

In multicultural Canada, love is likely to cross lines. Janet Huang and Avik Dey show how a wedding can celebrate two religions, multiple ethnic backgrounds, and one newfound love

# A FINE BALANCE

By COLLEEN SETO • Photographs by GEORGE WEBBER

Four years ago, when Janet Huang and Avik Dey met through mutual friends at the University of Calgary, the thought that they would one day have a multi-day, multicultural wedding never occurred to them. Both were simply interested in learning more about each other's culture, neither was overly religious, and like those flush with youth, they never saw any cultural challenges. That is until they started planning their wedding.

Janet's mother, Barb, has Scottish and Irish roots and grew up in Toronto. Her father, T.C., is Chinese but grew up in India. Both are Roman Catholic (T.C. converted from Buddhism when he moved to Canada) and raised their daughter in that tradition. Avik's mother, Eva, is from Calcutta. His father, Arun, grew up in Dhaka,

Bangladesh. The Deys are Hindus.

Both Janet, 25, and Avik, 26, were born and raised in Canada, but they wanted to honour the cultural and religious beliefs of their families by including traditional customs in their wedding. As a bridesmaid, I had an inside view of the planning of the celebration,



**DAY 4, WEDDING 2:** The Hindu ceremony was the final event (and second wedding ceremony) in the marriage of Avik Dey and Janet Huang.



**DAY 3:** "The Hindu tradition is in stark contrast to the Western view of giving the bride the wedding she has always dreamed of. Both views are totally correct, but the toughest part for me as the groom is trying to make everyone happy" - Avik Dey

Dinner after the Roman Catholic Ceremony.

a four-day extravaganza, which ran from June 30 through July 3, with more than 300 guests.

At first, the couple wanted to combine the Hindu and Catholic ceremonies but that proved complicated. They couldn't find a venue suitable for both, and each ceremony required different officiants, clothing and props. That's when Janet and Avik came up with the four-day event: Day 1, a rehearsal party; Day 2, dinner at the Dey home; Day 3, the Catholic wedding and reception; and Day 4, the Hindu wedding and reception.

"It was hard trying to balance all of the social and cultural nuances between Western-Catholic traditions

and Eastern-Hindu traditions," Avik says. "The biggest difference is in perspective. In Hindu culture, it is more a presentation of the family to the public through the weddings of children, and this is in stark contrast to the Western view of giving the bride the wedding she has always dreamed of. Both views are totally correct, but the toughest part for me as the groom is trying to make everyone happy."

A fine balance indeed, especially when some Eastern and Western traditions conflict. For example, it is customary for newly married Indian couples to spend the night at the groom's parents house. The couple elect-

ed to stay at the Hyatt Regency.

There were further complications. The groom, an investment banker in New York, and the bride, who is working toward her chartered accountancy designation in Calgary, wanted to plan their own wedding, along with their parents. (Both sets of parents and the couple financed the wedding.) "Indian weddings are planned, organized and financed by the bride's and the groom's parents," explains Eva, Avik's mother. "Our biggest challenge has been to learn to take a back seat while the children plan their own wedding."

Trying to make sure all voices are heard is tricky at the best of times; it is harder still when the voices aren't speaking the same



**DAY 3, WEDDING 1:** After the Catholic ceremony, and a rainy photo session, the bridal party met up with the guests at Drinkwaters for the dinner and reception.

language. Enter wedding planner, Lisa Hanslip. "This wasn't my first multicultural wedding, but it was my first Catholic-Hindu wedding," says Hanslip. "There's always the challenge of pleasing both families, and the multicultural factor certainly made things more interesting."

Naturally then, a major part of Hanslip's job was helping the families come to decisions, particularly those about what cultural components to integrate and how to do so. She helped come up with compromises that incorporated what both cultures demanded, and she tried to ensure that the decisions taken satisfied everyone.

## DAY 1

The bride's parents hosted dinner on Wednesday, following the rehearsal of the Catholic ceremony. The dinner honoured Janet's father's Chinese culture: traditional food was served and the decor was red, a celebratory colour in China. There were about 20 guests, including the wedding party and close family and friends. The wedding invitations had been stamped with the Chinese symbol for happiness.

## DAY 2

Thursday's event was an Indian dinner hosted by the groom's parents; the day's only challenge was finding a parking spot close to the Dey's home in Silver Springs. The nine-hour party (3 p.m. to midnight) was attended by about 70 people dressed in both Indian garb and blue jeans, who enjoyed food, drink, *mehndi* (henna art for the women's hands and feet) and good company. Every so often, you would hear loud screeches of laughter, cheering and chanting. This is called *oulu* and it's a sign of welcome



At the reception following the Hindu ceremony, the guests took to the dance floor. It was well past midnight when hotel staff shut the party down.

and appreciation. The delicious meal included Indian favourites such as naan, butter veggie balls (similar to butter chicken), biryani (spicy rice with chicken), and raitha (yogurt sauce). These treats were juxtaposed with Molson Canadian and Vanilla Coke. This meal was actually the week's third large Indian gathering; Indian weddings are often celebrated for many days. The two previous meals had been hosted by family friends.

## DAY 3

On Friday, the bride definitely stole the show at the St. Thomas More Catholic Church.

Janet wore a stunning Evalina Couture dress and walked down the aisle with the groom, followed by both sets of parents and the wedding party. A full Catholic mass was held; the priest, J.P. Horrigan, took the time to explain the readings and gospels, and that marriage is a sacrament. These explanations were helpful, since many of the guests (myself included) had never been to a Catholic ceremony. The mothers lit the unity candle and Avik's parents performed *namastay*, a sign of peace (like in yoga). Nearly all of the Indian guests came forward for a blessing. There was a lot of laughter and crying, as everyone congratulated the couple and then tried to escape a sudden downpour. After a quick and damp photo session, the wedding party met up with

the guests at Drinkwaters restaurant for the dinner and reception. Witty speeches and miniature wedding cake desserts (made by Janet and her mother) capped off the night, and everyone went home around 11:30 p.m. to prepare for the Hindu wedding the next day.

## DAY 4

The Hindu ceremony and reception on Saturday were held at the Hyatt Regency. Janet had two Indian bridal outfits—one purple and gold, the other turquoise. We bridesmaids donned saris (with much help from the Indian women), and were prepared with *bindis* (dots on



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our foreheads) and *mehndi*. The groomsmen wore traditional Indian outfits, known as Punjabi suits, and Avik also had two Indian outfits, called *sherwani*.

While the Catholic ceremony was formal and reserved, the Hindu ceremony was anything but. It began with the groomsmen bartering with the bridesmaids to gain entry to the ceremony. The maid of honour keeps the money, and the bridesmaids spend it on hosting yet another party. The negotiations were raucous—one guest described them as “something like the New York Stock Exchange.” Once the bargaining was complete, Avik and T.C. (Janet’s father) invoked the sacred fire by making offerings and repeating auspicious prayers with the Hindu priest. Janet was then carried in on a chair by Avik’s

two brothers and a cousin. The couple carried out the many rites of the hour-long Hindu marriage ceremony such as *jai mala*, the exchange of garlands to signify their acceptance of each other as life partners; *gath badan*, the tying of the nuptial knot between Janet’s sari and Avik’s scarf to symbolize the union of their souls; and *saptapadi*, when the couple takes seven steps and recites seven hymns that outline their new life together.

The evening wrapped up with a full-out Indian dance party. Even the older Indian guests were cutting the rug well past midnight, when hotel staff finally had to shut the party down.

The wedding was a big success with nary a hiccup. “We did accomplish

what we wanted,” a tired, but blissful Janet said the next morning. “There were two very distinct parts, but the cultures were unified. And I loved how into it everyone was. Everyone was genuinely interested in all the cultures.” She will remain a Roman Catholic, he a Hindu. They aren’t thinking ahead to children yet—just moving to Houston next year.

These weddings are possible in a place like Canada where multiculturalism truly lives and grows. It was best summed up by the father of the bride during his toast to the couple: “Love triumphs over all differences. We are not Chinese or Caucasian or Indian. We are Canadian.” I’ll drink to that! ■