

Cross Cultural Marriages and the Problem of Adjustment in Conjugal Life

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Abstract: India is a multicultural society and in the era of globalization people have become more mobile. Love relation among the members representing different cultures is becoming common. But societies and cultures being patriarchal, it is the women who have to make sacrifices and go through the painful process of learning and unlearning cultures. When the husbands extend all support, the wives manage to make the necessary adjustments but when the husbands do not stand by their struggling wives the marriages develop unreconcilable fissures.

Keywords: cross-cultural marriage, globalization, love, care, adjustments, support.

Introduction

Cross cultural marriages are not uncommon in India, because of its heterogeneous populations and loosely followed rules of marriage. All couples experience different kinds of problems in their conjugal life but the ones representing different cultural backgrounds are likely to face more problems in adjusting with each other. With globalization and greater spatial movements, the incidence of cross-cultural marriages has definitely increased over the years. Such marriages promote tolerance and brotherhood among the peoples of different cultures. The spread of education and new economic opportunities are the two major factors that offer greater freedom to the members of the younger generation in selection of spouses. Two families tied by marital relation but differ on beliefs, level of education, values and culture traits might issue like (1) whose customs are to be followed and (2) whose customs are of higher value. But with some improvisation and adjustments they find their way out from the possible social chaos.

There are advantages as well as disadvantages of cross-cultural marriages. The spouses are under pressure to learn each other's culture and make

compromises and adjustments in their ways of living. Mutual appreciation is one of the potential benefits of such marriages. The spouses as well as the families that are now tied by kinship ties become more tolerant and appreciative of each other's cultures. The children of such couples also learn elements of their parents' differential cultures, although they might be facing some serious problems as well while adjusting with two cultural traditions. Of course, such marriages are not risk-free. The spouses face multiple challenges in adjusting with each other and in mitigating the misunderstandings which might crop up while negotiating differential expectations and different cultural practices, tastes and value systems. One culture may promote women's submissive role whereas other may allow greater individual autonomy. Often, such marriages happen against the will of the parents and in violation of the prevailing cultural expectations. The couple encounters parents' objections; their friends' disapproval and their children may find disapproval from their peers in school and often get confused about their identities. The couple may fight over the mode of upbringing of the children as both of them might want their children to grow up the way they want.

The main purpose of this study of a few cross-cultural marriages in Sikkim is to explore the problems that face the couples, their children and family members. The focus here is on how the women involved in such marriages transform themselves while adjusting with the members of the families of their husbands and their differential cultural practices and expectations. In a patriarchal social order, the bride joins the groom's family and is expected to embrace the latter's culture. The women are constrained to make all kinds of adjustments and adopt a new way of life, a new language in a new social and geo-cultural space. The men, on the other hand, are free from such obligations as they are privileged to continue with their way of life, without making much adjustment.

The paper is based on three case studies of cross-cultural marriages in Sikkim. In the first two cases, the grooms are from Nepali community and brides are from other community and other country and in the third case, a Nepali Rai woman is married to a Bengali man.

Case 1

Sunita, a Bengali middleclass girl from a small town of North Bengal was a part of a small family of two sisters and parents. Sunita's father was a service holder while mother a housewife. The liberal ambience in the family helped Sunita and her sister growing up with values of women empowerment,

self-dignity, power of decision making, and so on. From her childhood Sunita used to help her parents by doing outdoor works like shopping, banking operations, cycling, bike riding etc. She had a tomboyish image.

It was in the university that she met handsome, shy Pranab, who hailed from a large joint family, based in rural Sikkim. Soon Sunita and Pranab fell in love. Their affairs turned into marriage within one year (1999). The marriage happened without much planning before they could know each other's culture properly. The marriage function was organized by Sunita's family at their home following the Bengali tradition. Some of Pranab's relatives who joined the marriage party were very much eager to know the rituals followed in a Bengali marriage. On the auspicious day the ceremony was over by midnight. Pranab and his family members experienced the difference as in the hills all marriage-related functions are organized during day time.

The couple settled in a neo-local residence, at Pranab's workplace, away from the latter's parental home. Sunita was new to the place and used to wait for Pranab the whole day, as Pranab had to attend his work. She had no friends to talk. The time table followed in the hills also posed a big problem for Sunita. In the evening time, when plainsmen return from work, have tea and snacks the hill people are busy preparing meals for dinner. Sunita had difficulty in adjusting with this routine; she was also shocked that after evening there was no social life in the hills.

Pranab remained very supportive and never complained for anything. He silently observed how Sunita was accommodating herself with the new culture. In order to help Sunita fight out loneliness the first thing Pranab did was to arrange cable connection to their television set.

One day, Sunita heard the sound of a bell called "Dhangro", which was being played by a traditional faith healer from a nearby house. On enquiry, Sunita learnt about traditional beliefs and faiths practiced by people of Sikkim. On another day, Sunita woke up from deep sleep hearing a weird sound and chanting hymn by a Jogi at mid night. She was horrified but later was told that it is an age-old Nepali custom to remove evil spirits and be free from sins by donating cash and kind to the "jogis". Sunita started following such local practices in order to be acquainted with the local culture.

Durga Puja is the main festival in both cultures. But the modes of celebration are different. In her childhood, Sunita used to enjoy this festival by pandal hopping, roaming from day to night with friends and family members, having special food and a lot of fun. The five-day long festival meant complete

fun; no cooking at home and total freedom from studies and other obligations. Sunita missed those childhood days badly sitting alone in her husband's place. As a Buhari (daughter-in-law) now she is expected to be in the kitchen most of the time. Along with other daughter-in-laws in her in-law's house she cooks special food for relatives who are supposed to visit them of the festival days, following Nepali tradition. She had to mould herself according to the demands of the culture of her new place. Now she longs for the festive days so that she could return to her parental house and recreate those moments of *puja* days in Bengali style.

The couple have been visiting their Mulghar i.e. Pranab's original residence occasionally. It is a joint family. In the village residence, Sunita always tried to get up early since that was the norm, but she always found out that other family members were already active in the kitchen and had two rounds of morning tea. Despite her honest efforts she failed to wake up early enough in the morning to outwit the other family members. She felt embarrassed thinking that she had failed to fulfill her in-law's expectations.

Sunita faced serious language problem, in the initial years after marriage, in communicating with in-laws in Nepali. She could not communicate in Bengali since other members had little knowledge about it. She could not find another Bengali in among the neighbours with whom she could have chatted. Lack of communication brought her a sense of isolation. In one sense, not knowing the language proved to be a boon since she could not decode the criticism her in-laws might have heaped on her inefficiencies. Sunita tried to overcome the crisis situations with smiles. To manage the situation, Sunita used Hindi as the lingua franca, which was understood by most of the family members excepting her mother-in-law and some senior members, who would not speak anything but Nepali. Both Sunita's family members and in-law's family sometimes laughed at each other over language and often cracked jokes on it in front of Sunita. Sometimes negative remarks in generalized terms were passed by the relatives of both sides which made Sunita upset. Every time she tried to correct them by providing detailed information about the two cultures she directly observed.

Within one year of marriage Sunita had to shift to another place as she got teaching job in a school where she had to explain in Nepali. Sunita had no other choice but to learn Nepali language because she not only had to teach her students but had to communicate with the maid servant, shopkeepers and other common people as well, who would communicate through local language only. Within a couple of years, Sunita became fluent in Nepali language.

It took Sunita some time to learn cooking of different local vegetables. To adapt to the awkward smell of dry fish and Kinema (fermented food) was a big challenge for Sunita. During the first Durga Puja holidays, when Sunita and Pranab went to their village home, Sunita was shocked to see a huge amount of raw mutton pieces hanging under the kitchen roof. It was a process of drying meat, which is a delicacy in Nepali food culture. Even people having refrigerator use this traditional technique of drying meat. Sunita felt awkward and disturbed but could not express her feelings even to her husband.

Sunita did not know how to ask her fiancée about his religious identity. So, it remained a secret to her before marriage. It was only after their marriage she came to know that her husband is also a Hindu. Sunita was happy since she knew that adjusting with a different religious culture would have been a big problem.

Sunita and Pranab have been together for the last 19 years. The actual crisis starts in this phase of life. Now their only son has become an adolescent. The teenager has embraced the Sikkimese culture and refuses to speak Bengali. He feels ashamed of speaking in his mother tongue and hides his mother's identity in front of his friends. This upsets Sunita. Despite the couple's honest efforts to adjust with each other's culture, the child does feel strong attachment to either father's culture or mother's culture. Sunita is very confused and puzzled at her son's behaviour. Notwithstanding some difficulties, Sunita has made sincere efforts to embrace her husband's culture and learnt to compromise. Until recently, life was quite smooth. Of late, however, Sunita has developed some differences with her husband over their only son's upbringing. Both of them want to follow their own style of parenting. Sunita is afraid of interferences of her husband when she is dealing with her son. She fears that their differential approaches might have some negative impact on the personality formation of the child. Till date Sunita has ignored every cold behaviour of her husband with a smile. Whenever there was any differences of opinion or adjustment problem with her spouse, Sunita used to think that the differences could be because of their differential cultural backgrounds. However, rounds of discussions with her close ones have taught Sunita that such conflicts arise not because of different cultural background but definitely because of elements of patriarchy in any family and differences in approach to the conjugal relation.

Her son's behavior puts her in stress and in a state of helplessness. Her son expresses her unhappiness over his mixed physical features and relatively not so fair complexion. Bishal, her son, has developed inferiority complex.

Sunita thinks that it may be a typical adolescence problem and hopes that it will soon be over as he matures with age. She hopes that one day her son will learn to respect and follow both the cultures.

Sunita is by and large happy with the support she has received from her in-laws so far. She does not have grudges against any of her in-laws. She believes that the success of marriages depends largely upon the family background and status and the approach to relations by the spouses. She feels that it is not differences in cultures rather individual level difference that sometimes create problems in their marital life. She feels that it is their educational background which would make their relation stronger. With mutual love, respect, and care, Sunita feels, the difficulties emanate from cross-cultural marriages could be overcome. She suggests that before marriage every couple must know each other's culture well so that they can adjust well after marriage. In some lonely moments, Sunita, a student of sociology, deeply feels that the traditional caste-based marriages within the same culture have some advantages in any woman's life, as she will have to make compromises to a lesser extent.

Case 2

Lory Fe Jagopa is a Philippino bride of a Nepali Sikkimese man. Lory is the eldest among six children of her father. After her mother's death her father married second time. According to their norm children's consent is required for the father to marry second time. All five daughters and one son allowed their father to marry again. Lory is the prettiest among her siblings. Her father is a businessman.

In her in-law's family, Lory lives with her husband, a four-year-old son and two-year-old daughter, a widow mother-in-law and a younger brother-in-law.

Lory's was an intercountry cross-cultural marriage. Lory was associated with one INGO called Universal Peace Federation. Her three maternal uncles had encouraged her to join this NGO when she was a high school student. As a part of the NGO she worked for the orphans, provided food to starving people, participated in cleaning streets and toilets, worked for the rehabilitation centers and arranged group marriages. Among her three maternal uncles the first one married a Japanese, the second one a Thai girl and the third a Philippino girl. All these marriages were organized by the NGO. When Lory grew up, she was brought to the capital city Manila by her uncles and admitted her into International Peace Leadership College. Lory joined the NGO when she was in college. She was the secretary of

PACRB, i.e., Philippine Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles.

After completion of her graduation she did her MA in Business Administration and started working as a lecturer. In 2010 the NGO with the help of the college organized a group marriage ceremony for 25-27 couples. Lory had also sent her photo for selection and so did her would be husband, who was also a member of that NGO. They sent their half and full body photos. According to the norm of their organization, the founder and all the assistants sat together, followed the match procedure by reading the forehead and ears of all the willing boys and girls. Once the pairs were selected, they had to take blessings from the head of the INGO. Hence in 2012, her would be husband from India went to Philippines along with the then culture Minister of Sikkim. Her husband received financial support from different sources as the journey was very expensive. On 19th April, 2012 the couple tied their knot through a function at Manila.

Her husband belongs to a conservative Hindu Pranami family. His family members had strong objection in this union as Lory is a Christian. But after marriage when Lory came to a remote village of West district of Sikkim the villagers and the in-laws were all impressed by the beautiful, very fair princess like Buhari (daughter in law); they all welcomed her.

Lory purchased a book before her marriage and started learning about Indian culture. In order to know each other's culture, the couple used to have video chat and long conversation through WhatsApp. They used to share each other's cultural differences but when the lady reached her in-laws' place, she faced the actual challenge. Language was an obstacle. Whenever she tried to communicate in Nepali it was misunderstood by the people. Moreover, her accent was so different.

After marriage, Lory came to Sikkim and joined a private university as an accountant. The university was not far from her house. She wanted to keep herself busy in order to save herself from loneliness and possible depression. In 2015, however, the institution closed down because of some technical problems. During her association with the university, she started interacting with so many people and started learning Nepali language. In a joking mood Lory told me that not knowing the language at the beginning was an advantage since she could not decode the sarcastic and critical comments, which they might have been hurled at her. She recalls that whenever she gave a smile without understanding anyone's conversation people used to say Bichara Buhari (poor daughter-in-law). Tagalog which is Lory's mother tongue, came to disuse. She was laughing revealing the

fact that only when she gets very angry, she enters into the washroom and releases her anger by shouting in Tagalog which nobody out here would understand.

Although a Christian, Lory has no prejudice performing pujas. But her children are little confused about the religion they have to be follow. Sometimes they ask their mother 'Mamma, where is God? How does he look like?' Lory tries to answer in her own way saying that God lives in the sky and he wears white cloth. But her son replies saying 'no, he stays in the Mandir, the temple placed in their home. Lory often cuts jokes on this issue to her mother-in-law, pronouncing that her first child is a Christian and the second one is Hindu.

Although her husband informed her that they belong to a Pranami family which does not allow non-vegetarian food, Lory took it lightly as in Philippines no one is a complete vegetarian. It was unthinkable for her. She thought that her in-laws eat less meat only. After marriage the first thing she had to sacrifice was the delicious non-vegetarian food made of pork, beef, seafood, octopus, crabs and egg and so on. She realized the gravity of the problem then. Sacrificing her loved food habits and becoming vegetarian was a big challenge for her. When she was pregnant with her first baby, the neighbours showed their sympathy by offering less spicy fried chicken to her secretly. Otherwise she was dependent on rice and fruits only.

Later on, she worked out a new survival strategy. Now whenever she goes outside, she visits a non-vegetarian restaurant and eats heart out. Sometimes she secretly manages to boil eggs at home and eats. Once she dared to have fry eggs at home but was caught by the in-laws.

Lory grew up knowing one kind of tea made of milk and sugar. In Sikkim, people generally prefer tea with sugar as well as salt. Some guests like tea with milk and sugar, some prefer just black tea and yet some others prefer tea with salt and milk. Lory gets utterly confused when she has to make different kinds of tea to the taste of different guests.

In 2016, four years after their marriage, Lory visited her parental home in Philippines, along with her husband and children. Her family members and friends were all shocked noticing that Lory's skin complexion had darkened dramatically. Lory explained the situation blaming it on the warmer climate and use of firewood for cooking.

Disagreements and misunderstanding with husband and in-laws disturbed her on many occasions. But her family values, lessons of humanity she has learnt from her parents and the head of the NGO prevent her from taking

any negative step. Lory also does not want to disturb her son's upbringing. Her parents have advised her that she should carry on with the present arrangement as long as her husband supports her.

Case 3

The third case is that of a Bengali groom and a Nepali bride. Sandhya and Akhil are living a happy conjugal life for the last 25 years. Sandhya is the second among nine sisters. Her father is a farmer and mother a housewife. Her father and mother have primary school level education. At the time of Sandhya's marriage her father-in-law and mother in-law were alive. After the death of her father-in-law, her mother-in-law started staying with Akhil's married brothers. Akhil is the youngest among five brothers and three sisters.

Sandhya and Akhil came to know each other in April 1992, when they joined two different government schools in the same place. It was a very remote place of West District of Sikkim. They were staying in a same building. One day, the headmaster of Sandhya's school introduced her to Akhil. The place was so remote that they hardly had any one to talk to. The two lonely young persons living in the same building soon became friends. They started sharing professional as well as personal problems. Akhil, by nature is a very caring person. His decency, politeness attracted Sandhya. The place where they lived was Lepcha dominated. Sandhya saw many of the boys belonging to that place indulge in different kinds of drug and alcohol addiction. Sandhya wanted to marry a person who would be free of any kind of addiction. She found Akhil the right choice.

There were several small but touchy incidents which enhanced Sandhya's admiration for Akhil. One day Sandhya found that one of her photos from her album was missing. She soon discovered that it was Akhil who had stolen it. The friendship soon turned into love. They decided to marry. There was no objection from Akhil's family but Sandhya's family members were against the alliance. In the hills, the plainsmen (Akhil was one) are referred to as Madeshia, which is one way to show them in poor light. Sandhya's family members were worried that it will be a mismatch since the Madeshias nurse an inferior culture. With the interference of some of Sandhya's relatives and local panchayat members the problem was sorted out. In 1993 they got married.

Sandhya feels that she did not face much trouble in her conjugal life so far; her adjustment with a different culture was also smooth. Being in Sikkim, surrounded by the Sikkimese, made her adjustments trouble free. It is only occasionally, during summer/winter vacations or festive seasons that she

goes to her in-law's place. At the beginning of their married life when she visited her in-law's place during summer season it was a very difficult time for her as the climate out there was extremely hot. But everyone in her husband's family treated her with love and affection which made her adjustments easy. Being the youngest daughter-in-law at home everyone loves her. All the elder brothers of Akhil cut jokes at her. Even today they wait for Akhil and Sandhya before planning and celebrating a major occasion in the family. Other family members have also accepted her as the perfect daughter-in-law. Sandhya maintains good relationship with all of them. Everyone shares their secrets with Sandhya. Sandhya, in order to honour their faith, keeps everything confidential and because of this she is loved by all.

Subham, their only son, was born a year after their marriage in a Primary Health Centre at West District of Sikkim. No one came to guide Sandhya during her critical days. After six months she moved towards Kolkata, where Akhil's family lives. There, Sandhya learnt some elementary lessons about child care from her mother-in-law and other family members. After seven years of their son's birth, their daughter Sangita was born. The couple became very busy and happy in their family life.

Until the death of her mother-in-law Sandhya followed the traditional Bengali habits like entering toilet with minimum clothes to maintain hygiene, which she was very uncomfortable with, and separating Amish and Niramish food that is vegetarian and non-vegetarian items as her mother-in-law was a widow who was a strict vegetarian. Now that her mother-in-law is not there Sandhya lives with greater freedom.

Bengalis enjoy Durga puja and everything associated with it, especially pandal hopping in group. Born and brought up in hill culture Sandhya and her children never liked it. No one ever forced them to join in this event. Akhil does not like pandal hopping. Therefore, it was not a problem to anybody. Sandhya remains busy in other activities during puja days. She expressed her happiness and pride while informing that in this year's puja she prepared tea eleven times a day for the family members.

Sandhya taught her children to bow down their head in front of all elders, which is to be done every evening according to Rai custom. Her children sometimes get confused about how to wish a person. Bengalis are less formal in wishing someone while the Nepalis are very particular in this matter. Akhil's family members are very happy seeing the politeness in her children. Children have learnt offering anything to anybody using both hands, which is a typical Nepali custom.

Sandhya expressed her dislike for the way the Bengalis in general talk to their parents or senior members. Initially watching a conversation, she thought they were arguing, quarrelling. Plain people speak loudly which Sandhya does not like as she taught her children to be polite.

Though the time-tables followed in Kolkata and in Sikkim do not match Sandhya and her family members have adopted the time-table followed in Kolkata in their family in Sikkim. They have introduced the habit of waking up early and going to bed late at night. Sandhya and Akhil thus find time to spend with their children after working hours. The children also get more time to study.

Initially, after marriage, Sandhya was communicating with her in-laws in English and Hindi. During her stay in her in-law's house for two months of winter holidays she learnt Bengali. At the first year Akhil used to help Sandhya in her conversation with members of her in-law's family. Whenever she spoke in Nepali Akhil's family members inquired she was backbiting. Now, at their own residence in Sikkim both Sandhya and Akhil speak in Nepali with their children but when they are at Akhil's place all four communicate in Bengali. Sandhya believes that cross cultural marriages are beneficial for socialization of children as they easily learn two languages and two cultures.

Sandhya learnt how to make roti and other Bengali dishes from her mother-in-law, when she was alive. In the beginning, in her in-law's place, she took time to adjust with the idea of using sugar in almost all dishes. She did not like the sweetened taste. But had all the dishes happily since she did not want to offend her mother-in-law. With time, however, Sandhya and her children have started loving the taste of Bengali dishes. The spicy Bengali foods were also a problem that she has overcome with time. Sandhya was surprised seeing so many dishes the Bengalis prepare for a main meal and the enormous amount of time they spent on cooking. The Nepalis prepare simple, less spicy dishes and they spend much less time in the kitchen. She learnt cooking different items from both cultures. Today, during festive time, she tries to cook food according to family members' choice.

Both of them belong to the same religion, there is no big adjustment problem in this regard. Sandhya's parents also do not follow traditional Rai culture. Sandhya has learnt from her mother-in-law about the importance of Laxmi Puja, in which the role of a daughter-in-law is very important. Even today, she remains present every year in Kolkata just for this occasion.

Now Sandhya's children have grown up and it is the time to think about their career. Sandhya gets little bit upset as her children have lost the opportunity to have a Sikkim Subject Domicile. According to the norm if a Sikkimese girl marries a non-Sikkimese boy the next generation are not entitled to have the same. By implication, they are not entitled to the facilities meant for the Sikkimese, nor even tax relaxation in job. They have to face open competition. But Sandhya accepts the fact positively. Since Sandhya and Akhil were aware of this from the beginning they have groomed their children in a way that they would be able to cope with the situation.

A thought sometimes that comes to Sandhya's mind is what kind of spouse her children will select. She thinks that she will give her children full liberty in this matter; she would not have any objection if her children select their spouses from different cultures. She however would like if her daughter selects a Bengali groom and son a Nepali bride. She feels that the Bengali girls are pampered by their family members. They hardly go through the hardships that an average Nepali girl goes through. That is precisely why she thinks that if her son marries a Bengali girl, she would face a lot of adjustment problems. A Nepali daughter-in-law would be more caring and understanding.

Conclusion

The three case studies narrated above help us in drawing a few observations. First, out of three cases one, the last one, is a very successful story because the bride could stay in her own state in the midst of her own culture but the earlier two marriages have problems because the brides had to leave their own culture and had to adjust with a completely different culture. In the case where the marriage worked out well the bride had to visit her in-law's place only occasionally and she took it as a fun to pick up the traits of her in-law's culture and got enriched in the process. The couple is happy notwithstanding the fact that their children would be debarred from the special privileges meant for the Sikkimese citizens. Second, much of the success of a cross-cultural marriage depends upon the love, care and understanding between the husband and wife. In a patriarchal social order, it is often the women who make all the sacrifices and adjustments and go through the process of unlearning and learning cultures, which is very difficult and painful. In this difficult journey what matters most is the husband's support; it gives added strength and courage to a woman to adjust and overcome the family problems.