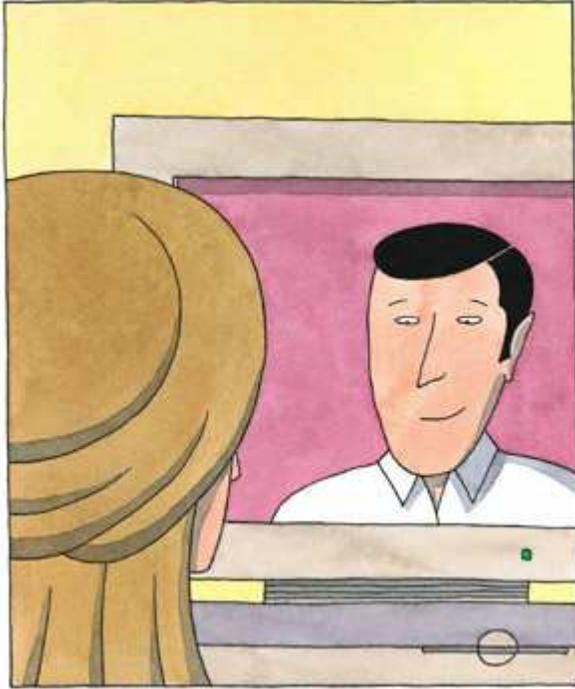


Bride Shopping on the Net

By Sandhya Nankani

Indian American singles take search for suitable "other" to the Net.



All 20-something-year-old Indian men or women, no matter where they live in the world, are bound to wake up one day to find the sun shining, the birds chirping, and their parents mumbling, "It is time for you to settle down. You are at that age."

Contrary to popular conception, even second generation South Asians who have grown up in the United States cannot evade this quintessential Indian dilemma.

Sometimes the parental matrimonial missive is accompanied by a list of "eligible" or "good" boys and girls, maybe even a photograph or two. For those unfortunate enough to still be single when the "talk" takes place, the full gravity of the situation is underscored with the suggestion to respond to or place a advertisement in the

ubiquitous, matrimonial sections of Indian newspapers.

So there you have it: "Alliance is invited for 6'1" tall, handsome, fair, public school educated, Punjabi, Hindu Arora Boy, 28, MBA (USA), from cultured & high family background, employed California in Automotive Company. Non smoker and occasional non-veg. Would prefer tall, well- educated, good and cultured family girl with Indian social and religious values. Caste no bar. Send biodata/ photograph to"

Some succeed in waving off these pesky demands from parents, aunts, and uncles, who have all the characteristics of a determined fly hovering around a plate of mangoes. The fly may buzz off momentarily, to bug another unfortunate diner in a crowded restaurant of single Indians, but, be sure that it will return to pester you again with an even louder drone.

"Time is passing," you are warned. "You don't want to lose all your chances, you know. Better you start now or else..."

What do you do then? I am not sure what I will do; the fly has not rested on my plate of mangoes. Yet.

However, I have had the privilege of hearing many delightful stories of attractive, professional, dynamic, lively, and intelligent men and women caving under the pressure, agreeing to look at some photographs, meet one or two prospects from "nice" families, maybe even send their own photographs out for review. Many members of my generation, despite their initial resistance, discover themselves finally worn down by the incessant nagging and agreeing to participate in the rites of introduction and post-meeting eye-brow raising.

Case in Point

A few months ago, I was talking to an old friend from college, a 25- year-old woman who had always vowed to me that she "wasn't going to get married for a long time." We had not spoken in almost a year and what do you know, the topic of marriage came up within the first 15 minutes of our conversation.

"My parents are putting the pressure on me," she said. "They want to put out an ad and they want me to take a picture. Our contract was that they wouldn't bother me about this until I was done with graduate school. I'll be finished this summer and now, they are beginning to worry about me."

Heard this story before? Sure.

My friend continued. "I have decided to be proactive. So, I'm putting out an ad for myself on the Internet. At least this way, no matter what my parents do, I can continue to make my own efforts at meeting people." In short, my friend wanted to feel as though she had more control over the selection process.

Matrimonial Services thrive on the Internet

I was fascinated by her approach and decided to check out the so- called Internet matrimonial sites. I had briefly browsed through them about a year ago ... by accident, of course. This time, however, I ended up spending hours scrolling down page after page of profiles of single men and women.

Did you know that over 100 URL's offer "matrimonial" services aimed at international Indian audiences? The format, audience, and layout vary. Some are designed mainly for NRI's seeking suitable partners in India. Others are spaces where young professional Indians in the West, and more specifically North America and Europe, can post personal advertisements for free, seek life partners in relative anonymity, and if necessary,

communicate with people whom they find interesting. Either way, sounds like a burgeoning business to me.

My mouth dropped open. I did not know there were so many single people searching for long-term relationships or for that matter, marriage. And, I had no clue that so many people were using the resources of the Internet to (as I saw it) empower themselves in a process that almost always takes away one's feeling of control.

I have often heard aunts and uncles say, "You can control how you do in school, how you do in your job, whether you get a promotion, a raise, graduate school admission. But, you cannot control when you are born, when you die, and when you get married. When the boy comes, he will come. When the girl comes, she will come."

The fall-out-of-the-sky theory that is so popularly flaunted is almost always directly contradicted by the gentle advice that follows. "You must not be trying hard enough. Why don't you go out more? It's America. You can date, you know." Or, "You should give these boys more of a chance. Why are you so picky?"

After I discovered the hundreds of personal advertisements floating in cyberspace, I began to wonder who these "suitable individuals" really were; whether they had found what they were looking for; were they having any luck? I know why parents post advertisements on websites like www.matrimonial.com, but what I wanted to know was what had prompted second generation men and women to turn to the Internet.

I wrote up a long survey and sent it by e-mail to a few hundred men and women whose advertisements I had landed upon and who fit my selected category of "U.S. based single professional personally seeking a long term life partner." I must confess I was somewhat biased in my selection. I picked people who reminded me of my close circle of friends – intellectual, educated, open-minded, with varied interests. I did not send any e-mails to men or women who wrote India Abroad style personal advertisements: "Seeking eligible bachelor, fair, financially secure, etc." Any mention of skin complexion, income levels or horoscope was an automatic out. And, lastly, in conducting my surveys, I used the name Sonya Devi Desmukh to retain some degree of anonymity. Then, I sat back and watched for a week.

The results are in: Audiences surprised and surprising

More and more single Indian men and women in North America are turning to the Internet as a means of finding their life partners, suitable others, soul mates, you name it. Many of them are surprised to find themselves actually using this medium.

"When I first heard about using the Internet to look for a potential partner, I thought only 'geeks' would attempt it," one 31-year-old high school teacher from British Columbia, Canada, wrote. "However, as I browsed through some of the ads out of curiosity, I realized then that most of the people featured on these sites were professional individuals. Most of the people were career oriented and did not generally come across too many single Indian individuals of the opposite sex."

A large majority of my respondents have corresponded with over 10 prospective partners in the past three months and a few told me that they might have found their "soul mates" through these services. However, few expressed a willingness to actually pay to use these services.

"I only tried them because they were free," said one 26 year old Engineer in Toronto, Canada. "I would not pay for a service that I feel may not work (cost versus benefit)."

Another man responded, "The person who searches wants you as much as you want them. So, why should one person pay?"

Educated Consumers

Choosing a web-site seems to entail a good deal of effort. Most often, a good deal of research seems to go into determining the web-site(s) of choice for one's advertisement.

One 27-year-old design manager in New York (email name: NYCPrincess) explained, "I viewed a lot of the ads on the site and researched around the site to see its quality. I wanted to place an ad to 'meet people' not a 'matrimonial' ad." She continued, "I chose the sites that offered me this chance."

Why put an advertisement on the Internet but not in a newspaper? Opinions on this varied, but the general consensus was that Internet dating services are more informal and provide a space for men and women to view each other as potential long-term partners, not just husbands and wives.

Many of my respondents felt that they had nothing to lose on the Internet. The anonymous nature of e-mail lulled them into a sense of security. No middleman was involved. On the Internet, it is just you and your words. Another deemed benefit is the available pool of candidates. NYCPrincess elaborates, "While I met four guys in the last year through my friends, I got responses from over 300+ guys through my ads."

This does not mean that these individuals meet every candidate with whom they correspond. In fact, geographic distance, time, and the availability of photographs usually cut down the probability of this occurring. Second generation South Asian singles have

set up an screening process no less rigorous than their parents' for themselves. The difference: they, not their parents, are in control.

Dating is different

E-mail – regardless of its perceived efficiency, economical nature, and speed – is no substitute for meeting a potential partner. Users of Internet based matrimonial services prefer to talk on the phone two to three weeks after first exchanging e-mails and like to meet soon after to determine their compatibility.

E-mail, despite its drawbacks, does allow for a relatively flexible and open meeting circle. When it comes to defining the ethics of Internet courtship, most of the participants in Internet dating and matrimonial services agree that there is nothing unethical about corresponding with several individuals simultaneously.

One 32-year-old, New York based communication designer who claims that he may have found his future wife, for example, continues to remain connected to other potential individuals. His explanation is simple. "One, I am not dating anyone," he says. "Two, I am searching for a life partner. Just because one inquiry is more 'flash-in-the-pan' than the others does not mean that I can hang my hat up. Three, I have never met this person. She responded to one of my profiles."

Not everyone is clear on expected etiquette of e-mail, however.

"Since it's different from getting to know someone in person, there's a learning process to go through," said a 24 year-old woman, an actor who lives in Chicago. "There should be a seminar on how to correctly establish long-distance relationships."

Although they admit that uncertainties, freaks and weirdoes abound in the cyber world, my pool of South Asian singles seeking suitable significant others remain optimistic about the process. At the end of the day, they know exactly what they want. Now that they have appropriated some aspect of the search for their life-partner into their possession, they seem to have fewer frustrations with the flies in the room.

"They just want to see me happy," they can write about their parents, extended family and community acquaintances, punctuating their e-mail with a smiley-face.



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