

Arranged happily ever after

<http://www.asuwebdevil.com/issues/2005/07/19/arts/693400>

-- In Their Own Words: Arranged happily ever after
Marrying a stranger chosen for you isn't necessarily the nightmare it might appear to be
by **Kanupriya Vashisht** published on Tuesday, July 19, 2005

Kanupriya Vashisht stands with her husband, to whom she was engaged only 15 days after meeting him for the first time on New Year's Eve in 2002. The couple married three months later.

My heart beats very fast under the red veil, which is heavy with beads, crystal and gold. I can hear my mother somewhere, pleading with me to be coy, to keep my eyes lowered. It is almost an acrobatic feat to catch a glimpse of the man I am marrying while appearing to be the bashful bride.

Suddenly the photographer wants us to look into each other's eyes and smile the eternal smile. Now I am really shy. And it comes to me in that split-second smile: I am marrying a complete stranger.

I know nothing about him except that he looks very fetching in a white suit. All night, the camera clicks fervently at us, capturing smiles, tears, doubts and dreams.

Arranged marriages have always been the norm in India and most of the rest of Asia. Although no specific statistics are available, almost 90 percent of Indian marriages, even those among the educated upper and middle classes, are arranged.

I never gave the custom much thought until I arrived in the United States. I was quite taken aback by the fascination and fear with which the Occident broaches the subject of arranged marriages. For most Americans, such unions have a sinister ring. They are associated with a primitive culture of tyranny and uncouth subjugation.

That is why I feel compelled to tell my tale.

I am a young woman from India with a fair propensity towards feminism. By most Indian standards I have a maverick physical appearance: dangerously short hair with naughty red streaks and a pierced nose.

I have been brought up by a rather free-spirited intellectual family. I don't need men to escort me when I go shopping. I can book my own tickets and write my own checks. I have a career and a relatively anglicized education.

And yet when it was time, I consciously walked into an arranged marriage. I was under no pressure. I had men friends and lots of opportunities to fall in love. I just chose not to.

Unknown territory

There is a thrill to arranged marriages that love marriages completely lack: The thrill of the mysterious unknown, or what Americans might call the excitement of a blind date.

And in most Indian cases, the unknown is not so dark. Parents usually search within the realm of their social acquaintances, gingerly eyeing kids of best friends or families belonging to similar social, cultural, economic, religious and educational backgrounds. Advertising in daily newspapers or over the Internet is a well-established tradition for parents of prospective brides and grooms.

There are no hard feelings. You can meet as many people as you want. Most educated middle-class women are allowed to reject suitors favored by their parents. Engagements can last longer than six months. And with even arranged marriages succumbing to modern ways, you are allowed to walk out if things don't work.

Contrary to the American misnomer, arranged marriages are not marriages of convenience. They never happen overnight. Parents undergo a painstaking search for the right partner. They dig deep into the family background and history of the bride or groom they choose for their child. For them, these weddings are acts of deep love, patience and trust.

Indians, unlike their American counterparts, do not have to make their own wedding arrangements. Their sole responsibility is to accompany doting parents on shopping sprees, approve elaborate new trousseaus, and on their wedding night to look beautiful and sit graciously on glimmering deep red couches, which look more like regal thrones. Parents spend a lifetime of their earnings trying to turn these weddings into grand memories.

Marriage in India is not just a union of man and woman; it is a union of families. You don't just gain a partner but his or her entire cultural legacy. Marriage is an intense, auspicious occasion blessed by gods, ancestors, elders, parents and large extended families.

Divorce rates (one of the lowest in the world) will tell you that marriages in India are usually for life. Parents rarely base their decision on impulse or instinct. It is almost a scientific selection of partners most likely to thrive well together.

My mother started looking for me when I was nearly 26. It took her almost a year to shortlist about five men she thought were suitable. I think I met all of them. I rejected them for reasons ranging from the color of their socks to their views on female emancipation, God and politics.

My mother did not give up. She did find "him" towards the tail end of my 26th year.

I met my husband for the first time in 2002. It was a very wet and windy New Year's Eve. I took a half day off from work to meet him.

My clothes did not coordinate with my umbrella. I grudgingly had to leave my suede sandals at home and tried quite unsuccessfully to retain the blow-dried look in my hair. In short, I was a mess by the time I reached the hotel he was staying in.

I asked him to come to the lobby. He came. He did not have a swagger; he did not wish to impress. Yet I felt this urge to smile at him. Neither of us felt pressure to fall in love at first sight. We understood we were meeting for something more permanent. I had never before seen this man, yet it seemed so right when he asked me out to lunch. The conversation was polite, it lacked innuendo, and yet I wished to stay on. I ended up taking the whole day off.

New Delhi is a complete mess on New Year's Eve, a gushing mass of humanity. We hardly found a private spot all day and yet we persisted. I was not in love, and yet something was happening: I felt almost eager to marry this man, this complete stranger.

We were formally engaged in just 15 days and married in three months. I gave up my family, my career, my country and my rebellious, independent streak to follow this man across the planet to Arizona.

We have now been married two years. With each passing day, I fall a little more in love. Ordinary things in him seem like exciting discoveries.

I know my marriage is too young for a happily-ever-after ending but it is old enough for me to admit that I am grateful my mother found him for me. In this big bad world, I might never ever have met the man I was destined to marry and then to love.

Not a panacea

Most arranged marriages in India are successful. It would be wrong, however, to say they never fail. There are frequent cases in which very different temperaments are yoked against their wills. As a matter of fact, the system of arranged marriages in India has subtle gradations. They range from shades of traditional conservatism to modern liberalism.

The less-educated parents in India are usually more conservative and tend to have a dictatorial sway over their children. Their decision is usually final and binding. Children of such parents can often be forced to marry against their will.

More-educated parents, however, act merely as facilitators to willing children who are either too shy or too busy to find their own mates. Such marriages are as free as marriages of love. Children have complete authority to accept or reject their parents' choice.

These are the marriages that make the Indian divorce rate look so good. For most Americans, the institution of arranged marriages is repressive and irrelevant. They are more comfortable with live-in relationships. I have nothing against the concept, but according to a study published in the American Journal of Marriage and the Family (2001), 40 percent of cohabiting unions disintegrate before marriage, and cohabiting couples who eventually marry have a 50 percent higher rate of divorce than couples who do not live together before marriage. I do not wish to prescribe arranged marriages as a panacea for people who have failed in love. But to me, the Indian way is more endearing as well as more enduring. I would not have chosen any other way to find love.

Reach the writer at kanupriya.vashisht@asu.edu