

people
in
Harmony

making mixed race matter



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Cover image is of Leah Widdicombe and her family.

Mixed race – not mixed up!

By Sophie Argent

As part of the fastest growing ethnicity in the UK, there should be little for me to write about as a mixed race (half French and half Indian) person. But despite a continuing focus on diversity, my experience still shows that we are largely not comfortable with the perceived 'confusion' which comes from saying "I am mixed race".



colours is vast, particularly in India) frequently occurs, as if there were some set formula that comes with this mixture. I quickly learnt growing up that how I saw myself and expressed who I was, was frequently challenged by others' perceptions of what race and background I looked like to them and how I should be.

I am mistaken for a variety of backgrounds; from Mediterranean, to Middle Eastern and South American, depending on your perspective and how attached you are to maintaining stereotypes of what certain races physically look like. The ambiguity of my physical appearance and race should not translate into ambiguity in my identity but it frequently does. Comparisons with other half Indians and whether you are too light or too dark, or the 'wrong' eye colour (although failing to understand that variety in skin tones and eye

My name doesn't give any clues about my Indian background either – only a French one which, ironically, I have little relation to apart from a basic level of French for those odd trips. I do though, speak Gujarati and Hindi fairly well. The fact I can speak these but not French, I have found, surprises many and even offends some people. I have a flair for learning languages and as I have been exposed to both Gujarati and Hindi from a young age, it should not be that surprising that I can understand them. But apparently, it can be a sign of 'being' or 'acting too Indian' (the subtext;

for my appearance and background). This can lead some to conclude that I am 'trying too hard', as if being mixed means that my ability to speak those languages (my languages), dress in Indian clothes, observe and attend certain Hindu religious occasions and traditions should be apportioned precisely to the 50% that flows through my genes and not more and certainly less than a 'fully Indian' person! This misses a glaring point which is that to be born into a culture, religion and a race is one thing but that does not guarantee engagement or that you will automatically be able to speak other languages or even be interested in certain traditions and customs. It does not happen via osmosis and this is particularly true when part of your background is from a country that you are not living in. It takes more effort if you want to understand and engage with it. In doing so, it doesn't mean that I have lost the other side of me or that I am neglecting it and feel ashamed of being half white. It is also not a sign that I am veering too much to the Indian side and that I will forget that I am 'only' half Indian. The fact is I have grown up with my Mum, an African-born Indian and a single parent. She has passed on her traditions, culture and religion to me and whilst I was baptised and attended a convent school until the age of 11, I was largely influenced by my Mum's Indian background and her deep Hindu faith. This has become an important aspect of my own identity that I have myself gravitated towards.

There is an underlying assumption that you are less entitled to participate in certain cultural or religious events because your Mum married a person of a different race, as if 'marrying out' automatically results in an exit of your cultural and religious upbringing. Legitimacy is therefore a constant battle when you are mixed race. Since you are 'only half Indian', it may not be as safe to rely on your take on cultural and religious aspects of your culture. I experienced this when I used to be a Bollywood dance teacher. A minority of attendees made it clear that they were not happy with me teaching, inferring that they considered me

unqualified as someone whose heritage had been diluted and, although it was not directly put to me in this way, they wanted a 'real Indian'. There are uncomfortable assumptions that belie this thought – that to be 'fully' of one race is purer, stronger, less equivocal and therefore better than being of 'mixed blood'.

I have become attuned to the bewildered looks that seep from furtive glances as I walk into some temples. To some I have been the very embodiment of 'shame' and 'betrayal' of culture and tradition. On one occasion, I heard a priest in the temple say that one of the 'dangers' of marrying outside of race and religion was the 'poor mixed children, who often end up confused'. I have experienced admiration and surprise when I seem to know words to bhajans (Indian religious songs) and my knowledge of certain rituals. Such reactions, whilst in the most part not malicious, fail to understand that this has been a part of my upbringing since birth and is a part of me! Luckily acceptance is not something I have sought in the last few years – a skin that I have shed as I have grown up and realised that others' prejudices and misperceptions are a symptom of their own worries and fears, rather than something inherently wrong with my background.

We are still too reliant on snap judgments made on the basis of what race you are and what our skin colour is. When that is harder to determine, as in my case, it causes even more intrigue and a lot of outdated and misjudged assumptions about the response: "*I am mixed race*". Being exposed to different influences through having parents who are difference races and religions, does not dilute my identity or make it any less valid. I have definitely had to think more about my cultural identity than perhaps others have, but that has definitely been to my advantage as I have made informed decisions about how my culture and faith work with me as a person. I am mixed race not mixed up; not confused and not lost! And I am stronger and richer because of it. ♦