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The Secret History

By **Sandy Asirvatham** (/index.php?category=author&s=Sandy Asirvatham) | Aug. 16, 2000

As I prepare to fly out to Los Angeles this week for the wedding of my cousin Arvid Mira* (my mother's brother's son), I'm reminded of the bizarre family secret that emerged the last time I attended nuptials on my mother's side (the wedding of her *other* brother's son Manu Mira) five years ago in Phoenix.

At that time--as a result of various relocations, divorces, and recurring family feuds--my sister and I hadn't seen Manu or Arvid since we were all teenagers living in New Jersey. Despite our common roots as Miras (a clan that mistakes loud circular arguments about decades-old events for actual conversation), we cousins had turned out to be relatively mature adults eager to laugh over and distance ourselves from our parents' follies.

Late on the night of the wedding, while Manu, his bride, and their guests were down to their socks gyrating to Gloria Estefan, Arvid and I wandered out to the hallway lounge with our drinks and some cigarettes we'd cadged. "It's a nice wedding," Arvid said, "but too bad nobody's here from the 'A' branch of the family."

I eyed him blankly. "Huh?"

"You know, the 'A' branch. Albert's kids."

I vaguely remembered my mother speaking about her uncle Albert in California--brother of my grandfather Martin, who died when I was 4. During childhood, because I already had my hands (and ears) full with firsthand Miras, I'd never paid much attention to those rumored legions of hearsay Miras around the world. And I still couldn't feign disappointment for the absence of some unmet third-cousin Miras. But I was really stuck on this "A"-branch business.

"The 'A' in M-I-R-A," Arvid said. He then proceeded to blow my mind by explaining that his last name--my mother's maiden name--was an acronym of the first initials of my grandfather (Martin) and his three brothers (Albert and two others whose names started with "R" and "I"--I may be mistaken, but I seem to recall they were good, proper British Empire names along the lines of Rudyard and Ishmael). Prior to my grandfather's generation, Arvid said, the family lived in a tiny village in India where people didn't use surnames. When Martin, as a young man, moved to the city of Ahmedabad, he invented Mira because he needed a last name to be employable in modern, urban India. His brother Albert also adopted the name, but the other two brothers didn't, even though their initials went into its composition.

I was dumbfounded.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you?" my cousin asked. No, I'd never heard one whisper of this wacky story. I now felt intensely sad for having kept aloof from my crazy family and its crazy history, and also intensely angry that my mother had failed, utterly failed, to reveal these important facts to me, thus reinforcing my alienation from the clan.

My sister joined us in the lounge, and Arvid repeated the story. She too was rendered speechless. Back in New Jersey, a few weeks later, I challenged my mom to break her usual silence on family matters. I told her the story Arvid told me. She stared off glassily into the distance and sighed.

"Part of Arvid's story is true, but also he has been lied to, probably by your grandmother," she said. "We *did* have a last name before Mira. It was Solanki. A Hindu name." She told me how her father, Martin, was such a fanatical Christian that he decided to repudiate all vestiges of his Hindu past, including his surname.

The irony was that Martin's father had converted to Christianity only halfheartedly and mostly as a practical matter. At that time in British India, converts had an easier time getting jobs, apartments, and places in good schools. My great-grandfather's expedient conversion ensured a first-rate, nun-supervised education for his sons, but also gave his boy Martin the tools for rebellion: the religious fervor with which he would later denounce his family history.

"Why didn't you ever tell us this story, Mom?"

Her big brown eyes leaked angry tears. "I was ashamed! I thought it was a ridiculous, fanatical thing he'd done!" It was one of the rare times I'd ever heard my mother speak about her father--a difficult, abusive, authoritarian man, from what little I've heard--and it offered a faint glimmer of insight into the somewhat mysterious person my mother is. "That's why I deliberately gave you and your sister Indian names--Sulochana and Sandhya," she said. "To defy what he had done!"

It's been almost two years since some readers of this column--two young women of Indian descent--chastised me for using the nickname "Sandy" rather than my given name, Sandhya. My response at the time was: You have no right to accuse others of failing to live up to *your* idea of ethnic pride, because everyone's got their own strange, idiosyncratic family history and their own deeply personal reasons for celebrating, ignoring, or repudiating their roots. It's still a bedrock belief for me: No one has the right to regulate another person's relationship to his or her own history.

I have to laugh at the perverse irony of my situation. When I succumbed to "assimilation" those many years ago--when I decided, as a lonely, insecure daughter of immigrants in 1960s white-bread America, to distance myself from my roots by "Westernizing" my name--I was also eerily mirroring my grandfather's rebellious actions four decades earlier. In one paradoxical stroke, my act of self-naming signaled my independence from the clan--and from my mother, who had herself rebelled by naming me Sandhya in the first place--and yet bound me unwittingly to my grandfather's secret history.

Family names have been changed to protect identities.

