

INFLUENCE | FILM CLUB

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Meet the Patels Discussion Guide

Directors: Geeta V. Patel, Ravi V. Patel

Year: 2014

Time: 88 min

You might know these directors from:

This is the debut feature-length film from both of these directors, a sibling duo.

FILM SUMMARY

Marriage is a crucial rite of passage in many cultures. Viewed as a time when an individual crosses the line between the family of old and the family of new, deciding who to spend the rest of one's life with is a major decision, one made between two individuals. Right? Not in MEET THE PATELS, where holy matrimony is truly a family affair.

Granting himself two weeks to find a wife from the tiny tract of land in the region of his family's ancestry, Vasant Patel found Champa on his 12th arranged meeting. Weeding through the previous 11 his extended family presented him with was all part and parcel for the course, and once he'd had 10 minutes in Champa's company, he was confident that this was his "till death do us part." So they entered into their arranged marriage and boarded a plane to the United States to begin their life-long adventure on American soil.

35 years later, Vasant and Champa are still happily married with two adult children, Geeta and Ravi. The joyous upbringing they were given, the strong Indian traditions they inherited, the immense bond between parents and children and extended family, and the marriage their parents maintain - these are the things Geeta and Ravi ache for in their own lives. Yet the American within them both grapples with the traditional ways. In America, girl meets boy on her own terms, and love finds you, not the other way around.

As MEET THE PATELS develops, it's not so much the differences but rather the similarities between us all. The search for love is inherent within all of us - and our idea of what defines romance is all a matter of personal and cultural perspective. Through and through, MEET THE PATELS is a light-hearted look at the biggest decision facing a great majority of us at one point or another.

FILM THEMES

With love as their driving force, the Patel family traverses the territory of marriage and its many impassioned implications while adapting to their adopted homeland, as cultures collide and compromises are made.

FAMILY: THE GOOD AND THE BAD

Family, that gigantic force in a person's life which one just cannot choose. The thing we are all given at birth and stuck with for the rest of our days. A family can serve as a source of support and depletion simultaneously, a comfort and a grievance, a liberation and a big heavy guilt. Ravi loves his parents deeply and is troubled by his inability to please their needs while meeting his own. In their own way, his parents share his troubles. "My happiness is your happiness," Vasant Patel declares, a statement both heart-warming and heart-wrenching, which reflects the power of family to take and give in the same breath.

CULTURE

As the Patel prepared for their annual trip to India, Ravi ended the relationship he'd withheld from his parents, stating, "I can't live this double life anymore." According to Ravi's upbringing, Indians marry Indians and specifically, Patels marry Patels. How do these cultural quantities translate within contemporary American society, which constitutes half of what makes up Ravi? A culture clash ensues, his deeply engrained Indian values facing his American counterpart. When his mother states, "I'm not giving up my culture that easily," she assumes that by allowing American culture to seep into her family's equation, the traditions that define and strengthen them will be jeopardized. It is left to the first generation Indian-Americans to build a bridge between the two.

MARRIAGE

Whether arranged or left to chance, marriage rules a great deal of the average life. For the Patels, family - with marriage a natural extension of that - is everything. Vasant goes so far as to tell his son, "Not getting married and staying single is the biggest loser you can be." Ravi wonders, what is the best formula for finding a life-long mate? My parents' way, which continues to happily serve them to this day, or my contemporaries' path, which actually really when you look at it isn't all that different, what with online dating and personal profiles ruling the roost. Whether in India or the U.S., Vasant speaks to a great majority when he tells his son, "The bottom line is: go and get married."

COMPROMISE

"When you compromise, you pay the price," Champa told her daughter, angered that her children weren't wholeheartedly embracing traditional Indian ways. But as the film developed, relationships evolved and the Patel family experienced the power of compromise. By allowing the possibility of change onboard, by softening pre-conceptions and loosening defenses, new truths emerged. Rather than sticking to a rigid path of right and wrong, the Patels learned about the strengths inherent in their bi-cultural lives and through individual compromise, carved out a new family formula.

"I love our family, our culture. When I have kids, I want them to have this same feeling, this same experience."

Ravi Patel

"Life is a commitment. You have to make some commitments."

Vasant Patel

"The culture has to adapt to the times. Every generation changes the way culture is."

Ravi Patel

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Besides a documentary, how would you classify MEET THE PATELS?
2. Did you empathize with any one of the characters in the film more than others? If so, discuss. If not, did you feel that you could understand the trials of the family members on a personal level or was their experience foreign to you?
3. On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being the least), how much does your upbringing influence your current intimate relationship decisions? Is it important for you to enter into a lasting relationship with an individual who shares a similar background?
4. What are some of the challenges facing a bi-cultural couple? What are some of the strengths inherent in a bi-cultural relationship?
5. What are your thoughts on arranged marriage à la Indian style? In which ways do you think it still functions in the modern world? In which ways doesn't it function in a contemporary society? In which ways is it similar to online dating in a Western context?
6. For most people, the notion of family is a loaded issue, with both its positive and negative sides. Do you feel more supported by or bound by your family relationships? Is it important to maintain strong links to one's biological family as one matures, or is it important to cut those ties and set off on one's own?
7. If you have a sibling, have you ever worked with him/her on a work project over a period of time? If so, describe that process. If not, discuss some of the perks and setbacks you can imagine exist between two siblings working together. Some people say, "Never go into business with family." Why is this?
8. What is your definition of marriage? Do you believe in the institution of marriage? What is your personal experience of marriage?
9. What, if anything, do children "owe" their parents? What, if anything, do parents "owe" their children once they have grown up and left the household?
10. Describe your culture. What about your culture is important for you to maintain and carry into your future? What aspects of your culture would you prefer to discard?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- MEET THE PATELS had its global premiere at the 2014 Hot Docs Film Festival in Toronto, where it was the runner-up for the Audience Award. The film has gone on to win a number of other awards, including being the first film ever to win both the Audience Award and Founders Prize at the 2014 Traverse City Film Festival.
- What began as an entertaining family movie (in Geeta's words, "My brother is hilariously suffering right now. Let's film it!") transformed into a six-year documentary filmmaking process. Ravi recognized the multi-layered issues he was facing - and the potential for a film - as he was doing a comedy routine at an Indian-American Lawyers Convention on his parents' pressure to get married. In his words, "The routine was killing in a way that I've never killed before, as if we were all survivors of the same war."
- Prior to MEET THE PATELS, Geeta spent 7 years working on "Project Kashmir," a documentary covering this social and political war zone.
- During the filming process, Geeta and Ravi met with great enthusiasm for their project, with even PBS expressing interest in their initial footage. Once the film was complete, however, they were rejected from film festivals for one year. They did a re-edit and were rejected again. Once the film was finally accepted onto one film festival, all future screenings were sold out.
- Ravi previously worked as an investment banker.
- Geeta has worked in media and filmmaking since graduating in Comparative Area Studies.
- The decision to include animation in the film came out of the desire to not film the Patel parents during some of the tougher scenes. Experimenting with various storytelling techniques, which were all expensive and eventually discarded, Ravi and Geeta decided on a radio style way of telling the story. Once Ravi had recorded his story in radio format, the animations were added in their raw "unfinished" form, which best suited the home video style.
- The surname Patel derives from "Patidan," which refers to a piece of land. Patels were thus in charge of managing community land.
- As of 2013 there were an estimated 3.2 million Indians in the U.S., with 87% of adults being foreign born. 70% above the age of 25 held university degrees, 2.5 times more than the general U.S. population. Half of Indian Americans are Hindu, 18% are Christian, and 10% Muslim, as compared to 80% of Indians in India practicing Hinduism and 2% practicing Christianity.
- India is the world's largest democracy and second most populated country, with over 1.2 billion inhabitants. Gujarat, a state in Western India from where the Patels originate, has a population of 60 million. The capital of Gujarat - Gandhinagar - was named after Mahatma Gandhi, who was born in the region.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Read** about [This Bar Saves Lives](#) - a charity working to end severe acute malnutrition that Ravi Patel is one of the founding members of. Consider buying a delicious snack bar.
2. **Remain** open to other's values. Whether you were born into a family where arranged marriage is status quo or finding love as an individual is modus operandi. Educate yourself on other traditions.
3. **Reflect** on the most important relationships in your life and take steps to be honest, fearless, and loving in dealing with them.
4. **Think** you know which of the Patels best represents your character? Take this [quiz](#) to uncover just where you stand within the landscape of Patels.

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In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.