

Pathak, Pathik. "Cross-Cultural Marriage Is No Picnic." *The Guardian*, 11 Jan. 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2010/jan/11/cross-cultural-marriage-fetished>.

Cross-Cultural Marriage Is No Picnic

My engagement present was a book of pocket psalms, with yellow highlighter streaked through passages that warned of the eternal damnation that non-believers face. It was presented to me in the small, dark room of a village house on the outskirts of Nairobi by my future father-in-law, a lay preacher. I had gone there to ask for my girlfriend's hand in marriage, and to meet her family. I'm a Hindu.

That's why I read Anushka Asthana's invitation for everyone to join Britain's cross-cultural marital jamboree with more than a little alarm. It's not that I oppose inter-racial or inter-religious marriage, because I've enjoyed mine. But there is a dark side to it, and sometimes the choices it forces upon you are more trying than deciding between curries and roast dinners.

I can't pretend that my marriage typifies cross-cultural marriages in any way. I don't have statistics to hand but I'd guess that Asian female/white male marriages are more common than Hindu Asian male/Christian Kenyan female. What my marriage showed, though, is that cross-cultural matches can light up an unexpected bonfire of bigotries.

My parents, for example, were remarkably accepting of our union, but my extended family much less so. For many traditional Indians, fairness of skin is the yardstick of beauty; it's inextricably linked to social status too. So my fiancée, darker than their servants, wasn't considered marriage material (this wasn't helped by the fact that many of my cousins have wives who could pass for Greeks). When she passed through Mumbai, on a work trip, they took the opportunity to quiz her on why she wanted to marry me, wondering aloud if it wasn't so she could get a British passport. The fact that she wasn't Hindu didn't seem to bother them too much, though.

If colour lay at the root of my family's objections, then religion was my father-in-law's prejudice of choice (I'll admit, being a lay preacher meant he was never going to accept without a struggle my worship of many, many gods). They had no problem with my race – "we are all brothers in Christ!" he repeatedly insisted. His problem was with my faith. For these reasons he didn't speak to my fiancée for six months before I went to Kenya, and threatened never to again unless she broke off our engagement.

Fortunately for us, he broke his silence the day before I arrived, in exchange for the opportunity to have a crack at converting me. He did try, and try hand, to give him credit (hence the engagement gift). I spent most of the trip squirming from the Christianity that crept into every family get-together; it turned out that there wasn't anything that wasn't worth praying for (we even paused to pray to a quick journey to the airport, even though it made us late). I ended up meeting more people from my father-in-law's church than from his family, and they all impressed upon me the perils of worshipping false idols. They also consistently failed to say my name properly. After a certain point I was convinced they were mispronouncing my name deliberately so that I might be think of myself as actually being a Patrick, and thus one step closer to the kingdom of Christ.

Despite these trials, they didn't put us off marriage, and if anything strengthened our resolve. So I'm not suggesting that anyone should give up their big romance out of fear of tripping up on family prejudices; that's clearly not the right message. But there's something worrying about fetishising cross-cultural marriage or trying it out for novelty or to prove just how liberal you are. It won't be a "magical journey" for everyone, and sometimes it can place strains of family that take them to breaking point. In fact, they should come with a health warning: cross-cultural marriages can seriously damage your relationship with your parents.