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MARRIAGE

How I, a Russian-Jewish woman, moved to America, met and married an Indian-American and integrated three worlds into my experience

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I was born in the former Soviet Union, Republic of Lithuania, in a Jewish family and immigrated to the US when I was twenty-one. Six years ago I met and fell in love with a Hindu man from India and now am married to him.

My family, like the majority of Soviet Jews, had to give up their religion and tradition, because practicing religion was against the ideology of the Soviet regime. No longer were the Jewish ways of life transferred to successive generations. The language and culture of the Russian majority prevailed in Jewish households. We spoke Russian, read Russian literature, listened to Russian music and even considered ourselves possessing the well-known "Russian soul." With no religious and ethnic tradition to take away, besides the borrowed Russian, and, having left the anti-Semitic Soviet Union, my family was eager upon arrival to assimilate the American way of life.

It was my mother who introduced me to my future husband. Introductions by elders are practically unheard of in my culture, but, I discovered, are common practice in Ravi's tradition. Before our first date, I started recounting what I knew about India and Indian people. I remembered a slogan popular at some point in my Soviet history: "Hindu, Russi, bhai-bhai" ("Hindus and Russians are brothers"), but I did not know then what it meant. When I was a child, my younger cousin and I saw a movie, "Sita and Gita," and were utterly impressed by the heroine who walked barefoot on broken glass to reach her beloved. As a little girl, I was fascinated with handsome Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and his graceful, stylish Italian wife. I knew of the capital of India, Delhi, and a few major citiesâ□□Bombay, Calcutta and Madras that sounded as exotic as India's ancient past. I certainly had heard of the Kamasutra and the Taj Mahal. I knew that India was a vast and poor country. Like other Russians, I believed Hindus had many Gods and were generally "idol worshipers."

When informal dating suddenly grew into serious talks about marriage, Ravi explained to me that even though he wanted to marry me, I ought to consider his proposal very carefully. Ravi explained that I would be marrying his culture along with him. I did not understand what this meant at first, because I received very little exposure to his culture while we were dating. I was bewildered. Ravi pleaded that he could not live without listening to Indian music, watching Indian movies, speaking to his friends in his native Hindi, celebrating Hindu festivities and eating the foods he grew up

eating. That is why I had to consider carefully whether I could live with him doing all those things.

I, on the other hand, foresaw our future union to be a sort of a cultural middle ground with no one's culture prevailing in the household. After all, we were both immigrants from two different countries who now lived in America. I certainly did not imagine that our household would be "Little India" on American soil.

Before my fiancÃ© expressed to me his need for retaining his tradition, I had mistakenly believed that anyone who immigrates to America wants to leave their country behind and accept their new country's culture as their own. It was particularly true for my family, because we came to the US as political refugees, victims of ethnic and religious persecution. When America accepted us and gave us the privilege to become citizens, we felt for the first time that we finally belonged somewhere. As a result, during the first few years in this country, I was eager to absorb my newly acquired American culture and become a part of it. Thus, I had difficulty understanding why Ravi wanted to hold on to his culture.

I accepted Ravi's marriage proposal after all. I was pleasantly surprised when his family expressed no

reservations about Ravi's marrying someone that was not their own. As Ravi told me later, his parents and siblings were content that he was about to marry a non-Indian girl as long as it would make him happy. Ravi's father calculated our astrological compatibility, concluded that we were a good match and presented us with the appropriate dates for the wedding. My family, however, with the exception of my mother, needed some time and persuasion.

Ravi's parents arrived from India to conduct our engagement. It was understood that I had to wear a sari for the ceremony. When I told Ravi's mother through a translator that I did not know how to wear a sari, she said that my mom would show me. She assumed that moms of every culture knew how to wear a sari. So, there we were, standing in my future brother's and sister's-in-law bedroom, with Ravi's mom grinning and reaching high to wrap a sari around her very tall first Western daughter-in-law, her grins making me self-conscious and shy, trying to understand what amused her. I wondered, "Am I too big and tall for Indian standards, or is she just too happy to see her son getting married?" Ravi's mother performed a traditional Hindu ceremony of engagement that felt very special and auspicious. The next day we concluded the ceremony at a Hindu temple in the city.

I was happy to be engaged, but new thoughts were nagging in the back of my mind: "Would I lose my own individuality and culture by marrying Ravi? Have I come to America to suddenly be submerged into another foreign culture that I know nothing about and that has nothing to do with the land I have chosen to live in?"

At our wedding, the disc jockeys played Hindi, Punjabi and Jewish music, and we danced bhangra and "Hava Nagila" well into the night. Our Russian, Jewish and Indian guests quickly united in their shared love of merry celebrations, music and dance.

And so my real immersion into Ravi's culture has begun. It starts on Sundays with listening to Indian classical music ("morning music," as Ravi calls it) or devotional music and ends with a Hindi movie in the evening. It lingers into the week with playing a good deal of Hindi music. Hindi movies are always in good supply in our household, and we watch them on average twice a week. When we visit relatives or friends, the latest music and movies are being bought, discussed, played and watched; the older songs and movies are never forgotten; and ghazals are played when the mood is right.

The turning point for me was visiting India. It was a

major shock and revelation at the same time. The sights, sounds and smells of Delhi stunned me. I looked at everything with my eyes wide open in shock and disbelief. When a person from a developed country, like the United States, comes to India, he or she experiences very different feelings than the ones I experienced. Most Americans grew up in comfort and overall satiety. India will shock them, of course, and they will probably feel guilty that so many people around the world still go hungry. But I experienced poverty myself, certainly not to such an extent as in India, but my family often had no money to buy food or clothes. Coming to India was almost going back in time; after all, I had come to America in search of a better, more prosperous life.

I quickly realized, though, that people of Indian origin keep coming back to India not because they enjoy the dirt, poverty and smells of India, or are immune to them, but because they long for the unique and cherished relationships with family and friends, substitutes for which they cannot find in their comfortable, rich and material lives abroad. Having spent time with Ravi's family and friends, I observed those unique relationships with their late dinners and long conversations where

someone is always in the kitchen feeding the nonstop array of relatives; with the all-night chatter and laughter; with puja every morning and visits to a temple; with firecrackers of Dipavali and the joyous dances and celebration. I envied Ravi for having friends that he had not seen for six years, but with whom he could still share everything, and who would always be there for him should he need any help. I observed Ravi's large family and a special relationship he has with each of his brothers and sisters: the older ones are respected as elders, the younger ones are looked after, teased with and given orders.

I felt that everyone in the household sincerely and graciously accepted me. Ravi's mother, a small, slender woman, behaved shyly with me. She wanted to know me better but did not speak English. Often we would sit down with a designated translator and talk to each other. She silently understood that I felt a bit out of place, that I was bothered by the surroundings: the dust and the dirt and very spicy food the family was accustomed to preparing. My mother-in-law tried to make my stay as pleasant as possible. She had been observing me and had started to like my

quiet personality and shy and respectful manner of talking with people.

Tradition and religion take an important part in Ravi's parents' house in Lucknow. When we first arrived, Ravi's mother and the sisters-in-law performed the homecoming ceremony. The family would attend the Hanuman temple, and I would tag along. One morning Ravi's mother performed Chitragupta puja. It was explained to me that my mother-in-law would like me to write a short note to Lord Ram, as was the tradition. Even though I did not practice Judaism, having been born Jewish, I thought that I could not actively participate in non-Jewish religious ceremonies. Mistakenly, I thought that maybe my mother-in-law was trying to convert me into a Hindu. Only later did I learn that Indian people do not try to convert anyone, unlike Christians, for example. In fact, respect and tolerance of other religions is one of the premises of Hinduism. And how could my mother-in-law understand my reservations when she equally participated in Muslim and Christian religious celebrations without giving up her own?

Having now lived with my husband for four-and-a-half years, his culture is naturally becoming a part of me. My knowledge of Indian contemporary culture sometimes tops those of my fellow Indians. I participate in discussions about Indian movies and music, as well as viewing and listening sessions. I can show off my equal familiarity of the old movies, such as "Ram, Teri Ganga Meli," and the newest release, like "Dil Chahta Hei." I am familiar with the latest singers and musicians, stay on top of Bollywood gossips and enjoy watching Hritik Roshan and Salman Khan flex their muscles on the screen, like any other Indian woman.

While my husband's weekend music selection does not usually fit my morning mood, as I need something faster and livelier to wake me up, I have learned to enjoy most of the Indian music and movies. In fact, I would rather listen to Indian classical music than some Western classical music. I have discovered that if you are exposed to something new long enough you learn to appreciate it. And it has happened to me: all my senses have opened up, embraced, and started to like Indian things. My ears have become keener

and have learned to listen to the music. My tastes have learned to use and combine the spices and even crave them. I have found socializing with Indian people more fulfilling than with Russians or people from my newly acquired American culture. I cook a russified version of the Indian food that entails liberal usage of most of the popular spices with minimal amounts of red pepper. My husband says that he likes my cooking (but I say he simply does not have a choice in the matter).

Our marriage presents more challenges than an average intercultural marriage, as we are not only working on improving it, learning to love and respect each other more every day, but constantly gaining knowledge of each other's cultures, family relationships and ways of life. It is enriching and fun to be in an intercultural marriage: we study each other's languages, read and discuss literature and history, familiarize each other with music and art. We laugh at each other's English accents and occasional misunderstandings, cumbersome Hindi and Russian speech, and create our own code words when speaking English. We discover every day that, notwithstanding our racial and geographical

differences, our souls, ways of life, opinions and backgrounds are incredibly similar. It seems that I have always known that I could never find the same closeness with an American man and, therefore, instinctively chose Ravi. My husband has also helped me reconnect with my own culture. Paradoxically, I am now more connected with my Russian culture while being married to my Indian husband than I was when I first came to America.

When we were picking the name for our baby, we found many Hindu and Jewish names that sounded similar. We chose the name "Baruk" that means "blessed" in Hebrew (Baruch) and "responsible" or "lifting the load" in Hindi (Bharuka). More challenges await our intercultural household as we bring up our son. How do we raise our child in both Russian Jewish and Hindu traditions? How do we make him a citizen of the world, open to embrace other cultures and proud of his own heritage? Do we teach him either Hindu or Jewish religious tradition or both? Do we let him choose a religious teaching for himself? We look forward to facing these important questions.

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