

## A suitable boy no longer...

After long being the most-preferred candidate in the marriage market, the NRI groom has lost ground in recent years. With the global meltdown, his bride hunt will only get tougher

SRIRAM SRINIVASAN , SHARADA BALASUBRAMANIAN

In 2005, when Pradeep Jayaraman began his hunt for a bride, he could have

been forgiven for believing it was going to be quick and easy. After all, he was a non-resident Indian (NRI) from the US, and an NRI was considered a big catch in the marriage market. But to his chagrin, Jayaraman found it was anything but easy. To use his own words, "Nearly 90% of the women I met didn't want to marry someone based in the US."

Three years and 300 women later, he finally found his match. They tied the knot in September this year.

Jayaraman was fortunate because his search took place almost entirely before the global economic meltdown happened. It's not that marriage went out of fashion with the economic crisis, because matrimony, like food, isn't sensitive to economic crises — people want to get married, no matter what.

What changed with the economic conditions was partner preferences, and as a result, NRIs have gone down a few notches on the most-wanted list. Curiously, their fall from favour in recent times has coincided with, and almost mirrored, the fall in the stock market. In that sense, to stretch the stock market connection, Jayaraman exited the market at the right time.

A Bangalore-based software engineer, an eligible bachelor on the lookout for a bride himself, notes gleefully how the online matrimonial profiles of many women have "NRIs, please excuse!" prominently displayed these days.

Those in the business of facilitating marriages have statistics to confirm this trend. Online matrimonial services provider Bharatmatrimony.com has seen a 20% reduction in responses for NRI grooms in 2008 (nearly a fifth of its new registrations are by NRIs).

Ahmedabad's Manpasand Marriage Bureau has more concrete proof. Each year, the bureau conducts a matchmaking event, with significant participation by NRI prospects. In previous years, most women used to choose an NRI groom over an Indian one. This year, it was the other way around: "They were interested more in Gujarati men settled in Indian metros, as well as inside Gujarat," says Smita Sheth, who runs the bureau.

### Changing trends

**Bharatmatrimony** It seems strange, but sociologists aren't in the least surprised. "Marriage is a reproduction of the class status," says **has seen a 20% drop in** Delhi-based sociologist Patricia Uberoi.



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The NRI tag was, until recently, considered the present-day equivalent of prospective grooms with government jobs in the pre-liberalisation era. "Today, people want a six-figure salary, with perks," says Uberoi, also the author of *Freedom and Destiny*, which deals with family, gender and popular culture in India.

Earlier, only an NRI could promise such a lifestyle. Now, India's growth story (never mind the aberrations) has ensured that many within the country can deliver the goods as well.

And, Indian women have become more aware of the fact that life as an NRI isn't always a bed of roses. U Kalpagam, professor at the Govind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute, believes the media has also played a role in this. "They created awareness about issues in NRI marriages. Today, women are cautious when it comes to NRI grooms," she says.

There's one more dimension to the mix: "Hot careers, independence and the need to spend more time with one's family are now the factors that decide whom a bride will marry," says Vibhas Mehta, Business Head of Shaadi.com, an online matrimony portal. And so, compatibility is fast replacing nationality as a factor.

## The segmentation

The general downturn in demand for NRI grooms shouldn't, however, blind us to the tribe's heterogeneity. It's too simplistic to assume that each prospective NRI groom is facing the heat.

"Even today, we can't say demand for NRIs is completely down," says Kalpagam. Five

years back, she wrote a paper on the increase in the preference for US-based grooms among Tamil Brahmins, owing to a large number of short-term working professionals going to that country. "For upper middle-class families, NRI men are still in demand. But the only difference (compared to some years back) is that women today are aware that a green card signifies security, while an H1-B visa is a temporary gateway to the US," says Kalpagam.

Meanwhile, the NRI supply base is also seeing a change. "The current economic uncertainty seems to have affected the decision of NRIs to marry, more so to have an arranged marriage," says Rajat Gandhi, Vice-President and Business Head of SimplyMarry.com. His portal has seen a 20% drop in traffic and registrations in the US and Europe. NRIs, points out Uberoi, have also increasingly started to look within their own community for partners. That's especially true for communities that emigrated many years earlier.

With both demand and supply contracting, the age of the illustrious NRI groom is probably fading fast. As to who will take over the crown is difficult to say. Those in the business say it will be someone closer home—a professional or an entrepreneur in India.

Interestingly, while NRIs are losing favour, the search for professional working women has apparently increased 15% (read, better financial stability in troubled times). Whatever the changes, trust arranged marriages to go by the economics!

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