

## My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

# My Big Fat Indian Wedding Experience

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The protagonist in this account, on mobility in Lucknow in India, gatecrashes a wedding party with some other international students just two days after arriving in the country. The prose is reminiscent of (quite accomplished) travel writing, but this account scored highly because of the sensitivity with which it takes the reader into the ceremony and describes the hospitality of the bride's sister, and other people present at the event, offered to perfect strangers. An international discussion on weddings is interspersed by dancing, eating, and reflections on the nature of hospitality, leading to the realization that 'the most amazing thing is that the entire time I had the impression that my presence was really cherished by everyone who met me, and the family was not only pleased but honoured to have me as guest.'

I've always been fascinated by India, what I thought to be, and discovered that actually is, a vibrant, colourful, incredible, chaotic, potpourri of people and cultures. During my Master I had the opportunity to spend a semester in Lucknow, a city next to the border with Nepal, and it truly was a life-changing experience. Throughout this time, I got to know and embraced a culture completely different from the familiar European one and at the end I was enriched by different ways of thinking and new perspectives on life.

Not even two days had passed since I landed on Indian ground, and me and some international friends, not caring about the jetlag, were already eager to experience how Lucknow was like during the night. The city is very chaotic, as I've always imagined India to be: cars don't follow any rules, cows and people cross the street whenever they want, tuk-tuks run at incredible speed zigzagging in between busses and elephants. It is very rare to find not-crowded places but somehow, strolling around, we found ourselves in a quite calm neighbourhood. Here, there wasn't so much traffic, lights and sounds weren't as intense as usual, so, bright lights and loud Indian music coming from a huge marquee at the end of a street caught our attention: it seemed like some sort of party was going on. Moved by our increasing curiosity, we got closer to the tent in order to understand what was happening there and in doing so, we basically crushed a typical Indian wedding. As soon as we timidly walked through the big entrance, we were welcomed by the sister of the bride, Pooja, who didn't think about it twice and immediately said that we were welcomed to stay and started showing us around.

Of course I was a little bit shy at first because I felt out of place and so many questions run through my mind: will the other guests look down on me because they think that I am ruining their special day? Will they be offended that I don't have any gift? Am I allowed to take pictures? Not knowing any of their traditions, I really didn't want to do anything that might have offended someone. But the warm and welcoming nature of the Indian culture overtook my initial emotions. I was impressed that we were welcomed with no questions asked, because it would never have happened in a European wedding. The bride's sister was so happy for our presence: having European guests (even though we essentially gatecrashed) was something that made her really proud and she couldn't wait to guide us around. She showed us her *saree*, the traditional Indian dress, and her *mehndi*, an intricate henna tattoo on her hands and feet.

The bride, on a stage in front of the crowd, was dressed with an orange *saree* and she looked exhausted. Her sister told us that it was normal because of all the jewels she was wearing: they were really heavy and she had to stand for hours with all that weight on!

When we arrived, the *pujas* (prayers) and the official ceremony (that go on for hours) were almost over and it was time for the buffet and the after party. Pooja told us that we could serve ourselves and try all sort of delicacies that were displayed on the huge dinner table. Only a small part of the buffet offered meat based foods, since the majority of the guests was vegetarian. She explained that they don't use cutlery, but they eat almost everything with the right hand and she went on teaching us how to make a ball of rice with it. Useless to say that the food was amazing, maybe a little bit too spicy for our European tastes, but after some coughing and tearing up we got used to it and we really appreciated it. A strange thing from our perspective is that there was no alcohol whatsoever, but there was a tent dedicated to smoking *hukka* (hookah), reserved only for men.

Inside the main big marquee there were some internal divisions, with lights hanging from the ceiling and on the walls, and some of these colourful 'rooms' were dancefloors. Of course, we didn't know any of the traditional choreographies but no one laughed at us; a lot of people stepped in to teach us the right moves, and not even the language barrier could stop them: the ones who couldn't speak English showed us how to catch up with the rhythms and then made us understand with gestures that we were supposed to copy them.

A lot of guests asked us about our lives, how weddings were handled in our countries, what we were doing in Lucknow and how long were we planning to stay. They showed a lot of interest in our answers, and in general everyone was friendly, ready to help if we had any doubts and enthusiastic to teach us about their culture.

If now I think about this wedding, I notice how all my early concerns and anxieties had no reason to exist. During the whole night I was chaperoned

through every stage and even if I didn't always know what was going on, I continuously felt included and welcomed, I was comfortable and I could enjoy the party. The most amazing thing is that the entire time I had the impression that my presence was really cherished by everyone who met me, and the family was not only pleased but honoured to have me as guests. This aspect reminded me of the concept of *filoxenia*, a Greek word that indicates the love for the guest. In ancient Greece, hospitality was considered as a really virtuous value and the host respected, and was honoured by, his guests. It's interesting how the oriental world incorporated in its culture an ancient western tradition, with the host offering 'welcoming gifts', such as food, to his *xenos* (stranger that is welcomed).

