



A WEDDING AND AN ARRANGEMENT

*An extract from the book
Faith And The Crossword*

Imelda Saldanha was born on 18th September 1908. After going through local English medium schools, wherever her father was posted, it was deemed proper that she acquire some spit-and-polish, or Anglicized graces and airs. So, she and her younger sister, Lila, were sent to the Good Sheppard convent in Bellary, about two days' journey from Mangalore. Those were the days when distances were measured less in miles than travel time. Run by European nuns, it was supposed to be a Finishing School. Not surprisingly, therefore, her companions were European girls and Anglo-Indians. They were brought up in western ways: Mum learned the piano, appreciation of Western Classical Music, needlework, embroidery, and every other skill that would make her a suitable bride to a civil servant.

But she was destined to marry the scion of a land-owning family.

Mum and Dad first met each other at a wedding—not their own; someone else’s! She was all of 12, petite and radiant with the veneer that the Finishing School at Bellary was according her. Dad was at the more discerning age of 19. He must have found her terminally charming, for the meeting inspired innumerable letters, each filled with drawings and jokes. Thoughtful, really, that a 19-year-old valued the sensibilities of someone seven years younger! She certainly valued the letters, and they stayed with her for a long time. In fact, that is how I became privy to them.

As it turns out, I wasn’t the only other to be privy. The nuns at Bellary also screened them before passing them on to Mum. Clearly, they found the letters affectionate and harmless, but they did allow themselves a bit of amusement: “Amy, here’s another blue envelope for you.”

After a five-year wait—and, indeed, after scores of letters—Mum and Dad were finally married on 5th May 1925 in Mangalore. It might be unimaginable today, but a 24-year-old marrying a girl of 16 was commonplace in those days.

I refer to times when weddings were the biggest of events in a household. Since both Mum and Dad were the eldest, no expense was spared. Preparations were made well in advance. Fulltime tailors brought their sewing machines over to the house and set up

shop. Not only Mum's trousseau, but everyone else's clothes got stitched. Why, even the goldsmith was brought home to make jewelry!

The grand affair lasted three days.

The first day was the *roce*. Each family had the *roce* separately, and this made it a difficult choice for the guests, since both the bride and groom's families were well-known.

At the *roce*, Mum and Dad wore traditional clothes and were blessed with coconut milk by all the elders, amidst mournful Konkani song rendered by elderly women. When I say mournful, I do not mean disturbing, but a tone and lyrics conveying a sense of loss. These songs, called *woyos*, lamented the fact that the bride and groom, each lovingly brought up, would soon be leaving their parental home to start out on their own. Yes, they led to tears all around.

Once the catharsis was over—true to tradition—there was unrestrained feasting. Guests who couldn't attend the actual wedding reception, by reason of a death in the family or some such compelling reason, lived it up at the *roce*. Alcohol flowed like tap-water. Cooks were employed for the day to serve up a repast. Many of the ingredients they used were brought by tenants of the family land. In fact, they came one day prior with fresh produce: fruit, live chicken, and goats.

After the *roce*, the boy and girl did not see each other—not till the wedding. That was the custom and norm.

The wedding mass, held in the morning those days, was followed by a small but extravagant lunch for close relatives. Evening provided the backdrop for a grand reception. All stops were pulled: the bridal couple made a magical appearance in a procession led by musicians. An old relative—I forget who—raised a toast and spoke about the families of the bride and groom glowingly. More drinking followed. Dinner itself was a gourmet's delight, as guests sat on carpeted floor, and savoured the fare off plantain leaves they had just washed with fresh water. Streams of servers chased each other down rows to ladle out dish after dish. The usual extravaganzas were all there: *sorpotel*, *sannas*, *sernay sukhey*, *mutton pollo* and *karam*.

Dad's sequence of letters had found a befitting finale.