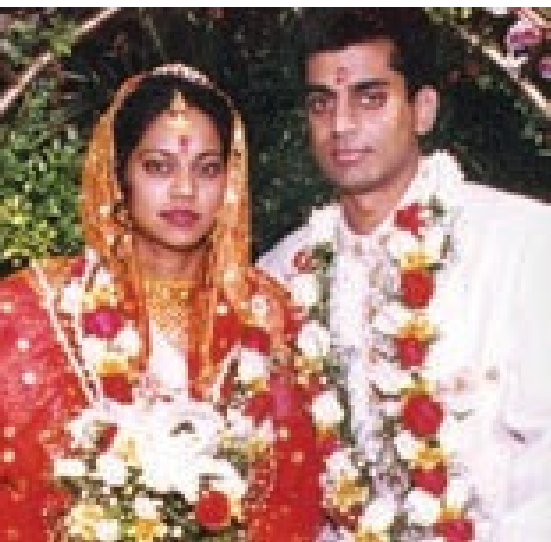


Forbidden Love

As Nishat Patel looked out into the huge crowd at his lavish East Indian wedding, he had no doubts about his love for his bride. Yet, amid all the gaiety and celebration, something was terribly wrong.

by Rick Bowers



The bride's guests alone numbered more than 600, but not a single person from his family was there. The amputation of his bride Mona's forefoot six years earlier in 1990 after she was hit by a drunken driver had made her "less than perfect" in his parents' eyes, and they had forbidden him to marry her. Now, they were boycotting the wedding.

Mona had once been considered a great prospect for marriage, but things had changed since the amputation. "One of my mother's biggest fears after the amputation," Mona says, "was, 'My daughter's not perfect anymore. Who's going to marry her now?'"

In fact, when she was in the hospital, Mona's East Indian immigrant parents told her that they no longer expected her to have an arranged marriage. "With arranged marriages," Mona explains, "they try to match the couple by education, physical attributes and other superficial attributes. If I still wanted an arranged marriage, they thought my only choice would be someone considered 'imperfect' as well." As Hindus, Mona's parents still expected her to marry an Indian and someone from her caste, if possible, but they had clearly lowered their standards.

They were, therefore, thrilled in 1995 when Nishat called Mona after seeing her at her brother's wedding reception and a relationship began to develop. "Nishat's family was already like family to us," Mona says. "It was just an

ideal situation because his family had already treated me like a daughter."

Everyone was, therefore, shocked when Nishat told his parents about the relationship. "They gave him an ultimatum: them or me," Mona says. "They did not want a disabled daughter-in-law."

When Nishat chose to go through with the wedding on December 31, 1995, his parents disowned him, and his father forbade everyone in the family to attend the wedding.

"My mother-in-law used a very derogatory word in our language for a person with a disability to describe me several times to my parents," Mona says. "She said, 'We don't want your crippled daughter, and we're going to do everything in our power to split them up. It was just awful.'" A 30-year friendship between Mona's and Nishat's parents had been destroyed.

After their marriage, Mona promised Nishat that she would try to build relations with his family for five years. "If they didn't come around in five years, however, he agreed that he would never ask me again."

Although the family accepted Nishat back shortly after the wedding, his father didn't speak to Mona for two years. "He would come to our house to visit my husband, and I would greet him at the door," she says, "but he would just look right through me like I wasn't even there. He would not acknowledge my existence whatsoever."

Over the next five years, however, Mona thought that she and Nishat were making progress and that his family had finally accepted his choice of a mate. Then, during a heated argument with Nishat's parents, the couple were shocked to learn how little his parents' views had actually changed.

"My father-in-law told my husband that if he were to marry me all over again, he would not change a single thing he did seven years ago. They insulted me once

again, and my mother-in-law again used that derogatory word to describe me. It truly broke our hearts all over again."

Mona says Nishat's parents' negative reaction to her amputation might somehow have originated in an understanding or misunderstanding of religion or culture, such as the caste system or a belief that what happens to a person is based on karma. "I think some who believe in Eastern religions do believe that in a past life, I must have done something to cause me to suffer in this life," Mona says. "Other than the obvious physical pain I endured, however, the only other great suffering that has resulted from my accident is the rejection from people I had once loved, Nishat's parents."

She has a different perspective on her amputation. "I don't look at it as suffering," she explains. "I have made a wonderful life for myself despite my amputation." Her amputation, which had to be redone as a full below-knee amputation in 1997, has, in fact, stopped her from very little. She's completed two master's degrees, has a great job as a psychiatric social worker, has started a San Antonio-based support group called Amputees Believing Living Excelling (ABLE), recently gave birth to a child, and is happily married. And because of all that she and Nishat have sacrificed for each other, she's sure of one thing: "We have a real love marriage," she says. "He's always supported me 110 percent, and my losing a leg hasn't had any effect on him whatsoever."

On the other hand, she says, her in-laws' rejection of her has backfired. "They thought that their status in the Indian community would be diminished if they welcomed a disabled girl into their family, but the opposite has happened. Because of what they did to their son, to me, and to my family, they are looked down upon by many in the Indian community."