Mixed-race families more common

December 15, 2007

CANADIAN PRESS (HTTP://NEWS.GUELPHMERCURY.COM/LIFE/ARTICLE/272468)
TORONTO

Daphne Keevil Harrold and Vivek Prakash began their married life by exchanging vows twice.

They saw a double wedding ceremony as a fitting way to honour their different cultures and a precursor to the way they would conduct all major celebrations from then on.

They booked a United Church in Montreal as well as an indoor venue in Delhi that could accommodate a fire -- a key feature of traditional Indian weddings.

They walked around that fire seven times receiving traditional Hindu blessings, then marched down the aisle surrounded by Canadian family members two weeks later -- the bride was suitably attired for both occasions in a red lehenga dress and white bridal gown respectively.

But despite finding the preparations exhausting, the 25-year-old graduate students felt they were all necessary.

"We had to make a decision that wouldn't cut anyone out," said Prakash in an interview from the home he shares with Keevil Harrold in Halifax.
"We had to compromise on the wedding celebrations, and we didn't want to invent some hybrid wedding ceremony. So to give both of our cultures due respect and to save our families extensive travel plans, we decided to have two ceremonies."

As multiculturalism becomes more prevalent in Canada, such compromises may become more common for future generations.

Census data released last week shows 1.2 million immigrants settled in Canada between 2001 and 2006, and new immigrants currently make up two-thirds of the country's population growth.

Minelle Matahni, a professor of geography at the University of Toronto, believes the census numbers prove that mixed marriages will be the wave of the future.

"I think we're going to see more and more mixing between ethnic groups in Canada," she said. "This is a trend that I think will continue to rise."

Matahni is quick to point out the positive social implications of such unions, shrugging off the stereotype of youth caught in limbo between cultures and emphasizing the advantages that mixed-race children have.

"Most of the people I've interviewed that come from a mixed background have the ability to move with different social and ethnic groups. They speak different languages. They have an ease, an ability, to segue to different spaces. That's something that we're all going to need as we move into a more multicultural society."

That ability has not come naturally for Keevil Harrold, but she finds the learning curve inherent in a multicultural family to be both exciting and crucial to maintaining a sense of identity.

Both Christian and Hindi traditions figured prominently in the two wedding ceremonies.

At the Christian service, the minister went through the liturgy with Prakash to ensure that he was comfortable with potential references to Jesus, and the couple wrote their own vows.

In Delhi, Keevil Harrold blatantly objected to components of the Hindu wedding vows that she felt were outdated, including tenets forbidding her to wear makeup outside her husband's presence and dictating that Prakash would give her all his income, implying that the future lawyer would not be working outside the home.

"Those were in there without my knowledge," Prakash said, laughing at the recollection of how his wife rejected such notions. "Obviously she wasn't going to have any part of that."

But Keevil Harrold was keen to embrace other facets of Indian culture and relished the compromises the Prakash family made to make her feel accepted, including allowing her into parts of the wedding ceremony usually meant only for the groom's family and teaching her the right way to wear a sari.
But while the mixed marriage was warmly received by both families, Prakash admits the sight of the multiracial couple still elicits some consternation in other circles.

"Daphne's a minority in India, so as a tall blond woman she really sticks out," Prakash said. "In rural areas, people would stare at her."

But although the couple never met with any opposition to the marriage, Prakash noted the level of conservatism among the Indo-Canadian community was higher than what he had observed back home.

"I think when a group is in a minority they make a special effort to hold on to the culture," he said. "Ideas may change in India, but those opinions don't necessarily shift here."

But on the whole, Keevil Harrold and Prakash feel their relationship is generally accepted and have confidently carried on celebrating both cultures.

They are both currently shopping for Christmas gifts, but recently exchanged presents and lit candles to celebrate Diwali, a Hindu holiday Prakash described as the "Christmas equivalent."

Keevil Harrold anticipates a lifetime of cultural integration, particularly when children arrive.

"Our kids will be half one culture, half of another, and I'm already thinking about ways to make sure they get to hear about their Indian culture," she said.

"I'm sure we'll be there every year, and that will help to open their eyes. They'll realize there are a billion of us!"