

[Mixed Marriages](#)

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Stalking an Unspoken Taboo Text:

In rural India, it's still taboo. Outside India, everyone is getting used to it. Visionaries laud it as the making of a multi-ethnic, golden race that will bring peace to the planet. Some of your closest friends have done it and everybody gossips about it-mixed marriages. By all estimates, it will only increase. Slowly, awkwardly, Hindu society is facing it and finding it's a lot healthier to talk about it and positively adjust to it when it happens, rather than hide it, fight it or ignore it. This begins our three-part series. By Shikha Malaviya, Maryland, USA They were discussing the recent marriage of her cousin Rahul to a black woman. She recalls her father's words quiet clearly. "Can you imagine! Rahul, a strict Hindu, marrying an African woman? Their lifestyle is so different. Imagine the children-Indian names, but they'll look black and be treated like blacks." Neha was appalled her parents were talking like this. How would they react if they knew about Mohsin, her Muslim boyfriend! Neha Pancholi, a 23-year-old girl from Ann Arbor, Michigan, experienced what many Hindu youth are facing in America. It's an issue of mixed emotions, mixed philosophies and mixed cultures. Should a Hindu date a Muslim? Should Christians and Hindus marry? What religion would a child be if the parents were Hindu and Jewish respectively? We all like to think of ourselves as liberal people and dismiss the issue of interreligious marriage by saying, "If they love each other, that's all that matters. As long as they are happy, we are happy." However, deep down inside, do we

really feel that way? How does one truly feel about inter-religious relationships and marriages? Does "love make the world go 'round," or does religion, tradition and society? Neha is not her real name. The computer science student at the University of Michigan, agreed to share her story with Hinduism Today on the basis of anonymity. Neha met Mohsin Ali at a party which her elder brother held four years ago. She was a freshman in college. "I was always very friendly and had no reservations about race or religion. When I met Mohsin, I regarded him only as my brother's friend," says Neha. But a week after the party, Mohsin met Neha for lunch at school and asked her to be his girlfriend. Neha said yes. "He was energetic, smart and intelligent, whereas I was more quiet and simple." Neha and Mohsin's relationship deepened. Eventually Neha told her elder brother who replied, "It's your life and your choice to make. But if our parents find out, don't count me in." Neha was shocked to hear her brother's words. "This was my own flesh and blood going against me." Within one year, Neha stopped socializing with other people because it made Mohsin jealous. She recalls, "I never cared that Mohsin was a Muslim until it started interfering with who I was. He proposed to me and I wanted to say yes, but he wanted me to convert to Islam. Our kids would have to be Muslim. I would have to live in Pakistan. I would have to wear a veil, etc." Mohsin didn't want Neha to pursue graduate school or act in theatrical productions. Neha was shattered. Things got worse when rumors spread. "We walked separately at school so that no one would notice us," says Neha. "Still, I would get stares from Hindu people I didn't even know. It got to the point that I was too scared to step out of the house. I became an introvert. My grades dropped. I lost fifteen pounds." Neha finally broke off with Mohsin six months ago and decided to marry a Hindu. She sighs, relieved, and says, "after what I've been through, I know that religion matters. Mohsin was the way he was because of

his upbringing. His mother wears a veil. My mother does not. That's only the beginning." To girls her age she suggests: "Think before you leap into an inter religious relationship. Don't do it if you can't be honest to those around you and to yourself." Challenges, Successes and Criticisms Is Neha's experience the rule or the exception? Do religious differences necessarily create barriers or problems? Mrs. Ellaru, from Houston, Texas, is the proud mother-in-law of a white Christian girl. Her son Raghu married Christina after they met at a hospital in Indianapolis where Raghu was training. Says Mrs. Ellaru, "I didn't have any opposition to my son marrying an American girl. My children have been raised in this country, so I don't expect them to marry a Hindu." Asked if there was any opposition from the Hindu community, Mrs. Ellaru replied, "No one said anything to me. Interreligious marriages are quite common now." Happily married for four years, Raghu and Christina have successfully integrated Hindu and American culture. They have two sons, Andrew and Austin, who are being brought up with a blend of Hindu and Christian principles. When the boys were baptized, Raghu asked his parents if it was okay. Both Mr. and Mrs. Ellaru agreed: "We are happy with whatever they choose to do." Mrs. Ellaru loves Christina like her own daughter, and is happy that Christina respects and understands Hindu culture. Whenever she comes to visit us," says Mrs. Ellaru, " Christina wears her wedding chain. She visits the temple with us with the children. She also wears a sari on many occasions. She likes to do these things on her own, and we appreciate it." But Vignaraj, a Hindu of Silver Spring, Maryland, feels that children bear the heaviest burden of mixed marriages. He says, "I believe your faith is your way of life. If your life partner shares the same faith, you share a common philosophy in which you can bring up your children. I have many friends that had mixed marriages which broke after ten or twelve years. Their children didn't know who

or what they were. Besides material wealth and education, what else do we have to give children but religion." Narayan and Kamala Ramanathan, a couple from Falls Church, Virginia, whole-heartedly support interreligious marriage. Kamala's mother is a Christian from England and her father is a Hindu. Kamala told Hinduism Today, "I base interreligious marriage on the strength of the person. If society says no, but the couple is confident of what they want in life, then by all means they should get married. But if they aren't sure of themselves, they shouldn't get married." Narayan and Kamala have an eight-year-old son, Rajiv. "I want my son to respect all religions," says Narayan. "I don't want Rajiv to be religious, I want him to be spiritual. To me, there is a big difference." Kamala's parents met in England where her father was stationed with the Royal Indian Army. Later they moved to India, where Kamala grew up. "I never felt different from any other family," says Kamala. "People who say that children get affected by interreligious marriages are wrong! My upbringing has only strengthened my understanding and respect of religion." According to Narayan, the concept of religion has become too rigid, placing barriers on people. He says, "We should judge people for their character, not their religion." More Open Talk, Less Phobia Please How concerned are parents about their sons and daughters finding interreligious partners? "They are very concerned," emphatically shares Bina Parekh (left), of Sahara, a hot/line counseling center in California serving the Indian community. "We hold forums for both parents and teenagers about dating, etc.," says Bina, head of Sahara's Youth Chapter. Sahara gets a lot of calls from parents, worried about their children dating people of different races and religions. "Teenagers don't call us that often about this subject," Bina says, "because they have their friends they can talk to. Parents are very reluctant to talk with anyone." Veena Ramachandran is a student at Catholic University, Washington DC. She feels

that interracial dating and marriage are still quite foreign to her parents' generation. Their marriages were arranged with other Indians and mostly successful, so they cling instinctively to the simple logic: "If it worked for us, it will work for you." Veena adds, "I think this happens in every society-parents worrying about love, race and religion. We shouldn't think that this happens only among the Hindu community." Marriage doesn't come without challenges, even hardships-even when Hindus marryHindus. But in such sensitive areas like relationships and marriage, I feel one does have to consider religion because how you are brought up and what you believe are important. It is vital to talk about culture and religion-no matter what the discussion reveals. Many of us are ignorant about others'cultures which generates more fear than the understanding so needed in this area. Dear Indian Parents

Meeta Gajjar married Frank Parker of Delaware, USA, last year. Meeta, an Indian Hindu, is an accomplished recording artist. At age 16, she sang for Rajiv Gandhi when he visited the US. She is the daughter of Bharat Gajjar, an orthodox Hindu pundit who has run the Sivananda Center in Wilmington for 30 years. Frank, white Caucasian, is a musician and by birth a Christian. Below, they both offer personal thoughts on marriage.

MEETA: Over the years, I've had many conversations with friends about Indian girls who wouldn't socialize with other Indian girls because they wanted American girlfriends. And if they had an American boyfriend, they would really snub us. They wanted to feel like they belonged, be "American," tired of feeling left out at school and American social life. I also felt different all my life-because I am too Indian to be American and too American to be Indian. I was born in the US but speak fluent Gujarati and was brought up with a very strong traditional Hindu upbringing, am a devotee of Gurumayi Chidvilasananda and worship Shiva Nataraja in the Kashmiri Shaivite tradition. My advice to parents is: bring

your children up with the concept that America and Americans are alright. Let them belong to the country they are growing up in and don't exclude them from school and social functions that their friends are going to, but also keep them involved in Indian functions and social groups, too. Let them know that we are special because we are different and that America loves culture and ours is one to be preserved. Indian parents need to more vigilantly keep the communication line open between themselves and their teens and allow them to feel safe talking about what's going on in their lives, including confusions. I feel the main reason that American men are interested in Indian girls is because we are dharmic, duty-conscious, and traditionally serving, loving and gentle-the perfect mothers. The traditional Indian girl reminds American men of the kind of woman their mother or grandmother may have been when America had more of the "old country" values, i.e. family-conscious and faithful wives. Many Indian girls don't want to marry Indian men because they are afraid they will control their lives, make them slaves and not appreciate anything they do for them. This is not so much the case among male Indian youths growing up here, but the girls see some of their parents' friends experiencing this and think they may be able to escape the feeling of not being treated as an equal by marrying an American who will value their Indianness as a precious thing and appreciate their gentle loving natures. I married an American, a wonderful person, Frank. He is very Indian in his heart. I feel I got lucky seeing that he actually is able to appreciate my traditional Hindu background and Indian customs and doesn't try to change me. We had both a Hindu and Christian wedding, and he agreed before marriage to allow me to raise our children Hindu. I've dated Indian men too, but in my line of work as a recording artist I needed a man who would let me be me, and that is what I have. The bottom line is: if your daughter is growing up in this country she has at

least a 50% chance of meeting and then marrying an American-unless more opportunities are made to meet Indian boys at the temple or Indian social functions. Indian girls raised here are not likely to marry partners their parents choose for them because of the freedom in this country. Yet, I would rather have not married than have done so without my father's blessings. But also, I would not have married rather than marry someone I did not love. That's how most Indian girls raised here feel. But also, there's nothing wrong with your children marrying Americans if you've raised them with your values and culture. They will surprise you. Have some faith. Stay by them in their struggle to adapt and make sure they know who they are before they go out into the world on their own. Give them their language, a personal God and a sacred prayer. Teach them how to use it. I know I couldn't get through one single day without my precious Lord Shiva. Frank: Since marrying Meeta, one of the most wonderful aspects of Indian culture I am enjoying is how important the family is and raising children properly with good educations, etc. I don't believe in divorce. Though I am Christian, I am not church-going. When I was a teenager, I got turned off by a Catholic priest telling us to live in fear of the Lord. I was at that time praying to God everyday and felt God was my friend, not someone to fear. Religiously, I am a spiritual person, very open and actually, I'm learning a lot about Hinduism from Meeta's father, whom I am very close to. Meeta and I love each other very much. We have absolutely no religious conflict. She wants to raise our children as Hindus and give them Indian culture and that's fine with me. Open Mind

It is helpful to keep in mind no Hindu who married a non-Indian or non-Hindu ever felt they did anything wrong, never felt handicapped, nor thought they compromised their children's happiness, nor feel they warranted society's censure and, always wonder, "What's the big deal, anyway?"

The "big deal," to state the obvious, is that orthodox Hindu society treasures its beliefs and customs-including language and little things like food, dress, music and even caste-oriented idiosyncrasies-and views mixed-marriage as a diluting influence. Importantly, as more Hindu parents face the possibility of their children marrying non-Hindus, some lessons are emerging. First, the need to view each situation individually. Crude generalizing is perhaps the new taboo, not intermarrying per se. A second lesson, coming more slowly, is accepting some karmic responsibility for the "mix" in the first place-appreciating the frustration of the Texan Hindu teen who said: "If our parents are always going to get mad about us dating and marrying non-Indians, no matter who they are, why didn't they stay in India and have their babies there!" The third lesson, a nice surprise, is that many non-Hindus really like Hinduism and are happy to adopt it. In-laws can be very helpful in this soulful process. Mrs. Shikha Malaviya is a free lance writer with a BA in mass communications. Part II will include messages from mixed-marriage couples from Australia and Malaysia.