

[Mixed Marriages Part II](#)

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Mixed Marriages Part II

Two religions, one marriage-the gamble, the costs

Part One introduced our series on mixed marriages with a mix of fact and opinion. Firstly, they are clearly on the rise-interregionally in India, and interracially and interreligiously globally. Secondly, many Hindus still oppose them. But outright condemnation is now viewed as more mean than meaningful. Accommodation is in. Part Two will undertake a decidedly less popular, very delicate discussion-the disadvantages of interfaith marriages. By Lavina Melwani

The carload of Hindu women were on a "moon-sighting" expedition in the middle of New York City. Driving up and down skyscraper-walled avenues, they were looking for the moon. It was Karva Chauth. They couldn't break a fast taken for the health of their husbands until they caught a glimpse of the moon. Finally, mission accomplished, they returned to the dinner party they were attending. One of them them was Janet, an American married to a Hindu man. Although herself not Hindu, she had learned some Hindi, installed a puja room at home and given her daughters Hindu names. She had been feeling sick that day and was faint from the fast. She felt angry and imposed upon because her husband Raghu expected her to observe the fast in spite of her ill-health. But he considered himself a model husband, and would have been annoyed if she begged not to. After all, wasn't his wife simply doing her duty as a good Hindu wife?

Sharda is a Hindu woman in Kuala Lumpur who fell in love with Hasan, a Muslim. He had insisted that she convert to Islam at

the time of marriage and that the children be brought up as Muslims. She gave in, but a few years later there is a major crisis: Hasan took a second wife, allowed under Islamic law. She has no choice but to accept it, because if she divorces him, he will get custody of the children. She has lost her religion and her culture, and even the intrinsic bond of man and wife. Such are the hurdles, big and small, of an interfaith marriage. These couples have to slay more demons than most, for they have to contend not only with the emotional baggage they bring into the relationship, but also with the demands of different traditions. Religion is indeed a major stumbling block in intercultural marriages. Which is the correct route to paradise? In the first flush of romance, couples hardly give a thought to religion, but the problems magnify with the birth of children. Which faith should they follow? Marrying a Whole Culture-Wow! Can a person from an alien culture infiltrate the tightly-knit Hindu world and make it home, especially in India? Many have tried. Some have failed, tripped by caste, religion and in-laws; others have flourished, turning negatives into positives, enriching both cultures. In any marriage, intercultural or not, it is usually the woman who makes the major adjustments. For a Western woman entering this culture of contrasts and contradictions, it is no easy chore. Many Western women have come into this bewildering Indian world of large joint families where the patriarch is the head of the extended family, no matter how old his sons. Another surprise is the Hindu mother-in-law, the de-facto commander, many-armed Indian Goddess who giveth and taketh, and to whom all must bow in obeisance. When a woman marries an Indian man, she generally marries his whole family of father, mother, brothers, sisters, sisters-in-law, uncles, aunts and cousins as well. For the Western spouse expecting more marital sovereignty, the Hindu joint family demands can be very disquieting. Often intercultural marriages fail, a victim of

unrealistic expectations. Some Indian men are brought up with preconceptions and misconceptions of what marriage ought to be, based on self-effacing mothers, sisters, aunts and sisters-in-law in a male-dominated culture. Living in the 90's, in hectic cities abroad, these men still expect their Western women to transform into traditional Hindu wives. Indian women married to foreign men, however, seem to do better, perhaps because these women are used to the idea of being the givers, compromisers, and adapters. In a traditional Indian marriage they would be adjusting to a vast family of in-laws, whereas here they adjust to a new culture and people. Susan is a young American woman married to Anil, a Hindu who lives in New Delhi. When she delivered her first son at her mother's place in California, the child was baptized, in a Christian name-giving rite. But in India this first son had a Hindu name-giving ceremony and was given a Hindu first name and an American middle name. Is he Hindu or Christian? Will his religious education become a matter of dissent? Only time will tell. I Love You, but my Religious Beliefs Too! Pathmaraja Nagalingam, a businessman in Malaysia, says that there are over 150,000 intercultural couples in that country. Since Malaysia is a Muslim country, in any intermarriages, the non-Muslim spouse must convert to Islam. "These interfaith marriages are the main reason we are losing our Hindus," Nagalingam says. Krishnan, a young Tamil in Kuala Lumpur was very committed to the Sanatana Dharma. So the priests at the temple were surprised when he told them he was marrying a Catholic girl. He explained she wasn't very religious so there would be no conflicts. In the first years of his marriage, he kept up his religious practices. But gradually he stopped coming to the temple because his wife wanted him home on the weekends. When the children were born, he intended to bring them up as Hindus, but his wife objected so he gave up this idea to keep his wife happy. To this day he

silently feels sad and guilty. Suraj, a Hindu man, married Mary, a Christian Indian girl. At the time of the marriage, they had agreed to bring up the children in both faiths. Over time, however, Mary who is with the children all day, began taking them to church and teaching them about Christianity. Suraj, who works long hours, does not get the opportunity to give them a Hindu education. Now the girl's priest and her relatives are trying to prevent the children from even accompanying their father to the Hindu temple. Of course, marital harmony is not guaranteed even in marriages between Hindus-but especially when one is religious and the other not. Saraswati, a young religious woman in Mauritius, loved satsang, doing karma yoga with other Hindus and performing a puja and meditation daily. She wanted a religious husband and repeatedly refused matches with men who ate meat or were too worldly. But her parents were very anxious to get her married off. So she gave in and married Ramanathan who said he would let her be vegetarian, raise the children as Hindus and continue her religious activities. But after marriage he wouldn't let her go to the temple, demanded she eat meat and sometimes beat her. The deeper tragedy here was that everyone had failed her-not only her parents, but also her close friends, relatives and community elders. The loss of Hindu religious culture through mixed marriages is common in many countries around the globe, especially in the USA, home of over 600,000 Hindus. Religion is not discussed much in mainstream America. Interfaith couples tend to avoid this topic. They feel that if they can avoid the troublesome "R" word, their marriage is safe. The result is that some parents bend over backwards to avoid the rituals and traditions of either faith and their children are brought up without any religious convictions. When faced with tough times, these children lack the bulwark of faith built on the example of parents, rituals and religious childhood memories. Suresh, a

young engineer in Atlanta, married Anna, an American woman with the understanding that both cultures would be respected. Once the children came, she did a complete turnabout. She would not allow them to go to the Hindu temple, derogated the Hindu culture and basically turned the children against everything Indian. Her relatives started taking the children to a Christian church. Suresh found his children didn't want to associate with anything Indian or eat Indian food. He was heartsick but felt he had no choice. Though still together, their marriage is a sham. Dr. Rao, a scientist in San Antonio, Texas, has seen many interfaith marriages crash on the rock of religion. He assesses, "When the husband and wife do not subscribe to the same religion, the greatest victims are the children. What I'm afraid of is these children who are not able to have any spiritual guidance will have nothing to pass on to their own children. It will lead to more and more unhappy situations." Paradoxically, Dr. Rao, although seemingly against interfaith marriages, blessed his own daughter's union with a Jewish man. The couple were married in ceremonies presided over by a Hindu priest, a Christian minister and a Jewish rabbi. Yet Dr. Rao finds no discrepancy between his words and his actions, for he believes in Hindu philosophy which allows a view of God as universal. He feels he can worship God in the form of Krishna and still be totally comfortable in a synagogue or a church. It is this same idea of one universal God that he has passed on to his children, and which they hope to pass on to theirs. True, these children will not be orthodox sectarian Hindus, but they will be Hindu in a broader, all-embracing sense. Such is the elasticity and humanity of Hinduism. Dr. Rao maintains religion itself-eclectic or sectarian-is vital for the well-being of children. And it doesn't help when parents are divided on the religious issue. "In India, there's a saying that a cart has to be pulled by both bulls in the same direction. If one bull pulls in one

direction and the other pulls in the other direction, the cart will never move forward." Part III will include testimonies by several interfaith couples from different countries. A Clash with Christian Clergy

Meeta Gajjar and Frank Parker of Delaware, USA, were married last year with both Hindu and Christian ceremonies. Meeta here shares what few know-tracking down a willing Christian priest isn't easy! During our search for a minister, my husband called several Christian churches of different denominations. He met wall after wall. The worst confrontation we encountered was with a Baptist minister who informed Frank he would burn in hell if he married me. He said God had chosen Frank to call him that day so that he could tell him this. The main problem that most of the churches had in marrying us was that they said our children would be "unequally yoked." In other words, they wouldn't have an equal chance of obtaining heaven. They also felt that by marrying me-"a Hindu worshipping false gods!"-that Frank would be throwing God away and therefore burn in hell. Frank finally found one that said he would marry us. We went and met him. He seemed fair, non-judgmental of me and gave us a little quiz to show how much or little we had in common by our answers to the same questions. But five months down the road he began not returning our phone calls. Frank finally got him on the phone and made him give us an answer as to why he was avoiding us. He said, "I haven't been feeling good, and I don't know a lot about this Islam religion." Frank said, "It's not the Islam religion, it's Hinduism!" He replied, "I don't have time to learn about whatever it is; please find someone else." We did finally find a wonderful minister who happily married us. His beliefs are based on a blend of Christianity, Eastern religions and metaphysics. He had heard a lot about my father and mother and held them in high respect. Also, I had a Hindu girlfriend who married an American. When she went to get a

priest to marry her, the priest made her attend church for 3 months prior to the wedding or else he would not perform the ceremony. So she did it. Note: Catholic priests may marry a Catholic to a non-Catholic without requiring conversion. Malaysia Marriage Masala

By Pushparani, Kuala Lumpur It was a typical ladies' night out. The conversation focused on yet another friend who had "married out." Six of us left school together with romantic dreams that included setting up home and indulging in domestic bliss. Of the six, only two married Hindus. Four have "married out" -two to Chinese, one to an orthodox Syrian Christian and the latest to a Malay Muslim. Mind you, they are all happy, but at a price. Aarthi was 24 when she met Hamid at the bank where they worked. She liked how open-minded he was. He considered himself a "progressive Malay." Aarthi came from a happy home with what she called "guided freedom." We all knew Aarthi had loads of male admirers. She was one of those women who brought out the protective instincts in men. Three years later, Hamid asked Aarathi to marry him. 'When he first told me about how he felt, I was stunned. I liked him a lot but never thought of it as love. Over the years I had come to value his views and opinions. "Maybe deep down there was always that feeling. A week later I said yes. That's when the trouble started. "His parents were more than willing to accommodate some of our culture. But mine were opposed. My father was aghast. The more I tried to talk with him, the harder he was on me. My mother stopped talking to me all together. Staying home became traumatic. The last straw was when I came home one evening and my father said that a doctor was coming to ask for my hand in marriage. I argued, cried and pleaded, but he had made up his mind. I decided to leave home. I stayed with friends and four months later I was married. On my side only four people turned up for the wedding; they were my friends. Just before

the wedding Hamid and I went to see my family. Except for my siblings, no one else spoke to us. We left a card on a tray with a saree, veshti and beetle leaves and fruits. We've been married two years. My father still doesn't talk to me. Hamid and I still go to visit my parents' home. We chat in the kitchen. My mother doesn't say much. We're planning on having a baby. My in-laws tell me that when a baby comes, ties get renewed. I hope it's true." Why Guys like Muslim Girls Sure, interreligious marriages have problems. But the problems of non-acceptance are the same for intra-mixed marriages between Indian Tamils, Sri Lankan Tamils, Telegus, Malayalis and North Indians. The more arrogant party refuses to accept the incoming spouse. The most common mixed-marriages here are between Hindu boys and Malay girls. One Hindu boy engaged to a Malay Muslim girl confided, "We find the Malay girls petite, charming, feminine and approachable, unlike Indian girls. Malays pay a lot of attention to personal appearance. Chinese and Indian Christian girls too. And though everyone thinks Hindu girls are chaste, coming from an estate and having lived in the university campus, I know that is a myth. We boys don't mind too much about religion. We just want a girl that we like. Besides, the Malays with their underlying Hindu-like culture are the next best to Hindus. Compared to Malays and Thais, our Hindu girls seem unapproachable, without a smile on their faces. If not for the law that you have to convert to Islam, most Hindu boys would have married Malays. We also know that Malay girls prefer Indian boys. They find them more responsible and less likely to take a second wife. Why should we complain about marrying outside the Hindu fold when even if Chinese (or Malay) girls are willing to embrace Hinduism, still we do not accept them." Race vs. Religion

Though absolute generalizations about marriage are foolish, summarizing reoccurring patterns is helpful. One trend

appears clear: marriages mixed by race are easier than those mixed by religion. Skin color and ethnic orientation are more smoothly assimilated, reconciled, compromised, or simply all-embraced, than differences of religious belief. And differences can be severe-e.g. Christians believe non-Christians are going to hell and Hindus worship a God with an elephant face, to begin an endless list. One factor helping Indian/Caucasian mixed marriages is that racially, Indians are Caucasians too! Same race, different skin tone.