Courtship Ideas Of South Asians Get a U.S. Touch

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familial interest. Her marriage, as some young Indians refer to it, was "love-cum-arranged."

Less than a decade ago, the decision about whom a South Asian woman here might marry was still often left to her parents, the prospective bride's individual preference for tall dentists or contemplative artists notwithstanding. But recently, purely arranged marriage has evolved into a new culture of what might be called "assisted" marriage, in which parents are free to arrange all they like — allowing their sons and daughters choice among nominees screened for caste, lineage and geography, among other measures — and giving the children veto power.

These young people may have come of age in an America of "Moonstruck" and "Dawson's Creek," but in many cases they have not completely accepted the Western model of romantic attachment. Indeed, some of the impetus for assisted marriage is coming from young people themselves — men and women who have delayed marriage into their late 20's and early 30's, said Ayesha Hakki, the editor of Bibi, a South Asian bridal and fashion magazine based in New Jersey.

"That has been the most remarkable trend," Ms. Hakki said, citing the example of a male acquaintance who, after dating on his own, turned to his parents for guidance.

As Madhulika Khandelwal, a historian who has studied Indians here, said, "Young people don't want to make individual decisions alone."

The Patel-Shah union was instigated by the chance encounter two years ago of Dr. Shah's mother and Dr. Patel's at Famous Pizza, a restaurant in Queens that is favored by Indian immigrants. Friends from the town of Nadiad in India, the two had not seen each other in 30 years. Their conversation moved to the subject of their still-single children.

In large part, Ms. Khandelwal said, the transition from formally arranged marriage reflects social changes in India itself, where assisted marriage is now common among the educated, urban middle class. That is because, she said, there are fewer extended-family living arrangements and more women pursuing higher education.

The purpose of assisted marriage here is not simply to preserve Indian cultural identity, but more pointedly to maintain class, religious and regional identities in a place where they might easily be diffused, those who have studied the Indian diaspora say. When Mona Mahajan, a recent graduate of Harvard Business School from New Jersey, married an Indian she met on her own, she was the first in five generations of her family not to have wed a Punjabi.

Arranged and assisted marriage have left Indians with the lowest rate of intermarriage of any major immigrant group in the United States. Among South Asian men and women here in their 20's and 30's, the vast majority of whom are foreign born, fewer than 10 percent marry outside their ethnic group, according to an analysis of the Census Bureau's 2003 American Community Survey conducted for this article. "In the beginning I was pretty against all of this," Dr. Patel said of this newer approach. "Growing up here, you feel that you're supposed to fall in love, but once you figure out that everyone goes on blind dates it doesn't feel quite as strange."

Among Indian parents here who are traditionally inclined, many begin to seek husbands when their daughters are 22 or 23, but the search may be forestalled if the woman is pursuing a graduate degree, Indian women report. Men begin looking for wives with their families' help at about age 26; within more liberal households, children often marry those they meet on their own.

Preceding any planned meeting is the exchange of the all important "bio-data" between families, the term used for a portfolio with the potential bride or groom's profile.

The embrace of more traditional habits is apparent in other ways. Weddings are often elaborate and last three or four days. Families of
the betrothed often still consult a Hindu astrologer who schedules wedding ceremonies according to the stars. When Anamika Tavathia, 24, was engaged to a young Indian she met in college, his family visited hers to propose on his behalf and the priest determined they should marry on June 26 of this year between 10:30 and 11 a.m.

This fall is expected to be an unusually busy wedding season in Indian communities, because many couples postponed weddings last year when many days were deemed inauspicious.

Royal Albert Palace, a five-year-old catering facility in Woodbridge, N.J., with a 21-foot statue of a former deputy prime minister of India on front, has become the locus for Indian weddings, and it was there, at a wedding last month, that two young women discussed assisted marriage.

"My dad's parents didn't even see each other until the day they were married," said Kesha Patel, 25, who came to the United States as a child and is looking for someone, with her family's help. "So when I think about that, I'm grateful for the system we have."

Kesha Patel has taken trips to India to meet prospective partners, and her family has arranged for her to meet men here, as well.

"Sometimes you'll get the bio-data and it will be great, and then when you meet the person, you're disappointed," she said. "My parents won't understand, they'll say, 'But he's from a good family, he's a doctor, he's a doctor, he's a doctor.' And I'll say, 'But he's short.'"

Alienating one's parents is anathema to Indian culture, and most young people wish to avoid doing so through marriage. Four years ago, Preet Singh, a 28-year-old teacher in Chicago, fell in love with a woman seven years his senior and not a Sikh. He hoped to marry her and live with her in his parents' home.

"My mother might have accepted the marriage but she wouldn't have lived with us," he said. "It was one of the nastiest breakups of all because that person helped me mature into a man." Not long ago, Mr. Singh's sisters posted his profile on an Indian matrimonial Web site, and he will marry this fall.

Part of his parents' displeasure with the previous relationship was the fact that he was dating at all. Though a Bibi magazine survey conducted three years ago revealed that the majority of married men and women questioned had had sex before marriage, dating, as Mr. Singh put it, "does not exist in our culture." This view leaves parents encouraging children to resolve the marriage question quickly.

The parents of Leena Singh waited until she was older than 25 and had earned a master's degree in mathematics and an M.B.A. to find a husband. Ms. Singh's father eventually found someone to her liking, Sanjeev Tavathia, a young man studying engineering in Iowa. They met in the company of relatives, then went out alone. Back in San Diego, where she was living with her parents, she called Mr. Tavathia and told him she was ready for marriage. He said she was 90 percent certain. They married several months later.

"From the beginning, I felt there was a physical chemistry," Ms. Singh said, "but it took years to develop a mature bond, and I guess you could call that love."

Despite its groundings in pragmatism, assisted marriage is spoken about among some young Indians in highly romanticized terms — implicit in it is the cinematic idea that immediate attraction should result in an eternity spent together.

Kesha Patel's sister married a man to whom she was introduced through her aunts. She decided to marry him the day after they met.

"A lot of my friends," Kesha Patel said, her eyes gleaming, "tell me you know in an instant."