UNDERSTANDING THE CHANGING PATTERNS OF MARRIAGE ALLIANCE IN INDIA: ANCIENT SOCIETY vs. CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract

In India, marriage forms the basis of a social institution. Arranged marriages have always been the preferred norm in contrast to the norms of love marriage. But today, the fact is that the entire process of mate selection has gone through several changes in contemporary times. The advent of computers has made the way to various websites and portals. These new vectors have taken over the occupation of traditional matchmakers. Many marriage portals have emerged in this age to assist the people for mate selection process. This paper makes an attempt to explore the changing patterns of marriage. An effort has been made to draw a comparison between the patterns of marriage alliance prevalent in ancient times with that of patterns in progress.

Keywords: Alliance, Ancient, Contemporary, Marriage, Patterns, Society, Vichola

INTRODUCTION

Among all the interpersonal relations, marriage is the most important one as mostly people marry only once in their lifetime. More than a personal relationship, marriage is also considered as a social institution. It starts with the selection of a marriage partner. The way people select a marriage partner, follows different procedure along with the rules and regulations of selection, the whole criterion varies from one culture to another and from society to society.

In the ancient societies, marriages were considered compulsory and an important institution which was based on religion, religious rites and for the pursuit of religion. Marriages were regarded as one of the most important social events which everyone should have to make. Marriage was measured as a sacrament and not an agreement between two individuals**.** Marriage was a life-long commitment of husband and wife towards each other and they used to share a strongest bond in that relationship. Marriage was believed to be the main duty and the only way to continue one's family. Moreover it was thought that for the achievement of Moksha, marriage is required. In the traditional societies, people generally preferred early marriages, arranged marriages, higher age difference between spouses and lesser dowry payments. The tradition of monogamous form of marriage, non-existence of widow remarriage, lack of provision for trouble-free divorce and chastity were regarded as significant ideals.

The patterns of making a marriage alliance have changed in modern times. In traditional Indian society, religious matchmakers like priests played the role of middlemen. With changing time, some castes like Nai (barber) and Marassi played the role of Vichola or middleman. However, in contemporary India, self-selected spouses have replaced the traditional spouses selected by families or other caste members. New vectors of matrimonial information have completely changed the alliance-making pattern in India.

ARRANGING A MARRIAGE IN ANCIENT SOCIETY

In India, marriage is considered as one of the most important familial as well as societal expectation for the Hindus. In the traditional times, marriage was taken not as a contract but as a sacrament within the Hindu society. Hence, marriage was expected to be a lifelong relationship between the husband-wife. It is imperative to indicate that *vivaha* (wedding ceremony) was compulsory for all the individuals at that time. K.M. Kapadia (1966) in his work on 'Marriage and Family in India' argues that the prime objective of a Hindu marriage was *dharma praja* (progeny, particularly sons) along with *rati* (pleasure). Chekki (1996) argue that marriage was looked upon not only as a union of two persons, but as a unification of two families, thereby making them more or less like blood relatives to each other. Wedding ceremonies were then economically, politically, religiously and socially oriented and as a result they were usually arranged by the elder members as well as through other extended family members. Similarly, Nanda (2000) also writes, *In a society where divorce is still a scandal and where, in fact, the divorce rate is exceedingly low, an arranged marriage is the beginning of a lifetime relationship not just between the bride and groom but between their families as well.* (p. 197)

Prakasa (1982) in his book on '*Marriage, The Family and Women in India'* revealed that the person who used to arrange matchmaking in traditional times was known as *nayan.* The matchmaker was generally a friend of the family members or a distant relative. Being familiar with both the families, such an individual attempt to arrange a marriage between the two parties. Ahmad (1976) in his work on '*Family, Kinship and Marriage Among Muslims in India'* argue that various families with offspring of marriageable age may have a

preference not to advance the potential matches with a marriage plan since communication between families could break down and could also result in unintended insolence between the two families.

Matchmakers used to serve two types of functions in the ancient times. As a marriage scouts, under which they set out to discover the promising matches for the families' offspring and as negotiators, under which they negotiate between the two families. Both as a scout and negotiator, a family used to send the *nayan* into the society in order to search for the potential matches. The matchmaker always keep into consideration "family background, economic position, general character, family reputation, the value of the dowry, the effect of alliance on the property, and other family matters" (Prakasa, 1982). And once a match was found, the matchmaker informs his or her clients and makes plans accordingly for contact all the way through him/her. Communication was thus assisted through the *nayan* in anticipation of some form of union. Depending upon the area, a definite meeting between the two families was then arranged in order to decide about the marriage union and thereby permitting the couple to see each other (Prakasa, 1982).

When the marriage agreement was finally made, the *nayan* may possibly be asked to help out in the preparations of marriage like buying jewellery and clothes, ceremony set-up, and announcement of the wedding ceremony to the whole commune. At that time, the *nayan* was not even paid for the services rendered to the families. The *nayan* was generally given the gifts by the families they served in matchmaking process. And the gift items included clothes, foodstuff, and support in farming activities (Ahmad, 1976).

MARRIAGE ALLIANCES IN TRADITIONAL INDIA

During the ancient and medieval times, marriage alliances were made through kul-acharyas or match-making castes.

- **Consultation of Kul-acharya**: In earlier times, a few learned and valued people used to take up matchmaking as a line of work, called as Kul-acharya. They had special command on establishing the marriage relation and received a great deal of social prestige. These persons used to keep written records of histories of families in detail and provided the information related to marriage after analyzing those record books.

- **Approaching the Vichola**: Literally, it means one who makes things happen or a middleman who establishes links between two parties in transferring marriage related information. Many of them were purely professional and matchmaking was their source of income. Conventionally, they used to be acknowledged from both the parties with attractive gifts, money etc.

  In earlier times, the person who plans the marriage between two families was known as vichola. The vichola worked as a mediator between the families who provides the full information about the socio-economic status of the family, their nature and regarding the qualities of the partner concerned. In

every village in Indian societies, these professional mediators used to suggest alliances for families. For this purpose, they keep an eye upon the boys and girls of marriageable age within the village. It was only the vichola who got to see the bride of the face before marriage; otherwise the face of the bride would be visible to the groom, in-laws and to other close related members after the wedding in a ceremony called muhdikhai.

- **Matchmaking Castes**: Nai, the barber caste, widespread in Northern India, played an important part in marriage alliance and village life. Because of the ambulatory nature of their profession, a barber had to go to patrons' houses. He thus, spread news and played role in matchmaking. Similar kind of role was played by his wife, Nayan, who used to work in various houses and thereby performing the task of matchmaking.

- **Swayamvara**: The Sanskrit word Swayam means self and the word vara means groom. In ancient India, it was a practice of choosing a husband, from a list of suitors, by a girl of marriageable age. In ancient texts, Tulsidas Ramayana describes the Swayamvara of Sita. Draupadi and Damyanti also chose their husbands through Swayamvara. However, this method of making alliance was not common among ordinary people of lower castes.

- **Through Close Associates:** Many a times, close associates such as parents, family members or close relatives were source of match-making. It was particularly true in case of cross-cousin and parallel cousin marriages. It was mainly a taboo in North India, but acceptable in South Indian Dravidian society.

ARRANGING A MARRIAGE IN CONTEM PORARY SOCIETY

The twentieth century has brought a different trend of arranging marriages in the society. The trend of consulting the children and getting their views on the subject of their marriage are largely observed. Nowadays parents or kin members choose the potential eligible partners by taking into consideration the societal, intellectual and economic background of the family unit. And one of the most widespread ways by which the partners are frequently selected is finding them from the friend list of the children or through the extended family members who possess an identical socioeconomic milieu (Medora 2002).Matrimonial advertisements have become an integral part of the mate selection process in the present world. More and more people are relying upon the advertisements to settle down the children (Das 1980). Advertisements are preferably placed within the newspaper for the reason that they are expected to catch the attention of far-reaching readers. Screening is initially done by the parties on the basis of photographs. After this initial selection, the young adults are endorsed either to meet up or converse over the phone in order to know each

other well. And in some cases, they usually go out with an adult family member who accompanies them whilst they are trying to find out whether they are compatible for each other. Whilst this exchange process, marriage remains primarily within the minds of both the partners and all times, the male usually proposes to the woman. If the woman accepts the offer, then the parents are informed regarding the decision of marriage by their offspring.

In most of the Hindu families, people prefer to seek advice from an astrologer to make sure that the two potential partners are well suited for each other. The astrologer matches the horoscopes of the couple and predicts what future has in store for them. Questions like whether the couple will be well-suited and pleased, have the benefit of good health, enjoy economic accomplishment, and most significantly have offspring are taken into notice by the astrologer. Indians generally consider that their lives are preordained and their fate is predetermined, therefore they are unable to help themselves as far as their preference is concerned. Hence, they have to give way to the celestial forces of the cosmos (Gupta, 1976).

Albeit the tradition of arranged marriage has always remain favoured in the whole nation, but the entire process of mate selection has gone through some contemporary changes. The advent of computers has made the way to various websites and portals. These new vectors have taken over the occupation of traditional matchmakers. Many marriage portals have emerged in this age to assist the people for mate selection process. Even the criteria for matches have also changed nowadays. For instance, working women are frequently preferred by the grooms and more stress is placed on the qualification and other values, rather than acquiring competence in the household chores. The prospective partners are authorized to intermingle more liberally in this day and age. Face to face conversations and mobile phones have made the job of accepting each other very easier. Prakasa (1982) has rightly said that newspapers, internet, television ads, and social conventions are serving as the contemporary *nayan* at this present time.

MARRIAGE ALLIANCES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

In recent times, marriage trends in India have undergone tremendous changes. Eventually, it varies from arranged to love marriage, arranged love to love-arranged, inter-religion, inter-caste marriage and sometimes living together. Nowadays, global techno-culture persists in India and social networking becomes a routine practice, including the matrimony services.

- **Marriage Melas**: Marriage fairs are mostly organized these days. In these fairs, large number of young men and women along with their parents gather on a common platform to select their prospective spouses. These fairs enlarge the participants' access to potential candidates and make it easier for them to find spouse endowed with required characteristics (Pache, 1998).

  Caste endogamy is still preferred in the contemporary society in the context of the patterns of selecting a partner. Hence, various caste organisations set up different types of strategies to confine marriages within their own castes and sub-castes. Therefore, marriage "melas" or fairs are generally

organised on a large scale to make sure that the selection of the partner is made within the particular caste and sub-caste. One such fair was organized by Maheshwari caste at Indore in Madhya Pradesh, which helped the people arranging same-caste marriage of their children. Maheshwaris is generally a caste belonging to the flourishing industrial and business society of the marwaris, The marriage fair that was organised by them continued for two or three days. Nearly hundreds of young men and women in the company of their parents became a part of this fair. This course of action helped the maheshwari families to choose spouses for their offspring and this fair also reinforced the practice of caste endogamy (Pache, 1998).

Nowadays, giving matrimonial ad in newspapers for the selection of life partner has become a second choice among the young generation. According to a report on the marriage fair in Gujrat, the 'Bhavya Jeevansathi Pasandgi Mela' was arranged for Vaishnav, Jain, Brahmin and Patel. This fair assisted the people in introducing the prospective brides and grooms on a huge screen. Their faces were shown on the big screen along with their relevant details such as their academic qualification and career details. The idea is quite clear that marriage fairs are considered as the most recent ways of finding a life partner. Such fairs will provide the opportunity to have face-to-face contact with large number of single men and women, thereby providing them an opportunity to choose their better half sometimes irrespective of caste (Daily News and Analysis, 2009).

- **Matrimonial Advertisements in Newspapers**: Newspapers are increasingly becoming a popular choice among people to seek matrimonial information in form of classified advertisements. These personal ad help the people in choosing their desired matches silently. The information will be then shared through a conversation on telephone or by the help of e-mail (Pal, 2011).

  Every Sunday morning, nearly thousands of Indians spend their tea time on the matrimonial weekend issue of their newspaper with the hope to click that suitable one for their children. Different leading newspapers in India are helping the people seeking brides and grooms through their columns of matrimonial advertisements. Approximately thousands of matrimonial advertisements are published each week in various newspapers. In such advertisements, women are not only portrayed in terms of their looks or skills but the subject of their earning power is also highlighted in these advertisements these days. This tendency shows that the demand of a working companion is the preference of majority of Indians.

- **Enrolment in Marriage Bureaus:** In this era of globalization, diverse mediating agencies are making their exclusive contribution in order to meet the demands of the local people. In this scenario, matchmaking has become a huge business everywhere. As a result, marriage bureaus are mushrooming up in each and every big city of India to fulfil the public needs. In this way, such agencies are providing their services of matchmaking between the potential couples in the contemporary society.

These marriage bureaus generally have a big team of professional agents, counsellors, consultants and legal advisors etc. These bureaus mainly provide their special services only on payment basis. The members who make their registration with such bureaus are helped time to time with the desired match list. Such bureaus also keep an eagle eye on the new members in order to flourish their business day by day. With this method, these working units are negotiating between the various information seekers.

- **Peer-to-Peer Conversation**: For as long as humans have acknowledged the desire to form romantic relationships, they have also accepted that finding a suitable life partner can be a tough job. Nowadays aspiring grooms and brides often interact with their peers who share constructive opinions to arrange their marriage. Many a times, colleagues, childhood friends, neighbors and other close associates provide reliable matrimonial information to the prospective young for marriage. Many a times, peers objectively gather at a festive occasion to exchange dialogues among prospective brides and grooms.

  Youngsters these days express their interest in meeting the person referred by their peers in the conversation shared by them, and if their interest is mutual, the contact information is usually exchanged and then the pairs will meet up to know each other in a better way. Video-dating has also become an important source to help the people especially if the suggested partner belongs to a foreign country.

- **Marriage Markets:** It is a place where parents list ads for their children with the aim of finding a marital spouse for them. People gather and read the listings to find a suitable match for their children. These markets also have marriage brokers for matchmaking. Though such markets are mainly found in foreign cities but such markets also exist in big cities in India like New Delhi and Kolkata.

  In the contemporary times, marriage brokers are mainly lending a hand in each and every aspect of the wedding. They not only help in the selection process but organize the other wedding arrangements as well such as resolving the astrological suitability, finding the priest, finalizing the guest list and even settling the demands of dowry between the parties. In all the transactions made by the brokers, there lies a deep hidden motive to earn the profit from the concerned party. Therefore, these brokers always keep in mind their own interests for finalizing the things and not the welfare of their clients.

- **Registration to Online Websites**: Online matrimony services refer to the development of a community on the internet that assists its diverse members to intermingle and share the matrimonial associated information all the way through SDI (selective dissemination of information) based personalized means. This provision provides a range of new-fangled ways for the users to network and pass on the first hand information. As a result, such services have achieved a large amount of popularity in this twenty-first century. Such type of platforms also brings the individuals having matrimonial curiosity on a mutual stage. Hence, interested members can easily look at the interests of

other members as well. The recent marriage service portals have their capability to place and modify their personal profile that allow the members to make use of striking services in the similar mode of social networking practices (Pal, 2010).

Marriage websites act as a variation to dating websites. These sites register various users who upload their profiles and photographs. Thereafter, they search the suitable match freely and instantly. These matrimonial websites offer the ability to use multiple filters to cut down the searches and allow for simultaneous interaction with several parties who are interested. Titzmann (2013) found that these websites propagate a family-oriented individualism. The major matrimonial websites in India include Shaadi.com, Bharatmatrimony, Jeevansathi.com etc.

Shaadi.com was considered to be one of India's five most popular websites by the year 2008. This search engine has more than 300 million page views every month and about 6000 profiles are added every single day (Challapalli, 2008). It is evident that the online matrimony market has become quite popular in a country like India.

CONCLUSION

Earlier the selection of partner for marriage was the duty of the parents or guardians only. The most important value was chastity in early societies. Premarital and extra marital relations were not allowed. Love was the consequence of marriage between boys and girls and marriage was not the consequence of love. With the advent of liberalism and urbanization, many changes have occurred in the Indian society. Pre marital sex relationships which were totally absent in traditional society have gradually become common in present times. Now- a -days the young minds are not in favor of parental choice for the selection of the marriage partner. Moreover, there are no restrictions in marriage system regarding the choice of life partner as things have become easier for the young generation by the new legislations. Thus, the attitude of people has been increasingly changing towards the rules of endogamy and exogamy.

The new vectors of matrimonial information have replaced the traditional middlemen or Vichola. Nowadays matrimonial alliances are made through websites, marriage melas, marriage bureaus, matrimonial columns of newspapers etc. Many matrimony portals like Shaadi.com, Bharatmatrimony and Jeevansathi.com have been playing a noteworthy role in satisfying the needs of countless information seekers related to marriage. The truth is that different matrimony service providers are making their amazing efforts in India. Thus, the way of selecting the life partner has undergone a vast change in the modern Indian society.

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