

# My idea of India as a closed society was like a bedtime story: Kusum

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INTERVIEW



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The interview below is of Kusum, who is from the French Reunion Island. She was born out of an Indian mother and a French father. Her forefathers were taken to the Reunion as indentured laborers. Indians were taken to reunion as indentured laborers between the years 1860 to 1936. Other than indentured laborers Gujarati businessman also went to Reunion. The French government have encouraged their assimilation into the French society however, Indian community managed to preserve their 'Indianness' through religious and cultural traditions. With growing connectivity with India, the Indian identity has been reasserted and is very much visible in their everyday life of the Indian community.

**Kalyani:** Hello Kusum, I welcome you to India. It is pleasure to have you here with GRFDT.

**Kalyani:** What India means to you? How do you relate with India?

**Kusum:** Thank you very much for having me here.

My 1<sup>st</sup> experience of India was in Mumbai when I was 11 years old. When I first came here I was shocked, it had so many people, so many cars, it was so distant. I saw Indians had so many Gods like Ganesh, Hunuman and also the Cross. I remember I drove in a bus and the

driver had Ganesh and many other Gods. It was difficult for me to understand that India was so much open. I had an idea of India. I used to think people are close minded here. There were so many gods, not only Indian Gods but Christian gods as well. And this observation came from a driver who was just a commoner. People here speak so many languages. They have so much color.

The other thing, which I came across, was the smell of India. India has a particular smell. Every time when my mother came back from India since I was a kid, she had a particular smell. When she opened her luggage I could smell like Indian.

**Kalyani: Is the smell good? Is it the sense of mother country that is giving you that smell?**

**Kusum:** It is not about good or bad, it is a smell. It is unique. It is smell...I don't know what exactly, but there is a smell. I have not found this smell in any other countries were I have travelled. Everytime I come here I feel this smell.

**Kalyani: People of Indian origin have created new ideas of India. From what you said we understand that you also had an idea of India? Is your idea of India imaginary? Is the reality very different?**

**Kusum:** I had a fantasy image of India. Many people back home have this imaginary of India. When they come to India the realities here are so different. Their idea of India is no more there. Sometimes they do not want to confront this reality. It was shock for me also. India is huge surprise, it is not at all what they told about my imaginary country.

**Kalyani: Are you disappointed by the reality you witnessed? Is it to do with poverty that is prevalent here? When you were told about India was it about the poverty here?**

**Kusum:** I was more than surprised, I was thinking that it is a joke. So I thought it was just one place, but then I travelled to Bangalore, to Pondicherry and it was so different...my idea of India as a closed society was like a bedtime story. India had so much openness. Indian people are so open-minded.

It was the first time I saw people sitting on street, a large number of them. There were garbage all around. We are not used to it in France. There it is not like that. I was not shocked by poverty but the fact that everyone has to push their life more and more. Everyone was trying to do his or her best. That was so different for me because for us if you don't have money you just complain and complain about money. Here it is so different. Actually they just try to do their best. India is poor is said in European countries but not in Diaspora.

**Kalyani: What you inherited as 'Indian Culture' in your family from your elders?**

**Kusum:** The idea of Indian culture that I got from my mother was that you have to be welcoming, you have to welcome guest with tea in your house. One thing you have to learn is to make tea properly. You will have to welcome people with food. It is like deep way of life. Deep education. It is like genetic to welcome people. In a family dinner, we do not go out in short skirts, we dress properly. All people in the diaspora have the same kind of education that you need to welcome people and offer them food. Food is very important.

For me India is a way of life, it is not about economy or dance or music. It is what my mother teaches me. It is about wearing gold jewelry because it brings luck. It is believed that gold jewelry brings luck in one's life. When I buy some fantasy jewelries, my mother scolds me saying 'you don't want to have lucky life?'. Every morning my mother wakes me to Subramaniam music to welcome me. She purifies the house. So I many times think I live with India.

**Kalyani: When you say genetic what do you mean by this?**

A. It means that no one taught these things to my mother. She knows about it inherently. She knows gold brings good luck. We also believe in position of moon. It is like don't cut nails on full moon. It is a belief. Just like jewelry to women is very important, it is most important gift to a daughter.

Land is also very sacred to Indian family. They don't sell land. You get to learn from your mother and father that never sell land. Land is sacred and this belief is not changing in Reunion.

**Kalyani: Are Indian Youth connected with India as much as you are? Or are you more connected because of your mother?**

**Kusum:** They are very much connected to India in their own ways. They are connected to India because they come here. They come here because they wanted to travel to India. Maybe because of business as business here is lucrative. They also come because of the religion. People of my age feel very connected to the temple. They like going to temple. There are ceremonies every week and that they are very very religious people. That is too much for me.

**Kalyani: In your religion do you also talk about Gita or Upnishads?**

**Kusum:** That is more philosophic. It exists in some way. It is more for an intellectual person, not only Indian but also French. There is no teaching or culture of its propagation.

Indians in Reunion are very very Tamil. They speak in Tamil a little and you can find a Tamil teacher. But finding Hindi teacher is difficult. Many people want to learn Tamil. Young Generation wants to know what the priest says. There is so much connectivity that now there is a direct flight from Reunion to Chennai and not to Delhi or others.

**Kalyani: Within Hindu community there are so many divisions? Is caste system prevalent in Reunion?**

**Kusum:** During the time when Indians reached Reunion there was a huge male population but number of women was less. The number of women mattered. Marriage was not a love affair. My Grandfather was a Sikh. He married my grandmother because her name was close to their caste. Because of the proximity with their name identity they got married. They wanted to keep the caste but they could not. There were intermixing between White and dark people. My generation is more about money rather than caste. People focus more on buying land. If there is no money they will move to Mauritius.

**Kalyani: Are marriage between Muslim, Hindus, Blacks and Whites common?**

**Kusum:** Yes it is common. First thing you should know that Indian people are called Malabar in Reunion. Malabar because of the Malabar coast and it is not derogatory to say that like the word Negro. Muslims are called Zahal, Chinese are called Chinua, Creole and white Zuhuai because of their hair. We have a lot of mixing. We eat together. We celebrate together, we celebrate Eid together, and we celebrate Christmas together. There are invitations from temple. We were like in an aquarium small small fishes in the water. May be we will become like Jews one day and it is not a problem.

I was married to a person with Muslim origin of a Gujarat family. We were so close, about how to treat your family. I was eating Beef my ex-husband was not eating beef. I don't eat pork, but he eats pork. Eating pork was not a problem for him because he came from a mixed Muslim family.

**Kalyani: How well are Indians integrated in economy? Are they doing well?**

**Kusum:** Yes. They have lot of land. It is separate because Chinese have more small business like small shops. Indians have more of land so that they are involved in agriculture. They are also in university. But now it is so different because Chinese and Indian are mixing

Thank you for that wonderful interaction; hope to see you see you in India soon.

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Person Name: Kusum