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All ready to mingle

SHAADI CONFERENCE — OR A SINGLES DINNER — IS THE LATEST HAUNT OF MATRIMONIALY-INCLINED NRIS IN THE US, SAYS **TURNA RAY**



In the US, where Americanised desis balk at the idea of their families arranging their marriage to a stranger, these purportedly more independent-minded youngsters seem to be warming up to the idea of matrimony by conference.

Shaadi conferences — less dauntingly known as “singles dinners” — are the latest trend for matrimonially-inclined NRIs in the US. If matrimonial websites are the

technological upgrade to personal ads in print magazines and newspapers, *shaadi* conferences are the version 2.0 of traditional arranged marriages.

The NRI matrimonial website *USAShaadi.com* has hosted six “singles dinners” in major US cities in an effort to provide single NRIs an “organised” forum to connect face-to-face. As many as 200 single desis gather in garishly civilised hotel conference rooms decked out in their sharpest suits and glitziest saris and focus on meeting potential mates like it's their job.

Before the first official singles event in Washington, D.C. this summer, *USAShaadi.com* issued a press release describing this “alternative way of finding matches” as “growing fast in the US [and] challenging the traditional ways of arranging marriages in South Asia. In particular, the paradigm shift is from the time when parents were solely responsible for finding matches for their sons and daughters, to now when educated and qualified youth in America seek a different approach.”

A pungent scent of nerves and pheromones wafted through the hotel foyer as throngs of 20-to 30-something desis formed a weaving line to collect their name tags, colour-coded by age, and programme folders, containing a list of participants and their “bio-data,” as well as an itinerary laying out the next eight hours packed with getting-to-know-you mixers broken down by caste, religion or region. Singles engage in speed-dating where participants rotate conversation partners every three minutes, a voluntary talent show and a formal dinner.



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The conferences are moderated by masters of ceremony "who coach the participants throughout the day", *USAShaadi.com* spokesman Manny Singh said. At the end the conference that runs the length of an average workday, singles let loose at a dance club. "Everyone gets really excited to dance after six hours of hard work," Singh said.

Undoubtedly, marriage is hard work and should not be entered into lightly. Not only is marriage serious business, with the \$11 billion Indian wedding industry growing at 25 per cent annually, corporations have discovered it's a profitable business as well. But must young NRIs approach their prospects as if they're going into a business meeting.

Yet the growing popularity of such events among NRIs has everything to do with their straight-forward, get-down-to-business atmosphere. "Here in the US people have very busy schedules. At *USAShaadi.com*'s events participants take a single day to meet many prospects in an organised fashion and increase their chances of finding a life partner," Singh said.

USAShaadi.com's singles dinners, much like corporate conferences, are more focused on networking than "closing the deal". They are all there to potentially meet people for marriage, but they can do as little as swap business cards with an interesting prospect or go as far as to meet the parents. *Rishtaas* arranged by families, on the other hand, can be shrouded in unfamiliar desi formalities and more meddling than young NRIs may be used to.

An NRI's marriage drama often begins in the form of rebellion against a tradition that gives the bride and groom little to say no in choosing each other. That angst often turns into frustration after NRIs search independently for a "suitable" mate but are still unable to find someone who fits a long list of requirements dictated by the family.

An engineering consultant from Fairfax, Virginia, came to the D.C. event in search of his ideal: a vegetarian, Jain, professional, family-oriented woman. "It's particularly difficult for NRIs because parents often don't like those you have dated," he said. "You're just dealing with a much smaller population here in the US and it becomes even smaller when you place conditions like they have to be a vegetarian, Jain like me."

A graduate student from Virginia, dressed in an elegant royal blue sari, decided to give the singles dinner a try because she had a hard time finding a person who had a good balance of Indian and Western qualities. "I want an Indian who was raised the way I was, not someone from India," she said, adding she wasn't into arranged marriages, but wouldn't mind meeting men through her parents.

Though other singles similarly noted their discomfort with the traditional arranged marriage, most had decided to check out the scene at the conference upon the urging of their parents, who in turn had seen the event heavily advertised on the desi television station ZeeTV.

In the end, then, despite the newfangled gadgets of the digital age and the high-powered *shaadi* conferences, the Indian marriage is still very much in the hands of the parents. NRI parents may have outsourced the hard work off to companies like *USAShaadi.com*, but they still exercise significant influence and hold veto power. "We recently got a call from a mother who asked us to talk to her son and try to convince him to attend our event," Singh said. Though parents aren't allowed in the hall during the conference events, they are

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invited to the formal dinner where they can meet their son or daughter's special prospects.

Singh said he has heard of three or four engagements spurred by the singles' dinners but there haven't been any *shaadis* yet. "A wedding takes a long time to plan," Singh said. "We've only been holding these dinners for less than a year!"

Turna Ray works in New York



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