



Changing Perceptions Regarding Marriage: Listening to the Narratives of Urban Youth in Bhopal

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Abstract: Marriage as an institution plays a very significant role in the lives of urban youth. Family greatly influences youth and their thought process in making marriage-related decisions, and youth also use family at their own disposal. Individuals marry in the name of family for physical, emotional, and financial support systems at the cost of their individuality and freedom and this loss accrues more to females. Females remain more fearful and less excited than males about their married life. Overall, urban youth don't associate marriage with happiness as much as with social support, security, and safety.

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Introduction

Marriage is an important social institution through which individuals satisfy their biological and social needs in an organised manner through the intervention of family and society. It's nearly universal and highly significant in terms of regulating sexual relationships and sanctifying reproduction. In our contemporary world, it's difficult to find a society where marriage remains entirely absent. D.N. Majumdar and T.N. Madan (1955) defined marriage as, "the social sanction generally in the form of civil and/or religious ceremony authorising two persons of opposite sexes to engage in sexual and other subsequent and correlated socio-economic relations with one another." Malinowski (1930) stated, "Marriage is the licensing of parenthood." I intend to use these heteronormative definitions of marriage to map out the gender expectations about entering into the marriage relationship. Edmund Leach (1961) argued that a universal definition of marriage is practically not possible and it is futile to discuss the matter.

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Marriages in India have since long been a topic of much anthropological, sociological, and general interest. Ties of kinship and marriage are important everywhere (Srinivas & Beteille, 1964). Nurtured from early childhood, the desire to marry is certainly a part of the everyday lives of children and adolescents and they are taught to see marriage very clearly as a precondition for becoming a mother or father:

“To remain unmarried is represented not so much as a social problem but as a personal tragedy and a collective worry. In getting married an individual is therefore following the rules set and accepted by the wider society, and there are very few alternatives to married life” (Donner, 2008: p. 65).

Sarah Lamb (2022) investigated the significant hardships, dangers, and societal criticism experienced by the Bengali women she interacted with. These difficulties arise because society expects unmarried women to project an image of purity and asexuality, and any sign of attachment or affection can subject them to the derogatory label of a ‘loose woman.’ In essence, Lamb’s exploration sheds light on the intricate ways in which single women navigate societal expectations and potential threats to their safety and reputation in the context of their sexuality and relationships.

Marriage has been followed in some form by practically all adults in every recorded society and is nearly universal in India. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015-16, by age of 45- 49, only 0.8% of women and 2% of men have never been married. After looking at these figures, one can get an idea about the importance given to marriage as an institution in India. However, marital patterns differ among societies and change over time in various ways that challenge any single theory.

The field of study of marriage is undeniably very vast, and there are many lenses and perspectives through which marriage, its decisions, procedures, undercurrents, and structures can be examined, for example, by implications in love (de Neve, 2011; Trawick, 1990), gift exchange, ceremonies, and rituals (Caplan, 1993; Goody & Tambiah, 1973), interface with caste (Banerjee et al., 2009; Grover, 2011), migration (Kaur, 2012; Palriwala & Uberoi, 2008), commercialised weddings (Kapur, 2009; Uberoi, 2008), marriage tactics (Donner, 2002; Sheel, 2008), agency (Kalpagam, 2008; Thapan, 2009) and, resistance (Gold & Raheja, 1994). The extensive field of marriage is very broad. While I will be touching on many of the aspects and themes mentioned here, I intend to deliver a fresh perspective of individuals in evaluating marriage-related decisions.

Family as an Institution: Determining & Determined

Family is held as the most important observable unit of analysis in the Indian context because important negotiations happen at the level of family where filial relationships become increasingly influential in making decisions. The influence of family as an institution on its members (whether male or female) is highly significant in terms of how people act in concomitant relation with their family ideals and values. Andre Beteille (1991) pointed out that family significantly contributes to the reproduction of inequalities. The caste and class positions are treated as family resources and play out significantly in the social, economic, cultural, and political realms. Therefore, family is both determined and determining (Walby, 1990: p. 89). It gets influenced by other significant social institutions like Marriage and Religion and in turn influences their functioning and this is the major point of contention in this text that we are exploring through various discourses.

Discussions around Love versus Arranged Marriages:

Grover's (2011) case studies suggested that love marriages tend to be more enduring and stable compared to marriages arranged by families in contrast to what Madhu Kishwar (1994) pointed out. This somewhat disheartening outcome is because women in love marriages lack alternative sources of support if their marriages encounter difficulties, leaving them with no choice but to endure their chosen partners' company (Grover, 2011: p. 10).

Madhu Kishwar's work (1994) sparked significant debate as she highlighted the parental role in both arranged and love marriages. Kishwar challenged the conventional view that family-arranged marriages were regressive while love marriages were progressive, suggesting that this perspective needed reexamination. To support her argument, she drew from the experiences of upper-class men and women, providing examples of unsuccessful love marriages where the emotional connection between partners often proved short-lived. Kishwar emphasised the advantages of family-arranged marriages, noting that these unions tended to be more stable due to the strong bonds formed between families over time through regular exchanges. Moreover, she highlighted that parents' support, both practical and emotional, in arranged marriages helped protect women's vulnerability within their marital households.

One drawback of love marriages, according to Kishwar, was that by rejecting parental choices, women could strain their family ties. This lack of communication between the families could hinder mediation during marital conflicts. She placed responsibility on women for disregarding parental

decisions, without criticising parents for withdrawing support in love marriages. Notably, Kishwar didn't address the impact of class and caste differences in her analysis.

Introducing a fresh perspective into the marriage discourse, Fuller and Narasimhan (2008) argued, in their examination of urban Vattimas, that a well-informed academic discussion about arranged and love marriages recognised the blurred nature of this dichotomy. In Tamil Nadu, many middle-class Vattimas are now arranging their marriages, albeit within their own caste. Importantly, companionate marriage has become a significant criterion for the Vattimas in both arranged and love marriages. While anthropologists acknowledge this merging of "arrangement and love," existing scholarly views still tend to link love marriages with "modernity" and arranged marriages with "tradition" (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2008: p. 751; Grover, 2011: p. 8). The clear distinction between "modern" and "traditional" marriages is problematic and not sustainable and the evolving marriage ideals are specific to an individual's class and context. It's crucial not to generalise the changing trends observed within the middle class to the whole cultural setting in India. Significant differences exist in how arranged and love marriages are perceived by young men and women within Bhopal's urban middle-class community and these perceptions and meanings are heavily shaped and influenced by their caste, class, regional, and neoliberal positions which we will explore in detail in the upcoming sections.

Economic Liberalisation: Contemporary Affair of Attractions & Relationships

The process of economic liberalisation, which India embarked upon in the 1980s and fully embraced by 1991, marked a significant turning point in its postcolonial trajectory. This shift towards economic liberalisation entailed opening up Indian markets to global capital and consumerism, fundamentally shaping various aspects of Indian society, including the politics of space, youth, caste, gender, and class (Fernandes, 2006; Anjaria & McFarlane, 2011). Over time, this economic liberalisation has led to increased economic inequality in India, fueling the growth of a robust middle class driven by consumption.

In the neoliberal era, urban youth grappling with the conflicting expectations imposed on them by their family and the prevailing patriarchal social order remains at odds with their desire to embrace a more modern lifestyle. Shaurya, one of my key respondents shared that his family placed stringent demands on him, such as abstaining from alcohol and tobacco and adhering to strict

boundaries in his interactions with women. These requirements are intended to facilitate the process of arranging a marriage that aligns with the class, social standing, caste, and religious background of individuals (Philip, 2022: p. 3). In this context, young men like Shaurya find themselves caught between the tensions of an evolving, modern India and the traditional expectations placed upon them.

My intention in studying the urban youth in Bhopal is not to simplify or overlook complexities and ambiguities but rather to explore and highlight tensions. This involves critically examining the ethnographic aspects of the term while utilising it as a useful analytical tool. The label 'urban youth' serves as a 'cognitive shortcut' (Hutchings, 2008; Philip, 2022) by treating young men and women as a discursive category rather than merely a demographic one. This approach enables me to delve into the meanings of being 'urban,' 'modern,' and 'progressive' within the specific context of my middle-class research participants.

As young men and women navigate the streets of Bhopal, they are constantly exposed to a multitude of images and representations of men through billboards, advertisements, Bollywood imagery, and the broader public sphere of modern India. These images predominantly depict commodified male and female bodies that are groomed, muscular/slim, hairless, fair-skinned, active, and overtly heterosexual, thus setting the basic parameters for an 'ideal partner.' Through my research, I discovered that these encounters with such images profoundly shape the notions of what it means to be a 'man' and a 'woman' and the significance of having a 'masculine' and 'feminine' body for the urban youth. The concept of a neoliberal self is a useful analytical tool when studying middle-class Indian urban youth, as it helps to problematise the notions of a 'new' India and a 'modern' self within this context. Neoliberalism, as described by Dardot and Laval (2014), is both a destructive and productive process. It breaks down existing rules, institutions, and rights while attempting to establish a new norm and a redefined worldview, "'making' of the body is part of the manufacturing of the neoliberal subject" (Dardot & Laval, 2014: p. 273). Within the framework of neoliberalism, the construction of the body is an integral part of shaping the neoliberal subject. Consequently, while youth work on their bodies to make them 'fit' and 'acceptable', they also desire a partner with such body traits as deemed appropriate and desirable in advertisements and neoliberal subjectivities.

For young men like Astitva and Shaurya, practices such as chest hair removal become embodied symbols of their 'modernity', closely tied to their

emotional imaginings and ethical engagement with the idea of being modern and attractive. Moreover, they believe that their girlfriends and other women appreciate the sight of their shaved, fair-skinned, and muscular chests, further sexualising and glamorising these grooming and consumption practices for them. Similarly, for young women, traits such as shyness and modesty along with bodily features like fair skin and slimness matter the most. I discovered that women were often compelled to groom and consume in a manner that would make them sexually desirable to the grooming and roaming young men. Urban youth like Astitva, for instance, would harshly judge young women and subject them to humiliation and mockery if their grooming and consumption practices did not meet certain standards of appropriateness. Philip (2022: p. 13) in the context of Delhi, has found that grooming and consumption have become new battlegrounds where masculine power and entitlement are exerted over women, as well as over other men.

This phenomenon reflects the commodification of Indian masculinities and femininities and the various attempts to construct a neoliberal masculine and feminine identity in the context of the 'new' middle-classness. For young men and women, these practices of grooming, enjoying, and taking care of one's body are not just encounters but active participation that affords them opportunities to engage in elaborate rituals of being seen and seeing others (Brosius, 2010) and entering into relationships. Scholars have shown that grooming, self-presentation, and embodying a modern self-image are crucial for young people to establish a neoliberal identity within the Indian context (Gooptu, 2009; Brosius, 2010; Nakassis, 2013). Empirical studies indicate that in India, sales of men's grooming products are growing at a faster rate than women's cosmetic products, a trend observed across South Asia (Moss, 2012: p. 53; Maycock, 2017).

Eighty-five per cent of the respondents said there is no ideal age for marriage and one can decide to marry whenever one feels she/ he is ready, finds the right person and becomes economically stable and independent. On asking in terms of specific numbers, the major view that came up is that one should marry between 25- 30 years of age. Most of the urban youth wanted to continue their bachelor's life as much as possible and travel around the world. Their desire to extend their unmarried status can be termed as yearning for "*elongated singlehood*" or "*prolongation of youth*" (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2008; Koh, 2011; Bhandari, 2020). At the same time, they knew they would not be allowed to continue their bachelor's life after 30 as this was regarded as the high time to marry according to them and their family.

Methodology

In terms of the geographical extent of my fieldwork, I had chosen the Vrindavan Nagar area of Bhopal as my primary site of research. This decision was motivated primarily by the reason that Bhopal is the capital and one of the main cosmopolitan centres of Madhya Pradesh, with a strong lure of migration especially from the neighbouring villages, towns, and cities, so the population here is mixed (rural & urban) and diverse (with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds) in nature.

This research was conducted through fieldwork involving three groups of young men and four groups of young women in Bhopal. These groups consisted of young men and women as students in colleges or universities, those who were educated but seeking employment, and those who were educated and already working. For young women, the fourth category comprised of those who were educated, but not interested in working, thus not seeking employment opportunities. Despite their differences in employment status, I had categorised them collectively as urban youth because their consumption patterns and aspirations aligned with a middle-class lifestyle, regardless of their specific economic circumstances, thus indicating their “middle-classness” (Brosius, 2010; McGuire, 2011). It is important to note that all the respondents lived with their families and their financial status was influenced by the income of their parents. As a part of ethnographic research, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with the individuals and focused group discussions with the groups intermittently spanning around eight months in four phases from May 2022 to April 2023 with the help of a mix of purposive and snowball sampling methods. The research design followed an iterative process, wherein the perspectives and “ways of seeing” (Berger, 2008) of the young men and women were privileged. The study adopted a multi-sited urban ethnographic approach, incorporating methods such as chit-chats, informal interviews, and discussions whenever informants encountered relevant images of marriage in their daily experiences.

A total of twenty key respondents comprised the category of urban youth for this research. They were unmarried, middle or upper caste, and in between the age group of 23 and 30 years. Their family location and their own salaries granted them access to higher levels of consumption, family-owned cars and bikes, smartphones, pocket money for various expenses like red wine and cigarettes, club and gym memberships, wandering around the city, and shopping. In addition to the key respondents, I conducted 15 informal, semi-structured interviews with other young men, 12 interviews with young

women, and 2 focused group discussions with a peer group on the occasion of their college farewell in the gambit of a game. I also interviewed a few activists and academicians at Jawaharlal Nehru University and the University of Delhi to gain a macro-level analysis of gender and youth in India. Throughout the research process, I obtained informed consent from all my respondents at the beginning of my fieldwork and regular intervals during my interactions with them.

My approach revolved around comprehending the actual experiences of the individuals in choosing their marriage partner and discussions around that in the family and society. A significant portion of my ethnographic material was presented through personal stories, narratives, and case studies. Notably, these narratives and cases were not used to extract the rules governing the underlying marriage system within a middle-class urban community. Instead, they served to illustrate the various circumstances, choices, and outcomes that could arise within a relatively uniform group. This exploration encompassed women's perspectives on an exemplary husband, men's perspectives on an ideal wife and the local understanding of a contented marriage. Nataliya, a 24-year-old spirited woman, has significantly influenced the content and arguments of this paper through her experiences and perceptions of gender and class consciousness. All interviews were conducted in an open-ended, semi-structured manner, allowing interviewees to introduce topics that hadn't been initially planned for, thereby fostering spontaneity and richer conversation.

Through transcribing interviews and collecting narratives, I had come to recognise the remarkable privilege I had had in encountering such a wide array of diverse and exceptional stories. These accounts could largely stand alone, separate from the researcher's narrative. While I can't definitively comment on whether my approach prompted responses distinct from those of other researchers, I am aware that some of my interviewees, both males and females, shared remarkably frank details about their personal lives, including traditionally sensitive subjects like sexuality. Multiple factors might have contributed to this situation, such as my ethnicity, gender, youthful appearance (as few believed I was the youngest researcher), affiliation with a reputed Indian university (which was seen as more progressive than local institutions), and notably, the uncommonness of the topic I engaged with to the type of research I conducted—both in terms of its themes and its extended duration.

A recurring concern that deeply bothered me was the curiosity displayed by the individuals I interviewed regarding my personal life, that would I

marry in future? What were my preferences regarding my marriage partner? Was I in a relationship? — a reaction that was indeed understandable, given the nature of my inquiries. Initially, I only disclosed personal details to a select few individuals who acted as my main hosts. However, a more significant factor was that I was seen as a local—and I was well aware that any information I shared would swiftly circulate due to its novelty.

Theoretical Orientation

This study tries to provide an extensive insight into the “pre-marital experiences” of unmarried individuals: the reasons why they marry & what are the potential advantages and disadvantages they have in mind before tying the knot, with a particular section of the Indian middle class—one that claimed benefits from LPG reforms (1991) and was proximately associated with a progressive and global India. The respondents for this study were those segments of the Indian middle class who were “educated” and self-identified themselves as “modern” and belonging to the “middle class”. The educated urban middle classes portray themselves as trailblazers of societal change and as leaders in adopting a modern global lifestyle. They do this while also expressing a hint of nostalgia for the perceived traditional Indian family structure and its fundamental values (Grover, 2011: Foreword x).

According to various researchers studying the middle classes in India, attempting to define middle-class identity based on econometric or income-based parameters is highly complex, if not impossible (Fernandes, 2006; Nisbett, 2007, 2009). Instead, it is more fruitful to study the performative aspects of being middle class, going beyond narrow measures of consumption and exploring the sociocultural dimensions of middle-class identity. Brosius (2010), for instance, argued that in the context of significant economic inequality in India, shopping malls and cafes serve as spaces where individuals engage in “Erlebniskulture” or internalised displays and celebrations of self. She suggested that being seen in such places was often more important than actual shopping, highlighting the performative elements of middle-classness that extended beyond financial measures to encompass sociocultural codes and values. Following similar methodologies, I also focused on the performative and stylised behaviours through which the urban youth attempted to embody a cohesive class and gender-based identity. Middle-classness among my respondents was reflected in their savings throughout the year and then travelling once a year to a hill station or a religious place, in their leisure activities, in their ways of enjoying life, for instance, going to a restaurant for dinner on the birthdays of family

members, fulfilling desires of parents, gifting them the accessories, introducing them to the consumer culture and technology, taking them to theatre and shopping malls, introducing western cuisine like pizza or burger to them, and the list goes on. I am not here making claims on the middle class at a pan-Indian level, my emphasis is to account for specific regions in Bhopal where this class is heterogeneous, loose, extensive, and accommodative: providing shelter to the individuals belonging to diverse professions and socio-cultural backgrounds.

Persons marrying are assumed to raise their utility level above a certain level in comparison to their remaining single throughout. The “economic” approach adopted by Becker considered “the determinants of the gain from marriage compared to remaining single for one man and one woman” (Becker, 1974: p. 300). What I am trying to do here is list not only the gains but also the losses which individuals think can accrue to them after marriage and then compare these gains and losses not only in economic terms, but also in cultural, social, physical, and emotional terms because these are the different aspects which individuals try to fulfil through entering into a relationship of marriage.

Ford & Drake highlighted that marrying to increase the source of finance is not something new: “*In the past, marriage was primarily a system to promote the financial, social and political aspirations of the families involved*” (2009: pp. 9-10). These aspirations hold great significance in contemporary times as well, more at the level of an individual. Despite extensive theoretical discussions and public conversations about the state of marital relationships in India, it’s surprising how rarely the theories are tested through real-world observations or how seldom the commonly accepted ideas in public discussions are questioned based on actual circumstances. Regardless of the reasons behind this shortage of research, it’s evident that detailed on-the-ground studies examining the evolving dynamics of Indian marriage and factors that prompt one to marry across diverse communities are quite limited. Although several studies have been done on married individuals, there is a dearth of literature on prospective individuals ready to marry soon.

Nitty- Gritty of Girlfriend- Boyfriend Relationship

Urban youth in the neoliberal times have access to new spaces and practices for expressing love and desire. Unlike the portrayal of Hindu masculinities in earlier literature (Banerjee, 2005; Anand, 2007, Dasgupta & Gokulsing, 2014) that depicted men as stoic individuals waiting for arranged marriages, young men like Sanket and Shaurya engage in sexual and romantic relationships and

encounters with girlfriends. They are part of Trivedi's (2014) conception of a sexual and romantic cohort of urban youth in contemporary India. Terms like 'live-in', 'break-up', 'casual relationship' and 'time-pass' are commonly used among this group and discussions about these topics are considered legitimate amongst young men and women. Most of the male respondents claimed to have had sexual experiences with women, including engaging in activities like 'kissing' and 'giving hickey/love bites on neck or breast' with their girlfriends during their outings. Having girlfriends is seen as an achievement, and young men are praised and respected for finding heterosexual partners. Connell's (2003) work on sexual learning among young men supports this notion by highlighting that men are awarded praise and prestige for their ability to access women, framing it as a 'conquest' for men. The framing of women as 'my woman' signifies a sense of privatised and exclusive ownership over women, highlighting the power that men enjoy or claim to enjoy over women within a patriarchal society (Menon, 2012). This concept is reminiscent of Nisbett's findings among young men in Bangalore, who similarly discussed their masculine ownership of women through the usage of the term 'his woman' (Nisbett, 2009).

The physical spaces in which interactions between the men and their girlfriends take place are seen as positive environments that enable connections between them. These spaces offer anonymity and freedom to express their sexual and romantic desires openly, away from the scrutiny of their families and relatives (Philip, 2022: p. 94). The interactions between unmarried men and women challenge the controlled heteronormativity that typically manifests itself through arranged marriages (John & Nair, 2000) in Indian society. Such interactions signify a departure from societal expectations and norms.

In common parlance, the boyfriend-girlfriend relationship is thought to be easily broken if things are not working out, unlike in the case of marriage where more people and families are involved who make sure that you continue and put your efforts as much as possible. Around 30% of the respondents were single and another 30% were committed at the time when this research was conducted; 40% of respondents were committed in past. They thought that the relationship could have been converted into marriage but in their own words: "*Things couldn't work out, we had different aspirations, differences of opinion, etc.*" It shows how casually individuals approach the pre-marital girlfriend-boyfriend relationship, unlike the husband-wife relationship.

Mansi Choksi (2022) offered a heartwarming, authentic, and compassionate exploration of the complexities of maintaining relationships in contemporary

India. She delved into the question of what one would be willing to sacrifice for love and asked, *'How much are we truly prepared to risk for love?'*, vividly portraying the struggles, humiliation, anger, victories, and heartaches that their decisions entail. The influence of arranged marriage as the prevailing norm remains deeply pervasive and powerful in India. Among the urban youth we are referring to, there is uncertainty regarding whether their girlfriends will eventually become their wives or whether their boyfriends will become their husbands. Scholars have demonstrated that social conservatism within the middle classes leads to the rigid reproduction of gender norms and practices in new forms (Jaffrelot & Van De Veer, 2008). While the male youth continue to date women, studies on similarly profiled older men indicate that girlfriends rarely convert into wives. For instance, research by Carol Upadhyia (2008, 2009) on software engineers showed that most of these men, despite working closely with women daily, still preferred arranged marriages organised by their families. This choice allowed the young men to relinquish control to their families, which they perceived as a noble reflection of their 'Indianness'. Similarly, Patricia Uberoi (2009: p. 25) suggested the concept of 'arranged love marriage,' where young men and women claimed to fall in love after getting married, as a solution to reconcile parental authority with the modern desires and inclinations of being in the 'new' India.

Diverse Views on Marriage

Fifty per cent of the urban youth viewed marriage as an essential system for society building where two different people, families, kinship systems, communities, cultures, beliefs, and viewpoints come together and grow with each other. For them, this is how human society and civilisation grow and develop. The major view was that the two sexes are incomplete in themselves and they require each other for their fulfilment and security. To fulfil their sexual desires, procreate, and raise a family, marriage is inevitable. Marriage completes an individual and adds an element of wholeness. These views are in alignment with the observation made by Lina Fruzzetti who said that the Indian conceptualisation of the ideal woman is a married woman and they can only achieve completion of self through a husband (1982: p. 130). This observation applies to all the respondents irrespective of sex.

Twenty per cent of the urban youth opined that marriage is a sort of stamp, a compulsion which is imposed upon unmarried boys and girls by society to create boundaries for them and confine them in those boundaries. Relationship outside or without marriage is considered morally detrimental,

especially for women and daughters who are viewed as responsibilities¹ to their parents which they must get rid of. Out of these 20%, some viewed marriage as very demanding in nature which comes with lots of responsibilities and expectations. For others, it is more of a hype created for the validation of a couple, as unmarried couples are still looked upon suspiciously and live-in is still unacceptable and a huge taboo in India.

Thirty per cent of the respondents had mixed views about marriage. A 25-year-old female youth, Sanchita opined, *"It's a good thing that two people come together when they are comfortable, become each other's better half and continue their lineage², but this is always not the case as we desire. Toxic relationship in marriage can make your life hell which cannot be left easily."* This ambivalence about marriage is the result of rigorous cost and benefit analysis done by the prospective individuals approaching the marriage market.

Sanchita gave the example of the Goddess Sita to showcase that an idealistic marriage can also be full of difficulties. Haider argued that women in Delhi slums did not view Sita as their role model (1998: p. 254). Similarly, urban middle-class young women in Bhopal did not view Sita as a role model and were critical of her destiny in general and her husband in particular. They were harshly critical of the happenings and mis-happenings in Sita's life, right after her marriage when she accompanied her husband Rama in exile to the difficulties of life, she faced during *Vanvasa*. The most disheartening incident for them was the performance of *Agni-pareeksha* after returning from Lanka and the order of re-exile by her husband when she was pregnant. Such heights of docility and submissiveness were not seen as ideal or imitative models amongst women there and they were very vocal about it. However, the complementarity with the husband was an undebatable topic as the notion of "better half" or completing each other as in the case of the "*Ardhanareshwar complex*" (Kakar, 1989) was dominant.

Out of the 50% of urban youth who gave functional views on marriage, 40% were males and only 10% were females. All 40% of respondents who viewed marriage in a confining framework were females. Likewise, 60% of respondents who gave mixed views regarding marriage were females. It implies that males in the specific locality we are looking into, view marriage as a functional aspect of society, while females try to question or modify it, thereby giving conflicting and mixed views on it.

Eighty-five per cent of the urban youth said that they thought at least once to remain unmarried in their life. Out of this, 65% were females and only 35% were male respondents. It implies that more females encounter such incidences and

experiences which lead them to think that the tag of marriage is not necessary and they can remain unmarried throughout. They love their independence and freedom and think that it's better to work on oneself and create more awareness about oneself rather than marrying and working to please others throughout life. Young men who considered the thought to remain unmarried were of the view that marriage is not an achievement, it distracts individuals from their goals and dreams. The frequently given examples were of great personalities like A.B. Vajpayee, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, Lata Mangeshkar, etc.

Marrying someone at a certain point of time has been made mandatory in our society which seems to be inbuilt, engrained, and has been continuing for a very long time. Parents consider it their primary duty to marry their children and settle them down. All the respondents being termed as urban youth said it's obvious for them to marry one day. The reasons given in favour of marrying varied from family pressure to social conditioning, fulfilment of biological and social needs to a way of life, a custom (*Rivaaz*). Interestingly, an explanation came that convinced by saying:

"After reaching a certain age, there occurs disillusionment in life. Parents cannot live with us forever. So, they want to make sure through marriage and reproduction that someone looks after us in their absence...In that case, marriage provides you with new challenges and you get involved in it: going out with your wife, school admission of children, celebrating your partner's birthday, anniversary, etc. altogether a new set of adventures. Your wife will be telling you to do many things. In that way, one will not become a psychopath."

Here the invocation of family and parents to highlight the significance of marriage as an institution and its connection to the daily mundane activities and continuity of life is interesting on the part of urban youth which cannot be completely detached from the socialisation thesis.

Qualities Desirable in a Life Partner

On asking about the qualities desirable in a life partner, some of them were significant and desired by both male and female urban youth. Ninety-five per cent of respondents opined that education³ and employment⁴ are essential prerequisites for marriage and they cannot imagine marrying an illiterate or unemployed partner irrespective of their sex. Another noteworthy concern was for financial stability, "*my life partner should be well-off and highly paid.*" A loving and caring partner was also one of the common concerns along with mutual understanding and respect.

Some of the qualities desired specifically by the female urban youth from their future partners included trust, loyalty, and faithfulness⁵ in general, "*he*

should share all his thoughts with me”, which males thought was practically not possible. Interestingly, this desire on the part of females was in contrast to what male youth were fearful about, after getting married, i.e. their freedom to flirt or hang out with girls casually. It was fascinating for me personally to listen to such desirable qualities which are difficult to find in male youth, for instance, understanding without communication. Pranita, one of my female respondents said, *“he should understand my silences and smiles, should read my face and understand.”* She was sure that she couldn’t express everything every time, so it should be the duty of her future husband to comprehend her moods and emotions through her silence. It became very clear that females want such a person as their life partner who believes in equality and freedom, with whom they can grow with and add value to their lives. They did not want hindrance of any sort in their career; however, they knew this break might come at some point after their marriage.

The qualities desirable by the male urban youth were equally captivating with their specificities. A good sense of humour and vivacity was demanded by almost all the males, *“she should be chilled and jolly; active, not dull; and should understand my jokes and sarcasm.”* The discourses around marriage are shaped not only through religious ceremonies, legal processes, and mediation but also in casual conversations, humour, and rumours, as well as through media and other ephemeral means. The epigraph exemplifies this by capturing a globally circulated and normalised discourse about marriage, depicting the dynamics between men and women, often infused with resignation, frustration, and even hostility (Basu, 2015: p. 14). This discourse fatalistically asserts that heterosexual interactions are the sole social arena, prevailing across different cultures, and it paints a picture of men surrendering their finances, autonomy, and the ability to win arguments.

Another important quality desired by urban male youth was dynamicity, *“my future wife should be dynamic and adaptable and should change herself, her behaviour, choices, and decisions according to the situations. She should be flexible, not argumentative.”* These qualities are indicative of taking complete control or charge over a wife who would be accepted and appreciated only if she fulfils her role in the normative framework of an ideal submissive wife.

Search for a Suitable Partner

Families of the urban youth (who participated in this study) had either started searching for potential spouses for their children or talked about initiating the search after taking clues from their children. Individuals choose to ignore such

discussions or conversations in the family. One of the female urban youth, Shrija said, *"They talk about it teasingly on a lighter note and I ignore."*

Whose Consent Matters?

Discussions with young individuals indicate that decisions regarding marriage are still largely under the control of parents, who might or might not involve their children in this process. While young people generally wish to have a say in these matters, they also recognise the significant advantages of parental arrangements. Numerous young individuals make efforts to push back against parental expectations (refer to Ahearn 2001 for intriguing perspectives on this subject), although the prevailing view is that opposition to parental unions is not very common in India. Grover (2011) encountered both girls and boys using the term *"zabardasti"* to express that their marriages were imposed upon them.

On indirectly asking about whose consent mattered the most in marriage-related decisions, it came out that the urban youth believed that their consent in marriage-related decisions mattered more than that of their parents. However, they were pretty sure that they could not go against the wishes and requirements of their family. The support of their family is something they earnestly look for. Males seemed to be more daring in this respect. Akshat, a 23-year-old young male said, *"The consent of my mother and father is important and I know they will support me even if I go against them."* It came out that females have a good amount of faith in their families. Nataliya opined, *"My family's consent matters the most, but they will make sure that my consent is not overlooked."* The youth were pretty sure irrespective of their sex that their family would search for a life partner for them, but it worked mutually. Maitrayee, a 26-year-old female said, *"They (family) cannot force him (boy) upon me as they know very well that I can break the marriage in future if I didn't like. I can also not go against my family's wishes. They need to ensure my consent in their choice and I need to ensure their consent in my choice. This is how it works."*

The urban female youth believe that their consent matters the most in their marriage-related decisions, but that consent remains entirely manipulative by the family as their families can convince them easily by saying, *"What is the problem in the boy? They are allowing you to study after marriage, the boy is well-settled, etc.... Although my consent matters a hundred per cent, I believe that my family will get included in my hundred per cent manipulatively. The family will ensure that it's not left out in any way in my final decision."* I term this interesting phenomenon as *"manipulative consent of family"* which applies to most of the respondents whether male or female.

Convincing Family at any Cost:

My approach to understanding the thought processes of youth and their marriage-related decisions in the urban context revolved around exploring their inner social world, which operates sometimes independently and sometimes entirely dependent on their families' authority. Studies in the realm of emotional anthropology have underscored how emotions are shaped by political and societal factors (Lutz, 1988; Abu-Lughod, 1999). The concept of love marriages in North India carries political implications, as it stands as a testament to the idea of choosing one's partner in a context where arranged marriages orchestrated by families remain overwhelmingly predominant (Srinivasan, 2020: p. 2). One of my key female respondents, Nataliya said, *"My marriage is an emotion for my parents. It's their dream to see me married to someone, happy with my new family."* For daughters, marriage is more of an emotion of departing from their loved ones, from their own home and spending the rest of their lives with a new family. When parents say that you should move ahead in your life, it means *"getting married"*.

In the extensive discussions with the youth, it became clear that family support and validation for marriage is a must for individuals. However, it seems that children very well know the tactics to fight and convince their parents. About 40%⁶ of the respondents had an apprehension that a lot of drama would be involved in their marriage. Ishita, a 25-year-old young girl said, *"In my case, there will be a lot of 'Hungama.' I will have to arrange a jury or fight a battle with them to convince them of my love marriage...If they will not allow me to marry the boy of my choice, I will not marry at all. Either I will marry my boyfriend or will not marry"*. Intimidating parents with such threats might work in some selective cases, however, Grover's case studies (2011) indicated that the concept of an "arranged love marriage," where parents eventually approve of the couple's chosen partner, doesn't work as effectively in reality as it does in idealised notions. This solution, often portrayed in movies, appears more successful in imagination than in actual practice.

In a cultural context where individuals live in a family with their parents in Bhopal, female youth want to marry into neighbourhoods that are conveniently located close to their parental homes. This arrangement allows them a significant degree of flexibility in moving between their birthplace and their marital residence. This geographical proximity after marriage strengthens enduring connections between mothers and daughters, reinforcing the pre-existing ties that were established before marriage. This underscores the central importance of the mother-daughter relationship, a bond that has been

overlooked in anthropological research, which has traditionally concentrated on examining mother-son relationships and male-centric models of Indian kinship as highlighted by scholars (refer Grover, 2011: pp. 9- 10).

Gains from Marriage

During interviews centred on the topic of marriage, conversations often revolved around aspirations and contentment for the future. Marriage is often depicted as an inherently positive institution, with the heterosexual couple at its core, assumed to be a universal cultural unit. Works like the popular paperback *“A History of the Wife”* propose that having and being a wife are still considered valuable, as being part of a romantic partnership is seen as validating and empowering over the long term (Yalom, 2001, xvii). This mirrors Giddens’s influential theory (1993) that modernity is characterised by the ascendancy of romantic love, even within marriage, as the primary source of personal fulfilment (Cole & Thomas, 2009⁷). Twenty per cent of the urban youth opined that after marrying, they would get recognition, respect, & validation from society, *“you can easily rent a flat in case of a married couple”*, one of the female urban youth highlighted.

A majority of the urban youth (73%) were certain that marriage would provide them with physical, emotional, and financial support and stability. Financial support for them is characterised by an increase in earnings, expenditure, and wealth building in terms of pooling salaries together.

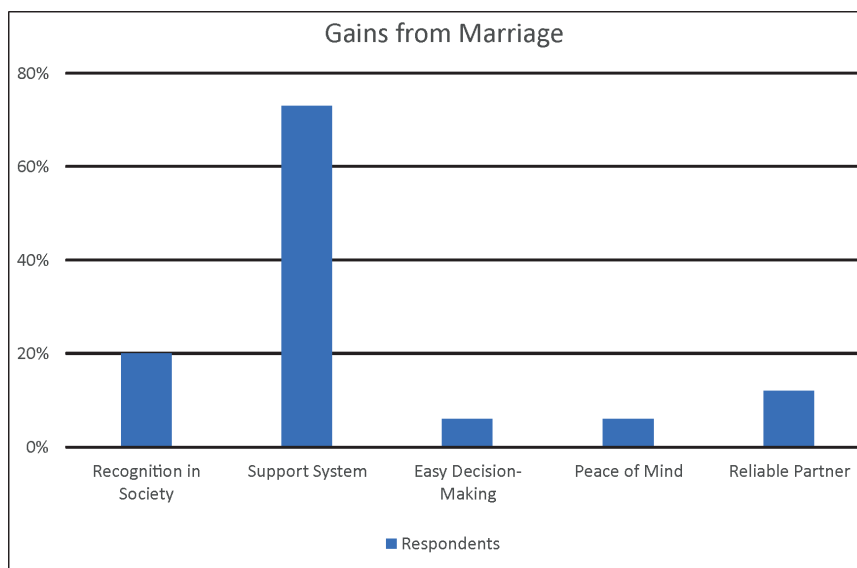


Figure 1: Gains from Marriage

Maitrayee, a female urban youth expressed her future desires by lining them up with marriage. She said, “After marriage, I will be able to live a luxurious life and spend my husband’s money on shopping (*sajna-savarna*) and travelling (*ghoomna-firna*). I will be able to fulfil all my life dreams (*zindagi ki khwahishein*).” Here are two significant notions of shopping and travelling which are not allowed to daughters by the natal families to excessively indulge in and it’s always deemed best to travel in the company of the husband. The female urban youth have time and again shared that their parents tell them to go and do whatever they want after marriage, “*jo bhi karna hai, jaha bhi jana hai, shaadi ke baad jana.*” Only 6% of the youth opined that decision-making will become easy after marriage, 6% thought they would be entitled to happiness⁸ and peace of mind after marriage, and 12% believed they would get a romantic and reliable partner through marriage.

Losses from Marriage



Figure 2: Losses from Marriage

Loss of individuality after marriage was one of the major concerns for urban youth next to loss of freedom. Out of 70% of the youth who opined that they would lose their individuality after marriage, 79% were females and only 21% were males. It’s significant here to invoke Betty Friedan (1965) who

attacked family as a patriarchal system and highlighted how the women's individuality and creativity get severely compromised when she maintains her domestic role to fulfil men's sexual, reproductive, and household needs. These apprehensions were shared by 79% of the female youth who thought their individuality would be compromised after marriage as they would have to handle many things together: their office, home, children, etc. and perform multiple roles.

Eighty per cent of the youth were of the view that their freedom would be compromised after marriage. Out of this, 75% were females and only 25% were males. Respondents opined that after marriage, priorities change and one has to keep oneself at last, take permission from the partner, *"one cannot go to the pub and do a party all night like before"*, thus restricting the freedom to make decisions, make choices and most importantly the freedom of movement. Privacy is also significant for the urban youth and sharing of privacy and "Me-Time" with someone is not desirable for them. Shaurya, a playful boy with multiple relationships revealed, *"I will not be able to talk to other girls or flirt with them. I will not be able to make relations with them even if I wish to. My personal things will be open, my insecurities will be revealed in front of her. She will probably try to change me."* These predictable attempts to change one's way of living are a huge concern for boys like Shaurya who certainly want to enter into the relation of marriage but also do not wish to give up the earlier relations of coquettishness and sexual intimacy.

Fifty per cent of the youth think that their career will face a break after marriage and all of these are females. Female respondents opined that after having kids, the chain of making sacrifices will begin and they might be expected to take a career break and leave their jobs to take care of children. The family and kinship structures in place have set role expectations concerning particular gender (Dube, 1997). The woman's capacity to produce offspring essentialises her major role in child-care and domestic activities. This also paints women as "proper" – "improper" mothers (Palriwala & Neetha, 2011).

On the other hand, male urban youth opined that their professional lives will improve after marriage as their residual work will be performed by their wives, for example, managing their secondary things like food, clothes, groceries, cleanliness, etc. Hartmann's analysis (1981b) revealed that the weak position of women in the labour market forces them to marry. After marriage (1981a), husbands remain responsible for the net drain of women's time. In his analysis, women find themselves in between the home and labour market being exploited by patriarchy and capitalistic relations. Morris (1984) showed

that the burden of housework fell majorly on wives even when their men were unemployed and wives were employed. But a better job plays a significant role in improving women's bargaining power in the domestic division of labour, "If the husband's class is held constant, then we find that the higher the class of the woman's job, the less uneven is the domestic division of labour" (Pahl, 1984: p. 272). Walby significantly argued that if women have other alternatives in terms of economic support, they are less likely to marry or remain in a marriage relationship, "the higher the social class of a woman the less likely she is to marry... They are also more likely to leave husbands when they have access to alternative forms of support" (1990: p. 84).

This conclusion cannot be applied to the findings of this study as my female respondents were employed and they still wished to marry one day. Economic support is one of the major reasons why individuals choose to marry, but it's not the only reason. Several other factors also come into being which we have discussed in the previous sections. If a household is the chief site of repression and exploitation, where one's individuality and freedom get compromised why does youth enter into marriage and set up a household? One of the convincing answers could be the Cost and Benefit analysis & choice and situation analysis done based on individuals' positions cut across by their class, caste, religion, ethnicity, age, employment, and marital status. Especially in the case of India, there can be worse things than marriage if men and women remain unmarried. Such studies have not been sufficiently conducted in India and thus leave scope for further research. By marrying, the material interests of female youth get fulfilled when they don't have better options or job opportunities in the labour market. Thus, women who marry consider the restricted available options they have and act in their best interest. Even if a woman decides to liberate herself from the bounds of marriage, such liberation usually lends her into poverty. Weitzman (1985) highlighted a similar issue in the context of California after looking at it from a class perspective and said, "*Being divorced if you are a middle-aged, middle-class homemaker with little labour market experience is worse than staying married. Women in such situations suffer a massive drop in their living standards. This is a consequence of losing a high-earning husband...*" (as cited in Walby, 1990: p. 87). This is very true of the young women in Bhopal as they negotiate with their experiences in the labour market. They desire the higher salary of their future husband so that they can either stop working or spend their entire salary on shopping according to their whims and caprices, thus fulfilling their "*zindagi ki khwahishein*", as Maitrayee highlighted. Other prominent reasons

for marrying even after getting a job are family and societal pressure and expectations to set up a new household.

Fears & Excitements Related to Getting Married

The institution of Marriage is undergoing many significant and noteworthy changes in contemporary times. The bond of marriage has not only become breakable, but moreover, it has become a symbol of conspicuous consumption, pomp, and show. This evolution is reflected in the cinematic portrayals of male and female characters in marriage. As India approached economic liberalisation in the 1990s, Hindi cinema predominantly portrayed heroes and heroines as meticulous about their grooming and appearance, consistently seen wearing fashionable attire. Cinematic representations of male characters evolved, reflecting the changing ideals and aspirations of masculinity, from the marginalised hero fighting the establishment to the modern-day hero who prioritises personal grooming and fashion (Philip, 2022). According to Consolaro (2014), the male protagonist no longer needs to prove his honesty or self-sufficiency; as long as he has wealth and the ability to consume, he is considered acceptable. Bollywood industry, television serials, and celebrities have played a significant role in normalising extravagant marriages. The royal weddings of celebrities like Virat-Anushka, Katrina-Vicky, Kareena-Saif, and recently Ranbir-Alia have created a heavy impact on the wishes and desires of the urban youth. With India's embrace of economic liberalisation, advertisements have transitioned towards more aspirational and stylised images, encouraging individuals to become gendered consumers (Haynes, 2012). The urban youth remain attracted by the physical intimacy and excited with the new gifts, clothing, dance, parties, and *shor-sharaba*. For young women, bridal entry, *lehenga* (gown), and getting attention are the major excitements. The television serials, cinematic portrayals, and depiction of marriage as a very desirable and charming event have made the youth believe that it is something very good and exciting and all should indulge in it one day.

Divorce represents the literal unravelling of the institution of marriage. It serves as a pivotal juncture where the underlying philosophies, values, principles, norms, assumptions, outlooks, and expectations associated with marriage, family, and parenting are brought to the forefront (Simpson, 1998: pp. 27). The prevalent narrative around increasing divorce rates often revolves around feelings of anxiety and distress, a sentiment that is corroborated by the urban youth. While divorce laws might offer a formal appearance of gender equality, they frequently disregard the actual economic

implications of divorce. Many women who resort to legal action encounter a conflict between their perception as empowered individuals utilising laws that exhibit surface-level fairness and the constraints imposed by social and economic factors concerning income and living arrangements. In essence, the process of potential dissolution unveils the fundamental economic framework underpinning marriage. This notion is captured in the concept that *“gender-structured marriage entangles women in a cycle of vulnerability that is socially induced and distinctly asymmetrical.”* This means that women *“become vulnerable due to the very institution of marriage itself”* (Okin, 1989: pp. 138). Okin’s legal scrutiny resonates with a fundamental tenet of socialist feminism, contending that the ideologies centred around family structures, particularly heterosexual marriages and nuclear families, serve as the foundation for economic subjugation. These institutions systematically cultivate dependency and generate *“inequality and imbalance”* within the gendered allocation of labour within households and evolving labour markets (Young, Wolkowitz & McCullagh, 1981: Intro. xvii).

The urban youth think that divorce is an option, but also recognise it’s not that easy in the case of India. Marrying gives legitimacy to the relationship by honouring a first-class certificate, but after getting a divorce, the tag of being *“second-hand”* is attached to an individual. Pranita shared, *“Divorce is a painful procedure. Divorced women are not looked upon as good and respectable women in our society. All the pros of marrying turn into cons after divorce.”* She apprehends that in the case of a girlfriend-boyfriend relationship, there applies no legal boundation, but in the case of marriage, more commitment is required.

According to Sudhir Kakar, an arranged marriage’s most appealing aspect might be the reduction of a young person’s anxiety about finding a partner. Regardless of one’s physical appearance or body type, there’s a reasonable assurance that a suitable match will be identified for them (India Today, 2007). Seventy per cent of the urban youth was of the view that they are not separate or different from their family. Most probably their family will find a specific, suitable partner for them, *“My family is very much excited and curious, perhaps more than me about the arrival of a new member in the family.”* A few feel that they have done a lot of experiments in their life and now at this point, arranged marriage is a viable option for them, *“I have now given this task to my family to find out a suitable partner for me (ab aap hi lakar do). I am done doing experiments with my life.”* An interesting view came up that highlighted one of the major advantages of arranged marriage, *“you can blame your parents or family for a wrong match that cannot be done in case of love marriage.”* These are a few of

the peculiar, though significant specificities considered by the youth before negotiating and arriving at the marriage-related decisions.

The concept of the “female fear factory,” as conceptualised by Pumla Gqola (2015) for South Africa, is relevant for understanding the production of women’s fears, anxieties, and vulnerabilities in public spaces in Bhopal. Gqola (2015) explained that women’s fear is manufactured through the visible, audible, and felt actions of men, which induce fear and control over women and their bodies. Men’s tactics, such as the threat of rape, bodily harm, and asserting masculine entitlement for women’s attention, serve as strategies for gendered and social control. Interestingly, these performances of instilling fear are closely tied to ideas of masculine respectability (Gqola, 2021; Philip, 2022). It is noteworthy that among the young men I studied ethnographically, there was a similar self-perception of being “respectable” men while actively creating an environment of fear and hostility for women in urban spaces which consequently shaped their understanding of a toxic, violent husband with a fragile male ego.

There is a prevailing narrative that associates women with the domestic and reproductive spheres, *“If men spend too much time in the house, they get spoilt (bigad jange), and similarly, if women spend too much time outside (bahar) the house, they get spoilt”* (Philip, 2022: p. 95). Even when women venture into public spaces for work or leisure, their domestic responsibilities remain, often resulting in a ‘double burden’ (McDowell, 1999) for them. Men in urban India often discuss women in public spaces using domestic metaphors, reinforcing the perception of women as inherently tied to the private and domestic realms, even in public discussions (Srivastava, 2007). The notion of ‘*duniyadari*’ (ways of being in the world) holds significance in contemporary times, particularly within the context of neoliberalism. In this neoliberalising environment, the ideal masculine self is expected to work hard, be self-motivated, and actively pursue the perceived abundance of opportunities. Even when young middle-class men face job loss and lack specific destinations to go to, they believe it is undesirable to stay at home due to societal expectations and spend most of the time in public places (Nisbett, 2009: p. 73). All these concerns correspond to my observations in the field that highlight the fears urban female youth have in mind about getting married. They frequently questioned themselves and others, *“How will my partner be? What if the person turns out to be horrible in future? What if he is a playboy and cheating on me? What if he is of a typical patriarchal mindset? What if he does not understand me or takes a stand by my side? What if he turns out to be violent or physically, emotionally, and sexually abusive? What if I stop*

liking a person after a while? I will be shattered and empty from within, clueless about what to do further in such situations." It came out in the interviews that the fears were more if the person to be married is completely unknown as in the case of arranged marriage. It's significant to highlight here that more than 60% of male youth said they didn't have any fear related to getting married and none of the female respondents said likewise. Only a few male respondents opined that if the partner turns out to be toxic, their life will be surrounded by anxiety, depression, and traumatic feelings. Even if they try to resort to divorce and remarriage, they think they will become very fragile, emotionally and mentally.

Concerns Regarding Marriage

Social Reproduction through Caste, Class, & Religion

Marriage is viewed as a societal obligation that not only unites two individuals but also forms a bond between families of similar caste and class status. In such alliances, the preference tends to be for isogamous (equal status) or hypergamous unions, favoured by the families of the young women. In discussing marriage practices in rural Haryana, Prem Chowdhry straightforwardly asserts that "desire, choice, and love" are detached from the institution of marriage, which primarily serves the purpose of "social reproduction" (2007: p. 2).

Recent studies in sociology and anthropology have delved into the paradoxes inherent in the lasting connections between marriage, caste, and kinship structures in India. These works also highlight the conflicts between traditional marriage customs and the desires of North Indian youth, whether living in rural or urban areas, to pursue romantic partners (Uberoi, 2006; Chowdhry 2007; Grover 2011), but that too is done very practically and consciously. Shalini Grover's "Marriage, Love, Caste, and Kinship Support" (2011) investigated the experiences of lower-caste women from urban poor backgrounds as they encountered love and intimacy due to urbanisation, resulting in the relaxation of caste-based marriage norms. Patricia Uberoi's "Freedom and Destiny" (2006) employed the lens of popular Indian culture to scrutinise the contradictions and tensions between individual romantic desires, familial responsibilities in selecting marital partners, and resistance against anticipated gender roles in urban India. Prem Chowdhry's "Contentious Marriages, Eloping Couples" (2007) relied on extensive research in rural Haryana to trace societal strains to "contentious" unions that defied marriage regulations prohibiting inter-caste, inter-varna, or intra-caste unions governed by rules of gotra (clan), village, or territorial exogamy.

Regarding religion and caste, the urban youth in Bhopal claimed that these factors are “insignificant” in their lives. However, the social significance of such claims is noteworthy. Despite the notion of Indians becoming more modern due to factors like integration into the global capitalist market, increased rural-urban migration, the widespread adoption of Western cultural values by urban elites, and the perception of caste’s diminishing relevance in urban environments, both religion and caste continue to significantly influence marriages among Hindus and Muslims (Kukreja, 2022: p. 8). Normatively, presenting oneself as ‘smart’ requires the youth to project an image that transcends caste hierarchies, as suggested by Deshpande (2013). However, the nature of patriarchal arranged marriages often leads to familial and inter-generation conflicts when attempts are made to turn girlfriends into wives, which can disrupt religious and caste boundaries according to Grover (2009). It is important to note that while the young men and women assert their “castelessness” and secularism to present a modern image of themselves, discussions about caste and religion were highly blameful to the family.

The majority of the urban youth said they would marry in their religion because they don’t want collisions in terms of culture or cuisine, *“religious teachings are part of my socialisation, my present self, and my family. For me and my family, the bond of marriage is very sacrosanct and unbreakable. I would prefer a girl from my religion because of similar life chances, customs, and familiarity with rituals. I don’t want conflict in my life.”* How subtly and cleverly the notions of “life chances” and “conflict” are juxtaposed in the above statement, which is indicative of refraining from overtly presenting oneself as conservative but bringing in other factors and players like family. The respondents said they would marry in their religion only because of the same ideology and beliefs and because their family and wider society would not agree. The tendency to bring in the family for marrying in their religion was common in all the respondents irrespective of their sex.

The question of caste is equally important and for 80% of the urban youth, irrespective of sex and religion, caste matters in making their marriage-related decisions. It would facilitate, in their views, the smooth transition and easy adaptability, *“For me personally, caste doesn’t matter. But for my family, it matters a lot and they will arrange a girl from my caste only. They are not completely wrong you see, as transition remains easy in one’s own caste.”* The female youth likewise opined that caste doesn’t matter for them personally but their family gives it a huge weightage. They attach the element of shame and embarrassment in the case of hypogamous marriages, whereas, they remain fearful of discrimination

and exploitation in the case of hypergamous marriages. For 90% of the urban youth, irrespective of sex, caste and religion, class matters a lot and this figure is higher than that of caste. For both male and female youth, the class of their partner doesn't matter, but the person should be qualified, well-off, employed in a decent job, and from a good family. All these factors indicate the class of an individual, which should preferably be upper to one's class, *"I want to marry a girl as rich as possible. When you have two offers: dosa and masala- dosa, you will obviously pick the better one. When your partner is out of the league, there is altogether a different adventure and excitement."* These concerns regarding the caste, class, and religion of future life partners bring into the limelight the fact that the youth ponder upon these issues consciously, however, like to blame the family for their own conscious choices. As Beteille (1991) argued, one can question caste, class or race as an institution but cannot really challenge family as an institution. Blaming and challenging are two different things altogether. Challenging the decisions taken on the part of the family is different from blaming the family for conservative choices, but ultimately following it. Marriage and the family being two aspects of the same social reality of man, are coeval with each other and with culture, because without the family there could be no preservation of the species and culture; and without marriage, there could be no family (Majumdar & Madan, 1955: p. 78). Thus, we can say that the institutions of Marriage and Family are interrelated to each other in a significant manner and this research has attempted to uncover this multifaceted, concomitant relationship. All the respondents said they would marry one day, probably by 30 years of age and would not remain unmarried because their families would not allow them to.

Conclusion

Through ethnographic exploration, it becomes evident that the notions of "old" versus "new," as well as "modern" versus "traditional," emerge in complex and contradictory ways. We find that individuals themselves are neither completely modern nor completely traditional and these dynamics are influenced by the powerful forces of globalisation and neoliberalism, which interact with local patriarchal and nationalist ideologies. Within this challenging blend, the lives of young men and women become riddled with paradoxes and contradictions in terms of their marriage-related decisions. Interestingly, they navigate these complexities using various strategies to reconcile the conflicting social and moral worlds they inhabit. Family exerts a great influence on individuals and their thought processes in making marriage-related decisions. Family ensures

that it's not left out in any way from the consent of their child and its interests get sufficiently represented in that consent which male and female youth think is one hundred per cent theirs. However, this process of ensuring each other's consent works mutually, *"they need to ensure my consent in their choice and I need to ensure their consent in my choice. This is how it works."* The urban youth will marry in future for physical, emotional, and financial support systems at the cost of their individuality and freedom and this loss accrues more to females. Females remain more fearful and less excited than males about their married life. Overall, youth don't associate marriage much with happiness as much as with social support, security, and safety.

These marriage-related decisions are tacitly intersected by one's caste, class, and religion in the name of family. Notably, the tendency to blame family can be observed where the urban youth has started using family as a scapegoat at their disposal. We have seen two prominent examples of this case, firstly, where individuals say they are done with doing experiments with their life and now they want their family to find a suitable partner. Secondly, where individuals opine arranged marriage is better than love marriage because later you can complain to your family about their choice in case of arranged marriage. Male and female urban youth try to portray themselves as modern, progressive, and open-minded, but at the same time also want to hold the traditional and orthodox beliefs, relating to caste, class, religion, and gender, therefore maintaining their beliefs through the family and blaming it for the same so that they appear to be clean and sanitised from any sort of biases about their future life partner.

Here I am not arguing that family doesn't perpetuate differences in terms of caste, class or religion or it doesn't force people to marry. It definitely does. But even when it does not, youth find it handy to blame their family which ultimately cannot be questioned. This is how youth have started using family and its ideology to portray themselves as not as orthodox or narrow-minded, and putting the whole blame of their biased decisions on the family. It gives the childhood impression of refusing something you don't want to engage in by indirectly saying, *"My mother will not agree or she will not allow me (meri mummy nahi manengi)."* The urban youth try to hide behind their family to perpetuate the differences and at the same time labelling the family as responsible for their prejudiced decisions. This leads us to ask a broader question: *"Why do people remain hesitant to present their views in front of others and choose to label them as their family's views?"* We shall try to unravel this mystery some other time in another study.

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Notes

1. As one of the female respondents highlighted, her father kept on insisting that he would go to 'Haj' after her marriage.
2. A significant number of respondents opined that they could not reproduce randomly with anyone.
3. Those individuals who have completed their education and have started working, think they have more autonomy in deciding their marriage partner as compared to those who are still dependent on their parents in terms of income.
4. Salary difference was not desirable in the views of male respondents, majorly because then a woman could claim a higher alimony in case of divorce. One of the male respondents gave the example of Jeff Bezos's wife, MacKenzie Scott, who became one of the richest women in the world after getting a divorce.
5. One of the female respondents said that she wanted a husband like a pet dog whom she could control at her disposal. Later she said she was joking, however, I realised that this was her somewhat true desire which she tried to cover up in the name of a joke.
6. Out of this 40%, 25% are females and 15% are males.
7. These viewpoints, however, overlook the reality that numerous human societies embrace non-monogamous relationships, and marriage may not be the exclusive foundation for enduring or affectionate partnerships.
8. These 6% of respondents who were all males, believed that the environment of their family would become happy and positive after their marriage. According to them, women of the family make festivals like Holi and Diwali lively and pleasant by preparation of sweets, performance of Puja and rituals, etc.

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