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Gender in Indian Society

Love and Despair Across Cultures: The Unique Challenges of NRI wives abroad and Foreign
Women Married to Indian Men

Introduction:

There are number of challenges that can arise when love, marriage and cultural adjustment all intersect. According to the 2018 UN World Migration Report, out of all the countries in the world, India has the largest population of people living abroad. As of 2015, it is estimated that there are approximately 15.6 million Indians living abroad. It is common practice for members of the Indian diaspora to get married in India and then return abroad with their spouse. While statistics surrounding the number of foreigners married to Indians are difficult to come by, one side effect of rapid modernization in recent times is the loosening of strict cultural norms surrounding social institutions. While marriage in India is still very traditional and marriages are usually arranged, the number of Indians getting married by choice is on the rise.

Considering the substantial amount of Indians living abroad, the number of Indians married to foreigners will inevitably increase. Indian citizens who have migrated to another country are commonly referred to as Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), a term I will use frequently for clarity purposes. In this paper, I am interested in exploring the distinct challenges that cultural adjustment and cultural differences pose to marriage by examining first-hand accounts of NRI wives and foreign women married to Indian men as they navigate difficult personal, familial and legal obstacles. *(Note: I do not believe that women should be*

defined by their marital status and I use the term “NRI wives” refer to the specific struggles of Indian women who move abroad with their husbands after marriage).

“Welcome to Your New Home”:

After the festivities of the wedding settle down, the reality of life in an entirely new country begins to sink in. When a marriage between an NRI and a woman living in India is decided (usually by the family), in almost all cases it is the woman who is expected to relocate to her husband’s home. While life aboard can bring about new educational and employment opportunities, many recent immigrants face challenges in adapting to the culture and language of their new home country. Many NRI wives also struggle with loneliness owing to that fact that, for many, it is their first time away from family. When these personal struggles are combined with assumed standards of behaviour inflicted on NRI wives by their husbands, conflict in the marriage can easily arise.

Dr. Pragya Rashmi, a senior consultant psychologist who frequently works with NRI wives, attributes much of the conflict to competing social and cultural expectations, explaining how “Most men expect their wives to be modern and yet meet local traditions. Girls from traditional Indian families cannot cope and end up being harassed” (Deccan Chronicle, 2016). However, establishing themselves in a new country so far away from family and friends leaves many NRI wives isolated and vulnerable if things in the marriage take a turn for the worse.

Abuse and Abandonment:

Unfortunately, there instances where the challenges are not cultural at all, but rooted in issues of controlling behaviour and domestic violence instead. In 2015, Times of India published the story of one young woman, who I will refer to as Aanya (identity concealed to protect anonymity) whose experience with NRI marriage started off fine, but didn't stay that way for long. When Aanya first relocated to Chicago with her new husband, she became tasked with cooking, cleaning and all other household duties. Aanya didn't mind this at first, as she was determined to bond with her husband's family. However, only 2 months into the marriage, Aanya's husband became violent and controlling. The abuse was physical, emotionally and financial. With no family close by or resources of her own Aanya felt trapped and ashamed of her situation. In her own words, "I had moved to the most westernized country in the world, but my life was more pitiful than that of a girl living in the most orthodox village of our country" (Times of India, 2015).

Another common issue among NRIs is spousal abandonment. A 2007 study published by the National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development revealed that, in the state of Punjab alone there were at least 1500 cases of deserted wives between 2004-2007 (Singh et.al, pg 31). More recently, a 2018 Times of India article tragically entitled, *One NRI Wife Calls Home for Help Every 8 Hours* states that between January 1st 2015 and November 30th 2017, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) received 3,328 complaints from NRI wives abroad. Among the most common complaints were mistreatment and desertion (Times of India, 2018).

Proposed Solutions to the Issues Facing NRI Wives:

Typically, NRI marriages are arranged in a matter of months, sometimes weeks. This limited time frame doesn't allow the bride or her family very much time to do a thorough background check on the groom. In many cases, the promise of a more comfortable, affluent life abroad is enough incentive for the bride's family to rush the marriage. The problems facing NRI wives are so severe and numerous that in 2007, the Indian government has issued a 90+ page document entitled *Marriage to Overseas Indians: A Guidance Booklet*. The booklet specifically advises Indians marrying NRIs to verify their future spouse's marital status, employment details, immigration status and criminal background. In addition, they should be vigilant in ensuring the person they are to marry has the appropriate legal documents (passport, social security number bank account papers, etc.)

With the recent increase in complaints, several new laws meant to protect NRI wives are in the works. The MEA is looking into implementing various regulatory measures to punish NRIs who mistreat or desert their wives abroad. One potential measure is the creation of a new law that would allow the government to cancel the passports of NRI husbands who abandon or abuse their wives. Although this particular law hasn't been passed yet, as of March 2018 it is being reviewed by the Ministry of Law and Justice in cooperation with the MEA (Hindustan Times, 2018).

The Challenges of Inter-Cultural Relationships:

In Indian culture, family and extended family is typically more close-knit than in western culture. The first time Amy Jo Burns met her husband's family she felt "white" for the first time in her life. Amy Jo hails from Pennsylvania and her husband Rajan is from Kerala. In an article in *Good Housekeeping*, she shares her experience reconciling with the familial and cultural challenges of their relationship. Although her relationship with Rajan's family had a rough start, everyone was eventually able to reconcile their differences and get

along. “Rajan’s mother came from a country I’d never visited and held traditions I didn’t understand. I couldn’t be the girl she’d always wanted for her son and this was the chasm we stood on either side of, each needing time to gather the courage to bridge it. And in time, we would” (Burns, 2018).

There is significant variation in gender relations across cultures. What might be thought of as friendly conversation in one culture could be considered flirting in another. As an American woman married to a Gujarati man, Sheryl Parbhoo had a faced a number of obstacles making friends in her husband’s tight-knit community. “I often felt disapproving eyes on me from the kitchen while chatting with the guys. While his (her husband’s) female cousins were always lovely and welcoming, I had no female Indian friends outside of the family. None rushed to befriend me. We simply had nothing in common” (Parbhoo, 2015). Similar to Burn’s story, Parbhoo also felt a cultural gap that manifested itself in emotional distance, which in my opinion illustrates the reality that cultural adaptation can be difficult to handle for both sides.

Another challenge in intercultural relationships is parenting. Inter-cultural couples have to grapple with questions like *who’s traditions do we pass down to our children?* Brittany Muddamalle, who blogs under the name *The Almost Indian Wife* emphasizes the importance of ensuring that both cultures (mothers and fathers) are represented in the children’s lives on a daily basis. This will prevent one culturing from becoming more “dominant” and will also help mixed race children feel proud of both sides of their family (Muddamalle, 2015). This is especially important if the family lives in a place where one of the cultures is a minority because too often, trying to assimilate to the more prevalent can cause culture children to feel ashamed of the less prevalent one.

Conclusion:

I wanted to write about intercultural relationships because, as a white woman in a long-term relationship with a Gujarati man, this topic is deeply personal for me. I also wanted to write about NRI wives because, within the last year alone, the Indian community in Halifax has seen a sharp increase of young, recently married women coming over to live with their husbands. I have been fortunate enough to befriend some of them and have nothing but the utmost respect for their strength and resilience in adapting to Canadian culture. The most important thing I've learned during my time in India is that happiness doesn't depend on where you live, it depends on the people you surround yourself with.

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