

Panel discussion held on July 27, 2008 on "Inter-cultural marriage: Challenges and Solution"

Transcript of Mr. Roman Mukerjee's speech on "MIXED RACE MARRIAGES – RELIGIOUS IDENTITY":

Roman Mukerjee was a pioneering senior officer in the Department of Canadian Heritage for thirty years who amongst the varied historic dossiers, he helped prepare the Canadian Multiculturalism Act for legislation and the unanimous passage. He was also one of the founding members of the bilingual Intercultural Institute of Montreal, the first such association in Canada. He is proud of his mixed race, mixed culture and mixed faith heritage that is lived in family life. In retirement, he is currently active with visible minority religious communities such as the Sikhs and the Muslims. He is a member of the Capital Region Interfaith Council. Multiculturalism is a way of life in all spheres.



ABSTRACT

In a mixed race, intercultural and interfaith marriage and family life, it is a challenge Roman Mukerjee faces in the truly multicultural path officially proclaimed in Canada. This presentation will summarily focus on how the religious diversity is faced within the mixed race family from youth to maturity. This is an original witness that will form part of the larger package where mixed race couples of diverse cultural backgrounds will share their experiences for common ground and identify issues towards follow-up research.

Good Day. Namastey (East Indian) and Dobry Den (Slovak),

That greeting reflects my core identity by the name of Roman (Slovak) Mukerjee (Bengali-East Indian). My father is of Indian origin (Hindu) and my late mother was of Slovak (Christian) heritage.

Very briefly, my parents met during the last World War in Zlin, the Czech Republic whilst training in Bata's, a prominent international Shoe Company, currently headquartered in Toronto. My parents were the first Indo-Slovak mixed race marriage that hit the media headlines. I was born in the Czech Republic under Nazi rule with a Nazi birth certificate that would come to haunt me later in life. There were also bets as to which color I would be at birth. I turned out "whitish" and most lost their bets. Moral: Do not bet on me.

It was during the war period that my father joined the India independence Azad Hind Fauj in Berlin where he served under the leadership of the renowned and radical nationalist leader, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. Some of you may have heard my father's presentation here on his active role in the national army. It was only when India gained independence from Britain that I returned with my parents to India at my early age of four years old. My formative years were spent in India till I was 19 and I then left to study in Canada. This youth developmental period in my life would be spent in India within the intercultural context of my parents. I would attend an English medium boarding school that was run by the Canadian Catholic Jesuit Mission in Darjeeling. The students were of diverse backgrounds from within India and other countries which nurtured an open spirit.

There are many dimensions that one may touch in an intercultural marriage and family setting like mine. Given time constraints and the need to strike a learning chord, I will primarily focus on the religious identity that I acquired within the intercultural context of my mixed race and distinct faith parents and the influence of my school environment. It is important to stress that the religious experience is an integral part of one's basic identity. As one says in Hinduism, it is a "way of life".

In my residential school days from age six onwards where I passed nine months per annum, there was the strong British education influence, as we prepared to finish the Cambridge school certificate. Simultaneously, there was an intense Roman Catholic thrust by the Canadian Jesuit's leadership who led the school for those with Christian roots. In my early years in the school, the priests did not approach me with the Catholic faith as they initially took me for a Hindu, with my surname Mukerjee. Their policy was to provide moral education to non-Catholics which I initially received. When they came to know that my mother was Christian, the pressure upon my parents and on me was made to convert me to Catholicism. As far as my father was concerned, I was born a Hindu and that could never change. As far as my mother was concerned, in interfaith spirit, it would be fine to formally add the Christian dimension to me, a born Hindu. What my parents did not realize nor was I then sophisticated enough to fully discern, Catholicism became the prime and only focus in my religious education. There was no recognition of the Hindu part of me right in India whilst frequent comments were made how true the Catholic faith was and how secondary Hinduism was, with the "many gods". This was all laid on me by the good Jesuits in the well-intentioned and genuine Christian missionary zeal in India. Whenever I returned home after full Catholic immersion, I was far more Christian than Hindu in outlook and in practice. My parents never debated the issue which they felt would evolve in interfaith spirit over time. I have to admit that over those formative years till age nineteen when I completed my high school and pre-university education, the Hinduism in me was quite marginal on account of the total immersion in Christianity at the school. I kept a relative distance from Hinduism that my father and my Bengali relatives devotedly practised in my midst. Brainwashed?

Very briefly, my parents were very accommodating and inclusive to one another in the way they brought me up. For example, at home we only spoke Czech whilst I learnt colloquial Hindi and Bengali on the conversational side in daily social contacts plus, with family members on my East Indian side. In food, we readily ate Indian curry and rosogoolas and then Czech goulash or stew, whilst fully respecting the exclusion of beef in accord with the Hindu tradition. In music, I learnt to play the European accordion and play Czech and Bengali songs that were sung together at home. I continually expressed the duality of my origins that were not in real conflict. The key mechanism is mutual accommodation and avoidance of the purist thrust. It is not a one way street. On the religious plane however, I was in my teens on a one way and the only street namely, Christian, the 'true' faith.

Most significantly, my father philosophically and regularly warned me that if one breaks the traditional societal rules, one must be prepared for the natural opposition and, one peacefully continues to be who one is in a positive spirit of sharing. By definition, those of us along the intercultural path must be tolerant and accommodating with each step we take. By definition, an intercultural existence must be flexible to be complete. Yes, it is a challenge as it is lived on a daily basis. I try to live in duality of race and cultural traditions on a daily basis. Unquestionably, India's diversity marked me strongly during my youth. The Slovak heritage was acquired in terms of bonds to my revered mother in India. I am always Indo-Slovak. At the same time, there was the social tension as to whether or not I was white enough or brown enough in my real mix. One has to be firmly conscious as to who one is.

It was a privilege to receive a fully paid scholarship to come and study in Montreal, Canada where my East Indian identity came to the fore in my studies at the undergraduate level. It was then that I began to seriously recognize that an essential part of my identity, the Hindu faith and culture were seriously missing. I came to realize that I had to enter into ongoing interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue in thought and in practice. There was the underlying need to strike an identity balance in my "mix".

In my early years in Montreal, I joined and I helped establish the first Intercultural Institute in Montreal on a voluntary basis that literally opened me to serious dialogue with the Hindu faith and tradition. The founder was a great liberal Holy Cross francophone priest, Rev Jacques Langlais, Order of Canada and Order of Quebec who inspired me. I began to call myself Hindu-Christian which the formal Christian establishment would not accept. On the Hindu side, I never got any resistance to expressing my Hindu-Christian identity. Very briefly, in cross-cultural harmony, I was able to truly feel that I had my faith and culture in both traditions. There was no need for theological debate over the core values of both

faiths. I just came to be in both traditions from my parental source. This was an integral part of my full identity. For example, love thy neighbour as yourself is common to both Hindu and Christian traditions and so on. I could not be a purist. I had to live in religious diversity that is an integral part of my identity.

To jump in time and in space, I settled down in Canada and I served for thirty years in Canadian Heritage – Multiculturalism. I y got a government offer of a senior position to address diversity on varied fronts, particularly the Asian communities. For example, I initiated multiculturalism in education in the school systems across Canada to ensure equality and full participation of students and parents in the rich diversity that composes Canada.

I took the lead with the RCMP to modify the dress code and accommodate Sikh Canadians with turban and kirpan in the RCMP. I assisted in modifying the House of Commons Opening Christian prayer to be inclusive of all faiths and spirituality. Most significantly, I helped prepare the Canadian Multiculturalism Act for legislation. All this action was more than a job. It was part of my intercultural and inter-racial life. I was not simply at a federal government public service desk job. I lived multiculturalism.

On my home front, I married a French Canadian and a devout Catholic woman. After an eventual divorce due to profound religious differences, I married a Jewish woman. Yes, I did not complete my first intercultural and interfaith marriage. No one is perfect. It does take two to clap hands. The divorce and annulment matter are settled in compromise in and out of court and there are no ill feelings. Life continues in the search for the intercultural path. I was blessed with a tolerant and fully inclusive Cindy, my second wife who is here watching me. I am watchful.

On the religious front again, my second wife who is Jewish and I were married in the Hindu temple. In full respect for the Jewish tradition and the people, I arranged to get a fresh birth certificate that annulled my Nazi one. I fully respect my wife's Jewish faith and the basic practices as she does mine in my Hindu-Christian faith. We try to be inclusive in the key practices and aspirations. Yes, one must be sensitive and open to frequent compromise to gain full ground together in the spiritual and cultural paths in the mixed culture marriage. This is the Canadian way of genuine compromise. There is no recipe other than openness and good faith in diversity as the true bond. The bottom line in mixed race marriage is love where one gives to the maximum. Yes, I am very much in love with Cindy. I hope she is in love with me.

It would be naïve to think that all this functions smoothly on the social level. For example I am sorry to report how a Catholic priest and a Hindu woman who along with me helped establish the first Intercultural Institute in Montreal whereby we had common team and intercultural bonds, they just cut me off when I divorced. As current directors of the Institute, they made a blunt moral judgment over my personal family matter. Persons of mixed heritage cannot afford to break intercultural ties as we of mixed race and culture are a minority. There is always room for compromise, the Canadian way. We must be united that we be fully recognized. Just as some ethnic groups like the well coordinated Jewish community tend to be united so must we in the "mixed" tradition hold together. The importance is that we are together in the intercultural journey we all share.

Again, those of us in mixed race heritage often suffer subtle and overt racial discrimination or exclusion by extreme religious or cultural fundamentalists. We are marginal to such people. The most severe manifestation to those of us in mixed race is racial discrimination as we are not "pure" enough to some pundits. We are the "mongrels", the "bastards" and the "impure" who do not fit in the purist agenda. For us, we are so enriched in our diversity. We must affirm ourselves. Yes, we are not "pure" as we must firmly assert our dual identity that is so alive. We must be recognized for who we really are.

It is not easy to gain mixed race recognition, even at the federal government level. Ironically, after thirty years of devoted public service with Canadian Heritage-Multiculturalism and after a decade in retirement, I made a proposal to the department to do groundbreaking work in Mixed Race Marriages and Social Implications.

I was given a blunt email no and a cold shoulder right at the very source in the federal government that claims to address multiculturalism. One is not so readily accepted in the mixed culture and mixed race marriage way of life. Persons like me in mixed race marriage are only 3.9% of the population, with little political clout. I again repeat, we must affirm ourselves. We are who we are. In that spirit, I just met an Indo-Czech couple like me with well grown up young ones. We united with such joy and spontaneous bonds as we share the same blood. We are in the same intercultural and interracial tribe.

The very fact that the India Canada Friendship Circle has given me this opportunity to bear public witness to this cross-cultural identity that blends the East and the West is very deeply appreciated by me and my family. This affirms my identity that I so freely breathe, like I do today and everyday.

In very practical interfaith terms, I go to church, Hindu temple and synagogue when appropriate and my family celebrates the major holy days in the calendar of each tradition. Yes, we eat East Indian curry and Jewish matzo ball soup. We are a happy mix. For me, it is really worthwhile to triple pay for the diverse faith expenses towards a high quality of life in the multifaith and multicultural heritage. No accountant can measure the full value. This is all a part of my complete identity. I thrive in this diversity.

Now, may I demonstrate how practical the mutifaith and multicultural character in mixed race marriage and family can be in service and how it gains formal and encouraging recognition.

First, I had the privilege to be called by National Defence Chaplaincy Services to help inaugurate the first multifaith room in the military chapel at the Uplands base in Ottawa. I was selected to represent the Hindu role, whilst the Military Chaplains fully recognized my Christian. This was followed by an interfaith Peace Vigil in the military base church where I expressed my Hindu-Christian faith prayer in witness. This past December, at the Ottawa military base, it was the first time in my life that I got formal Christian acknowledgement by the military chaplains of my Hindu-Christian identity. This all came at long last in my 65th year which was well celebrated. It does take time to be publicly recognized for who you are in the "mix". People like me are not typical and yet we are very normal.

The next example deals with the Canadian Islamic Congress which was organizing the October Islamic History Month to publicly exhibit the diverse character of live Islamic culture from the past to the present. This projects the full Muslim identity right here in Canada. I happened to bump into the President of the Canadian Islamic Congress by internet and I was invited to participate on account of my diverse and intercultural background. I was the only non-Muslim to be honoured to be on the organizing committee of the Islamic History Month to offer intercultural counsel. I never could feel more welcome and at home in an ethnic community than in the full Islamic national exhibit. This past initial exhibit was such a success that parliament declared the event as a permanent feature each October. It was so moving how the Muslim community recognized the diversity in me and permanently included me in the national Islamic History Month Committee. This clearly breaks all the stereotypes of the Muslims.

You will still have to bear with me, as I have waited 65 years to bear full public witness of my "mixed" identity to a primarily Indian audience. I cannot be cut off now. That would be discrimination.

I will not deny that varied traditionalists understandably have difficulty with multiple religious and cultural identities as being "diluted", as being "mixed up" or as "neither here nor there". There are others on the orthodox path who feel that one faith is weakened when mixed with another. In short, it is not pure enough. With due respect, I recall the Catholic bishops of Italy formally urging Catholics not to marry into Islam as the Christian faith is weakened. Similarly, it is somewhat understandable that the Jewish community has reservations over mixed faith marriages like mine whereby they feel that their small ranks may crumble. I am of the view that mixed faith and mixed culture persons like me are not a threat or a mere dilution. We are contributors in full life towards intercultural dialogue and harmony by sheer necessity. The hyphenated religious status can be a source of interfaith

strength which is a gain to both faiths and traditions through interfaith harmony. The intercultural links stimulate global consciousness. Yes, times have changed. There is greater room for interfaith and intercultural relations in full public view and so in mixed race marriage.

As a former federal public servant in Canadian Heritage – Multiculturalism, I functioned bilingually and as a visible minority member. Again, though clearly “white” in my appearance, I identified as a visible minority in the public service, with my Indian name and my strong bonds to India.

Yet interestingly, since my father arrived from India just a decade ago, he has made me more conscious of my Czech roots as we both speak Czech to one another, my mother tongue and we frequent the Czech embassy and the Czech community to keep those bonds live. Yes, I do cross cultural lines so readily. I must.

Now, in terms of my children or the youth and their ways of life in the context of a multicultural home, they became quite liberal in outlook in such a key dimension as religion and values. For example my biological daughter, Meera went on to carry her Christian and Hindu influences in her own way. Concretely, it was her initiative that led to a marriage in Church to which her husband, Jeremy belonged and then in the Hindu temple, followed by a reception at East India Company restaurant with good curry and rice. Television News had to come and broadcast this distinct wedding in the Hindu tradition. Meera naturally reflects East and West.

Then, I have an adopted daughter of Inuit origin, Liane who I nourished in her home family ties and simultaneously her Inuit roots. I helped her trace her biological roots to complete the mixed cultural picture. Interestingly, she is employed by Indian and Northern Affairs. She is my daughter who reflects mixed heritage that includes Inuit.

As for my youngest adopted daughter from Honduras (Central America) in my second marriage to my Jewish wife Cindy, we followed the footsteps of the mother in my daughter Alisha being named and blessed in the Jewish tradition. At the same time, on account of her Latin American roots, she was immersed in the Spanish language which she now fluently speaks in the Latin American community and she acquires the culture-specific traits. My wife Cindy and I thrive in such diversity with our youth.

There is a future for those of us in mixed race marriage in being formally identified by Statistics Canada in the census and being counted for who we are. I was overjoyed when I saw as the headlines of the Montreal Gazette quote: “ Census Canada: Mixed race unions on the rise as Canada’s diversity increases”. At last, we are federally counted. We do really count.

Again, I take this occasion to extend my very deep felt thanks to the India Canada Friendship Circle and to each of you for giving me this my first chance in my life to come out in public on this live issue of mixed race and mixed culture marriages and family life. Most important, I appreciate your listening to a “mixed” person who is trying to clarify what this clearly means. I hope that I have not made the obvious too complex. Like all of you, I am just here.

People like me, just wish to be more recognized for who we really are in the genuine “mix”. I did my very best to share my “mix” today. I hope you digested it. Dekuju, Dhanabad, Merci.

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