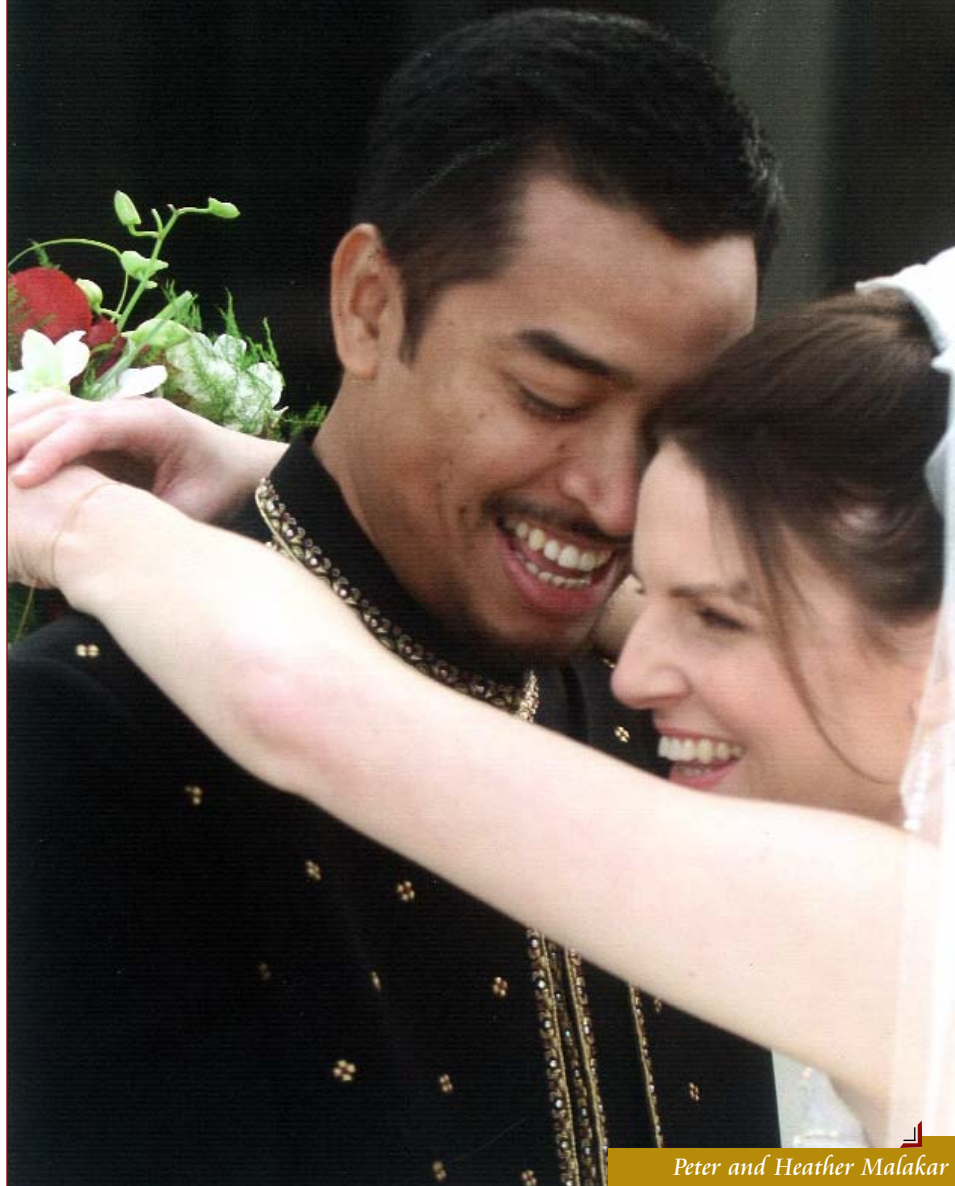


Valentine's Day Tales

Marriage

Indian American Style

By ANNE LEE SESHADRI



Peter and Heather Malakar

Couple No. 1

The array of choices, the coping strategies of mixed couples is exciting and a bit hilarious.

That day” is around the corner again, the day that rekindles memories of love and intimacy, and precious moments stolen on moonlit balconies or beaches. For my husband and me, as well as the thousands of couples in the United States and India who con-founded parental expectations, rolled the proverbial dice and married someone ethnically distinct from across the oceans, Valentine’s Day represents the triumph of love over arranged, of Cupid over karma.

Meeting on an American University campus, as Srikanth and I did 10 years ago, we knew that by tying the knot and circling the fire, we’d be taking Robert Frost’s “Road Less Traveled.” Little did we know, however, what excitement lay in store as two cultures collided and coalesced to direct our day-to-day American, and now Indian, life.

In both Washington, D.C. and New Delhi, I happily realized that we were not alone in this experiment. Seeing American and Indian couples all around me, I found the array of choices, the coping strategies of us mixed couples exciting and a bit hilarious as well. Truth, myth or fun? I resolved to find out, and several brave couples obliged me with their special *Bride & Prejudice*, happily-ever-after stories.

How They Met
(Or as Kareena Kapoor once said: *Jab We Met*)

In class, through friends, in chat rooms—



Kevin and Moni Duffy

Couple No. 2



Sunil and Ariana Rabindranath

Couple No. 3



Anshul and Jenika Kaul

Couple No. 4

today's Indian American couples meet typically and fatefully, even when a love match was not what they or their parents had in mind.

Couple No. 1: When Los Angeles native Heather Halstead, who has a Master's degree in counseling, was exploring north-eastern India to find opportunities for serving people, she met Peter Malakar, a Christian Indian doctor. But romance was the furthest thing from her mind. Having earlier experienced life and customs in a remote, conservative Indian village, she was ultra-cautious. "He would e-mail me (when I returned to California) but I wouldn't respond for several months, just so that he wouldn't get the wrong idea," says Heather. The persistent doctor had the right idea all along: He kept praying. Heather returned to India, this time to New Delhi, where Peter was working. And seeing that they were better together than apart, they fell in love, got married in December, 2005 in California, and returned to New Delhi, where they now run an NGO together.

Couple No. 2: For them, it was an easier choice. "My father told me he would never push me into marriage," says Moni Basu, a Bengali non-resident Indian whose family emigrated to the United States when she was 13. She met Kevin Duffy, a fellow reporter, while they were working the night beat at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution in the southern U.S. state of Georgia.

Couple No. 3: Student Sunil Rabindranath, of South Indian-Malaysian origin, found student Ariana Leon, a Midwestern American with a keen interest in South and Southeast Asia, through mutual friends. They attended graduate school together at Ohio University and now live in Washington, D.C.

Couple No. 4: Anshul Kaul, a Kashmiri, and Jenika Doctor, who now coordinates the South Asian Studies Program at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C., crossed paths in India while she was an intern. He Hindu, she Jewish and Unitarian, they now live in the Washington, D.C. area, are married and looking forward to their first-born.

Couple No. 5: Dominic Keating was a lawyer in San Diego, in California, when he stumbled across and fell in love with Shaista Taj, an Accenture consultant, on a jogging trail. Shaista's Muslim parents were helping her find a proper husband...but "son-in-law Dominic" was a real *Pyar Mein Twist*.

Meet the Parents

(Do you want my daughter's hand?)

Meeting one's prospective in-laws is daunting in any culture, but doubly so when you're dealing with foreign elders. In some instances, it's the mom who requires gentle persuasion. The first time Anshul visited Jenika's parents in the United

States, her mom was concerned and a bit worried. Why wasn't he holding her hand or showing any affection? Did he really care for her? Little did she understand that to Anshul, public displays of affection were highly inappropriate, and especially embarrassing considering the "public" included his future-mother-in-law.

American dads aren't necessarily any easier. Heather's father flew to India from California to check out Peter before the couple were engaged. Peter won over his future father-in-law quite quickly (as Mr. Halstead was nothing like the tough and rough Robert De Niro of *Meet the Parents*) and the engagement ceremony was full of Indian culture and color. But Heather also wanted an American-style engagement. With advice from her American roommate, Peter planned a romantic day (or so he thought) boating on a lake outside New Delhi—only to discover that the water had dried up several years before, leaving only cows lazily grazing on the lake bed. Not to be deterred, Peter ordered a cup of hot tea, bent down on his knee, and beseeched Heather for her hand.

Dominic also had to deal with a tough, prospective dad-in-law. "When I walked into the room to talk with her father for the first time," Dominic recalls, "he seated himself in a corner of the room with his arms folded." Shaista excitedly interrupts, "But when I returned from the kitchen an hour later, they were sitting near each



Dominic and Shaista Keating

Couple No. 5

other and my father's arms were stretched across the back of the couch." This didn't surprise her: "My father and Dominic are very alike...They find common ground in law, science, current events." That's not to say Dominic was off the hook when it came time for the Muslim custom of asking the bride's father for permission. In a scene out of some American talk show, Dominic had to ask for Shaista's hand in front of a big audience: her father was there, as well as Shaista's entire paternal family.

I Do—But How?

(And what color is my sherwani?)

Creativity and negotiation are needed in planning Indian American weddings. Our five couples adopted differing approaches to satisfy the expectations of both sides.

Sunil and Ariana participated in two separate ceremonies, but integrated one another's customs in both. His family sent Hindu symbols and wall hangings to adorn the front of the church for the American ceremony. He dutifully donned his first-ever tuxedo for the occasion and she wore a pur-

ple sari instead of a traditional American, white, wedding dress. For the Hindu engagement, Ariana wore a Malayali-style sari and touched the feet of Sunil's mother and grandmother, receiving their blessings.

For Jenika and Anshul, who choreographed and participated in a "big, fat" five-day Indian extravaganza, the American wedding part incorporated both cultures, including a canopy that represented a Jewish *huppah* and Hindu *mandap*, poems by Rabindranath Tagore and the perennial favorite, Punjabi bhangra at the reception.

Shaista and Dominic planned a Western-style wedding at a hotel in California. Only when they walked up the aisle, a Muslim *imam* was there to greet them instead of a minister or priest. Then they signed a traditional Islamic marriage contract. She wore an Indian wedding dress, but in white, the color most American brides wear, instead of red. Dominic's family joined in the henna ceremony, with both sides singing songs in English and Urdu, praising or deprecating the bride and groom on cue. Dominic's family seemed to take the upper hand in the mock competition, but few recalled the score afterwards, for it was all in good fun.

Heather and Peter tied the knot in multi-ethnic Los Angeles, and enjoyed adding all the Indian touches and flourishes they could find. Her bridesmaids wore *lehengas* tailor-made in New Delhi based on e-mailed measurements, and a woman acquaintance originally from Hyderabad prepared all the mouth-watering food. The most moving part of the ceremony came during a short, simple phone call, when Peter dialed his parents on their landline in Assam. With a microphone held to the receiver for all to hear, Peter's parents prayed for God's blessings on the marriage from halfway around the world.

The Quickest Way to Your In-Laws' Hearts (Through their stomachs, of course.)

Americans married to Indians quickly learn the importance of food in their partner's culture. In fact, eating skills seem to be an avenue of acceptance into the new family.

Kevin was astounded the first time he visited his in-laws in West Bengal. As a mark of respect, he was presented with a silver plate holding 22 types of food. "Where

do I even start?” he wondered. Since that awkward first encounter with Indian cuisine and overwhelming hospitality, however, he has proven himself to be a good *desi* by learning to eat Bengali fish dishes with his hands. “He can sail though the tricky fish dishes,” says Moni with admiration, “even the bony elish fish.”

Like Kevin, Dominic also mastered the Indian art of eating without utensils. Shaista states proudly, “He does really well; instead of looking around for a hot dog and ketchup, he asks for pickle.”

Biryani, kebabs, fish and masala dosa—these are some of the Americans’ favorite dishes, covering the north, south, east and west of Indian culinary culture. With practice, Ariana has become quite an Indian cook herself. “She used to measure out everything with great pains when she cooked Kerala dishes,” Sunil explained, “but now a pinch and a smidgen have become valid measuring units for her.”

Cultural Blunders (A Fashion Faux Pas)

Navigating Indian culture can be tricky, say the American spouses, even after studying it for many years. Sometimes the Americans try too hard and err on the side of excess. When gallant, suave Sunil tied Ariana’s first sari on her, he miscalculated with some of the pins and left half of her top exposed.

Sometimes these well-meaning spouses do get it right. While Dominic dances the bhangra well, Kevin is called a movie star when he dons Indian dress. And Ariana, after the initial botched attempt, is more comfortable and relaxed wearing a sari than a Western style dress, says Sunil.

Baby X (And how to keep nosy neighbors guessing.)

For most Americans, picking a child’s name is easy because it’s a parent’s individual choice. But in mixed marriages, naming babies is half graceful art, half political compromise and no longer about advertising to the world which state, city, religion, ethnicity, class, caste, author, actor or relative the parents most identify with.

For Shaista and Dominic, it was important to give their children global names, not

just bicultural ones. Summer (Samar) is an Arabic name that is understood everywhere, they explained, while Sophia can be Indian, Pakistani, European or American.

Holidays: Twice the Usual Fun

Indian American couples tend to have double the fun when it comes to celebrating holiday traditions. “We celebrate every-

VALENTINE’S DAY

Contrary to popular belief, Valentine’s Day is not an American invention. The customs of exchanging romantic cards, giving flowers or sweets or taking time to express tender sentiments to one’s significant other on February 14 developed in Europe and were brought to the United States by immigrants. It is not a holiday anywhere in the United States. But woe betide any husband or boyfriend who manages to forget the day in the face of all the advertising by greeting card and candy makers, restaurants and hotels, florists and gift stores.

thing!” proclaim Dominic and Shaista, pointing out that, for them, marking Eid and Christmas every year is a way to teach their children to be tolerant and free from prejudice.

Ariana and Sunil made their annual Diwali party a tradition at their Northern Virginia home. Moni and Kevin celebrate Durga Puja in Atlanta, Georgia, while Anshul and Jenika enjoy celebrating Christmas, Holi and Hanukkah.

Most mixed couples celebrate Christmas. “Although Christian, Peter was not used to seeing a Christmas tree,” Heather explained, “but he is patient with my

American customs.” Sometimes it’s the other way around. Moni recalls her first Christmas with Kevin, “I grew up (as an Indian in America) longing to celebrate Christmas. So Kevin did all the traditional things for me that one would do for a child, from buying and decorating a tree, to gift-wrapping presents—everything except Santa Claus!”

Jenika makes sure that Anshul gets his own stocking and a Christmas ornament every year, along with a traditional lamb dinner that sits well with his Kashmiri heritage.

Three Cheers for the Ties that Bind (And the love that endures.)

When asked what they appreciate most about their spouses’ Indian culture, the Americans I interviewed were unanimous: their strong sense of family.

“The extended family is very strong, the togetherness,” says Dominic, whose in-laws reside with him.

Moni observes: “In India, the house is open to everyone in the family.” Kevin understands the importance of family and enjoys the “family ties I have.”

For all young couples, marriage to someone from another culture was as interesting as it was illuminating. And as the years go by, do the differences diminish? To answer that I had to find a couple whose marriage had withstood the test of time and distance. I found my inspiration in Ophelia and Amos Gona, she an African American professor from the southern United States, he a professor from Goa, both living in suburban New Jersey since the 1970s and now retired. When I asked Ophelia what insights she could share with SPAN readers about bridging cultural differences, she wrote: “It sounds strange, but after 46 years of marriage, I can’t think of anything I could possibly add.” I went back home and told Srikanth, and we both smiled.



Anne Lee Seshadri, at left in her wedding photo with her husband, Srikanth, is an assistant cultural affairs officer at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi.

Adnan Siddiqi, the cultural affairs counselor at the U.S. Embassy, contributed to this article.

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Courtesy ANNE LEE SESHADRI