

EXPLORING ARRANGED MARRIAGES IN MY FAMILY: NEGOTIATIONS OF CULTURE, FAMILY, GENDER, AND LOVE IN THE ADVENTURES OF MARRIAGE

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The purpose of this narrative is to explain how arranged marriage is an integral part of an Indian family, to describe how marriages are arranged, and to offer explanations for the acceptance of arranged marriages by educated women of Indian origin. Additionally, the author illustrates the changes that have occurred in arranged marriages over the decades by presenting the arranged marriages of her parents, her sisters, and her own. The author discusses how girls in her family were socialized to accept marriages arranged by their parents, and illustrates how love before marriage was frowned upon in her family and in India when she was growing up.

When I came to this country ten years ago, even strangers on college campuses stopped and asked me questions about arranged marriages. After my marriage, whenever students asked me some personal questions, the concept of arranged marriage always came up. I was looked at with disbelief. "Your marriage was arranged, too? Does it exist?" Such questions motivated me to address some of the myths that are associated with arranged marriage and how the tradition of arranged marriage has evolved over the years by presenting the case examples of arranged marriages in my family.

The purpose of this article is to explain how arranged marriage is an integral part of an Indian family, to describe how marriages are arranged, and to discuss how gender plays an important role in the acceptance of arranged marriage. In addition, I illustrate the negotiations of culture, family, gender, and love in the adventures of arranged marriages.

Indians from Asia are referred to as East Indians by the Census Bureau. East Indians are ranked third among the Asian groups (Census, 2002a). Of 11.9 million Asians living in the United States in 2000, 1.9 million were East Indian origin. More than half of those (1.007 million) were born in India or outside of the United States (Census, 2002b). Foreign-born East Indians living in the U.S.

have more than doubled since 1990 (4.5 million). The majority of the Indian couples I have met in the U.S. over the past decade had arranged marriages despite their education and western lifestyle. An understanding of arranged marriage as an integral part of East Indian family life is important for social work practitioners and family practitioners so they can develop sensitivity toward couples whose marriages are arranged and understand arranged marriage as a complex social phenomenon. First, I discuss the life style in India when I was growing up. Second, I discuss how girls were socialized to accept arranged marriage in our lives and how love before marriage was chastised in my family and in India.

Throughout our lives we were reminded that marriage is to be a happy union of families, a source of blessings from relatives, and recognized by the community. Marriage was considered as a place for developing new relationships and for promoting the networking of families and family interests. We were socialized to believe that only "arranged marriage" would be conducive to developing a healthy relationship between the families of a couple. There was always some arranged marriage being planned in my family, as I had eleven aunts and uncles and several cousins. Every year we had one or two marriages of

my cousins. The success of a majority of the arranged marriages in my family showed that arranged marriage does work. Parents and relatives reminded us through their actions and words that marriage is the elders' business and not the business of a boy or a girl. My mother was certain that "we will find a boy for you from a respectable family."

Growing up Female in India

India is a gendered society where the roles of men and women are distinct. Women were mostly passive in the Indian culture, and men typically were the primary breadwinners and managers of issues requiring interaction with individuals in the community, such as arranging marriages for their children (Mahajan, 1996). My family was not an exception; my mom was a stay at home mother and my father was the only breadwinner and had final say in family decisions. My father financed the education of all his children.

My parents were extremely strict with girls; we were not allowed to stay out after dusk and had a strict curfew. Girls in my family were not allowed to travel on our own for more than a couple of hours. My parents always made sure that we were safe, as chastity and virginity are highly respected in East Indian marriages. We girls were trained to focus on our studies and family tasks. We attended only a limited number of trips sponsored by our schools. Occasionally, we were actively involved in girl scouts and other extra-curricular activities and attended camps and other trips, which were special privileges. My parents usually distracted us from teen activities. Early attractions were chastised as shameful and unacceptable by both school and family.

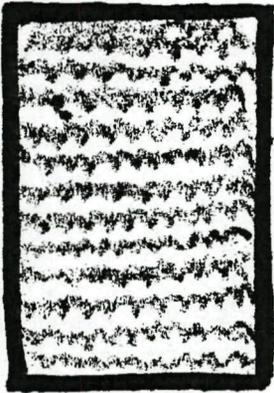
The dress code was strict. "Guard yourself. Do not make others look at you by dressing differently, by leaving hair untied, or by laughing loud." My father blamed my mother if we ever did not abide by the expected dress codes or curfew times during

our teenage years. This is the strategy many fathers use to discipline their daughters, and my father was not an exception. We did not like my mother getting into trouble. My mother was less authoritarian but reminded us often that "your father may not like that."

Love and Modesty

Schools and colleges discouraged any discussion of love before marriage and seldom permitted any public demonstration of love such as kissing or hugging. Schools and colleges sometimes took drastic disciplinary actions by as suspending students who demonstrated romance in college/school campuses. Early attractions and crushes were responded to at the teasing level among friend, and we advised one another not to go beyond what was acceptable by our society and our family members. Getting phone calls from boys was forbidden in several families. Dating was out of the question. However, we all socialized as a "group" by studying together, helping one another, and attending trips and camps arranged by the school. Only a small number of courageous women and men dared to exchange "love letters" or to meet secretly at their own risk behind the scenes. These types of dating behaviors are mostly forbidden in families and schools in India. My aunts were firm that "love or dating occurs only in fantasy or movies; it will not work in real life." Stories, movies, and news highlights associated with love before marriage showed that these were usually followed by elopement and were viewed as having a negative effect on good relationships between the families of the bride and groom. Therefore, "love marriages" were not highlighted as being happy marriages when I grew up in India.

We were taught all along through a Tamil proverb: "Kal [stone] analum kanavan[husband], pul [grass] analum purusan[husband]." Stone is used in the proverb for "hard-hearted person" or "a person with no emotions" and grass is used



for “useless person” or “a person of no value.” The tentative meaning of the proverb is, “Even if you have a hard-hearted husband like a stone accept him as your husband and even if you have a useless husband like grass accept him as your husband.” When I asked my mother about the inherent meaning of the proverb she stated, “Accept your husband as he is and live with him.” Since husbands are chosen mainly by family members, the proverb probably emerged to encourage women to accept their husbands “as is.” Moreover, men and women are required to honor the choices of their parents and elders in their family as India is a collectivist society (Sinha, Sinha, Verma, & Sinha, 2001). Family cohesion and conformity is given importance in traditional Indian marriages. Romance or compatibility or feeling is not given importance.

When I was in my teen years, for the first time in my family one of my cousins chose a “love marriage” by dating a girl who was not selected by his parents. That created much shame in my family as several people made fun of his marriage in front of my mother. The concept of “love marriage” in India refers to a marriage that does not meet the criteria of an arranged marriage where collectivist views dominate. Instead, the woman or man chooses his/her spouse on his/her own, dates, and loves before marriage. We were reminded of this often and told through direct and indirect conversations not to do the same thing. Since then, a handful of “love marriages” have occurred in my family without the approval of the parents.

Arranged Marriage: My Parents

Traditionally within families of Indian origin, arranged marriages vary based on each family’s own traditions, and these traditions have changed over the years.

My mother was 18 and my father was 24 when they married in the late 1950s. My mother was born and brought up in a remote

village and completed high school just before her marriage. Their families lived 50 miles apart. Within the fifty-mile radius there were hundreds of small villages. During that time, the main form of transportation was a bullock cart to connect to neighboring villages. Public transportation was rare in the villages. Several children, including my mother and father, walked three to five miles to attend school. My mother’s village did not get a formal road or public transportation until the late 1970s. Despite lack of formal communication between villages, arranged marriages existed, due to active grass-root, caste-based organizations and mutual friends. My father’s and mother’s family members were total strangers to each other and they were not related by blood or by any means. My father’s and mother’s family met due to a mutual friend, whom my mom met and interacted with when she and her classmates went to a nearby town to take their high school final-year exam. My father saw my mother at a traditional family bride viewing at my mother’s house. Their parents arranged the marriage because my mother’s brother believed that my father was a federal government employee and could therefore provide a good life for my mother. They had no way of verifying whether he actually had a job or not, due to their inability to travel to be able to verify his place of employment. At that time, trust played an important role in marriages.

My parents’ marriage ceremony was held at my father’s village, as it is the tradition in our subculture for the marriage to be held by the bridegroom’s family. My parents met up close only when my father tied the nuptial cord around my mother’s neck. Nuptial cord is a yellow cord used for “tying the knots.” Still today, men tie the nuptial cord around the bride’s neck with a gold pendant, which is a form of wedding band that pronounces the marriage between men and women. In my subculture, men tie three knots at the time of marriage. “Tying the knots” symbolizes the

lasting bond of marriage between husband and wife, lasting bond between the families of bride and groom, and lasting relationship between the communities where the bride and groom lived before marriage. My mother left her family immediately after her marriage and went with my father, who worked hundreds of miles away from both families.

Arranged Marriages: Second Generation

After my parents' marriage there were several arranged marriages in our family, including the marriages of my two uncles and an aunt. The marriages of all of my aunts and uncles were arranged in the same way, by their parents or older brothers. In the 1970s and 1980s, several of my cousins' marriages were arranged. Some of my cousins married their first cousins.

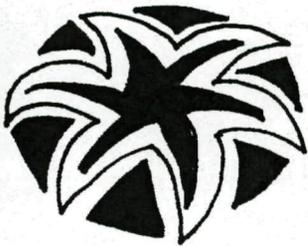
It was an early evening on a Sunday and my house was decorated like a model home with fancy draperies. The whole house had a festival look. It was a special day for youngsters like me, as a potential groom and his family members were coming to see my oldest sister who just had completed her graduate degree in 1982. She was 24. My parents were delighted to search for a groom for my sister, as they felt that she was ready. Nobody directly asked her opinion at that time. My oldest sister was one of the most beautiful girls in my family, tall and fair. My sister did not express much interest in the beginning years of the search but cooperated with my parents in wearing a silk sari, a lot of jasmine on her braids, and jewelry. On top of that, she agreed to come and sit in front of the bridegroom's family and friends in the traditional bride-viewing ceremonies arranged by my parents. At the family bride viewing, my sister sat in front of the prospective bridegroom's family. Occasionally, family members of a prospective bridegroom's family asked questions about her college and

her culinary skills, as Indian girls are expected to cook nicely.

In the beginning years, my parents were less intrusive and permitted qualified, prospective men and their families to see my oldest sister. My parents had four important criteria that had to be met before they considered anyone as a prospective groom. First, they verified with our family astrologer that my sister's horoscope was compatible with the prospective groom's horoscope. Second, since my sister had a graduate degree, they wanted someone with the same or higher level of education. Third, the family history had to be clean and simple without any negative events that could flag our attention. Fourth, the groom had to be capable of supporting his family by having a decent job and income. In addition, we siblings had our own criteria, which were not given much consideration by our parents. His appearance was more important to us siblings, as my sister was a princess to all of us. Moreover, we did not know much about other needed traits of a husband. We had to sneak in order to check how fat and tall the groom was. We had to check the sofa on which the bridegroom sat to determine his weight. We told our parents not to proceed any further with some grooms whom we did not like. We wondered whether our parents ever heard us.

It took two years for my parents to find the right groom for my sister. My sister saw her husband a few months before their wedding at a traditional bride-viewing event at my home. The groom visited my sister for a second time at her work with one of my cousin's family members. My parents then visited his family and home and did some enquiries about the groom before they finally decided to arrange the marriage. My father also visited the groom's place of work and enquired with others about the groom and his job.

None of my siblings had a chance to talk to my sister's groom. Only my father and my



mother spoke to him for a couple of minutes. My sister never heard a word from her future husband before marriage and, like my mother, she met him up close only on the day of her wedding, just minutes before her husband tied a nuptial cord around her neck. Her marriage was a first, a special event in our family. My parents were overjoyed and arranged the marriage ceremony for my sister at our home, which is unusual in our subculture, where the groom's family usually arranges marriage ceremonies. Her marriage took place in the mid 1980s. Since our house was large and had several acres in the front and back, the place was prepared like a temporary marriage hall to accommodate nearly one thousand guests. The wedding was traditional, with a priest's blessings.

Usually, marriage is arranged for the girls of the family first. The oldest girl in a family usually gets first priority. The following year, my second sister's marriage was arranged. My parents were a bit more comfortable with the process by then and did not let several grooms and their families come to see my second sister. My second sister was only in her early 20s. Similarly, my second sister also met her husband up close only minutes before her wedding. My second sister also cooperated with my parents.



My Arranged Marriage

I was next in line and was only 20 years old. My parents were extremely modest in not letting the prospective bridegroom's family come and see me. Although as a teenager I enjoyed seeing prospective bridegrooms' families flocking to our home to see my sisters,

I refused to appear in front of anyone. How did I speak up? I might have gotten the courage to speak up because of my social work education. The bottom line was, I did not like the idea of sitting in front of a group of people. My parents respected my wishes, as they might have started thinking about the pros and cons of making their daughters appear before a prospective groom's family or their fear of a daughter being rejected by prospective grooms and their families. My parents were not alone in the hunt for a husband for me, as they had help from my sisters and their husbands.

In 1992, I got an international scholarship to come to the U.S. for my doctoral studies. My parents and my older sisters were against my plan to come to the U.S. as none of the girls in my family had left the country to receive a higher education abroad. They tried to convince me to stay back. My sisters were worried that it might be hard to find me a groom with a Ph.D. One of my sisters asked, "Who will marry you if you go abroad?" My brothers and I worked hard to convince my parents into sending me abroad. To avoid the troubles and stigma associated with girls who leave the homeland, my parents were determined to find a groom for me before I left the country. I also cooperated by agreeing to appear before a prospective groom. Luckily, they found a prospective groom, a university instructor who was teaching at a local university. When his parents came to see me and heard about my scheduled trip to the U.S., the groom's parents backed off by giving an excuse that they needed a stay-at-home bride.

My mother slowly prepared herself to see me go abroad, as she really did want all of her children to grow. My mother, who nurtured us all along by actively participating in our school and extra curricular activities, always wanted the best for her children. My father, on the other hand, felt the pressure from my aunts and the large society and wanted to

abide by societal views. Finally, my father was also willing to send me abroad with the condition that I complete my education within a short period. My trip to the U.S. in 1992 was the longest trip I had ever taken on my own. It was the first flight I had ever taken.

From the day I started school in the U.S., my father always asked when I would graduate. He always nagged my mother and my oldest sister about me, making them frequently write letters containing their usual advice and a list of dos and don'ts. He also sent newspaper clippings from the local newspapers that highlighted the struggles and successes of Indian women in the U.S. All these actions demonstrated how nervous my parents were after they sent me abroad.

I was partly involved in the search of prospective grooms by going through matrimonial columns in a local newspaper, *India Abroad*, and getting information from friends in the U.S. These prospective grooms from abroad did not match my father's expectations. For example, one groom was not tall enough and another groom's horoscope was not compatible with my own horoscope. Height was one of the most important factors, as all the girls in my family are tall. Therefore, my parents expanded searching for prospective grooms who worked and lived in India. They became nervous as the days passed by. Since my parents were becoming desperate, they advertised my profile in a local newspaper in India as seeking an eligible groom, a new strategy for my parents. Indian newspapers usually had regular matrimonial pages with a list of profiles for their 'brides wanted' and 'grooms wanted' columns.

It was early in October 1994, when I got a telephone call from my father. He asked, very authoritatively, "Could you come for a short visit to India?" I explained about my commitments, my workload at school, and the most important factor, my inability to afford a short trip. My father was adamant, saying

that he needed to meet the demands of a prospective groom's family who wanted to see me before they decided whether I would be suitable for their son. My father and one of my sisters were willing to sponsor my trip. In my opinion, a trip would not be feasible and would probably not have been fruitful. Our arguments ended with my father giving me some information about the prospective bridegroom and saying that I should anticipate a photograph from the groom's family.

Fortunately, my parents already had pictures of me in a traditional sari and gave a couple of these to the prospective groom's family. I waited for his picture. I was 27 and I cooperated with my parents, as my parents had become very nervous about not being able to find a groom. Since my parents' marriage was arranged, we children view our success as the product of their dedication and satisfaction with their marriage. With all this, I was comfortable with the concept of arranged marriage despite my living in U.S. Of course, my parents' search for a groom was an interesting topic among my colleagues in my doctoral classroom in Florida.

Due to a postal strike in India, I did not get the groom's picture. Instead, I got a call from my father saying that they had made an informal engagement in a small ceremony of 30 to 40 guests. I was dumbfounded, and I was hurt because the decision was forced on me. I made several phone calls to express my frustration with their hasty act of making an informal engagement. My father claimed that he had discussed the groom and his family with me on several occasions. My parents also made my sisters talk to me about the groom and their opinion about him. Since I did not anticipate seeing the groom before the engagement, I wanted my parents to ask my opinion "directly" before they made their decision. To my great relief, my father said, "I will not proceed with your marriage if you do not like the groom when you meet him in

person.” I was happy with the deal cut by my father.

A couple of weeks after our engagement, I got the groom’s picture. The picture was not helpful. I could not tell what he looked like, nor could I tell his height. I discovered that we both were in the process of completing our dissertations. One or two times my parents let the groom contact me over the phone. I was thrilled with the privilege, as neither of my sisters had had an opportunity to hear her husband speak before her marriage. When I reached India, I expected that the groom would come and receive me with his family and my family. However, only my family, his sister, and his brother came to the airport. Finally, my parents let the bridegroom see me. It was a great relief for me when I saw him. He was charming and lively. They allowed us to talk with each other for an hour at a nearby restaurant. I could not believe that my parents gave me that opportunity. We both were competing with each other to say as much as possible in the short time we had, sharing what we liked and what our family liked. We liked one another. In the Indian tradition, giving compliments directly is uncommon; therefore, we did not express our liking of one another.

The following day we talked about our wedding card and its design. After a couple of days, my sister and I went with him and his family to select my wedding sari and a sari for a formal engagement. I had met my husband in person four or five times before our wedding. I felt extremely privileged, as none of my sisters had received that opportunity. My father said that I should not ask my husband intrusive questions such as “Do you smoke? Do you drink? Have you dated others?” and so forth. My father merely told me, “Based on my enquiry, he seems to be good” without any definitive answers. I guess my father was extremely nervous and worried that my husband and his family might judge me negatively if I asked too many

questions. Like my older sisters, I entered my married life with many unanswered questions. Our marriage was in 1995. As was the custom, my husband tied the nuptial cord in a wedding ceremony attended by more than 500 guests.

A Modern Arranged Marriage

In 2002, my little sister’s marriage was arranged. She had far too much advice from all of us suggesting how she should select her groom. I am not sure how helpful we were. We older siblings spoke to various prospective grooms and asked several questions that we had not been allowed to ask our husbands before our marriages. Some were honest and expressed that they had dated girls and others admitted that they enjoyed smoking. I was impressed with the honest information provided by some of them. We had contact with several prospective grooms directly and chatted over the phone several times to know more about them.

This time my little sister was an active participant in the search and selection of her husband. She was open about the type of husband she wanted. She searched several sources on her own and with us to find a person who would match both her dream and my parents’ expectations. She did the compatibility matching of the groom’s horoscope with her own horoscope, using the programs available on the Internet. The matrimonial Web sites enabled us to post the profile of my sister and get proposals via email from prospective grooms in the U.S., India, U.K., and other parts of the world. She was extremely active and cooperative in the search for a groom. She received her Master’s degree in Australia and lived and worked in Canada, therefore, her financial condition was much better than that of her older sisters at the time of her marriage. She flew from the U.S. to India to meet a prospective groom when a groom’s family wanted to meet her. She met her husband a couple of months

before their marriage and spoke to him over the phone several times before their marriage. She was actively involved in planning her wedding arrangements with our parents.

Still, the basic tradition of arranged marriage has not changed. What has changed is that girls are playing an active role in the search and selection of their groom with their parents and siblings. Girls are coming forward and getting answers to their questions before they commit themselves to marriage. Roles of women are changing due to education and influence of western culture. Nowadays, matrimonial websites make the search for a bride or a groom easy and simple. In traditional Indian marriages, all girls wear a wedding band (nuptial cord) tied by their husbands as a necklace and silver toe rings. In South India, the nuptial cord is a yellow thread with golden beads and ornaments. The majority of the women from South India wear the cord around their neck every day. Men, on the other hand, do not wear a wedding band or symbol. The Indian marriage system does have double standards in requiring only women to wear wedding bands. Again, the majority of women who live in India and abroad accept these symbols as a customary practice.

On Having an Arranged Marriage

If I explore why we all accepted an arranged marriage, I find several reasons. For example, family pride is partly based on the conformity of the girls to family traditions and by the standards set by the family and the community. If we do not conform to the family values, it is considered shameful, aggressive, and disrespectful. In order to let other girls in the family enjoy the privilege we girls had, such as going to college and living abroad, we were directly or indirectly forced to conform to the family norms.

Falling in love before marriage is not encouraged in East Indian society. East Indian culture is a collectivist culture where family is

given more emphasis than just a union of two individuals. Girls' parents usually consider the character, health, and ability of men to provide a good living for their daughters. A boy's parents look for physical appearance/attraction and the girl's culinary skills when they look for a bride for their sons. In modern arranged marriages, the parents let the women and men talk before they finalize the marriage deal, and sometimes they let the girl and the boy meet and talk on a frequent basis after an informal engagement. Indians overall discourage individualistic views, such as women's or men's selection of their own mate. Most recent research confirms that girls tend to go by the choices of their parents in India as women are more inclined toward collectivist behavior (Sinha, Vohra, Singhal, Sinha, & Ushashree, 2002).

My family was not an exception. All women in my immediate family accepted and married men chosen by our parents. However, some men, including two of my own brothers, chose their own spouses. Are the men in my family against arranged marriage? I do not think so, as my brothers played active roles in searching and interviewing prospective grooms for their sisters. However, when their turn came, they went with "love marriage," as they said that they fell in love with the women they met at work/school. Their courage and assertiveness might be partly due to the difference in socialization of men and women in India and in my family in specific. Boys are given much more freedom than women to exercise their wishes. Although my parents were disappointed by my brothers' actions, they accepted graciously since they are "boys."

Did my view about arranged marriage change? Certainly, my view has changed tremendously on how arranged marriages should occur. During my student years, I never visualized how a girl could participate actively in an arranged marriage. I perceived such involvement as less traditional and aggressive.

Now, I strongly believe that girls and boys must actively participate along with their parents in the search for their spouse and must play an active role in deciding their life partner, which is happening in modern arranged marriages among Indians living in India and abroad. Certainly, I am against arranged marriages in which parents force their son/daughter to accept their selection blindly. I am also against arranged marriages in which dowry (gift) plays a major role.

Summary

Arranged marriage is a concept that has been part of the socialization of all boys and girls of Indian origin. Neither girls nor boys have been trained in how to date. All the girls in my family were comfortable with the idea of having an arranged marriage and cooperated with our parents. All four of us have college degrees. Two of us got our terminal degrees abroad and lived on our own for two years abroad before our arranged marriages. None of us married men who are closely related by blood. All of our husbands were total strangers to our family. The tradition of arranged marriage has survived and is still thriving in India even though the western culture has a strong influence.

The discussion of arranged marriages in my family shows how arranged marriages have been changing over the years, yet the tradition of arranged marriage is still alive and practiced in Indian families living abroad and India. While my father remained powerful in making the final decisions in all our marriages, he respected and considered our views about what type of groom that we preferred. I am not sure whether we would have chosen better husbands if we had dated and found our own.

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