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Marriage first, love next

An arranged marriage

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The transatlantic flight was turbulent and the knot inside my stomach was getting bigger and queasier as we approached Boston. The plane was taking me to my future in the United States through a raging storm. Not the best way to approach one's future! But it ominously reflected my state of mind. I'd had an arranged marriage two weeks ago and was relocating from Madras, India, to join my husband, Arun, in Connecticut, a man I'd met only a couple of times before. Somewhere down in the plane's belly were two suitcases packed with odds and ends that my family, friends and I thought were necessary in helping me start life in a new country. There were kadais, deep pans indispensable in Indian cooking; a pile of recipe books that was my survival kit; CDs of popular movie songs and South Indian classical music for familiarity and comfort; paintings, since I love to be surrounded by art; books I couldn't bear to part with; silk saris with gold embroidery for special occasions; a couple of pairs of jeans and t-shirts; and lots of tampons. I knew I would be too embarrassed to buy them in front of my husband. That was two years ago.

Today, there is not much between my husband and me that is embarrassing, much to the amazement of our American friends. "I didn't think it would work," confessed Chucky, Arun's classmate from Boston University who'd flown to India for our wedding. "You two were so gawky it seemed you were on an eternal first date!" Friends and colleagues kept up an incessant barrage of questions. So I decided to write about my very personal journey and give you an insight into that part of the world I grew up in, where arranged marriages are as common and as normal as sneezing. That's the way it's been for hundreds of years. Isn't arranged marriage primitive?" an American colleague of mine asked. "Does it involve dowry? Were you forced into marriage by your parents? Did you have any say at all? Did you meet your husband before the wedding day?" All these questions reflect a genuine curiosity about another culture and race. With the growing number of Indian immigrants in Connecticut, most of whom have had arranged marriages, these questions need answers. No, an arranged marriage is not synonymous with a forced marriage. The decision to get married was entirely mine and Arun's; our parents were catalysts in enabling us to meet. Yes, I met Arun three times before we got married and there was no dowry at our wedding. In addition to being a crime, it would have been an insult to both our families to ask for or offer a dowry.

Arun and I had a very awkward first meeting. We gawked at each other over lunch and didn't know what to say. "Lighten up, you two!" Arun's sister kept prodding us. Her good intentions didn't help much. Neither did my future mother-in-law's appraising smiles and nods. Our parents made polite conversation and seemed oblivious to our alarming fit of perspiration. I was thinking we were all going to drown in a sweaty river when Arun turned to me and said, "Want to get out and grab a cup of coffee?" This led to a real date two days later, when just the two of us met and talked. Our attitude to life, career, marriage, relationships, priorities, commitment, family, values. It was intense. We realized our expectations from life were similar, and I could see how mature, easygoing and open-minded he was. It was fun being together and the chemistry was awesome.

"So, how do you feel about this?" he asked at the end of the day.

"It's nice, but too sudden and too soon, don't you think?"

He looked at me for a long moment. There was something very tender and intimate in his glance. "I think it'll work," he said, smiling. I gulped. "How can you



In the two years since her arranged marriage, Sujata Srinivasan has fallen deeper in love with her husband, Arun, and her new home.



Sujata and Arun Srinivasan exchange garlands during their wedding ceremony in India. The bride was nervous to leave her home of Madras to live with her husband in Connecticut, but now feels at home in the United States.



Sujata and Arun Srinivasan

tell?" I asked. "I want to wake up every morning for the rest of my life holding you in my arms," he said softly, adding, "I normally don't talk this way. I'm not romantic at all." His ears went red as he leaned over and kissed me. I fell for it. I simply fell for it.

take their vows in front of the fire at their wedding in India.

Arun got back to the U.S., from where he started e-mailing. Then he called. By then, he had me wrapped around his little finger. He announced to his friends we were getting married even before he'd asked me! It didn't come as a surprise when he proposed over the phone. All too soon, the wedding date was fixed for next month. My life went into a chaos mode. Relocating 10,000 miles away from my parents, brother, aunts, uncles, cousins and friends seemed overwhelming. It wasn't easy just because lots of women did it. Like childbirth, although common, it's a unique and painful process for every woman. Besides, my career as a journalist was going great and I had an exciting job handling a national television bureau from my city. But deep down, I knew this was going to work and that Arun and I were meant to be together. Still, I needed affirmation from someone whose judgment I treasured. My father. "This is entirely your calling," he said. "But yes, I like Arun very much. I think you'd make a lovely couple." "But he lives so far away, I wish he was closer to home," I said. My separation anxiety had already started. It was my mother who helped seal the decision. "You should marry someone for who he is, not where he is. Remember this is a lifetime relationship and you'll both spend the rest of your lives together. You can't force yourself to fall in love with a man just because he lives next door! If you feel good about Arun, then there is something special here." Still, I needed to meet him one more time before our wedding and vent my hopes and fears. Don't we all have fears before getting married, arranged marriage or otherwise?



"I want to meet Arun at the airport," I announced. My mother pursed her lips. "Lufthansa arrives past 1 a.m. We won't let you go alone that late," she said. Arun was checking into a hotel near the airport since he had to catch an early morning flight to Bangalore, his hometown. We were getting married a day after. He'd asked me if I could meet him at the airport. "No way," my mother announced vehemently. "But, Ma ...," I pleaded. "Look, his family will think you are a fast girl if you met with him that late. And we can't send you alone with him to the hotel. His mother might think something happened there and she'll never respect you! You can go out with him as late and to as many hotels you want after marriage!" I was dumbstruck. "Whatever gave you such an idea?! Nothing's going to happen! Please, we just need to talk." A few days later, after consulting her woman friends (some of whom were astonishingly conservative), she came up with a solution. "You can go." My grateful smile froze halfway when she announced, "Your uncles and brother will go with you. That will make it respectable."

My mother was most liberal with others but surprisingly conservative about matters with regard to me. Once on a late evening when I was returning from work, I decided to stop at a local cafe to enjoy a quiet evening reading. Some 150 pages later I realized it was dark and late, and I had to get home. (In India if you're single and work in your hometown, it is expected that you will live with your parents. There is no other socially acceptable way!) When I reached home at 10:30 p.m., my mother was sitting by the front door awaiting my arrival. When I told her I got delayed at a cafe, she was most upset. "A girl from a good family doesn't go alone to cafes, especially this late. Boys will think you want to be picked up," she said.

I will never forget the expression on Arun's face when he met me at the visitor's lounge. I was flanked by two burly uncles on either side - one was an accountant and the other was a retired army colonel. My younger brother solemnly led our procession and handed his future brother-in-law a big bunch of roses. "Welcome to the family," he said, and we all grinned. It was an awkward drive to the hotel with my uncles wedged between Arun and me, talking about the weather. At the hotel's coffee bar, we spoke more about the weather and the long plane journey. When it was time to leave, Arun came close and slipped something in my hand. It was a beautiful heart-shaped bracelet. The next time we met, we became husband and wife. Our wedding was a traditional South Indian ceremony. The wedding vows were in Sanskrit and taken before a fire to symbolize purity, integrity and eternity. "It's like bungee jumping," I kept saying, trying to calm myself. "You either jump or you don't. And when you do, everything will turn out OK." And it did.

Our relationship unfolded gradually, day by day. We didn't have spectacular fireworks that dazzled one moment and were gone the next. Instead, there were simple moments of everyday life that were cozy and comforting, because they helped define our relationship. We started doing things for each other, naturally. I'd wake up in the morning and iron his shirt. He'd give me a foot massage in the evening. I'd cook his favorite dish. He'd oil-change my car. Earthy things. Neither of us kept a score on who did more. Neither of us took the other for granted. We read newspaper tidbits to each other over morning cups of coffee. We swam and canoed together. We danced jazz together. We enjoyed going to the theater and bookstores together. We planned our finances together. We talked about our future. We laughed together watching sitcoms. We received invitations as a couple. It was beautiful, this sharing of our lives. Nothing was too big or too small to share. Our metamorphosis from "I" to "We" happened without our conscious realization. We didn't analyze it. We just accepted it and enjoyed it as a gift from life. The phrase "arranged marriage" evokes strong negative connotations among a majority of modern Indians and Americans alike, who view it as a conflict between tradition and modernity. As an educated, career-minded woman from a progressive Indian family, I discovered that some traditions work. Arranged marriage is one of them. Indeed, I could sense something special between Arun and me from the beginning. The in-depth discussion we had on our value systems gave a deep insight into each other. A large part of our

conversation was what we wanted out of life, and from our partner. There were no storybook expectations, because this was not superfluous and rose-tinted. This was our lives, and we spoke about hard-hitting subjects. There was something solid and mature about the process.

But can anyone fully understand another person unless one lives with them? In my environment this is permissible only after marriage. I never had a chance to have a premarital relationship, because my upbringing did not encourage it. Besides, I believed in a one soul-mate ideal and did not want to take my chances until I knew that the person was right. Arun felt the same way. I have no regrets. For someone like me with zero dating skills, this system is a huge safety and comfort cushion. Having never played the dating game, I had no bruises, baggage or scars. It was wonderful to be starting something that was so new, fresh and beautiful for both of us. Being introduced by our parents made us feel complete; we believed that marriage was an alliance between two families, not two people. Since most arranged marriages last a lifetime, a widespread belief is that the woman loses her independence and becomes subservient to her husband. Or she is afraid of the social stigma of divorce (this is rapidly changing). That must be the reason the marriage works! Let me tell you, that's a load of humbug! Modern Indian women expect equality in a relationship, and there are compromises from both sides, since the man and woman love each other and feel their relationship is worth cherishing. And since both were raised with traditional values, there is a mindset from early on to make this a once-in-a-lifetime relationship. I've seen it work for friends and family, many of whom have been happily married for over 50 years. However, not all Indian marriages are arranged by parents. Some are arranged by friends or colleagues; most of my cousins are married to people they met at work or social get-togethers. One of them even met his future wife online. The much talked about Indian caste system is also changing for the better, with more cosmopolitan alliances. Again, I've seen this with family and friends. Although I did have an arranged marriage, I always had the choice of falling in love and getting married. However, none of my relationships with male friends was anything more than platonic. Given that there is such diversity in India, all arranged marriages are not alike. Families seek alliances from backgrounds similar to theirs. Academic qualifications and outlook on life play an important role. There are also those that put wealth above everything. This creates a notion of a premium on a well-settled doctor or engineer abroad. It also leads to the vulgar practice of dowry - the better placed the groom, the more the dowry he commands. Well, there are gold diggers everywhere.

The other crude side of an arranged marriage is what is considered "bride shopping." Often, a prospective groom coming to India on a holiday from abroad is short on time and therefore visits as many suitable women as possible. This is arranged by the groom's family, and his day's schedule often involves meeting as many as a dozen prospective brides. The women often don't know that they are a part of this jet-setting itinerary. I myself have once been a stop on this whirlwind tour, much to my anger and disgust. The mother of the prospective groom had come home and met me and had apparently sent a glowing review to her son in the States. A few hours after his arrival in India, his proud mother brought him to come and meet me. It was during this meeting I came to know that he was on a fast-paced bride shopping tour. To avoid a scene, I sat through the conversation and was joyous when he left. My mother, who was equally upset by this callous attitude to women, came to an understanding with me that we would be not be a stop on similar future tours.

Over the past two years, while falling deeper in love with Arun, I've also fallen in love with my new home - the United States. Bill Cosby as Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable reminded me of my dear father, and "The Cosby Show" helped ease my homesickness. I took to jazz, enjoyed going to various bookstores, sitting at a cafe in Harvard Square, watching life unfold in Times Square, soaking in the beauty of the seasons in New England, and visiting museums and the theater. I love the melting pot that is the United States. My transformation into a wife and a hyphenated person with two identities - India and the United States - unfolded simultaneously. It has been a beautiful sojourn. I know what it is to be an Indian-American. I feel at home.

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