



Bridging The Cultural Divide

Text: Ayusha Nirola & Photo: Anupam Sharma

Come wedding season, and I am relegated to the ritual of sifting through the piles of invitations. Some of these blessed unions 'stood out' since they pronounced wedded bliss for individuals belonging to two different 'castes', something that is a rarity in our society but definitely on the rise. In the past, occurrences of violence against couples madly in love, belonging to different castes, wanting to 'tie the knot' were commonplace – they were declared outcasts, tortured and sometimes even violently attacked. As preposterous as it sounds, a mere surname can change a family's attitude towards one's daughter or a son. *A mere surname.* As primeval as it is, sadly, at some level it still holds true in our society.

If that sounds depressing, here's the good news. Times are a changing and so are perceptions. In today's context when we proudly announce ourselves as part of the global community we cannot get ourselves isolated by issues of caste, creed, or class. Falling in love and deciding to spend a lifetime with one another is not just about having mushy feelings, it's the meeting of two minds, two souls, two individual who look beyond the narrow social bindings and connect. We are seeing more of that change happening in the Nepali community. Recently there was one high profile marriage that made the news circuit buzz.

Parash and Megha

They met when they were school kids and say that they never real-

ly proposed one another, but on 8 July, 2010, Parash Shakya and Megha Chaudhary got married amidst their loving friends and family. I meet the newly-weds not even a week after their union and can clearly see the sparkle in their eye. I ask them how it feels being married. "She is around, so I have to give a good answer right?" jokes Parash and goes on to say, "At times I feel like I am dreaming. To have someone you love around all the time is an amazing feeling." Surely, he is smitten. The wedding that took place at the Agrawal Sewa Kendra was a private affair attended by close family and friends and

tered was whether we clicked or not," shares Parash. "There were no second thoughts for us, we knew we weren't committing a crime and hence decided to fight for what we felt was right," he continues. It was a union that seemed impossible to consummate, yet they stood by one another and in Megha's words "fought for the right thing."

The acceptance

Their journey took a lot of convincing, and at times was a roller coaster ride of trials and tribulations. Megha is the only daughter amongst five brothers in the Chaudhary household.

YES THE FAMILY OBJECTS (AS EXPECTED) BUT MY QUESTION WAS WHY? WHY IS THE ISSUE OF INTERCASTE MARRIAGE SUCH A BIG DEAL? IN MY QUEST I WAS IMMENSELY DISAPPOINTED, AS PEOPLE GAVE ME VAGUE AND UNCONVINCING ANSWERS.

Megha shares with a smile, "The wedding was more than what we had imagined it would be."

Apart from their marriage we have had other high profile marriages around the city this past wedding season which were probably kept hush-hush for the fear of 'what the society would say'. But looking past all this, Megha and Parash's marriage has undoubtedly broken boundaries and opened doors for many couples who have decided to spend their lives together irrespective of what background they come from. "The fact that we came from different communities did not matter. What mat-

ter? Why is the issue of intercaste marriage such a big deal? In my quest I was immensely disappointed, as people gave me vague and unconvincing answers. Some said it's a religious thing while others simply didn't know why. So I went to a source I have trusted since birth – my mother. She said, "It is not so much about the caste, it's more about a family's concern for one's daughter. It is only natural to want her life to be as comfortable as you have provided for her. With the issue of stepping into a family with an alien culture, adjustment and fitting-in becomes twice as hard." Motherly wisdom gave me plenty food for thought.

Megha's father, Basanta Chaudhary speaks my mother's tone. He says "I was initially very upset and not prepared for this. My concern as a father, as with any father, was with her happiness. Megha has had a very comfortable life and the first thing that crossed my mind was whether she would be able to adjust to a totally different custom and tradition. So more than the caste or the back-

ground of the boy, this was what had me worried." Megha's persistence paid off. With time he accepted his daughter's wishes and made other members of the family understand the situation. "Parash is a wonderful boy and I am sure he will prove himself. He is capable of great things in the future." Strong words from a supportive father-in-law.

daughter her happiness," says Chaudhary. Ultimately a parent's decision lies where their children's happiness lies.

The adjustment

With all said and done my mother's words echoed in my head. The hardest part is the adjustment. How does one fit in with the new way of doing things? As trivial and insignificant as it may sound, adjusting to a new home and to a different culture is like being born altogether. You need to learn to do many things differently. Now combine this with the fact that you have just stepped into a culture that you are not familiar to. How does one do it? How does one adjust and how does one stand up for one's love without hurting your family in the process? To this Megha says, "The thing is, for the girl you don't just get married to the boy, you get married to the whole family. So before you get married, you have to be sure about his family's reaction and whether they would accept you or not. And you have to be hundred percent sure of your relationship with your man."

Giving the Courage

Megha and Parash have known each other for 15 years. At some level their marriage will give courage to other people in a similar situation. After all, it is not about breaking traditions. At a time when the whole nation is divided, it might be the only thing that would serve to bring our diverse traditions together.

As I end the conversation I ask them about their plans for honeymoon. "She can't decide on one place," Parash answers. "I am a Libran, so I am looking for the perfect destination," says Megha. "There is no such thing as a perfect destination," Parash says, as he looks at his wife and smiles matter-of-factly. They are your typical married couple and I don't think their surname plays a big difference in their happiness, does it? Be happily married, forever.!

But of course there is the societal pressure. "There were people who told me to get them married outside Nepal, in a private ceremony, but I felt that would be completely wrong. I was convinced I was not committing a crime by giving my