



Jonathan Player for The New York Times

Hindu women take part in a speed dating event at a London nightclub. Daters meet for three minutes before moving on to the next potential mate.

Arranged Marriages Get a Little Rearranging

By LIZETTE ALVAREZ

LONDON, June 21 — They are young, hip, South Asians in their 20's who glide seamlessly between two cultures, carefully cherry picking from the West to modernize the East.

They can just as easily listen to Justin Timberlake, the pop star, as Rishi Rich, the Hindu musical dynamo. They eat halal meat but wear jeans and T-shirts to cafes.

Now these young Indians and Pakistanis are pushing the cultural boundaries created by their parents and grandparents one step further: they are reshaping the tradition of arranged marriages in Britain.

While couples were once introduced exclusively by relatives and friends, the Aunt Bijis, as Muslims call their matchmakers, are now being slowly nudged out by a boom in Asian marriage Web sites, chat rooms and personal advertisements. South Asian speed dating — Hindus one night, Muslims the next — is the latest phenomenon to hit London, with men and women meeting each other for just three minutes at restaurants and bars before moving on to the next potential mate.

Arranged marriages are still the norm within these clannish, tight-knit communities in Britain, but, with the urging of second- and third-generation children, the nature of the arrangement has evolved, mostly by necessity.

What the young Indians and Pakistanis of Britain have done, in effect, is to modernize practices that had evolved among the urban middle class in India in recent decades, allowing the prospective bride and groom a little more than one fleeting meeting to make up their minds.

The relaxation that had crept in since the 1960's allowed the couple, after an initial meeting before their extended families, to meet alone several times, either with family members in another room or at a restaurant, before delivering a verdict. Now, the meetings take place in public venues without the family encounter first.

"The term we use now is 'assisted' arranged marriage," said Maha Khan, a 23-year-old London Muslim woman. "The whole concept has changed a lot. Parents have become more open and more liberal in their

concept of marriage and courtship."

Gitangeli Sapra, a trendy, willowy British Sindhu who at 25 jokes that she is on her way to spinsterhood, is an avid speed dater with no qualms about advertising her love of modern arranged marriages. She even wrote a column about it for The Sunday Times.

"It's not based on love," she said, "which can fizzle out."

Ms. Sapra had attended 10 of the more formal arranged meetings — awkward, drawn-out affairs in which the young man, his mother and several other relatives came over to meet the young woman and her family. She wore her best Indian outfit, a sari or elegant Indian pants and top.

In Britain, new rules for an old practice.

She sat quietly, which is almost impossible to fathom, considering her chattiness. When called upon, she poured tea, and then talked briefly to her potential mate in a side room.

"The matriarchs do the talking," she said over a glass of wine at an Italian restaurant. "You sit there looking cute and like the ideal housewife."

"To be honest, it's an easy way to get a rich man, with my mother's blessing," she added, with a laugh.

None of them worked out, though, and Ms. Sapra has moved on to speed dating, with the blessings of her mother.

The very concept raises the hackles of some more old-fashioned parents, but many are coming around, in part out of desperation. If Ms. Sapra finds someone on a speed date, she will quickly bring him home to her mother.

The abiding principles behind an arranged marriage still remain strong — lust does not a lasting marriage make and family knows best. But parents and elders, eager to avoid alienating their children, making them miserable or seeing them go unmarried, have shown consider-

able flexibility. This is especially pronounced among the middle class, whose members tend to have integrated more into British life.

"The notion of arrangement has become more fluid," said Yunus Samad, a sociology professor at Bradford University, who has studied marriage in the Muslim community. "What is happening is that the arranged marriage is becoming a bit more open and children are getting a bit more say in this so it becomes a nice compromise. There is the comfort of family support and a choice in what they are doing."

"It's a halfway house, not completely traditional and not completely the same as what is happening in British society," he added.

To the surprise of parents and elders, this new hybrid between East and West has actually stoked enthusiasm for an age-old tradition that many young people privately viewed as crusty and hopelessly unhip.

Now they see it as an important way to preserve religion and identity, not to mention a low-maintenance way of finding a mate. "It's like your parents giving you a black book of girls," said Ronak Mashru, 24, a London comedian whose parents are from India.

The young people also recognize that arranged marriages — in which similar education and income levels, religious beliefs and character outweigh the importance of physical attraction — can well outlast love marriages.

"The falling-in-love system has failed," said Rehna Azim, a Pakistani family lawyer who founded an Asian magazine, Memsahib.

South Asian unions are viewed as marriages between families, not individuals. Divorce is anathema, while respect and standing within a community are paramount. A lot of people have much invested in making a match work.

Similarly, several customs have

survived dating: decisions have to be made relatively quickly, often after the second or third meeting, and, Ms. Sapra said, "once you've said yes, there is no turning back."

Dowries remain common and background still matters, too.

"Our mums look at the C.V.'s," said Vani Gupta, 30, a speed dater. "They figure out whether we're compatible on paper — right job, right background, right caste. It's nice to know your parents have done the work for you. You feel more secure."

These middle-class women, most of them educated professionals or university students, are looking for more modern men, who accept working wives and help around the house. But a "mechanic won't try for a lawyer and a lawyer would not look for a mechanic," she said.

Ms. Sapra, for example, is looking for a fellow Sindhu, and a Gujarati Indian typically seeks another Gujarati.

Muslims still keep it mostly within the family and the same region of Pakistan. Cousins still frequently marry cousins, or at least second or third cousins, and many British Pakistanis still find their brides back in Pakistan. But now more men are marrying white British women who convert to Islam, and others insist on finding a Muslim bride here who speaks English, eats fish and chips and watches "East Enders," a popular soap opera.

Parents and elders have had to adapt, in large part because the number of potential partners is much smaller here than in their home countries. Rather than see an educated daughter go unwed, parents and elders have accepted these more modern approaches. "Women are not going to be put back in some kind of bottle," Professor Samad said.

Ms. Azim said: "Parents can say my child had an arranged marriage, and he can say, 'Yeah, it's arranged. But I like her.'"