

# How spousal relationships are changing in India

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# What influences spousal relationships?



1. The prevailing and changing socio-economic, political, religious and cultural ethos of a society.
1. The current status of women in society.

As society changes with changing times, it brings about significant changes in the attitudes of people towards marriage as an institution and spousal relationships within it.

This in turn influences each spouse's perception of the romantic ideal in their marital relationship, the level of individuality the spouses accord to each other and the power equations between them.

# Marriage in the Rig Vedic era (from 300 BC to 600 BC)

- One of earliest and commonest forms of marriage was **self-chosen marriages (*gandharva Vivaha*)** (Panday: 1969).
- The woman selects her own husband.
- They meet of their own accord in their ordinary village life or in various other places such as regional festivals and fairs, begin to enjoy one another's company, and consensually agree to live together (Panday: 1969).



# Status of women in Vedic times

- Women enjoyed an honourable place in the social life of the community.
- As wives, they were regarded as equal to their husbands and were treated as *Ardhanginis*, or 'the better half'.
- Husband and wife were regarded as joint heads of the household.
- Spousal relations were close, respectful and equitable in many ways.



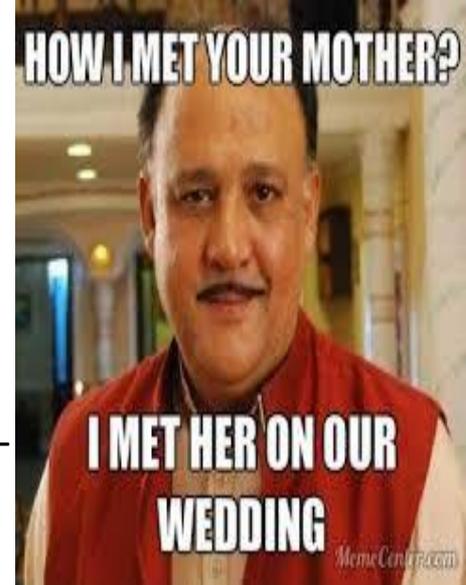
# Perception of marriage in traditional India

After the Mogul invasion of India in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Hindu society became more patriarchal, and more caste- and kinship-oriented.

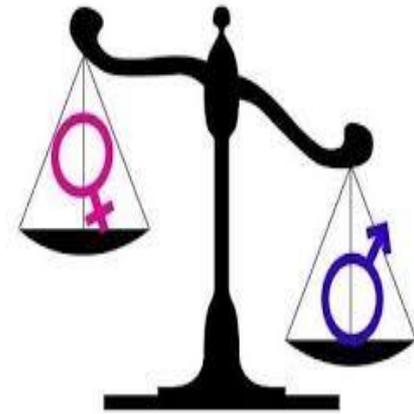
## Traditionally, Hindu marriages:

- were perceived more as a socio-religious institution than as a personal relationship because they took place between two families rather than two individuals.
- were mostly endogamous and were generally **arranged by parents** and members of the kinship group, with class and caste positions and religion as important considerations; **everyone had to marry; the young couple had hardly any say in the selection of the spouse; their first meeting was mostly on the wedding day.**
- were arranged by families for daughters as soon as they attained puberty, owing to social pressures.

**'Love or self-chosen marriages'** were associated with pre-marital sex, pollution of high castes by lower ones, an attempt by their children to evade their obligations towards family and a threat to their very identity.



# Changes in the status of women in traditional India



- Filial relationships were considered more important than spousal relationships.
- Women were stripped of their traditional independence and honourable status and placed permanently in male custodianship: first of their fathers in childhood, then of their husbands through married life, and finally of their sons in old age (Kant: 2003).
- The perception and practice of marital roles were influenced by gender-based and patriarchal traditional values and norms; the wife's status was clearly viewed as inferior and subordinate to that of her husband; the wife's identity was subsumed by her role as wife and mother; the wife was considered the property of her husband with hardly any rights of her own.
- This placed women in India at a disadvantage in the marital closeness and power game.

# Status of women in twentieth century India

Social and legislative reforms have:

- given wives legal identities of their own.
- enabled them to seek higher education and gainful employment outside the home.
- changed their aspirations and expectations from marriage and their marital partner.

**However**, while women have attempted to change their roles to a great extent, men have changed their roles only a little and the broader workplace and cultural norms have not changed much at all.



# Concept of marriage in the twenty-first century



- A friend's voice: *"We are not just looking for a wife for our son but also a daughter-in-law for our family. Of course we are not going to force him to marry someone he is incompatible with. However, his marriage will affect everyone in the family, so we have to select very carefully and then hope for the best".*

# Radical changes in arranging marriages

Definition of arranged marriage suitably expanded to focus on meeting the needs of individuals as well.

- The process of arranging marriages and the criteria for selection of the life partner have seen modernizing changes.

## Parents

- now show increasing willingness to adjust to their children's romantic aspirations, giving the couple the opportunity to get to know each other.
- have moved from being main decision makers to allowing their children more choice in the selection of their life partners, while continuing to look after the material aspects of arranging marriages.

## Indian youth

- are now rarely forced to marry someone against their wishes and both boys and girls are allowed a right of refusal of the partners.
- are reluctant to marry someone of whom their parents disapprove, so they try hard to gain their approval.





# Preference for arranged marriage



Lata's point of view was that:

- *“my parents would want to see me settled in a good marriage as soon as I earn my postgraduate degree and so they have already started their search for a suitable husband for me. Actually, it is kind of exciting.”*

According to Asha,

- *“I for one would rather defer to her parents, because I feel that my parents are wiser and have my best interests at heart. Also, if I marry with my parents' approval and blessings, I can always count on them to help me if I am ever in any difficulty.”*

# Marriage – a matter of choice!



**Marriage not an inevitable state, but a matter of choice – whether to marry at all, whom to marry and when.**

Sita's explanation for rejecting this much sought-after man was as follows:  
*“During the first meeting itself, when I asked him what he thought of working women, he very arrogantly stated that, in his frame of reference, his future wife's career would always be secondary. In fact, in that half-hour meeting, he spoke most of the time and hardly allowed me to say much. My parents were very sad and disappointed but after they heard my reasons for rejecting the man, they accepted my decision and have been very supportive and sweet ... My grandmother ... is still hoping that I will get back to him ... According to her, he was such a good catch ... and I must learn to compromise and adjust. I have no regrets at all. I definitely want to be the one to decide – and not anybody else – whom to marry and whether I want to work after marriage or not.”*

# Compatibility between spouses: important



- Manisha said,

*“I have told my parents that I agree that they should look for a marital partner for me, but have also informed them that I want to be allowed to have more meetings alone with the prospective man and be given enough time to make a decision. I have also negotiated with them that I will only agree to marry if I find that the man selected by them is compatible with me at an individual level.”*



# Equality in the husband–wife relationship



Asha clarified:

- *“For me, equality does not mean that my husband and I should share exactly the same roles around the house. For me, equality means that both of us should work together to divide our responsibilities fairly.”*

Lata added:

- *“Most of us are aware and have accepted that at least for the first few years of marriage we will be living in a joint family with our husband’s parents and relatives. That being the case, I feel that I should not be the only one to make all the adjustments as my mother had to. I am very clear that my marital family must respect my individuality. I would like a partner who has the maturity and confidence to offer me a more equitable relationship and to support me to develop a more equitable relationship with my in-laws for myself and for us as a couple.”*

# Both spouses receiving respect and love from the family



Nilesh shared:

*“Whether after marriage we live independently or live with our parents, it is important that our parents respect our views, just as they expect us to respect their views. For instance, my father and I argue all the time as we differ on many things, yet I know that both of us respect and love each other. My wife should also get the same space, respect and love from my family.”*

# Young Indians...



- no longer perceive marriage as a social obligation for the perpetuation of lineage;
- now want to get married for love, companionship and individual happiness.
- are looking for more equality in their relationship and acceptance of their individuality by the marital family.

## **They are negotiating with parents for:**

- more opportunities to meet partners themselves;
- more time to make a decision,
- more latitude for rejecting an offer.

# Young Indians today ...



- are actually bypassing the conventional dichotomy of love-versus-arranged marriage, and are using the best of both approaches, either simultaneously or by constructing new combinations (Oberoi: 2006).
- are aware of the dynamic relationship between love and material conditions. The focus initially on the material in arranged marriages does not necessarily debar romantic love, as, even in self-arranged or love marriages, once a couple make the decision to marry, they have to sort out the material aspects related to getting married.

Hence, such a conceptualization actually blurs the boundaries between love and arranged marriage practices.

# And finally ...



- As Apoorva Dutt (2015) has pointed out, “we all know that a great marriage is not when the ‘perfect couple’ comes together. It is when an imperfect couple learns to enjoy their differences, be it a love marriage or an arranged one, and the success rate of marriage doesn’t depend upon whether it was arranged or not but rather on how the two people understand each other.”