

## INTERSECTIONS RADIO

MAY 11, 2016

### TRANSCRIPT

SARIKA MEHTA: You are listening to KXRY Portland on 107.1 FM, 91.1 FM, and streaming online at XRAY.fm. I'm Sarika Mehta. Welcome to Intersections Radio, a new independent podcast which also airs on XRAY. Intersections Radio is the show where we geek out on all things intersectionality.

So, today is the first in a two-part series that examines the intersection of sexuality with faith and ethnicity. And, today is a special episode featuring community activist and Hindu pandit Sapna Pandya. Sapna is the Executive Director of the Washington, DC-based social justice organization Many Languages, One Voice. Sapna grew up in the DC area, deeply steeped in the Gujarati Hindu community.

And while she's a community activist fighting for immigrant rights on the one hand, we actually had met before, because she officiated a friend's wedding. It was a deaf gay Indian wedding, and the first time I had an opportunity to witness the traditions of my community, but with a contemporary twist. Sapna is also a queer woman and frankly, that's quite a rare find to be as a pandit, which is a religious person who officiates Hindu ceremonies. So we talked about this, and the criminalization of same-sex relationships in India, and how we reconcile our identities with faith communities. This is Intersections Radio. Sapna Pandya, thank you for joining me on Intersections Radio.

SAPNA PANDYA: Absolutely, I'm excited to be here.

SARIKA MEHTA: The way we met is that you were officiating my friend's wedding. So, are you a religious scholar, or, tell us about that part.

SAPNA PANDYA: Sure. So, I did happen to major in religion in college. I wouldn't say that necessarily makes me a religious scholar, but I did focus on Hinduism and Islam when I was in undergraduate. And actually, what led me to appreciating weddings was more of my personal interest and also personal history. So, my grandfather on my father's side was a priest. He conducted wedding ceremonies for pretty much the entire Gujarati community, Gujarati Hindu community, I should say, living here in this DC area, up and down the east coast. And I would watch him, this is something that he did, as I say, a second career, basically, after immigrating here to the US. He passed away two years ago at 95.

And he and I always connected on the fact that we were very interested in religion, we used to talk a lot about religion. I would, like I said, watch him do the different pooja ceremonies, especially for weddings, but also for housewarmings and other things. And when he passed, I felt like I wanted to just carry on that tradition, and that history, of my dada, and do the wedding ceremonies and other ceremonies as well, particularly for our generation. And, you know, for me, like a fitting tribute because he really did do that service for his community, and so now in particular the weddings I perform have been for the queer community, the South Asian queer community, so I feel like I'm doing, the service he did for his community I'm doing for my community now, by trying to carry on these traditions.

So, that's kind of what led me to it. Very soon after he passed, I went and got a lot of -- my grandmother gave me a lot of his things, that he used to use, the different samagri, or, you know, pooja supplies that are needed, the books that he would read from in Gujarati, in Hindi, in Sanskrit, in English, and so I just have basically all of his things, and I really do feel a part of him when I am trying to continue to do this tradition. In particular, some of the storytelling that he used to do, and the very sort of personalized way that he would conduct ceremonies for people, I try to also do the same in talking to the different couples, or the people that I've been conducting ceremonies for. So it's just been about the last -- since he passed, so since two years, that I've been doing these ceremonies.

SARIKA MEHTA: I love that you're carrying out this tradition of your grandfather. It's not at all a common story for women, and especially not for queer women. Which leads me to my next question, if you could share your coming out story with us?

SAPNA PANDYA: Yeah, I can. And you're right, and I will say that I know it's not very common, you know, what you just mentioned, but in my family, in particular, my parents as well as my grandparents really didn't have a lot -- I don't know if it has to do with the fact that I was the eldest, or whatever, but my grandfather taught me to do these things as if I was a boy, and even other things, my dad taught me how to use tools, and how to be into construction and stuff like that, so I do all the fix-it at home right now, which my wife loves, because I was taught to do that by my dad. So, I didn't grow up with that same sort of, the gender binary, as strongly. Which I, now that I'm older, feel very grateful for. So it wasn't something that was kind of seen as odd for me to do as a woman, necessarily, but it's interesting you say that because I have definitely gone into spaces where, you know, I'm introduced as the pandit, especially for couples of families I don't know, and they look at me like, you're the pandit? Like, the family does, you know.

SARIKA MEHTA: Yeah.

SAPNA PANDYA: Think it's like, they expect this sort of older man to be the one, so, anyways, it's interesting you mention that. My coming out story, I mean, it's been about fifteen years that I've been out now, and I guess I came out to friends in college, and that was the first sort of layer, then my real coming out was interesting because it actually took place in India, in Bombay. And even though I was born and brought up here, I never really connected to the queer community in the United States, and in DC. I think I thought that the queer community in DC was either white or black, and I didn't really fit in as immigrant, brown, South Asian person. I didn't even see any Latino queer groups at the time.

So, I think I really delayed my coming out in that way. And, I went and found KhushDC, which is the South Asian LGBT group here in the area, online, I read about salwa online, and I finally mustered up the courage to go to a KhushDC event here in DC, but then the problem became that it was all cis gay men, and no queer women, so I walked in and promptly out. So, it was like trying to find a space and not finding it here, so it was about 15 years ago that I was in India for work, in Bombay I was doing HIV research and HIV work there, and I reached out to the queer community, and specifically queer women in Bombay, just on the listserv, and went to my first gay part in Bombay and met my first queer folk there, and that was really an extremely pivotal moment in my life, because I had -- it seemed like I had to really find other South Asian queer folk, so that I could actually come out.

So, that's really where my journey started. And then I started to, you know, tell those close to me in my life, my parents and good friends, and things like that. And I've been blessed with extremely supportive family, from my parents to my sister to my cousins and aunts and uncles, and my wife and I got married here in DC five years ago, when the law passed here. Her parents are also incredibly

supportive. Her family came from Pakistan, my family came from India, meeting for the first time in DC because, just by the fact that they lived so close together there, they can't cross that border. So it was easier for them to meet here. And so, yeah, they met for our wedding, and we've just been incredibly blessed to have extremely supportive family and extended families. So, that's a little bit of my coming out story.

SARIKA MEHTA: Well, thank you so much for sharing that. That's really fascinating, for, like, five different reasons. I mean, the fact that you had to go to India, go to Bombay, to find your queer folk people, to come out. I mean, that's an even more difficult journey for a lot of people generally. So you had talked about your journey of becoming a pandit, and your coming out story, and reconciling the two, because the two tend to be in conflict. And I couldn't even really say why. Is there anything in the Hindu religion that speaks against sexuality?

SAPNA PANDYA: Yeah, I mean, again, you know, all of this stuff is really up to interpretation. Right? So if you ask me versus asking somebody else, they may give you two different answers completely, and I think that for my version of Hinduism that I was raised with, and that also I read about, I don't see anything that is particularly condemning of same sex relationships. Now, there's a lot of patriarchy, and there's a lot of, and in particular going into like the wedding ceremonies and things like that, there's a lot of very strict gender roles, so, yes.

But, you know, where do you separate the, what you're going to listen to and take as your example, because there have been Hindu pandits and scholars that have said that Hinduism is against homosexuality. There you have your example of Baba Ramdev, who is renowned for being a yoga scholar and yoga expert and Hindu baba, and whatever, but at the same time, says that Hinduism is against homosexuality. And then you have others that say, well, didn't -- not, now we're conflating gender and sexuality, but didn't Arjun and the rest of the Pandavas, you know, well, especially Arjun, the famous story of him dressing as a woman when they were in exile, when the Pandavas were in exile, and there's stories of that.

There's the story of Shiva and Vishnu, as two male identified deities, producing a son, Ayyappan, so you have these stories as well, so it kind of depends on which train you want to take, and what you also define as your Hinduism. Are you looking strictly at the Puranas and the books to give you guidance on how to live your life? Or are you talking of a more spiritual Hinduism? And so, I think that's also -- it's a complicated question to answer, I think, because it is so personal. There are those that would say that Hinduism necessarily is actually not just accepting of but celebrating of homosexuality, because we celebrate plurality and diversity of form, and of gender, and of spirit. And so isn't that the queerest thing that there could be? So, and, not to mention love and compassion, how much, you know, Hinduism embraces those as well. But, again, it depends on whose Hinduism.

It's, at the same time, there's the political aspect, and I don't think I can talk about Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, any religion without sort of also bringing in that piece, because the Hindu right wing, besides Baba Ramdev, the Hindu right wing and the Hindu fundamentalists in India and, I think, manifest here in the diaspora as well, through the VHP and the BJP, are very hateful towards the queer community, and you have instances of the BJP that threw rocks at the theater when Fire, the film Fire was first screened in Bombay, to them being very much against the movement to remove Section 377 from the Indian Constitution that condemns homosexuality.

So, and they say they are Hindu, and they say they are holding up Hindu tradition, and they say that they are the ones that are really the keepers of Hinduism. So, it depends also on who you believe are

the authority figures. Are you going to follow the BJP and the VHP, are you going to follow these Babas and these Sankhs, and whatnot, or are you going to look at your own heart and your own sort of understanding of love and compassion as to what being a Hindu means?

So, I think it's -- and again, I don't think this is unique to Hinduism, I think it's, you can say that about all faiths. I mentioned earlier, my wife is Pakistani, she's Muslim. And her Islam and her parents' Islam are embracing of homosexuality, because the point is to love, and the point is to show your love for another person, so her parents are practicing strict Muslim, and that is where they find their love and their compassion, and acceptance, for lack of a better word, for her, so I think it really does go back down to, like, how you define your own religion and your own spirituality. And you can find that acceptance in any faith community, if you are defining it by the actual root of that religion as opposed to the political or the power game, which is where I think a lot of the condemning of homosexuality comes from.

SARIKA MEHTA: I'm glad you brought up the political piece, and I definitely want to talk a little bit more about that in a moment. I want to talk about the -- a little bit more on the microlevel. Like I said, the first time we met was when you officiated my friend's wedding. One thing I remember is when you were saying that you were trying to make some of these rituals and mantras less gendered. Give some examples of what you do during these weddings to make them more evolved and appropriate for our modern times.

SAPNA PANDYA: Right. And you know, I have since, actually, officiated my first straight wedding. So that was really interesting, I think, experience for me, because in the straight community, there are pandits that would officiate that were like -- I even asked this couple, I'm like, why did you ask me? Because you could get any pandits to do this. Like, you could just go to the local mandir and, like, get the guy sitting there to do this. You know? And why me? And they're like, yeah, we could, but we didn't like any of them, because we really want a feminist ceremony, we wanted -- so it wasn't even about the queer, but, like, you know, there is this also way in which it's feminist, breaking gender norms, and also being queer, embracing and queer-friendly all at once. So even though this was a straight couple, like, they wanted me to be the pandit for that reason.

And, so that's one of the things, is that it's the marriage in pretty much every cultural context is about property, about the woman in a straight context being property of the man. Right? So that's one of the key, one of the main ways in which we try to, and I say we because I really do talk to each couple in depth before the ceremony actually happens, that we try to reframe it. So, in all those places, like, even the tying of the mangal sutra, or even in tying of the cloths together, and who gives away who. We've got about, who is going to be that person. So as opposed to sometimes, again depending on the ethnic group that you come from, it, oftentimes, the bride's male relatives, even specifically her maternal uncle that is the one that gives her away. Right? So, is there somebody else in your family that could be the person that -- and if it is your male family members, that's fine, it's not about being anti-male, but why are we defining the giving away of somebody as having to happen from a male person giving that, giving you away. You know?

And so, talking about that and maybe choosing other people. Also thinking about chosen families, that's another way in which we kind of queer it up, is, it doesn't have to necessarily be biological family. Even for my and my wife's wedding, we did a nikah, we did a Muslim ceremony as well as a Hindu, aspects of Hindu ceremony, kind of combined them. So we did a nikah, and in the nikah, you usually have two witnesses and advocates that are present, are supposed to be present for the signing of the nikah-namah, of the wedding contract. And in that, also, we chose our chosen family, not necessarily

our blood relatives, but our chosen family. And especially for the queer community, that is extremely important, is our chosen family, and so we, in especially a lot of the queer weddings I've done, we've tried to bring in chosen family into more roles, because there are actually roles to play all throughout: tying of garments together, giving of rings. How much can we involved queer, uh, chosen family as well. So that's another way.

And I think one more way is in actually talking about the physical, again, there are so many different ceremonies and they differ from geography to geography, but in the Bollywood version of the going around the fire. which pretty much, you know, every couple that has a Hindu background, like, at some point we get to the, who's going to go around the fire first? You know, that question. So, that's a another way in which -- and when my wife and I got married, we did the very physically complicated thing of actually trying to go around the fire together, at the same time.

SARIKA MEHTA: I just want to interrupt for one second. It's complicated because it's a very small space, and there really is a fire, and you're dressed to the nines, and things can -- yeah.

SAPNA PANDYA: Exactly. So, with all of those considerations and, for my wedding I wore a sari, and you know, I was, like, just very cognizant of, I didn't want the sari to catch on fire, with all the gold there, and all those things, so, and if you've ever tried going around in a circle with another person, just, like, one has to -- one person has to walk faster than the other, and just, the timing of it. So we did that, but we did that on purpose, because the idea is supposed to be that a woman typically follows the guy around the fire, and she gets to do the last circle, yay, that's like her big prize that she gets to finish the fourth circle, or the seventh circle, depending on how many -- depending on your community. And, so, if that's the, that's her big moment of glory kind of thing. And doesn't have to necessarily be that -- okeh, so the woman is all, is going to do the first four instead, but actually that, how does it work for your relationship, you know? And, I think the last, the straight couple's wedding that I just officiated, they even actually chose to just do an even number, and he did three and she did three, because they said that their journey in life is shared, and so they wanted to share that as well. And so we changed it.

And then, so, this is all about symbolism. Right? So, every single aspect of their Hindu wedding ceremony is all symbolic, and so, and representative of their relationship, so shouldn't it be tailored to what your relationship actually is, and that's how they decided to do it. And, you know, I did say that this was being shaped in a feminist lens, and, you know, most of the crowd erupted in applause for that.

SARIKA MEHTA: Wow.

SAPNA PANDYA: But, it could be -- and then, that was in a straight wedding ceremony that we did that. So, with some of the same sex couples that I've officiated, we have also changed it up, because even if you may be of the same sex, there are still different roles for each person to play in the relationship, so even just to symbolize that, we have one person go then the other person go. So, going around the fire thing becomes a big debate.

SARIKA MEHTA: This is very fascinating, and I'm just laughing because I'm remembering, you know, my own wedding or other people's weddings, with exactly this, the going around the fire, and how much frustration I felt, knowing the gendered meaning behind this symbolism, and that being said, I'm curious if, in these modern interpretations, have you experienced any pushback from the community?

SAPNA PANDYA: You know, it's a weird double edged sword, right, that when queer couples get married, typically we are the ones that are really in control of what our wedding ceremony looks like.

And when straight couples get married, it's their parents that are. So, it's a weird double edged sword. Right? Like, my wife and I had complete control over what our ceremony was going to be, because we were the ones -- it wasn't like our parents are going to sit us down and say, this is what it's going to look like. As supportive as they are, they, it wasn't, it's not something that folks are jumping up and down to have their children marry somebody of the same gender or sex. Right? So, we're not getting that, and I can see even the difference from me and my sister, where everybody at the wedding was, like, not her friends, but they were my parents' friends, you know, and so therefore you're doing this wedding ceremony more for your parents and more for your community, whereas, when my wife and I got married, everybody there, when Gaurav and Gaurav got married, it was, everybody there was their friends, not necessarily their parents' friends.

And so actually, in the same sex weddings, I have really not gotten much pushback, because again, it's been for that particular community. It's interesting, like I said, I just officiated a straight wedding, and that's my first time of getting some pushback, where the bride had told me, she's like, you know, I want things a certain way. I want it to be feminist, my mom wants it to be another way, she wants these certain poojas to be done, but I don't want them because they're very gendered, and, so we planned it a certain way, but her mom intercepted at the ceremony -- at the day of the wedding itself, she approached me with all the different, all the aunties came, and they were like, so you're the pandit? I'm like, oh boy, I'm getting cornered now.

And she's like, which vedis are you going to do, which rituals are you going to do? So I showed her the thing, I showed her the rundown, all the things I was going to do, she said, okeh, good, you're doing that one, okeh, good. Okeh, but you also have to do this, and I had to stand up for my friend who was getting married, I was like, no, actually, she doesn't want to do that. She, like, and then she said, why not? But that's the tradition, that's what we do, you know? It was, actually, the going around the fire thing, I think that's what it was, that she wanted her to, you know, be behind, and I was like, no, actually, she wants to be in the front. So, then she says, but that's not how it's done, and I'm like, well, that's how we're doing it. So, her mother was like, well, you need to explain to her, you're the pandit, so you can convince her, I can't convince her. But I'm not going to convince her, I'm not that kind of pandit who's going to sit down your daughter and twist her arm to do it the right way. You know? So, it was interesting.

And the other aspect, another example I can think of of some pushback, which was interesting was, I was doing a housewarming ceremony for a friend who is Hindu in the Caribbean, and his mother was kind of very confused about the fact that a female was a pandit, and why was I the one that, how come I, as a woman, am doing the ceremony, and what, and how do I know anything anyway, because wasn't I born here, and you know, she was questioning me. And it was his grandmother who was the first to be born in the west, who is a 70-some, you know, year old woman, who was the first in the family to be brought from the subcontinent to the Caribbean, who actually stood up for me and said if you're going to question her, then you better question me, because I was the first one to be born in the west and this is -- she is the first one to be born here in the west, and she doesn't know any less than I do, like, so, you know, just leave her alone kind of thing.

So, it was an interesting connection, that I realized that somebody whose directly immigrated from India has with the Hindu Caribbean community from three generations back, like, that's where our timeline intersects. Right? So, that was interesting. And the pushback was interesting, and then also the support. And in that same housewarming ceremony, a lot of the friends that he had invited happened to be Jewish, and as you may know, in a lot of Hindu ceremonies, there's a lot of swastika action. And in particular one of the things that at least my, the way that my grandfather would do the ceremony, he

would paint a swastika using kumkum on the door of the house, and that's part of performing the ceremony. So I had to tell them, I'm drawing the swastika, this is not the same as the anti-semitic symbol, and what it means, and I broke it down in Sanskrit in terms of what it means. But I asked my friend first, like, would you prefer me to not, considering most of your friends here are Jewish? We went ahead with it, but he wanted to just explain that. So we did.

So, you know, there's, there have been these aspects of interesting pushback, or questioning, that have occurred throughout, yes.

SARIKA MEHTA: That's really interesting. I mean, we could have like a five hour discussion on this, but I want to move to the political aspect. You had kind of briefly mentioned before, like, for example, the Indian Supreme Court ruled that gay sex between consenting adults was a criminal offense. Talk about how these decisions, they really have a very strong effect on the diasporatic LGBT communities.

SAPNA PANDYA: Yeah, they do, for a number of reasons, right? One is that, I think, a lot of diaspora communities are actually quite transnational. I mean, I go, my wife and I both go to India and or Pakistan pretty much every year. She goes to Pakistan every year, I try to join her on every trip. I go to India almost every year, every other year, and she tries to join me on those trips. And so, when we're on those trips, we have an existence and a reality and a community there, also, so, to know that you're going back home, and to be criminalized back home, it has a tremendous consequence. It's difficult enough as it is to feel transnational, or feel as migrant, and to know that you're not accepted on yet another level, legally, is difficult. I think there's also the aspect of adoption, because of 377, you know, gay couples cannot adopt in India, and that is rule, actually, that the central adoption agency in India has, and they had it on their website up until recently, they've taken it down now, but it used to, there used to be this box that would like flash in the corner that said, you know, gays and lesbians may not adopt. And with 377 still being in place, and the criminalization of homosexuality, that is yet another aspect in which our families cannot raise children, and have children.

I have other friends that have adopted through India as single women, but that's, you know, impossible to do for gay men and for gay women that are in committed relationships as well. So that's another way in which, I think, it manifests and it hits home.

SARIKA MEHTA: Tell us about reconciling your own identity as a queer woman with the faith community of Gujarati Hindus. I ask because I find it frustrating that it feels like oftentimes queer people of color have to give up their ethnic or faith communities in order to be out, but not, you know, still not a part of their community.

SAPNA PANDYA: Yeah, I think so. And you know, I haven't, again, I haven't really felt that conflict. I think the only, the way in which I feel that conflict is less to do with my spiritual identity, and more to do with my relationship to that faith community, if that makes sense. And that's true, I think, of a lot of other queer Hindus of faith that I've spoken to, queer Muslims of faith that I've spoken to, that they're clear on their relationship with god, it's not that that's being questioned. It's the, how will my faith community see me, and that is the conflict. Because, going to temple was a big part of my growing up, especially I'm a bharatanatyam dancer, and so, as a dancer, and especially as a bharatanatyam dancer, a lot of my performances would happen at the temple, which is predominantly a South Indian temple in Maryland. And so I knew the people there, I knew the Hindu community through dance, and through the temple space, the physical temple space. You know, going there almost every Saturday or Sunday for performances or for just other temple fun days.

When I was coming out, it was difficult for me to, especially when I was of marriageable age, to have to dodge those questions by aunts and uncles of, like, well when are you getting married, when are you getting married, and all of that. So, I've actually now started to come out to some of those aunts and uncles, and that's been interesting, because I've known them all my life, and so when I talk about being Hindu, right, there's the personal and then there's the being Hindu in the public sense, or in the community sense. That's what's harder to reconcile, because it's how can I maintain that in that community, and also be queer? Because for a long time, I just didn't go to temple, and I didn't go into those spaces, because that was harder for me. I never doubted my faith or my spirituality, or the fact that I could be Hindu and queer, it was that larger piece that was more difficult.

And then thankfully many of them have been extremely supportive, and I just, one of my, the markers of how I feel like I've actually become accepted is, you know how you get these magnets and things from Indian businesses, whether it's a jewelry store, or a clothing store, or a real estate agent, or a tax attorney, or whatever, it's very big, right, is to print out these calendars and calendar magnets, or whatever. And there is an uncle that I've known since I was a kid, and he's a real estate agent in the area. And my parents used to just always get this magnet that they would put on the refrigerator, and it has his picture on it, and, you know, come home to my parents' house. And just last year I received one in my name and my wife's name, with his magnet and his picture. So now I get to put, you know, uncle's picture on my fridge, the same way my parents had it on their fridge all the time when I was growing up. And to me, it's like, okeh, the Hindu community accepts me, or at least wants me to use them as their agent, their real estate agent.

So, it's those ways. I think for me that's the harder struggle, is navigating that. It's a whole other thing for the Muslim community, in particular for Muslim immigrants who are female identified, that didn't go to mosque growing up, but in the US can, and so finding and navigating that space here in the US, where women do go to mosque, is a different reality, I think, and finding one's community that way, because in the US, our places of worship become the center of those communities, that the temple becomes the center of the Hindu community, the mosque becomes the center of the Muslim community, etc. etc. That it's a bit different for queer Muslims, I know, but that is a constant journey that one has to go on and to, like you said, it's the flip side of that coin, right, of not coming out. So, yeah.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right. That's a really good point, and I appreciate you sharing that. It must have been difficult to just not go to the temple for that period of time, but at the same time, you know, you're dealing with how do I reconcile. Sapna Pandya, thank you so much for this really interesting discussion, and for joining me on Intersections Radio.

SAPNA PANDYA: Thank you very much. And I can't wait to hear more segments from Intersections, now that I know all about it.

SARIKA MEHTA: Thank you. That was Sapna Pandya, the executive director of Many Languages, One Voice, and Washington, DC-based Hindu pandit.

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