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Umang Khandpur
University of Kentucky, umang.khandpur@yahoo.com

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Imagine the following scene: Haley is an undergraduate student preparing to earn a degree in health administration. She grew up in a middle class household of two university professors. Ravindranath attends the same university studying for a career in medicine. Ravi was born in Jodhpur (Rajasthan), India to a chemical engineer and a housewife. His family decided to immigrate to America when Ravi was 11 years old. He spent the latter half of his pre-adult years in an upper middle-class household of Indian tradition.

Ravi and Haley are enrolled in the same seminar class one semester and soon enough begin meeting up at the campus library to study for exams and discuss ideas for class. They enjoy the time they spend with each other and around midterms they become "Facebook official."[1] A few months into the relationship, Ravi musters the courage to tell his parents that he has been in a relationship with a girl from school. Unfortunately, the news is not received well. In their uncompromising tirade, his parents tell him that what he is doing is wrong and remind him of the marriage arrangement they had made with the Rathod family just before leaving for America. In addition to remarking that he doesn't even know the woman half way around the world, Ravi tries to stand firm by explaining that he is not speaking of marriage; rather, a relationship with a woman whom he loves. His father disputes Ravi's claim with "First marriage, *then* love. Understand?" Ultimately, Ravi's unsatisfactory argument merits a one-way trip back to the motherland.

The above fictional account exposes the reality and importance of arranged marriage to a traditional Indian family. An arranged marriage is one that is planned and agreed upon by the families or guardians of the bride and groom, whom have little or no influence in the matter

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[1] Gretchen Kelmer, "Should We Make It Facebook Official?" <u>The New York Times</u> 30 Dec. 2012: 1-1.

themselves.[2] In the eyes of most Western readers, the introductory story is surreal. It may seem uncivilized, cruel, or strange. But this narrative is not so farfetched to a Rajasthani. In fact, arranged marriages in India are more common than Christians are in America.[3] They are so customary that there exists a term for the rare occurrence of a marriage which is *not* arranged – a "love marriage." Most of the middle class in modern India feels that a marriage is to be arranged, heterosexual, and lifelong. It is simply "too important to be left to chance."[4] While opinions of the system differ from those that operate within it, the practice of arranged marriage is a thought that has crossed the mind of every Indian parent. Despite the interminable denigration and occasional quarrel with the law, the custom has shown incredible resilience and evolution.

Historical Context

Arranged marriage arose as early as the Roman era. Daughters were used as currency in exchange for escalating the military position of the family and/or solidifying tactical alliances. Arrangement within aristocracy was also commonplace. It was seen as a pure way to preserve legacy and unite kingdoms. The practice continued and eventually spread to colonial America, a time when marriage between first and second cousins was acceptable because of the insistence to maintain a bloodline.[5]

India had independently seen its rise of arranged marriage since it was largely disconnected from the Western world before imperial times. Although the institution eventually

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[2] Oxford Dictionaries
[3] The Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life
[4] Saheri's Choice: Arranged Marriages in India, Films Media Group. 1997. (5:30); Marriage in Modern India, The London School of Economics and Political Science. 2012.
[5] Arranged Marriage – Past and Present, Hub Pages, Inc. 2010.

was displaced by "love marriage" (the idea that a romantic relationship should precede marriage) in the Occident, South Asia has been tenacious in holding to the concept, especially the middle class. The resilience can be attributed to the fundamentality of certain elements of a Hindu marriage described in the following section.[6]

Significance & Ritual Aspects

A Hindu marriage is one of the sixteen *sanskaras* or sacred life experiences. It is a pivotal point after which the person transitions into adulthood, married life, and parenthood for the next forty or fifty years all in one ceremony that may last a few days. In the eyes of the common villager, the prospect of marriage serves to complete four independent tasks. Giri Raj Gupta notes:

> First, marriage is a religious performance without which the individual is incomplete. The institution of marriage is considered to be a part of a person's *dharma* (religious duty). The sacrifices offered to the gods and deities by unmarried persons are said to be incomplete because a man is only half in himself. He becomes complete only after he secures a wife (cf. Kane 1941: 428-29). Second, marriage implies children who will carry the name of the father and *vansha* and become future caste members. Third, children are also necessary to assure a happy after-life for the parents. A son is needed to perform the funeral rites for a man after his death. A son is also given the responsibility of performing the *pani-dena* rite (oblations to the dead) which propitiates the *pitras* (souls of the

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[6] Ibid.

agnatic ascendants). A daughter will someday be offered as the greatest gift possible through the rite of *kanyadan*. If there are no children to perform these rites, it is believed that person's soul will not be saved. The fourth function of marriage is to satisfy the sexual desires of the partners in a socially acceptable manner. Bachelorhood is frowned upon since it is believed that a bachelor will be driven to a sinful life to satisfy his physical drives.[7]

Even though the above block quotation was written from the experiences Gupta had in a village in Rajasthan – where the father has authority over his daughter when the girl is a child; the husband has authority over her when she is a woman; and, her sons have authority over her when she is of old age – the cultural significance of marriage in India extends to middle and upper class families. In addition to the aforementioned, marriage allows consolidation of family property, provides an opportunity to strengthen kinship, and maintains social satisfaction in affected society.[8] On the note of kinship, C.J. Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan from the London School of Economics and Political Science affirmatively state that "for the majority of middle-class Indians, arranged endogamous (within same caste) marriage remains the norm, in both preference and practice. In most groups, inter-subcaste unions have become more acceptable and common, although in some of them, a strong preference for subcaste endogamy persists."[9]

Preliminary Compatibility Assessment

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[7] Giri Raj Gupta, Marriage, Religion and Society: Pattern of Change in an Indian Village (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974) 55.

[8] Santana Flanigan, Arranged Marriages, Matchmakers, and Dowries in India, Postcolonial Studies @ Emory (Oct, 2012).

[9] C.J. Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan, "Companionate Marriage in India: The Changing Marriage System in A Middle-Class Brahman Subcaste", Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 2008: 736-754.

Before a marriage can be officially declared, a multitude of factors are investigated by the parents and trusted parties to ensure compatibility, future prosperity (both in the marriage and in the derivative households), and divine satisfaction. The concept of *sanjog* is often supplicated in the context of divine satisfaction. It serves a dual purpose: promotion of predestined marriage and softening of the rejection to an unsuitable partner. Some of the important factors that are investigated to screen out incompatible matches in the village scene include but are not limited to: endogamy, age, economic/social standing, education/vocation, physical beauty, and astrology/numerology.

Endogamy. In this context, endogamy refers to marriage within caste and subcaste. A caste is essentially a "hereditary social group which bears a name and an attributed ritual status along with a set of distinctive characteristics."[10] There are, of course, certain honors of preserving village endogamy including promotion of local caste solidarity. As kinship ties are formed, the caste is strengthened. Specific to the artisan and agricultural castes, intra-village marriages are preferred because women are considered economic assets. Gupta asserts "a local alliance allows a young wife to occasionally help her natal family during an especially busy harvest season or in a crisis situation."[11] In the case of migration with so many members of a subcaste leaving the local community, Fuller and Narasimhan say "…subcaste endogamy can remain the dominant norm, in both preference and practice, even for a group with so many members now living in cities or overseas."[12]

Age. Since marriage is viewed as sacrosanct, much emphasis is placed on Vedic scriptures which advocate the marriage of a virgin girl before menarche. People believe that early marriages

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[10] Gupta, 41.
[11] Gupta, 57.
[12] Fuller and Narasimhan, 743.

"protect the chastity of women, ease the transfer of a girl from her father's domain to that of her husband, and make it easier for a girl to adjust to her husband and in-laws."[13] Pre-puberty marriages are also considered to be more sacred and pure than a marriage which takes place later in a girl's life, since the girl has not been contaminated by the pollution associated with menstruation. India's urbanized society is much less concerned with age. In fact, the average age at marriage for men and women in India is 26 and 22.2, respectively. Compared to 28.2 and 26.1 for men and women, respectively in the United States, the difference in males is insignificant and in females is only slightly significant.[14] What is more concerning to a middle or upper class family is the past relationships of either match.[15] Parents become cautious when the possibility of returning to a previous lover is unveiled.

Economic Status. "A poor father is not your fault. But a poor father-in-law is." This popular expression entices the parents to look for a financially stable – better, prosperous – family to marry their son or daughter into for a few reasons. Firstly, when the newlyweds become parents, the weddings for their children will be expensive. Thus, a wealthy family will be able to attract mates and invite friends from distant places to marriages, thereby promoting newer ties over a broader region. Secondly, better economic resources of a family contribute to enhancing the social image of the son or daughter who marries into that family.[16] The business field has emerged as a lucrative line of work in conjunction with India's skyrocketing economic growth. Cities such as Bangalore, Chennai, New Delhi, and Bombay are booming. The approach that

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[13] Gupta, 65.

[14] Average Age at Marriage, <u>MedIndia</u> with <u>World Health Organization</u> and <u>Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in India</u> (2011).

[15] Aruni Bhatnagar, Personal interview, 12 Apr. 2013.

[16] Gupta, 68.

India is an outsourcing destination is shifting to the recognition that India will have one of the largest global markets for goods and services.[17]

Education. Education, though considered greatly rewarding and a significant means by which to move upward on the social scale, is not a major prerequisite for marriage in a large section of the lower caste population.[18] Nevertheless, in middle and upper class populations, education is as respected as socioeconomic status, age, and values. An Indian man studying abroad in, say England or the United States, attracts many women. MDs are preferred over PhDs because medicine in India is highly competitive and is held in high regard for its premise of sustaining life (akin to Vishnu, "the preserver" god in Hinduism). Moreover, medicine is valued cross-culturally whereas a doctor in philosophy does not directly impact the betterment of life.[19]

Astrology. This factor may be the most important in determining an appropriate match for a young man or woman. Horoscopes are believed to be the principal link between a person and the cosmos. The fortune of a person is thought to move in accordance with the cosmic world so that similar horoscopes indicate that two people will be compatible as spouses. Horoscopes are analyzed, sometimes for days, with the consultation of an astrologer and/or numerologist – usually the community pundit. Match percentage increases with increasing commonalities in astrological attributes and helps predict the success of a marriage.[20]

After the above match criteria are dealt with, a gift from each family is given to the other, usually valued at some proportion of the other family's net worth in order to indicate

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[17] Gunjan Bagla, <u>Doing Business in 21ˢᵗ Century India</u> (New York: Business Plus, 2008); Saritha Rai, "Is The Next Silicon Valley Taking Root in Bangalore?" <u>The New York Times</u> 20 Mar. 2006.
[18] Gupta, 73.
[19] Peter Heehs, <u>Indian Religions: A Historical Reader of Spiritual Expression and Experience</u> (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Manpreet Chopra, Personal Interview, 21 Apr. 2013.

[20] Gupta, 60.

commitment to the marriage. In middle and upper class situations, the soon-to-be spouses then meet at one of the families' households for a feast of some sort where they are given some privacy to personally interact with each other.[21] A buffer lasting a couple days is normally kept following this gathering to allow time for any objections or arrival of invited guests overseas. Finally, the marriage begins. In village settings, marriage may take place the day following completion of the preliminary compatibility assessment.

Modern Notion

Love succeeding marriage may still be an uneasy concept for some, yet it is very present in India and is continuing growth worldwide. Mateen Olumee from Australia's InsightSBS program on Arranged Marriage makes an important distinction between lust and love. He argues that for most people who think they are in love before being arranged, love is a misnomer, a convoluted fabrication to veil what is truly only lust. "Love will always follow [marriage]. It grows with time within a marriage."[22] An advocate supports Olumee:

> At the end of the day, the parents are the best authority source to know what their child is like and how they're going to perform in a relationship. We do live in a Western society that, since the days of Shakespeare, has dictated marriage by romantic love. And unfortunately, romantic love is what's causing so many marriages today to end in divorce.[23]

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[21] Monsoon Wedding, dir. Mira Nair, Mirabai Films, 2001.
[22] Insight, SBS, Sydney, Australia 13 Mar. 2012.
[23] Insight, 2012.

Love marriage is common in the West because the culture is one of experimentation in which the experimenter searches for compatible traits. It stresses that ample time must be given to search for the traits the experimenter finds attractive or compatible in another. Of course, Olumee would remark that this is just lust. If the two partners in the romantic relationship decide to pursue marriage, they would be making an uncalculated risk. In South Asia and many parts of the world, dating can be equated to something of a hobby because in terms of marriage, it is a fruitless endeavor. Only parents, who have been through considerable life experiences, can properly calculate the risk associated with marriage, and this is done through inter-family conventions. The culture here is one of utmost trust in and respect for parents which leads to a sense of security in arranged marriage.[24]

The success of arranged marriages cannot be overlooked. The percentage of marriages which end in divorce in India is less than 1.1%.[25] However, the other side must not be ignored. Many times, the families meddle in financial matters and custody of the children born by the marriage.[26] Early age and lower-caste arranged marriages carry a reputation of having high domestic violence and sometimes sexual abuse. Even in middle-class Asian Indian immigrant families, there have been reports of domestic violence but it is rare for them to surface. Shamita Dasgupta and Sujata Warrier in their observational study "Asian Indian Women's Experience of Domestic Violence in the United States" noted that:

> As immigrants, these women were under added pressure to uphold the standards
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> of 'cultural family values' in a foreign land. They expressed a strong desire to be

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[24] Supriya Khandpur, Personal Interview, 21 Apr. 2013.
[25] UNICEF, Human Rights Council, ABC News, 16 Aug. 2012.
[26] Sam George, "Pros and Cons of Arranged Marriage," India Tribune, 2012; Arranged Marriage vs. Love Marriage, Hub Pages, Inc. 2010.

true to their culture, which does not allow disintegration of marriage under any circumstance.[27]

The resilience arranged marriage has shown can be attributed to its evolving structure. For example, today it is acceptable in some families to have a "self-arranged marriage" wherein the man and woman meet themselves and after some courtship, introduce their respective families to each other. There is more liberty in this situation for the partners because dissatisfaction is voiced and deliberated, but the opinions of the parents are still held in high regard.

Return to the introductory scene: A few weeks in, Ravi convinces his parents to return to America because he unrelentingly proclaims his love for Haley after which his parents decide to compromise. He meets up with Haley and soon enough, they begin talks of marriage. The parents of both families convene to discuss many things, among them horoscopes, socioeconomic factors, principles by which the marriage will be guided. Haley is allowed to dine with Ravi's family where she and his parents get acquainted. Finally, Ravi's parents agree to a self-arranged marriage. He and Haley have their wedding at the local temple, lavished with flowers, jewelry, and expensive dress.

The institution of arranged marriage, characterized by great honor, compromise, respect, consecration, and prosperity, is more than just tying a knot. It's a tying of families and propagation of tradition. The prevalence in India alone is meritorious. The above account is evidence of the versatility of arranged marriage. It continues to evolve while remaining one of the most significant events in a person's life.

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[27] Shamita Das Dasgupta and Sujata Warrier, "In The Footsteps of 'Arundhati': Asian Indian Women's Experience of Domestic Violence in the United States," <u>Sage Publications</u>, Sept. 1996.

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