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VOWS

Finding Common Ground in the South, San Francisco and South India

Sree Arimilli and Sandheep Surendran lived nearby in San Francisco and shared striking similarities. But they didn't come together until they called on astrological forces (and a dating app).



Cassi Alexandra for The New York Times

By Alix Wall

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It was ultimately a dating app that introduced Sree Arimilli and Sandheep Surendran of San Francisco. But more traditional and spiritual elements, as well as a bit of self help, also played a part.

Ms. Arimilli was out to dinner with a friend in New York in late 2016. When talk turned to their love lives, Ms. Arimilli, a self-described intuitive type, shared a hunch she had, that she felt her intended was near. After she returned home, she told another friend the same thing. That friend suggested Ms. Arimilli sign up for a dating app, so she did, on Bumble.

Within two weeks, she was texting with Mr. Surendran, who, at least geographically speaking, had been “near” for years. In fact, they lived about a mile from each other but had never crossed paths.

While she didn't usually commit to dinner on a first date — too many awkward evenings had taught her — she did this time.

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In the restroom after dinner, she remembered thinking, “I don’t want this evening to end.”

“It was unusual compared to other first dates or other relationships, it was more earthy,” Ms. Arimilli said. “It wasn’t like fireworks, rather there was just something drawing me to him. It was so different, and I knew I should go with it.”

Mr. Surendran was of the same mind-set. On the sidewalk outside, he asked, “Shall we continue?” And they did, over drinks.

The two had so much in common.

Ms. Arimilli, 55, was born in the southeastern state of Andhra Pradesh, India. The youngest of the three children of Madhava and Vasundhara Arimilli, she immigrated with her family to Baton Rouge, La., when she was 3. Her father was a geologist, and in the United States worked as a chemist, while her mother was an accountant. Ms. Arimilli graduated from Louisiana State University, and after a first career as an accountant, she is now the founder and president of Arimilli Consulting, a San Francisco-based boutique firm offering executive search services.



The bride, wearing a gold-embroidered gown, was escorted to the altar by her parents. Cassi Alexandra for The New York Times

Mr. Surendran, 43, is the younger of two children of Chiyyarath V. and Shyamala Surendran, who immigrated from Kerala, India’s most southern state, to Lubbock, Texas, where Mr. Surendran was raised. His father was a structural engineer, while his mother was a cardiac monitor technician. Mr. Surendran graduated from Rice University and is the founder and principal of San Francisco-based Surya Design, which does product development and engineering.

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There were many differences in their personalities, but they both had lived in Houston for four years, spent most of their adult lives in San Francisco and had their own businesses. Mr. Surendran had

in San Francisco and opened their own small businesses. And they both were raised in South Indian immigrant families in smaller cities in the American South.

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They also spoke of their devotion to their families.

Of course, the difference in their ages came up. Mr. Surendran was used to dating older women; his desire not to have children was a deal breaker for most Indian women he met.

“We’re very much in the same place in our lives,” he said.

Ms. Arimilli sensed that she should be as open as possible to whatever background from which her future husband might be.

They shared their first kiss at the bar. While they made plans that Friday night to see each other on Tuesday, the next day they decided to meet on Sunday instead. On Tuesday they turned off their dating apps.



Shenal Arimilli, the bride's sister-in-law, officiated the ceremony, which was held under a brightly colored flowered arch. Cassi Alexandra for The New York Times

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Ms. Arimilli had been married once in her 20s. She felt the pressure to marry young, though she said her choice of an unsuitable partner was made entirely on her own. She had done a lot of internal work on herself since then, and now, felt ready.

For Mr. Surendran, readying himself was a bit of a family affair. On a 2015 trip to India, his parents consulted an astrologer about their single son. He needed the light of a sapphire to pass through his skin to remove whatever was preventing him from meeting the right woman, the astrologer prophesied. If he wore one, he would meet her within a year.

Since his family caste are goldsmiths, his uncle made him a sapphire ring. Though Mr. Surendran doesn't normally wear jewelry, nor does he believe in such things, that he liked the ring

surprised him. He started wearing it in 2016. He met Ms. Arimilli one and a half weeks before the year was up.

In addition, Mr. Surendran had joined four female friends to do the exercises in the book, “Calling in ‘The One:’ 7 Weeks to Attract the Love of Your Life” by Katherine Woodward Thomas.

“I think it’s a terrible misnomer for a title, it should be called ‘Get your Stuff Together Before You’re Worthy of Someone,’” he said, using a stronger word than “stuff.”

One of the final exercises is setting an intention for when that person manifests. The wedding of his college best friend was in May in Cancún, Mexico, and Mr. Surendran hoped to bring a girlfriend with whom he could envision a future. He invited Ms. Arimilli.

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While they were moving quickly, it felt organic, like something was pulling them along. “At no point did it ever feel to either of us that this is too much, or make the other want to run away,” Mr. Surendran said.



After the ceremony, the newlyweds mingled with their guests, most of whom were vaccinated against Covid. Cassi Alexandra for The New York Times





Strands of decorative flowers make a stark contrast against the edge of a mesa in the Southwestern desert. Cassi Alexandra for The New York Times

Both say that while their partnership has important elements such as laughter and tenderness, it was also somewhat of a pragmatic decision. The couple drafted a mission statement for their relationship in premarital counseling, that they will revisit and revise each year.

“I describe it like a house,” Mr. Surendran said. “It’s not a brand-new house with fancy appliances, but one with a rock-solid foundation that’s a great home and needs a little maintenance from time to time. And we’ve got a giant toolbox in the garage to fix whatever comes up. We’ve been able to work through our issues in such a healthy way, that it gives me the confidence that we can ride this out.”

“Having someone that loves you in this way, it just allows you to show up in the world with greater fullness,” Ms. Arimilli said, noting that she “set her aspirational relationship GPS” to point to the type of man embodied by Mr. Surendran. “We’re each other’s biggest cheerleaders. You can really fly in life when you have that.”

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Shenal Arimilli, Ms. Arimilli’s sister-in-law, observed that in the time they had been together, their families had weathered more than their fair share of health crises.

“Very early on, Sandheep was called upon to help her care take for her family,” Shenal Arimilli said. “He not only adores her, but I’ve watched how he’s embraced her entire family in such a powerful way, and she did the same when his father passed away.”

“There are people who fall in love, but age or culture gets in the way,” she added. “They’re creating a paradigm shift in how you can love and be in relationship. This is what humanity is in need of, to break out of the norms.”

In July 2018, Mr. Surendran sent himself an email that said, “Plan the thing.”

Mr. Surendran decided on a ring design and asked his goldsmith uncle in India to make it. In December 2018, at Fairmont San Francisco, he proposed after a holiday dinner with friends, at the adjacent Tonga Room and Hurricane Bar.





Ms. Arimilli and Mr. Surendran met about five years ago through the dating app Bumble. They had been living just a mile away from each other in San Francisco, though they never crossed paths. Cassi Alexandra for The New York Times

Shenal Arimilli, ordained by the Universal Life Church, married the couple at Blame Her Ranch in Ribera, N.M., on Aug. 28, with Mr. Surendran's aunt, Viju Sreenivasan, participating in the ceremony. They planned a weekend of events in Santa Fe, an hour from the ranch.

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A flowered arch with strands of flowers hanging from it made a stark contrast against the edge of a mesa in the Southwestern desert. There was a light drizzle during the ceremony, with thunder and lightning appearing afterward, and then, a rainbow. Hummingbirds circled during the processional and ceremony.

While they exchanged flower garlands, they omitted some of the more traditional Hindu customs and read their own vows, coming up with a ceremony that was just like them: a hybrid of East and West.

Observed Shenal Arimilli: “Sree and Sandheep have patiently waited for the person they want to spend the rest of their lives with. They really let life’s twists and turns bring them together.”

On This Day

The Ceremony Shenal Arimilli led the nearly 100 mostly vaccinated guests in a guided meditation that brought in the ancestors, and asked guests to envision the bride and groom living a lifetime of joy together. She also emphasized that everyone there had played an important role in shaping either the bride or groom, or them as a couple.

The Officiant Sree Arimilli met Shenal Arimilli at a party nearly 30 years ago. After talking to her for 10 minutes, Sree asked if she could introduce Shenal to her brother, who is now her husband. Ever since, she has hoped to return the favor, Shenal Arimilli said. She was “stunned” to be asked to officiate, as that isn’t done at Indian weddings.

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The Attire The groom's father died this past April; a robin had been making frequent visits outside his window. The bird became a wedding motif and was embroidered near his heart in the lining of Mr. Surendran's royal blue jacket, which had gold paisley embroidery on the lapels and cuffs. Rather than traditional red and gold attire, Ms. Arimilli's gown was gold embroidery on top of gold. The couple worked with Swati Couture, whose creator designs garments in her Palo Alto, Calif., studio. They are sewn and embroidered in India.

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