

Studying India's New Found Courtship with Love Marriage

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As a small girl, looking over my mother's family photo album I noted a picture of an upright stern-looking woman who was the matchmaker who introduced my maternal grandparents. Being that her work had led to the creation of my mother and then ultimately me, I gave her an extra stare appreciating how her efforts had led to my existence. By all reports my grandparents were an unhappy couple who stayed together for their children. According to my mother, my grandfather was a righteous tyrant while my grandmother was a dutiful wife and an exquisitely caring mother. My parent's generation went to dances and socials and freely chose their dates and mates. When my mother was in her early 20s her father attempted to marry her off to an unattractive rabbi. She was so aghast at her father's meddling that the afternoon the guy visited, she hid in her bedroom, declaring that she would not come out until he left the family apartment.

Growing up I was entertained with countless stories of how my parents ruthlessly broke up with less than appropriate boyfriends and girlfriends until they found each other. They met at a dance at a Jewish country club in the Catskills. My Dad approached my Mom whose long out-stretched legs cause him to first query, "Would you like to dance or am I too short for you?" My Mom accepted the dance and six weeks later she married my Dad. By all accounts they were very attracted to each other and very much in love. And thus I was raised in a culture that celebrated what many Indians and Middle Easterners refer to as a "love match."

As a teen I was shy and completely clueless about how to garner the attention of guys. At my high school sock-hops, I was largely a wallflower. The boys who did ask me to dance were never the ones I considered to be cute; I remember earnest-information-seeking talks I'd have with other girls about how to give the guys we were attracted to, "the eye." Eventually I became brave enough to more openly flirt with the men who interested me, but being dismissed, rejected or dumped was always really hard. Matching my parents' true blue story-book romance was a sheer impossibility.

When I visited India in 2007, discussions about the benefits of love marriage were in the air. Nearly every tour guide and train compartment companion with whom I interfaced had something to say. I recall one train ride from Rishikesh to Agra where my train compartment was abuzz for hours as every passenger explained her beliefs. One professional woman was in a new love marriage with a husband whose family was from a lower caste than her own. She

reported that her new family's meals lacked the variety she was accustomed to, but that ultimately she was happy to have freely chosen her husband. Another woman in the car was in an arranged marriage and contended that it was a good one—that the positive support she and her husband receive from their in-laws added to their lives. Meanwhile, her 12-year-old-son who was defying her strict vegetarian practices by eating eggs contended that a love-match would be the only sort of marriage he would accept.

The following week while seeking technical assistance at a cell phone store in Allahabad, an attractive female manager offered me tea and asked me into her private office. Suddenly I was bombarded with questions about love marriage. Did I think dating for love (and marriage) was a good idea? Would I recommend it (for her)? I offered cautious and conservative answers, pointing out that she'd have no family support if she fell in love with someone her parents did not approve of. Did she feel equipped to weather the ups and downs of romantic love all on her own? With a quizzical and concerned look, she copied down my email address and did stay in touch for awhile.

Several weeks later on a 30-hour train ride from Kolkata to Mumbai, I heard the troubling story of Sita, a woman who had become estranged from her despicable arranged-marriage-husband and was returning from the wedding of her daughter who had married her long-time boyfriend. Her husband had boycotted the wedding because the daughter's fiancé was from a lower caste. Meanwhile, Sita beamed with joy, considering the happiness in store for her daughter.

Prior to visiting India, I'd looked over anthropologist Serena Nanda's 1998 research on the strategies Indian parents employ to arrange the marriages of their sons and daughters. She reported that parents can spend many years looking for a good match that reflects caste, astrology, personality, appearance, and earning potential. Unlike other times and places when marriage arrangements were forced, today veto power can be exercised; I'd heard of one Indian guy who had rejected over 50 of the matches his parents had found for him.

While Nanda noted that arranged marriage was preferred even by the Westernized best educated Indians, the well-educated Indians I met were largely in search of love matches. Several such young professionals confided that they were in better positions to find compatible spouses than their old-world parents could possibly be. Two such professionals were secretly living together, enjoying the sweetness of a new relationship that was all their own making. Another woman, a researcher at a Kolkata think tank, reported that her parents had given up on finding her a match in that her professional network was far superior from what they might locate by running ads in newspapers or using *Shaadi*, an Internet matching service for marriage-minded Indians.

Have arranged marriages really been that bad? Not necessarily. Ideally, they function to generate alliances between like-minded families anticipating that the nuptial couple would fall in love following an elaborate week-long wedding. Despite the low divorce rates associated with arranged marriages, imported TV shows like “Sex in the City” and “Bay Watch” have led a growing number of young Indians to want to go out on Western style dates and really fall in love. Fueling the appetite for the true-blue love match, the current generation of Bollywood stars has begun to engage in off-screen love marriages, making it all look so romantic and attractive.

Having been raised in a nuclear family love-match-celebrating culture, I grew up without the safety and security of a supportive extended family. My parents left their family wombs in New York City to settle in far flung Palo Alto, California. My maternal grandmother visited once for a couple of weeks when I was a little girl...our blood family connections were largely with distant cousins who had also made the San Francisco Bay Area home. At most, we’d see these cousins a couple of times a year for holiday celebrations; largely we all lived in isolated nuclear family satellites.

In tandem with the isolation from extended family, love-match seekers, learn to weather the ups and downs of romance. Becoming tough-skinned resilient is key. Women develop radar-accuracy for ferreting out trustworthy romantic possibilities from the vast fields of players. Strategies are honed, like acting disinterested to generate mystery and intrigue or sprinkling romantic fairy dust to cause a “player” to convert into a “catch.” The Western Love-Match culture is of course rife with fallout, including off-the-charts divorce rates as well as unplanned pregnancies which generate a huge cohort of unsupported single parents.

Meanwhile, Western media paints an absolutely torrid picture of the travails of Indian, Pakistani and Middle Eastern young couples who defy suffocating traditions and go off on their own to engage in freewill marriages. Young husbands can be accused of abduction, adultery and kidnapping; while nuptial couples risk being murdered by their own fathers, uncles and brothers to restore family reputation and prestige.

The whole world hungers for a middle-ground. The hard-edged independence of romantically skeptical Westerners is hardly a goal for the Indians and Pakistanis who so want to freely choose. On my flight back from India I sat next to a guy who was returning to his US home following meeting a match his parents had arranged. In the end, he doubted the girl would really leave her whole family to join him in America. And would he move back to India to be with her? No. Was another long plane ride in his future? Perhaps; he’d faced that the kind of commitments that traditional Indian spouses make to each other are what he wants. America’s testy dating scene had left him wanting.

As growing numbers of East Asians eye Western style dating they strategize a grand romantic jackpot. Attempting to side-step all of the no-strings-attached hook-ups and friends with benefits arrangements; they hope to find the kind of true-love Americans portray in their movies and love songs. While *Shaadi* provides users with a marriage-minded advisor to negotiate matches, several other tech-friendly competitors have emerged that allow customers to do their own searching. Without trusted parents and go-betweens to engineer effective marriage choices, unhappy married men are using the sites to search for sexual affairs, while adventurous single women have been prone to date more for nice dinners than for love. From the sidelines, it looks like my family's three-generation expedition from unhappy arranged marriage to freewill love marriage to romantic skepticism is about to be condensed into a single generation's journey in India.