

# OPINION by Shyam Bhat

## *Super speed dating (or the swayamvar is back)*

What is common to a Rabbi and dating? Sounds like the start to a bad joke, but it is in fact a serious question, one that you probably don't know the answer to, unless you googled it or you happen to be Arul Mani.

So allow me tell you the answer: speed dating.

That's right. This ultra fast form of dating popularised in the 1990s by *Sex and the City* and other TV shows in the US was devised by a Rabbi of an ultra orthodox Jewish community, as a way to get Jewish singles to meet.

I first heard about speed dating as a single guy in my late twenties in Illinois. I thought the whole thing was for losers, and even though I went dateless on many a weekend night, the loneliness was preferable to the ignominy of attending such events. Speed dating, as far as I was concerned, was for men and women who were socially challenged, unable to meet and to speak to people in the real world.

I think that was the general perception back then. Even those who went to speed dating events seemed embarrassed by it, indulging in it almost furtively. One of my colleagues at that time in the US told me, when I asked how he met his wife, "We met at a speed dating event, but Sharon doesn't like telling people that." His wife smiled and said, "He was a journalist covering the event, and I had just gone along with a friend." It was almost as if they wanted to distance themselves from the unsavouriness of that evening.

Fast forward a decade and I now live in Bangalore, a city that has morphed from the small town it was when I left 14 years ago into a cosmopolitan chaotic dizzyingly diverse and energetic hub of activity. Ten years back in Bangalore, dating was uncommon, speedy or slow, but now of course, times have changed.

Speed dating has come to Bangalore and is here to stay. A friend's sister, in her late twenties told us that she had been to a speed dating event recently.

"How was it?" I asked

She described the event, conducted in the now well known format. "You spend two minutes with each guy, then the organiser rings a bell and another guy comes to the table. You write down the names of those people you want to contact, and then they match it with the guys' list and then they email those who matched with the contact numbers."

"Sounds complicated," I replied.

"Less complicated than regular dating," she replied.

I asked her if two minutes was enough time to decide if she liked someone or not. "Yeah sure, I know right away if I don't want to go out with a guy again, or if I am interested in spending more time together. It's not like I have to decide about getting married right away."

She didn't really like most of the men she met – they seemed "not my type" – but, she added, "I met two guys who seemed nice, and I might meet them for a coffee sometime next week."

As I spoke to her, I was aware that in attending this speed dating event, and in choosing her dates, she was exercising a level of autonomy that would not have been possible in the old India. But in the new India, the confident and independent single Indian woman is exercising her right of choice.

And this should not be surprising at all, because after all, the original speed dating was not invented by a Rabbi. It was an accepted practice in some segments of Indian society centuries, maybe thousands of years ago. We just called it a different name – swayamvar.

I completely understand if the word "swayamvar" has acquired a certain greasy quality after Rakhi Sawant's reality show. But let me remind you that the process was a noble celebration of female emancipation and autonomy. The swayamvar was super speed dating, an ancient Indian solution to the universal female plea, "Where have all the good men gone?"

The father of the bride, usually a king, invited men from all over

the country to compete for his daughter's hand in marriage.

After several tests and examinations and trials, the bride would garland the best amongst the suitors and, it was hoped, they would live happily ever after.

Once I understood speed dating in the framework of female emancipation, in the light of our own cultural heritage, I changed my mind. I don't think it's for losers, at least not in this country. Speed dating is just one more example of an evolving, emancipated society. Thankfully for the guys though, this time it is more egalitarian, more equal – the number of men and women are equal and therefore, theoretically at least, kinder on the men than the original version.

But does speed dating really work? Isn't speed the antithesis of intimacy, the poison to authentic interaction? Not according to the research. We are instinctive beings. We might think that we are logical and have a notion of the kind of partner we desire, but apparently our choices are made unconsciously.

Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Blink* describes a study that examines choice. Participants in the study filled out questionnaires about their ideal mate, but these apparently did not match their subconscious preferences.

Other studies demonstrated that we decide whether or not we like a person (in the romantic sense) within three to 30 seconds of meeting them. Apparently there are unknown, almost imperceptible stimuli that act on the deepest recesses of our brains, drawing us closer to some people and pushing us away from others. One theory for example is that we are attracted to people with compatible genes, and we detect this compatibility through our olfactory nerves, through chemicals called pheromones. A few

seconds is all we need and everything we use to explain our likes or our dislikes – he is a great listener, he has a great sense of humour, she has a beautiful smile – these occur after our brain has already made the choice for us, so to speak.

Speed dating just taps into our instincts, our ancient signalling mechanisms.

Of course, women are much better at listening to their instincts; the men often are confused by signals from the brain located in their nether regions.

To that extent, it is the woman who makes the choice and the man who competes for her attentions. We have seen this all before in India. Ladies and gentlemen, the swayamvar is back in town.



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