Journey to India And to Myself
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MARRIAGE

# Journey to India And to Myself

Our Chennai wedding proved quite the introduction to the wonders of Hinduism

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I do not think that my husband and I see each other as the world does. Sometimes he absently takes my hand across the dinner table, and when I look down, I am startled by the contrast in our skin colors. But I do not see us as contrasting people, just unique individuals. We are both Hindus, and we are both human beings. We are not our bodies. But just as we cannot change the differences in our outward appearances (nor do we want to), neither of us will ever be 100 percent accepted into the other's culture. No matter where we choose to live, one of us will always get curious stares. One of us will always be speaking with an accent. One of us will always be feeling a bit hesitant in delicate social situations This is the life we have chosen, and it has been a rich blessing.

I did not fully appreciate how ingrained a person's culture was until we went to India for our wedding. For one, I had never been in the minority before. Now I was walking in my husband's American shoes. Even though I was dressed in

traditional clothing, I never failed to earn the curious stares and smiles reserved for a foreigner. Children glanced at me from their school buses, adults looked twice and then looked away. One little girl stuck her head out of a passing car and yelled, "White lady, white lady!" Coming from the anonymous West, this was, at first, quite unnerving.

Once in India I met--and fell in love with--my normally shy husband all over again: he enthusiastically interacted with his loving family in loud, interrupted conversations; he navigated with ease through the streets; he bargained with vendors; he bought favorite snacks that I could only guess at. This was his world. He came alive like a dry river stone finding its color again after being returned to the water that shaped it. After the newness wore off a bit, I saw beyond the Western perception of India as a dirty, crowded place. It was not dirty, nor was it the mystical, magical, exotic place that I visited in movies and my own imagination. I experienced it as a place that is more real to me than anything I have ever felt or seen. India is a place where the layers are taken off and you see humanity and world and your soul as it really is.

Three days after our marriage, when the cord holding my wedding pendant was still bright yellow, we visited Kapaleeswarar Temple in Chennai. After circling the outer courtyard in our bare feet, we entered the dark sanctum and stood peacefully in the crowd while they dressed Goddess Karpagambigai. It was dark and the air was stale from so many people crowded together in a granite room with no windows and only one door. Despite the heat there was a kind of coolness and calm that came from being in a temple that so many thousands had prayed in over the centuries. That is,

until a frowning man came out of the crowd straight for me, the only "white" person in the sanctum among more than 200. He waved his finger in my face and loudly proclaimed what the signs read outside the sanctum: "Non-Hindus not allowed." The crowd became interested and quickly surrounded us. The situation escalated as only it can in India. People started speaking loud, passionate Tamil back and forth, heads nodding and hands flying through the air with strong emotion.

I had, it appeared, traveled all the way to Mother India merely to be judged by the color of my body when all I wanted to do was forget myself for a moment and focus on God. I felt such strong sadness and fear. Fully expecting to be escorted out at any minute (if not crushed first), I asked my husband what was happening. After what seemed like forever, he said, "They are all telling this man to leave you alone, to let you stay and worship. You are obviously a Hindu." I began my journey to India searching for something outside myself that would make me whole. Instead, I found a part of myself that was there all along.

I consider my marriage into a Hindu family, in a Hindu wedding ceremony, an initiation. If I was not Hindu, I would not have found such meaning in the ceremony. I tried to learn about it ahead of time so when we went through the ceremony I would go through it with all my heart. It was on our wedding day that Vinesh and I became vegetarians, and it was on this day that I first wore the bindi, thali and toe rings of a Hindu woman. I also took a Hindu last name and use it proudly, the name of Lord Sukumar. I am an honorary member of my husband's caste by marriage now and the member of a loving extended family. On the other hand, I did not have a formal

conversion/naming ceremony, but I may one day, perhaps alongside our firstborn child.

When I found Hinduism, I felt that I had found my spiritual home. I did not have to change anything about myself or my core beliefs that I carried before I found Hinduism. For me, Hinduism is a path that a) challenges me to improve myself, b) gives me peace, and c) gives me a lovely and powerful way to communicate with God. I have found that the path I need to be on to grow and become closer to God is called Hinduism. Even if I changed my name and went through a formal ceremony, some born Hindus would not see me as a full Hindu. On the other hand, some would see me as a Hindu soul, even if I did not marry a Hindu or take a Hindu name or wear Hindu clothing. I cannot please everyone.

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