "auspicious" and therefore good luck for a budding marriage. June 6 is the date many priests recommended this year, and it was booked by multiple couples a year in advance, Gandhi said. Fifteen years ago, such cultural awareness from banquet hall operators was hard to come by as the Indian immigrant community was still new to the area, vendors and Indian community leaders say.

From 2000 to 2013, the number of Indians across the six-county Chicago region nearly doubled, to 11,000 people, according to U.S. Census statistics. The population rise was due, in large part, to highly skilled workers being lured to Chicago for jobs and to the suburbs for high-performing schools, Indian community leaders have said.

While working as a catering assistant at the Fairmont Chicago hotel, Sabrina Hans, who is Indian, remembers how relieved potential Indian clients seemed when she understood requests such as the need for vegetarian menus,



PHIL VELASQUEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Waterford Banquet and Conference Center in Elmhurst hosts about 100 Indian weddings a year. Related events include mehndi parties where brides, such as Ami Patel, above, and their families have henna designs applied.



STACEY WESCOTT/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

For his wedding, Viren Shah rides a horse guided by Billy Massuci. Massuci, who is of Italian heritage, converted his ranch in Wayne to focus on business from Indian weddings.

or that Muslim wedding receptions don't offer a bar; or the Hindu custom known as *homa*, in which the bride and groom circle a holy fire that symbolizes light, power and knowledge.

After a steady stream of Indian families began requesting her services at the Fairmont, Hans knew she would have enough business in 2002 to open an Indian wedding-planning business known as Sabrina Hans Events.

"There were no (Indian) planners. I worked with Jewish planners, Italians, Greeks. But the Indian weddings were so elaborate that they needed a planner, so I thought this was a perfect

segue for me," she said.

It didn't take long for Hans' business to grow. What began as seven to 10 weddings each year quickly tripled as Indian families recognized they could turn over the tedious job of coordinating — traditionally a responsibility assumed by both families — to one person. Today, Hans averages 30 multi-event weddings each year, with an average budget of \$150,000, she said.

Hans wasn't the only one who capitalized on the demand. The families who operated two well-known Indian restaurants in the Chicago area also recognized a need for large banquet facilities to host wed-

dings with Indian cuisine catered in-house.

In 2003, the owners of Viceroy of India in Lombard bought a former movie theater in Downers Grove and converted it into a hall capable of hosting weddings of up to 1,000 guests, said Kruti Purohit Jain, event manager of the venue, called Ashyana Banquets.

And in 2008, the owners of the India House restaurant chain took over a hotel and conference center in Elmhurst to open Waterford Banquet and Conference Center, a venue capable of hosting 1,500 in theater-style seats or 1,000 guests seated at tables, said Gandhi, its general manager.

**"This is something that parents plan for their kids their whole life."**

— Sonal Patel

"As the Indian population started growing and we saw more people being here for long periods of time, the demand was there," Jain said. "There weren't very many outlets that Indian people could go to."

Eventually, mainstream hotel chains caught on to the burgeoning industry and entered the market. Today, the Renaissance Schaumburg Convention Center, Westin Lombard and Hilton Chicago/Oak Brook Hills Resort offer separate Indian catering menus for special events, while dozens of vendors compete for the business.

Sameer Patel, 36, of Skokie, couldn't believe how many vendor options there were when he volunteered to help his younger brother and soon-to-be sister-in-law plan their wedding for Memorial Day weekend.

At the couple's request, Patel contacted five DJ choices, all of whom specialize in offering both Indian and popular American music. All five were already booked. He eventually found another, he said. "It's become a huge business. I

feel like you have your choice of whoever you want in terms of DJ, decorator, flower people," Patel said.

Meera Gadde, who married her husband, Raj, in mid-May at Ashyana Banquets, said the couple considered getting married in her home state of Iowa but opted for Chicago's suburbs because of the large selection of vendors able to pull off a cultural event.

"If we would have done it in Iowa, it's not as easy to find those type of things," said Gadde, 29, who lives in Chicago. "A lot of the decorations would have to be shipped from Chicago."

Mayank and Sonal Patel, husband-and-wife owners of a business called Shaadi Creations, supply decorative chairs, altars, lighting and other dressings for Indian weddings.

They note that another factor fueling the booming Indian wedding industry is that the parents of today's brides and grooms are often established doctors or in other high-paying professions — with money to spend. While 10 years ago, they might have been given a budget of \$1,800 to \$2,200, today families budget as much as \$110,000 for decor, the couple said.

Traditionally, the cost of the wedding ceremony and lunch afterward is covered by the bride's family, while the reception cost is split by both families, Gandhi said.

"This is something that parents plan for their kids their whole life," Sonal Patel said. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime event, so they really go all out."

After working for decades as a film projectionist at Chicago movie theaters, Massuci, owner of Maharaja Farm in the far west suburb of Wayne, didn't expect to spend his retirement bouncing from one Indian wedding to the next.

But after a friend asked to borrow a horse for an Indian wedding, his name got around. Today, Massuci can explain the traditions behind Indian weddings of multiple faiths, is greeted at Indian restaurants with familiar handshakes, and has Bollywood music as the ring tone on his cellphone.

He loves a good summer Indian wedding, he said.

"Our weddings are nothing compared to theirs," he said. "You walk out, and you'll never forget."

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