



Yankees & Indians

Essay and Photographs by Jennifer Vivekanand

My husband is what is known as an NRI, or Non-Resident Indian, from Chennai, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu in India. I am a WASP, or White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant, from Michigan. Being from the North makes me a Yankee, so that makes both my husband and me foreigners to North Carolina.

In Durham, North Carolina, where we live, there is a thriving South Asian community. There is also a small diaspora of South Asian and White mixed couples in this area. I have heard accounts of weeping parents and icy receptions on the part of families when weddings were announced. My husband Amrit and I are fortunate in that we did not experience any such trouble with our families when we made our intentions public.

Meeting my future in-laws just three days before our wedding, made me very nervous about their reaction. What would they think of this American, Christian, white girl marrying their son? We had made many telephone calls and exchanged emails prior to their arrival from India, but first meetings are always nerve-wracking. Add to the mix our different cultural backgrounds and religions, and you might have an idea of the unconventional way in which we first bonded. As it



My mother-in-law performing the *Pongal* puja. *Pongal* is also the name of the traditional sweet rice dish prepared where the puja is performed.



During *Pongal*, decorated bulls are marched through the streets. Residents make gifts of cloth and tea money to the owners.

turned out, my in-laws are very warm and kind people who accepted me into the family without reservation. I was very touched by the gift of a traditional wedding necklace, the *mangalsuthra*, from my in-laws. The *mangalsuthra* has many different styles and sizes, just like American wedding rings. My own parents were also very accepting of our union, so it made for a relaxed and happy wedding time.

We tried to represent both our cultures in the wedding weekend. During the rehearsal, I wore a beautifully embroidered *ghagra choli*, a long skirt with a short sleeved blouse, that my mother-in-law brought from India, and we held the rehearsal dinner at an Indian restaurant. The wedding was held at Duke University Chapel, where we wore traditional American wedding clothes, and our groomsmen and bridesmaids were a mix of friends, and family on both sides. We blended into the ceremony my mother-in-law placing the *mangalsuthra* on me, in addition to the traditional exchange of wedding rings. At the reception we served both vegetarian and meat dishes, to accommodate all our guests' needs and tastes.

Sometimes we do get stares from people, but for the most part, it just seems to be out of curiosity. I have been frequently asked, among other things, if I have converted to Hinduism, or if I am now a vegetarian. It is surprising what perfect strangers will come up to you and ask. It is assumed my husband is a Hindu or that he is a vegetarian simply because he is from India. I always answer the same way. "No, why should we change? Our differences are what attracted us to each other in the first place." For the most part, people have been very accepting of us, and I am encouraged to see the issue explored now in recent hit movies like *Bend It Like Beckham*.

January 2002 I went to India. During my first morning, I awoke to the sound of a vendor shouting his wares in the street. Jumping up, I went out onto the balcony and peered down. The palm and mango trees, parrots and flower sellers caught my eye. Down below, sitting in a blue ox-cart, were two small boys. They were staring back at me and giggling. I smiled and waved. They probably thought I was a lunatic, but

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I didn't care. We arrived in time for the *Pongal* harvest festival. *Pongal* is also the name of the sweet rice served on this occasion. I came downstairs to see fresh stalks of sugar cane being brought into the *puja*, or prayer room. Catching a glimpse through the window of decorated cows being led down the road, I ran into the street like a demented tourist to watch the procession marching by. People donated pieces of material to the men

leading the cows, which were then draped over the animal. A passing cow "blessed" me by raising his hoof on the command of his owner, in return for some tea money, or small rupee donation. That same morning, a woman was drawing designs called *Kolam* with white rice powder in front of all the houses on the street. Because it was a holiday, she was filling in the designs with pretty colors. *Kolam* is a symbol of good fortune and welcome. It is an old cultural traditional and an important form of female artistic expression in India. An artist myself, I was impressed with the intricacies of the designs.

The unfamiliar sights, smells, and sounds all around me were fascinating. I had been warned about the traffic, but nothing could prepare me for actually seeing and being in it. The roads in Chennai seemed to be one giant obstacle course. Seeing drivers share the road with cows, scooters, ox-carts, barefoot bicyclists and pedestrians, taxis, cars and three-wheeled autos was a new experience for me. Not to mention the ancient lime-green city buses crammed full of people at rush hour. The use of the horn was liberal, and it was shocking to see entire families riding a motor scooter, women riding sidesaddle holding tiny babies. Although I saw poverty, I also saw a progressive India. Most Americans only think of India in terms of a *National Geographic* special on TV.

While in India, we went to a tailor, who stitched me some beautiful *salwar kameez* of raw silk, and other materials. The *salwar kameez* is a pull over shirt in many styles and lengths, with matching pants and a long scarf that is worn over the shoulder. In the south of India, in the State of Tamil Nadu, where my husband



Typical traffic scene in the city of Chennai, formerly called Madras, in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu.



The traditional art of *Kolam* is very old. Every morning, women of the house draw rice powder designs outside their doors. Mothers teach daughters and good *Kolam* skills are admired. The designs can be simple or complicated, and are often symmetrical.

is from, the *sari* is more traditional. It is made from varying meters of material, depending on the style, and each is folded a specific way. The younger generation is wearing the *salwar kameez* more, as it is more convenient for work, and most foreigners, like myself, choose it over a *sari*, as it hides a multitude of figure flaws. The beautiful hand-stitched embroidery on all the clothes was the work of true craftsmen.

In North Carolina, these blending of cultures and flavors is evident in many areas, such as the Research Triangle Park and surrounding areas of Durham, Cary, Raleigh, Chapel Hill, and Greensborough, just to name a few. People are just as likely to eat a *samosa*, a triangular shaped pastry usually filled with potatoes and peas, as they are to eat a sandwich. There are restaurants, grocery stores, and a cable channel here where movies from Bollywood, the Indian film industry, can be watched, as well as the latest soap operas imported from India. There are doctors, students, engineers, restaurateurs, and shop owners here. Duke University has a South Asian student association, as does North Carolina State, Eastern Carolina University and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Recently, Anoushka Shankar, half-sister to the singer Norah Jones, and daughter of the famous sitar player Ravi Shankar, performed at Duke to big crowds of appreciative fans. Duke has also recently had performances by Odissi dancers from Orissa in India.

In the wake of 9/11, there was a lot of worry among my small mixed-marriage community, that there might be hate crimes committed against South Asians and their families out of fear or cultural misunderstandings. It was so wonderful to find people even more supportive than usual. This area of North Carolina is quite culturally diverse, which makes for an interesting jumble of people and customs. I look forward to seeing what the future holds.

A resident of Durham, North Carolina, Jennifer Vivekanand is an illustrator, author, and graphic designer. She enjoys travelling and photography, and has just published her first children's book. Her work can be viewed on her website: www.artbyjenn.com