Educational Insight: Modern Matchmaking
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Educational Insight

Modern Matchmaking

Hindu Ways of Arranging Marriages, Traditional and Contemporary

From Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami's Living with Siva, with excerpts from Kavita Ramdya's Bollywood Weddings; Rajini Vaidynathan's "We Just Clicked;" and the eight steps of the traditional matchmaking process

I remember reading a cartoon a number of years ago in which two parents were telling their daughter, "You can marry anyone you want as long as he's a brahmin." The family, of course, was of the brahmin caste. Certainly the tradition of marrying within one's caste, or jati (occupation), and community (language group), is still the strongest one in our global Hindu community. New trends, however, are also manifesting, as our article points out. For example, it is common these days to marry someone of your own profession, often having met each other in graduate school. MBA's marry MBA's; MD's marry MD's. The jati of birth might be quite different for each and also the language group in India--however what the couple has in common is working in the same profession, a new form of caste system so to speak. On the other hand, a religious community that marries into itself, such as devotees of the same guru parampara, can provide a continuity of religion and culture over a period of many lives for the reincarnating souls enabling these souls to maximize their spiritual progress. POur general advice: the greater the difference in cultural and religious backgrounds, the more important it is that the couple take time to get to know one another before marriage takes place. Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami

Marriage in the Hindu Tradition

From Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami's Living with Siva

Marriage is a union not only of a boy and girl, but of their families as well. Not

leaving such crucial matters to chance, all family members participate in finding the most suitable spouse for the son or daughter and thereafter commit hearts and minds to assist in times of need. Marriage is a sacred covenant which all relatives take up the responsibility to care for and protect. It is one of the most sacred events of life. Through the homa rite at the marriage ceremony, the priest invokes the Gods. The elders, the priests, the Gods, the devas, the planets and even cows witness the couple vow themselves to holy, harmonious matrimony for the rest of their lives. Thus, divorce or annulment are considered out of the question. The Rig Veda intones: "United your resolve, united your hearts, may your spirits be one, that you may long together dwell in unity and concord" (10.191.4).

While not all marriages must be arranged, there is wisdom in arranged marriages, which have always been an important part of Hindu culture. Their success lies in the families' judgment to base the union on pragmatic matters which will outlast the sweetest infatuation and endure through the years. Compatibility of culture and education is also taken into consideration. A spouse is generally sought from within the same religious community. The man and woman should at least be of the same religious sect for long life and a happy marriage. This may not seem important if both are not religiously active, but conditions will tend to change in future years, especially after children are born, and the disparity can lead to separation and divorce. Most families begin early in finding the proper mate for their children among families they know and esteem for the kinship bonds the marriage would bring. Those involved ponder whether the two families can blend into a one family harmoniously with benefits to both. Stability is enhanced if the groom has completed his education, established earnings in a profession and is at least three years older than the bride.

Seeking the Best Match

In arranging a marriage, the families consult astrologers regularly until a match is found. Sometimes the boy and girl are allowed to get to know each other long before they are aware that a marriage is being arranged for them. Of course, if they do not get along well, the matter is dropped and the search is on again. If one match is not agreeable, another is sought. The inner-world devas also help to arrange the best matches. Most traditional astrologers have one or more devas assisting them to provide knowledge from the akashic records and insight into the planetary powers that impel karmas.

Astrological compatibility is also sought for and acquired between the girl and her prospective mother-in-law. The results are taken especially seriously if they will be living in the same home, because in this case the bride will be under the guidance

of the mother-in-law and may spend more time with her than with her own husband. In marrying the son, she becomes the daughter of his mother.

Once a potential spouse is selected, discreet, informal inquiries are made by a relative or friend. If the response is encouraging, the girl's father meets with and presents a proposal to the boy's father. In some communities it is the boy's father who presents the proposal. In these modern times, with the worldwide diaspora of Hindus from India and other countries, the fathers must take an aggressive role in helping their sons and daughters become well settled in life. If fathers do not fulfill this obligation, it becomes the duty of the mothers. This pattern differs from the tradition of well-settled village communities where only the father of the girl makes the overtures. In today's widely dispersed global Hindu village, it becomes everyone's duty to help in the task of matchmaking for the next generation.

Once the union has been tentatively agreed upon, the families gather at the girl's home to get further acquainted and allow them to meet and discuss their potential life together. Of course, mutual attraction and full consent of the couple are crucial. After all the input from the community is in place, it is the couple themselves who must make the final decision whether to spend their life together, based on their own personal sensibilities and judgments. They do have the right to say no. In recent years, we have found that an excellent way for a young prospective couple to gradually get to know each other before committing to marriage is through correspondence by e-mail over a period of several months. The first and the last important factor for a good match is that the boy and girl must be happy and comfortable in each other's company.

Pledges and Blessings

Love marriages that are not arranged by the parents are also fully acceptable if the astrology is excellent, the parents on both sides agree and the young lady and the young man are of the same religious denomination. Of course, these ideals cannot always be met, and if not, more support will be needed from family and friends to make the marriage a success.

Before the wedding, the bride and groom each writes out a covenant by hand, pledging loyalty to one another and formalizing their promises, ideals, expectations and love. The couple share and discuss these documents together, read them carefully and make necessary revisions until 100 percent agreement is achieved. Like a ship's chart, these detailed vows can be referred to if the relationship gets off

course. Each of the two families makes a written pledge as well, signed by the mother and father of the groom and the mother and father of the bride, stating what they promise to do and give toward supporting this marriage in the areas of artha, kama, dharma and moksha. Also most welcome are written testimonies in support of the marriage from grandfathers, grandmothers, uncles and aunts, sisters and brothers, as well as from other members of the religious community. This is also a time when anyone among family and friends may, in deepest confidence, even anonymously, share with the family preceptor any obstacles to this marriage that should be known and understood. A full, honest disclosure of the boy's life and the girl's life, including sexual experiences, should be made to both families and to the kulaguru.

From the time of inquiry into a match, several months should be allowed for the jyotisha acharyas and shastris to assess compatibility. The whole process of arranging a proper match for a son or daughter often takes two or more years. There should never be a sense of urgency for this or any other lifetime commitment. As Jnanaguru Siva Yogaswami so wisely said, "No hurry. No worry. No sorry." Nor should the arrangements ever be forced on the boy or girl. They remain free to cancel the process at any time if the match does not seem suitable to them.

When all agreements have been reached, the boy's mother adorns her new daughter with a gold necklace. Generous gifts are exchanged between the members of both families to bind the two families together in love and loyalty. Rejoicing begins with the formal engagement party, when the boy and girl exchange gifts, such as engagement rings. Later, they read their pledges to each other in the presence of elders. All arrangements and ceremonies culminate on the wedding day, when members of both families join to wish the couple a righteous, prosperous, happy life leading to the ultimate goal of enlightenment. During weddings or related ceremonies, the vegetarian diet should in no way be compromised. Meat and other nonvegetarian foods should not be served, even to please guests of other religions or communities. All Hindus attending should be requested to dress in formal Hindu attire.

Supporting the Marriage

Once a marriage has occurred, both families are relied upon to hold it together through the years. It is the duty especially of the husband's parents to support and make the marriage work and to offer a home to their new daughter. But it is unacceptable in modern Hindu society, and especially in our fellowship, to follow the oppressive tradition in which the girl becomes the total charge of the boy's

family and is seldom allowed to see her family of birth. It is the duty of the bride's parents to monitor her protection and observe the couple's abilities to dwell in unity and concord, while allowing them freedom to work things out together in their new home.

If she is abused physically, they must open their doors to receive her back, to be sheltered, comforted and consoled. It then becomes their duty and that of all shishyas in the community to try to patch things up, restore harmony and obtain trustworthy promises from the husband that this will never happen again. The bride should receive no blame for her husband's violence, for it is he who has broken his promise to adore her and protect her from harm.

The blending of the two families as a one family gives both the son and daughter two families to support them in good times and bad. It is the responsibility of both families to work toward assuring an endearingly enduring marriage, as well as to guide the raising of the progeny, so that they may become good, productive, dharma-aware citizens, contributing to society at large. If the two families fail in this mutual effort, society fails.

To build solid marriages, some Hindu institutions provide a family evening for fellowship and discussion with a trained counselor. Once a year during the holy time of Pancha Ganapati, the couple take out their marriage agreement and together study where they have been lax or derelict. They trace back in their minds to incidents that are still vibrating as negative samskaras, and apologize humbly and seek forgiveness and total resolution. They renew their commitment to each other. This is a wonderful key for setting the tone for the coming year--of harmony and peace, which leads to abundance and happiness. We call this anahata yoga, cleansing the heart chakra, bringing up that true love for one another. It is the process of bringing up all those things that were not settled before going to sleep, to retrieve those seeds before they get ploughed under and produce another crop of sorrow in the coming years. It is bringing up little things that each one said or did that hurt the other and were not resolved. It is bringing up incidents of anger, any physical violence, which should never be but may have been. It is time to extend apologies, talk with your kulaguru, and make promises and New Year's resolutions to set the course of the future on the path of dharma, which is based on ahimsa.

Cross-National Marriages

Many are the cross-national marriages happening today, marriages between

members of different nations, religions, cultures or races. Times have changed. It is communication that has done it. With no communication, there is no change. When information flows freely, independent thinking is the result, and change is inevitable. Yes, inevitable, and that is what we are seeing today. The younger generation are thinking for themselves, no longer relying on elders to advise. This is unfortunate, for now they will have to learn from their own mistakes. What a way to learn! But this is what is happening, and it is happening faster than we would like to see. Much faster.

Any kind of marriage can survive if true love is there as its glue. True love is the kind of love that gives the couple the ability to give and take from each other without serious conflict, to go through the ups and downs together in trust, to support each other without fail and to reign as benign king and queen strong enough to bind all members of the family together. Even the rishis said that when true love is there, any kind of astrology is good and the marriage will be lasting. Love overrides all bad influences and softens incompatibilities. Love is the sum of the law. But how would a young couple know if theirs is true love or magnetic love? By giving the love a test. That is how. Test it with time. Magnetic love weakens and all but disappears over time. True love grows stronger, much stronger, with time. True love mellows through the years.

Cross-national marriages are essential to the Hindu thought that avant-garde thinkers are sharing today, "All the world is one family," Vasudhaiva kutumbakam. Citizens of the world bound in love can survive the torrents of the upheavals that naturally come as lives are lived through together and individuals grow ever closer and closer in body, mind and spirit.

Every marriage needs a support of some kind or another built into it. True love is the best support of all, but support from the parents on both sides is a necessary help, too, especially for couples who were drawn together only by magnetism. It is when the magnetic love fades away, and all that's left are the children, that support from parents and friends is essential for the marriage to last without violent outbursts of released stress which was once undying passion.

Shall we have a look into the future? Since cross-national marriages have happened, are happening, and will continue to happen, there must be some sensible way for them to happen without undue strain on the families of the couple. Wisdom is supposed to fix things, heal conditions and settle problems. But first we

have to admit that there is a problem. And, yes, cross-national marriages are a problem to many people of the old school. The old school only became old just ten years ago. Before then it was a school sharing standards of how things should be to maintain a growing and stable society.

When It's Too Late to Say No

When an Asian girl marries a black boy, should she be banished from the kingdom? Yes, according to the old school, the old standard. No, according to the new school, the new standard. The banishment method of parental punishment is outdated and bizarre today. Today's girls think. They understand. They do not intend to be the ill-treated servants of the mother-in-law. The days of Cinderella have long since passed when the mean old stepmother made her cringe beneath her wrath. Boys, too, think for themselves. They read, they listen and evaluate. Theirs is an ever-changing world ahead. They are busy preparing for it. But then along comes love, of one kind or another, to complicate their lives.

When Karen falls in love with Shan and elopes to his country, go visit them and bring her home in your heart. "I love you, therefore, I love whom you love." That should be the attitude. When Kumar announces his undying love for Carmen, his lover from Mexico, and informs you that her father has a place for him as senior partner in his business, accept it. Enjoy Mexico City. It is a great place, because Kumar and Carmen are there.

Yes, hands across the ocean are loving hands. Hands across the ocean are binding continents to continents, businesses to businesses. This and more is what all Hindu elders are seeing happening around them today. Today's world is a happening world. Cross-national marriages are inevitable as the peoples of the world become more and more a global village. This is the real, earthy expression of our belief in one God and one world. The soul has nothing to do with nationalism, social restrictions, ethnic taboos or restrictive, prejudicial upbringing. Two souls joining in dharmic matrimony transcend all such boundaries.

My advice has always been that families should arrange marriages for their children. That's part of their purusha and stri dharma. This is a process they should begin early on. But if they don't do that, obviously their young people will start arranging their own marriages. And very often when they do arrange a marriage for themselves, the family objects. They have no right to object, because they didn't perform their duty in the first place.

The dilemma is that matches are not being arranged, and yet parents also want strict control over their youth, and youths are going to find partners, one way or another. Girls especially should be chaperoned. It's very easy in today's world to meet the wrong kind of people. As one solution, though not the ideal, I recommend in such cases that mature young ladies double-date and chaperone each other. Then they can talk together about the young men they are dating, and bypass the families who've neglected their duties, and arrange a good marriage for themselves that will be lasting, and in the future raise the next generation by doing their duty by arranging a marriage according to tradition for their own children early on.

We cannot stand in front of progress, lest we get run over by it. But we can sit by the side of progress and guide it so it doesn't run off the track. This cannot be done when we break off communications and refuse to talk to the youth when they don't obey the old standard. It is communication that is catalyzing the changes in the first place, so we all must guide the young by keeping the channels of communication open. Don't let them go. Go with them. Love them and gently guide them.

Interfaith Marriages

I tell young ladies, if you are planning on getting married, do not do what the average mother might tell you, "Get the husband under your thumb right at the beginning. Otherwise you might have a terrible time, because it's harder to do it later on." Don't do that. Go into your marriage for better or for worse and live up to your vow. Be to your husband like melted butter is on toast; it is absorbed. Be one. You will have a very happy old age.

It might be rough at the start, but don't hold divorce over his head to force him into various preconceived ideas that your girlfriend has put into your mind, as so many do, or that you've seen on television or in the movies. You have seen the results that Hollywood marriages have played upon the lives of those who have had them as they have gotten older through the years. They are not happy people, though they are advertised as glamorously as they make their living. That is not the way. The way is, when you take your vow, think about it first, and then stick to it for better or for worse.

I tell young men, "Gentlemen, if you are thinking about getting married, do not marry a young lady who won't be one with you in your religion, who will not be

willing to stay at home and take care of and raise your family, one who doesn't respect you as a man and starts, right off the bat, by telling you what to do. Don't do that, because if you do you will be miserable and you will lose your manhood and be nothing but a puppet on the strings of your wife. And you will both be unhappy, but she especially, in older age. Rather, choose a girl who will blend with you for better or for worse. And whether you are successful or not, she will be happy to eat what you eat and go where you go. A Roman ideal pronounced by the bride at weddings was 'Where you are, there I will be.' It might be difficult in the beginning years, but it will be much better later."

A seeker wrote to me saying, "I'm in love with a Christian girl but she wants me to give up my religion and accept Jesus Christ. How can I explain to her that Hinduism is my path and I want to stay with it, but I love her very much? What should I do, Gurudeva?" I responded that you have to think of the children and how you want to raise them. Obviously you want to raise them to be good Hindu children. Since there is very little connection between Hinduism and Christianity--because Christianity does not accept karma or reincarnation, the existence of an all-pervasive God or our temples and ceremonies--there will be serious problems. If she remains a Christian and you remain a Hindu, the children are going to be very confused. If your beloved doesn't want to go along with you intellectually and spiritually, maybe your love is only physical; that is called carnal love--love of the flesh. That is a very limited type of love, and it is not long lasting. Don't be guided by your carnal, instinctive emotions. Be guided by your spiritual intellect, or by my good advice. Go shopping. Find a good Hindu girl, or let your parents find one for you, so you can raise a good new generation of high souls.

I've seen many cases of Hindus marrying outside of their own religion, and I've seen the young couple be very happy for a while. But after the children come and the sensuality of the marriage has cooled off, then there arises a tension between the husband and wife. Generally one becomes more religious than the other. The non-Hindu spouse argues, "You should be religious in my religion," and the Hindu insists, "You should be religious in my religion." The victims of this conflict, which generally goes on throughout life, are the children. It is a couple's shared allegiance to a religious tradition that is the most important common ground.

Contemporary Adaptations

Bollywood Weddings, excerpts from Kavita Ramdya's Insightful New Book

Sixty percent of asian indian adults in the united States are married. The specific

phenomenon I am interested in examining is how middle to upper class Indian-American Hindu men and women negotiate the Hindu wedding ritual, including the marriage decision process. This book begins with the second generation's process of finding a spouse. It moves through the engagement process, and concludes on the wedding day. Although the focus here is negotiating engagement and marriage, I am interested more broadly in the negotiation of culture. Whereas originally I situated second-generation Indian-American Hindus between two antithetical philosophies--that of prototypical mainstream middle-class America and traditional India--my research repeatedly frustrated this worthy assumption, prompting me to extend and complicate my thesis to include modern-day Bollywood as a prominent mediating source of culture informing second-generation Indian-American Hindus on their wedding day.

Not two but three cultures are operating in the lives of second-generation Indian-American Hindus when they are planning their weddings: 1) a traditional India which in some respects no longer exists in the most pluralistic country in the world but which has a presence in the immigrant and second generation's memories and sense of history, 2) mainstream middle-to-upper class America as described in wedding planning magazines such as Modern Bride and websites such as theknot.com, 3) and Bollywood India as instantiated by wedding-planning magazines such as Bibi and websites such as benzerworld.com.

Weddings are a window into seeing how second-generation Indian-American Hindus construct India and America. Weddings reveal conflicts and choices. Finally, weddings matter, not only for the bride and groom. Weddings are rites of passage where intergenerational and cross-cultural tensions play out and, in the case of Indian-American Hindus, convey a sense of compromise between multiple cultures.

A Match that Was Not to Be: Rati and Paul

For Rati, a defining moment in her search for an Indian-American Hindu husband was when her white boyfriend accused her of "being racist." Rati had just returned from her first trip to India since she was a child. She stayed in the houses of various relatives, family with whom she "picked up from when we last met without skipping a beat." Often she was meeting extended family for the first time and was impressed by the open-armed welcomes. Upon returning from her trip to her home in New York, Rati's interests in Indian culture reignited. She revived her love for vegetarian dishes and began taking yoga. Along with continuing her bharatanatyam (classical Indian dance) classes and watching Bollywood films, she began attending the local temple with some international Indian students she met at the local art theater's showing of Lagan, a popular Bollywood film. Paul, Rati's boyfriend at the

time, quietly grew more and more impatient with Rati's love for anything Indian and finally burst out in frustration when he saw her zealotry showed no signs of subsiding. Boarding a local train a few moments before the departure time, Rati made a motion to sit next to an Indian male passenger before Paul intercepted and took the last empty seat himself. Rati was left to stand, but she caught Paul's look of self-satisfied smugness at having successfully kept Rati from making another Indian acquaintance, a man who might serve as a further threat to their relationship.

Later, when Rati confronted Paul about his sneakiness as well as his lack of confidence in their relationship, Paul admitted that after dating her he "could never date another Asian again" for fear that he would not be taken seriously since he was not Asian. When pressed further, Paul accused Rati of preferring Indians to whites and of "being a racist." Rati's anecdote about dating Paul, a white man, is interesting because it highlights the second generation's enthusiasm for and the significance they place on "being Indian" and relying on activities like practicing yoga to express Indianness. Watching Bollywood movies, eating vegetarian, practicing yoga, learning Indian classical dance and other activities are significant in describing the second generation's understanding of India, their own ethnic-American identity and the characteristics they seek in a marriage partner. After the incident described above, Rati dumped Paul and relinquished the American notion of falling in love and pursuing a "love marriage." Shortly thereafter, she posted an online matrimonial ad in shaadi.com Therein began her adventures and misadventures that would eventually lead her to meet and marry her Indian-American husband, Shiv.

Arranged Meetings: a Third Paradigm

For second-generation Indian-American Hindus, there are two models for marriage: the arranged marriage and the love marriage. These models are diametrically opposed. The love marriage usually involves a whimsical and incidental meeting followed by months and often years of dating. The arranged marriage excludes dating altogether and in fact rarely allows for more than one meeting before the wedding day.

So, how do second-generation Indian-American Hindus negotiate these two opposed models of marriage? How do they reconcile love marriage with arranged marriage? "Arranged meetings" is an already negotiated and well-established third model for marrying among second-generation Indian-American Hindus. The second generation uses this method to filter out prospective marital candidates who do not have the "right" ethnic, religious, linguistic and regional traits desired by their

parents. For example, a family active in the Gujurati Hindu community can seek only fellow Gujurati Hindus to introduce to the eligible son or daughter. Any marital candidate left standing is fair game for something akin to dating. The second generation feels free to determine whether the meaningful candidates have sexual chemistry and compatible personalities, characteristically American criteria contemplated in making a "love marriage" decision.

In this way, neither arranged nor love marriage are excluded, and the needs and desires of both generations are respected. The first generation is still involved in finding a suitable partner for their child, whether through introductions by family and friends, or placing an ad online or in a newspaper. Additionally, candidates who do not come from the same religious sect, speak the desired dialect, or originate from the same region of India (and thus possibly eat dissimilar food), are cast away before a set of eligible prospects are considered. Then second-generation Americans embark in all the activities associated with pursuing an American "love marriage." They date for months and sometimes even years, determining whether she and her partner share common likes and dislikes. They also determine, and not just by holding hands, whether there is enough sexual attraction to keep their mutual attentions "'til death do we part."

Along with their immigrant parents, most of the second-generation Indian-American Hindus I met prefer to marry a partner of Indian heritage and Hindu faith because marriage is seen as a definitive way for the second generation to express its identity as ethnic and religious Americans. They are American, yes. But they are also Indian and Hindu. Additionally, pleasing the first generation's wish to see their children marry a Hindu Indian is itself an expression of ethnicity, of one's Indianness, in this case with respect for the traditional value of deference to one's elders.

Ethnic Capital

This idea provides additional ammunition against the "melting pot" metaphor. Within the second-generation Indian-American Hindu ethnic minority, men and women of marriageable age who have high economic and social standing prefer to marry within their community rather than engage in an exogenous marriage. Rather than participate in a "melting pot" as early ethnic scholars described the trajectory of ethnic Americans, participants chose to marry people from within their community despite the New York area's diverse population.

Rather than debating values and characteristics second-generation Indian-American Hindus should seek in a partner, the first and second generations have already negotiated a compromise whereby the second generation engages in various methods for meeting a partner that meet all or most of the immigrant generation's religious, ethnic, regional, and linguistic cultural criteria. At the same time, the prospects who make it through this sieve of criteria are then free to engage in dating relationships that look typically American. For instance, Shiv and Rati were attracted to each other's profiles because they shared the same regional and religious Indian identity; however, they dated for two years before marrying. Their mutual love for Indian performance was what bonded them together in terms of sharing common interests.

The Indian-Hindu community has evolved enough in the last forty years that mechanisms are already in place for the second generation to search for potential marriage partners. These mechanisms respect both traditional Indian as well as modern American criteria. "Arranged meetings" provide a group of candidates acceptable for a member of the second generation to fall in love with after having satisfied the first generation's ethnic and religious requirements.

Second-generation Indian-American Hindus seek marriage partners who have what I describe as "symbolic ethnic capital." This finding sheds light on how the second generation envisions and understands Hindu India. The men and women in my study scrutinize characteristics in the opposite sex in order to confirm if that marital prospect is "Indian" enough for marriage. Like Rati obsessed over getting better-acquainted with her Indian heritage through practicing yoga, learning Indian classical dance, and watching Bollywood movies, other participants used similar activities as markers for Indian ethnicity among marriage prospects. Being ethnically Indian and from a Hindu family was often not enough. Especially "expressive" Indian-American Hindus desired a marriage partner who could further confirm their identity as Indian-American Hindus.

A number of factors are important in the Indian-Hindu American community when it comes to finding a mate in a limited and dispersed pool of partners. Processes such as placing matrimonial ads in ethnic newspapers and online allow second-generation Indian-American Hindus to meet fellow Americans as well as Indian Hindus in England, Canada, India and Singapore. These mechanisms are important because they allow second-generation Indian-American Hindus to meet partners that satisfy the first generation's religious and ethnic criteria as well as the community's desire to find a partner with symbolic ethnic Indian and America capital.

Finding a potential partner through newspaper and on-line matrimonial ads was followed by typically American patterns of dating which included a long courtship designed to ferret out similar hobbies and the quality of sexual chemistry. By meeting a potential spouse through a family network or other family sanctioned modes of pursuing marriage, such as online matrimonials, second-generation Indian-American Hindus accrued symbolic ethnic Indian capital they later spent when in long-term relationships and premarital sex. Mainstream American dating was encouraged by my participants' immigrant parents to ensure that romance and love, two values that express Americanness, were as much a part of their children's decision to marry as religious compatibility and regional identity.

Rati and Shiv Meet through Shaadi.com

Rati, whose mother is a white Lutheran woman from Canada and whose father is a Hindu raised in Uttra Pradesh, India, literally chose to "be Indian." The story of how Rati decided to utilize shaadi.com--an on-line Internet matrimonial website popular among South-Asian Hindus--supports my notion that, for second-generation Indian-American Hindus interested in expressing their ethnic-American identity, marrying a fellow Indian-ethnic Hindu is the most effective way. Coming from a bi-cultural family, Rati was not exposed to Indian-Hindu culture until her twenties, when she made conscious efforts to adopt Indian-Hindu religion and customs. Rati is both a career-minded professional dancer and an Indian-American woman seeking to establish a family to uphold the Indian and American sides of her identity. Rati reports that her parents' attitude was: "When you want [religion] in your life, you'll go find what works for you."

As if applying for a job, Shiv, Rati's future husband, sent a competitive biodata, or resume, to Rati in response to her picture and profile on shaadi.com. After first talking on the phone for three and a half hours, Rati and Shiv began having regular phone conversations before she visited him in New York. After her first visit, they began seeing each other every other weekend for three months before getting engaged.

Rati describes meeting Shiv on the matrimonial website as making their relationship more honest and open than if they had they met in a bar or through a friend. She tells me how "all the questions you want to ask on the first date" about marriage, family, education, and salaries "you can't ask" when meeting through conventional methods but that by the time six months roll by and "you've figured out what a guy is all about, that's six months of your life wasted." As she puts it,

"On shaadi.com no one is there for a booty call. No one wants to date for fun or pass time." Plus, all the uncomfortable questions regarding money and salaries are already answered in the bio-data, leaving the boy and girl more time and energy to focus on discovering whether the two have chemistry and are compatible for marriage. Rati and Shiv's families were from the same region in India and belonged to the same caste, two criteria that led Shiv to Rati's advertisement through the click of a few scroll-down menus. Having pre-determined that they were compatible in terms of region and caste, the two were free to pursue an American-style romance. But, as Rati describes it, "The elders could not have done a better job putting the two of us together." Rati engaged in two models of marriage, the arranged one as well as the love one, in her arranged meeting. Rather than reject either the traditional Indian or modern American models for marriage, she embraced elements from both traditions in choosing a spouse. It took her parents' divorce and her trip to India to move Rati to express her Indianness and thereby her Americanness. Rati claimed her Indian heritage upon returning from India and married Shiv to reinforce her ethnic-American identity.

Hamsa and Nalin

Whereas Shiv and Rati's courtship began with Shiv's response to Rati's online matrimonial advertisement, Hamsa and Nalin met through friends while students at the University of Wisconsin. Nonetheless, Hamsa and Nalin's story (like Shiv and Rati's) emphasizes the significance among second-generation Indian-American Hindus of finding not only a co-ethnic marriage partner but also a spouse who carries a certain level of knowledge of Indian culture and Hinduism.

In one photograph, Hamsa sits with her chin in one palm while Nalin stands behind her hugging his hands around her neck. In another the two playfully hold hands and stand across from one another as if they are about to whirl in circles. Rather than look demure, as Indian tradition would dictate, Hamsa smiles like a love struck Bollywood actress and Nalin looks like a young Amitabh Bachan (one of Bollywood's most famous actors).

Hamsa is embarrassed when I comment on how much I enjoy looking at her wedding portraits. "Yes, well we did whatever our Indian wedding photographer told us," she says. "Those poses aren't natural to us, but they're typical Indian wedding poses." What intrigues me in my conversations with Hamsa and Nalin is their inability to distinguish modernized India from the India they have configured for themselves in their imaginations. To them, India is one homogenous country with one homogenous tradition. This confession is even more striking for me because Hamsa and Nalin are a regionally mixed couple. Nalin's family is from Gujarat in

Western India, and Hamsa from Andhra Pradesh in South India, yet they consistently ignore the diversity of cultures within the country and remain ignorant that their own "traditional South Indian" wedding was a hybrid one.

Ironically, Hamsa and Nalin's "pure Indian-Hindu" wedding reveals how there is no pure "India." As the couple's wedding attests, India is made up of many different regional cultures and a myriad of religious faiths and languages.

Nalin was not the first Gujarati North Indian man Hamsa dated either. She tells me that although she had many friends in her ethnically diverse high school, she did not date until she arrived at college. "I had one two-month long relationship with a Gujarati Indian guy before I met Nalin," she tells me. But apparently he wasn't Indian enough: "He was very different from Nalin. My ex-boyfriend wasn't very knowledgeable of his background, and he didn't have an Indian community growing up in West Virginia; he wasn't familiar with the religion and didn't know the language. He'd never been to India. That's why I didn't connect with that guy. He was very apathetic about being Indian."

Knowing about India was something Hamsa actively looked for in a partner. Like Nalin, she wanted to find a partner she could love but who could also assert his "Indianness," thereby reinforcing her own symbolic ethnic Indian capital, and in the process her own Americanness. She wanted to marry a man knowledgeable of his Indian-Hindu background to reflect her own cultural and religious ties with India. While outsiders might posit that Hamsa's wish to exclusively date Indians depletes her American symbolic ethnic capital, I argue that it instead makes her more American.

Nalin reports he was very intentional about exclusively dating and marrying Indian women:

"From the very beginning I always knew I would meet all types of people, but in terms of marriage I wanted to marry someone with the same cultural values. It would be easier and we would get along better. Around high school I made that choice when I started seriously thinking about dating and figuring out what I was looking for."

When asked what values are specific to Indian Hindus, he recognizes that values are found across cultures and re-formulates his thoughts. "It was more cultural, going to temple. Growing up, I think Indian culture brought about family closeness; family came first. In college I never thought about dating a non-Indian." When asked whether his parents were upset that he married a non-Gujarati girl, he responds, "In a perfect world I would have married a Gujarati girl, but they are educated enough to know that compatibility is more important."

During their two-year courtship at the University of Wisconsin, Hamsa and Nalin moved to San Diego for a summer where they interned and took classes. In San Diego, they tell me, they fell in love. "I didn't think I couldn't live without him," Hamsa tells me, "but I thought I would be sad if he ever left." Hamsa presses her two index fingers into her fluffy comforter and they travel, making an upside down V, until they meet at the same point. "That's how we were; we started off in different places and spent enough time together dating that we pulled each other in the same direction," she explains. For her, love for her husband was not love at first sight, but still conformed in a way to the traditional Indian view of love where one marries first and later grows to love one's spouse. For Hamsa, a couple dates and then grows to love one another.

Eight Points of Traditional Matchmaking

We briefly explore the venerable hindu system by which parents find a suitable partner for their eligible boy or girl, taking into account family backgrounds, personal characteristics, astrological compatibility and mutual consent of the couple-to-be. Until the last few centuries, marriages in all human cultures were arranged. Kindred were closer, and in very real ways a new bride or groom became daughter and son, joining the extended family. Such arrangement provide community stability and strength, and a wisdom derived from making this crucial decision based on life-long knowledge of the couple.

According to the 2,400-year-old Hindu law book, Artha Shastra, "Any kind of marriage is approvable, provided it pleases all those that are concerned in it." Of the eight forms described in this and the other ancient law books, the first four--brahma, daiva, arsha and prajapatya--involve some form of arrangement, without dowry, between the parents of the boy and girl. These four are termed prashasta or "commendable." The brahma form is the free giving of a girl "well adorned" with jewelry and clothes to a boy of good character. The daiva form is the

bestowal of a girl to the officiating priest at a sacred ceremony; the arsha form is bequeathing of the girl signified by the auspicious gifting of two cows to her family. In the prajapatya form the bride is given with the condition that the couple perform their religious duties together. The remaining, aprassasta or "not praised," forms are: asura, the giving of a maiden in return for payment from the suitor; gandharva, the voluntary union of a couple arising from passion; rakshasha, the forcible abduction of a maiden; and paichacha, the stealing of a girl when she is drugged or asleep.

Hindu law accepts the gandharva marriage, condemns the asura and paichacha forms and limits the rakshasha to the warrior caste, Lord Krishna's abduction of Rukmini being a famous example. However, any marriage can be legitimized upon the consent of the girl and her parents.

1. How It Begins

Upon the boy's completion of education and beginning of gainful employment his parents proceed in earnest to find him a bride. As with most of the customs regarding arranged marriage, this practice remains virtually unchanged from Vedic times, when the boy was married at age 24 upon conclusion of the brahmacharya ashrama, or period of studentship. The girl is expected to be three or four years younger than the boy, due to the girl's faster maturity. Ideally girls are married between 17 and 21, boys from 21 to 28--older being less of a problem for a boy than a girl. The "word" is put out through friends, relatives and most recently matrimonial ads. Also the children may be asked if they already have someone in mind. Sometimes a match is found very quickly, in just a week or two. In other cases it may take six months to a year to locate a suitable prospect. A go-between (termed aryaman in ancient times) is essential to the process. He may be an uncle, other close male relative or, in some areas, the village barber. The men make the contacts, but they do nothing without full consultation and agreement from the women of the family. Once the go-between has determined both families are favorably disposed to a match, a formal preliminary proposal is made by the girl's father to the boy's father.

2. Family Background

A Hindu marriage joins not only two individuals, but two entire extended families, numbering dozens, even hundreds, of people. The reputation, learning, religious life and allegiance, health, personal traits, refinement and customs of those families contribute to the potential success of a marriage as much or more so than the individual qualities of the boy and girl. What is sought for is sameness of family

background and economic and social status so that when the girl joins the boy's family, she does not enter a home greatly different from her own. Non-smoking, non-drinking and vegetarianism may be essential, required conditions. The matchmaking investigation is done openly by talking with friends, relatives and fellow employees of the concerned families, all of whom readily share information. In the present day, sameness of family often still means marrying within one's caste. But the mixed nature of modern society have the effect that caste does not insure the similarity of background it once did, particularly if the boy is raised in one country and the girl in another. A mandatory check of family lineage guarantees observance of the often complex local customs regarding degrees of permissible blood relationship.

3. The Boy's Character

The girl's parents regard the boy's education and earning ability to be of vital importance, for these make likely his long-term financial stability. It is also highly desirable that he already be employed. Once satisfied with the boy's ability to adequately provide for a family, his personal character reputation among friends, relatives and teachers is carefully looked into. Male relatives of the girl will talk with this group of people, inquiring in some detail about the boy, his personal habits, religiousness, reliability and how he behaves with regard to girls. If the boy lives in a Western country, this latter issue would be investigated quite carefully. Health is very important. There should be no indication of mental retardation, schizophrenia, or disease such as TB. Drinking or smoking can be a very negative attribute. Physique is only critically important in that the boy must be taller than the girl; otherwise it is a useful but not determining factor. Parents will also look closely at the boy's father and grandfather, on the assumption that the boy will develop the same good (or bad) qualities. Similarity of boy and girl is the goal. For example, parents would not marry a refined girl to a boy who is crude or uneducated, even if well-employed.

4. The Girl's Qualities

Appearance, personal character and homemaking ability are generally foremost in the consideration of the girl. She should be shorter than the boy, have a pleasant walk, a feminine voice, modesty and good health. Her potential as a future wife is judged by observing her mother, grandmother and sisters. And, like the boy, inquiry regarding her character and temperament is made among her relatives, friends, teachers and fellow students. Her religious inclinations (even more so than the boy's) and education are important. Some skill in music or dance is a plus, but extensive stage performance or involvement in sports is traditionally frowned upon. Since having children is a primary purpose of Hindu married life, the desirable girl comes from a large family--an indication that she herself will have many children. A

girl from a small family--especially an only child, or one without a brother, is at a disadvantage. In recent decades the girl's ability to hold a job and earn money have became a paramount consideration for some, even above religious, cultural and child-rearing considerations. The trend may be related to the demands for dowry in which the boy's family approaches the marriage with financial gain in mind, as well as to pressing economic conditions.

5. Verifying Compatibility

Ideally the complete charts of the boy and girl will be calculated and analyzed by a competent astrologer. There is also a simplified system of ten tests based on a comparison of the boy's and girl's nakshatras (birth stars) and rasis (moon signs) used in the absence of a complete comparison to diagnose the physical, mental and emotional compatibility of the couple, plus future health, number of children, financial success and longevity. Customarily the astrology is examined early on in the evaluation of a match. The preliminary tests of rajju, vedhai and what is known as "Mars affliction" identify a few (about 20%) very inauspicious combinations which predict great misfortune in marriage, or divorce. The second eight tests are allotted one to eight points each, for a total of 36. A happy and lasting marriage usually requires a score of more than 18 points. For example, the test of nadi, given 8 points, predicts emotional intimacy or lack thereof; that of yoni, given 4 points, indicates physical compatibility, marital harmony, faithfulness and children. Astrology is a good but not perfect predictor of marital success. The great Hindu astrologer Rishi Kalidasa advised, "Even if by these matchings the girl gets more than 20 marks, if the boy does not really love the girl, a marriage will be futile."

6. Introducing the Couple

The couple meets only when there is a favorable outcome to the investigation of each family, the astrological compatibility, the characteristics of the boy and girl and the preliminary meetings of the parents. In previous times, and still in some areas, the girl would be secretly pointed out to the boy and his family at a public event such as a temple puja. Today a preliminary exchange of photographs largely replaces this custom, which prevented a girl from being faced with a number of outright rejections. Usually the boy and his family will go to the girl's home for their first meeting. The parents will sit and talk, and the girl--who may be aware but is not told of the purpose--will be asked to come in and serve tea to the "guests." How she reacts to requests, her dress, appearance, speech, behavior toward her parents, brothers and sister and rapport with young children are all noted by the boy and his family. After she leaves the room, the boy states if he has a favorable impression. If so, the girl is asked privately about the boy. If both are agreeable, they talk privately together, perhaps walking in the garden for an hour with young children as escorts. Sometimes more meetings are held. A final decision is then

made requiring agreement of six people--the four parents, the boy and the girl.

7. The Betrothal Ceremony

The betrothal is called vagdana, "word giving," a practice described in the Vedas. The boy's family is invited to the girl's house where the girl's father formally promises that his daughter will marry the boy. This promise is binding and very unlikely to be broken before the wedding. The oral promise is essential and standard throughout India, though specific betrothal customs vary considerably. Most, if not all, communities practice exchange of visits and gifts between the families as part of sealing the agreement. The gifts from the groom's family include clothing and cosmetics for the girl, while her family give clothing for the boy.

Other home observances include applying tilak to the boy, the giving of a gold necklace to the girl by the boy's mother--often the necklace she received at her own betrothal--and/or the more modern exchange of rings. In some areas the womenfolk sing humorous songs. A formal religious ceremony (kanyavarana) may be conducted by priests, but often the whole matter is handled in an informal manner. In Sri Lanka, for example, frequently a civil wedding is held immediately upon the decision to marry, with the formal religious marriage taking place later. Commonly it is just a matter of weeks between the betrothal and the marriage, which is held at an astrologically auspicious day and time.

8. What About Dowry?

There is no Hindu scriptural or legal basis for the payment of dowry--that is, giving money to the boy's family to secure a marriage. It was unknown in early India and arose only in recent times. In the last few decades abuse has reached such proportions that newly married girls are even murdered in disputes over dowry! Marriage arranging has become for some a process of extortion from the girl's family.

The proper Hindu custom is stridhana, "women's wealth," by which an abundance of jewelry and gold is given to the girl at the time of her marriage. This is her personal wealth, intended to provide security in case her husband dies or abandons her, especially after her own father's death. Legally, it remains her personal property during the marriage and must be returned upon a divorce. A wealthy Hindu bride might possess a pound or more of gold. Also, she would bring to her new home everything needed for housekeeping. A related money issue is the

expense of wedding festivities, which in India can run up to several years' salary of the bride's father. Lavish weddings are a worldwide custom, cutting across all religions and cultures, but reason should prevail in deciding how much to spend.

We Just Clicked...

"Indian Love: We Just Clicked" by Rajini Vaidyanathan, Mumbai

It all seems so easy in the bollywood films. the characters fall in love at first sight, and despite some initial resistance from their family, it all ends happily ever after. The reality, of course, is very different. Sitting in a crowded cafe packed with young Mumbaiites, is Nik Talreja. He is, in many ways, the archetypal Bollywood hero: good looking and charming, but missing one thing--a woman by his side. Nik is just one of 15 million people in the country using the web to meet a life partner. Internet matrimonial sites are big business in India. The world's largest, shaadi.com, was created 13 years ago, and now boasts an extra 10,000 new users every day. In fact, a key distinction between Indian matrimonial sites and those in the West is that, in India, it is often the parents who are going online to find a match for their child.

"We give freedom to our own children, they are well educated, they are brought up in a good culture," says Arun Joshi, who is searching for a son-in-law. "The only thing we desire would be that they get married within a restricted caste and community," he adds. His 29-year-old daughter is too busy climbing up the career ladder to find herself a husband, so Mr. Joshi has decided to help things along by submitting a profile for her online.

In the tradition of arranged marriage, it is standard for parents and relatives to search for a match that meets a certain set of criteria. Those specifications can vary from family to family, but often include looking for someone from a similar caste, community, salary bracket and even skin color.

Off-Line Centers

Targeting parents appears to be a key strategy for the companies behind these sites. In recent years, there has a been a rise in so-called "off-line centers" designed to bring Internet marriage to those who are rarely online. Resembling Internet cafes, with banks of computers lining the room, there are advisers on hand to help guide people through the process of creating a profile and selecting matches. For the young couples who place themselves on these sites, Internet matrimonials offer a choice which simply didn't exist before.

While there are many other happy stories of matches made in cyberspace, there are some people who question how progressive it is. "I don't think it's breaking down barriers, to tell you the truth," says Bandhana Tewari, the fashion feature editor of Vogue, India. For Bandhana, new technology is not changing the old values, where meeting a partner by caste and background is so important. Meanwhile, she predicts that it will be a long time before people use the Internet simply for dating, rather than searching for a specific type of marriage partner. "I don't think India has reached that level," she says. "They still will not give up their moral stand."

The Traditional Way

But Gaurav Rakshit from shaadi.com argues that these sites are breaking down social barriers. One example he cites is that more than half of the people using the site do not search for a match by caste--a sign, he argues, that things are changing. "If we found those numbers were trending the other way round, we would probably have to take a very hard call, saying that we're exacerbating such things. But right now we see them trending very nicely for us in the same way that India is evolving."

There are, of course, large parts of rural India where there is no Internet. But Mr Rakshit hopes to reach these parts as a long-term strategy. He claims one in ten of all registered marriages in India can be attributed to the Internet, but in five years' time he believes this number could rise to as many as one in two. But he might have a job on his hands.

In the village of Wana, a three-hour drive from Mumbai, where there is no Internet connection, Rathina Surjivadhi is celebrating the marriage of his daughter Anita. He found her husband Jagdish with the help of local matchmakers. He is yet to be convinced that the Internet way is better. "You need to make sure you don't ruin the girl's life," he says. "If they drink or have had affairs, the Internet can't tell you that kind of thing."