Book Review: *Matchmaking in Middle-Class India: Beyond Arranged and Love Marriage* (2020) by Parul Bhandari

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BOOK REVIEW


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Marriage is one of the most fundamental concerns that have always intrigued scholars in India. Exhaustive accounts have concentrated much on the structures and patterns of marriage. Recent studies have focused on the aspirational life of both marrying individuals and their families; and how it symbolises a ‘new’ middle-class identity. However, Parul Bhandari’s work goes further into analysing the often-ignored affective dimension of marrying individuals.

Set in the backdrop of the post-liberalisation period, Bhandari aims at explicating how contemporary marriage practices are utilised by upper-caste Hindu professionals in North India for the construction of a ‘modern’ and global identity; and how these practices affirm, and are in turn affirmed by middle-class moralities in India. In Chapter 1, Bhandari debunks the dichotomous categorisations of arranged and love marriage, and dwells upon the formal and informal processes of selecting spouses. She rejects any teleological understanding of spouse selection; and conceives the ‘modern’ as engagement with the genealogical past. She explores how the contemporary method of matchmaking strikes a ‘balance’ between individual preferences and familial expectations. Bhandari attempts to analyse the conundrum of meanings associated with the ‘new’ middle-class identity. Moreover, contextually embedded subjective experiences of middle-class identity serve not only to influence spouse selection, but also cater to the process of self-fashioning of both marrying individuals and their families as being ‘modern’. Bhandari goes on to analyse the web of ‘actors’ involved in matchmaking, and the invocation of specific middle-class moralities, that espouse a particular vision of Indian modernity.

Chapter 2 foregrounds the phase of ‘elongated singlehood’, during which pre-marital experiences, and feelings of rejection and hurt influences one’s preferences during spouse selection. Moreover, specific middle-class moralities associated with diverse romantic encounters either reinforces or redefines the ‘modern’ self and ‘new’ middle-class identity. Invoking the temporal dimension to matchmaking, Bhandari underscores the significance of changing consumer culture, leisure habits, exposure to diverse media platforms, and reconfigured
urban spaces in shaping the lives and experiences of high-income unmarried population. The idea of delayed but ‘right’ marriage seemed paramount. However, what constitutes ‘right’ marriage/spouse is contingent on both informal pre-marital experiences of marrying individuals, and on the formal processes of matchmaking, as we shall discuss in the subsequent sections.

In Chapter 3, Bhandari analyses forms of ‘decentralized mode of control’ (Bhandari, 2020, p. 48) or the latent involvement of the family in pre-marital relationships as well as in the formal spaces of matchmaking. The ‘modern’ family does not dominate; instead, it guides spouse selection, communicating its desires through dialogical engagement with the marrying individual’s desires. In a bid to be ‘modern’, class homogamy has been curated to define ‘new’ middle-class morality. Furthermore, Bhandari explores forms of ‘muted references’ to dowry, and how this practice is couched in a language of desire and ‘practicality’. The dynamic imageries of dowry, in an age of consumerism, is inextricably connected to the professional middle-class identities of both individuals as well as their respective families.

Chapter 4 traces how matrimonial agencies and matrimonial websites become ‘bridges’, where their *modus operandi* not only aims at promoting individual-oriented forms of companionate marriage, but also situates the relevance of the family in matchmaking. Thus, contradictory preferences become a crucial element in contemporary matchmaking in India. These new matchmakers further new forms of moralising discourse, to construct an image of ‘modern’ marriage. Bhandari goes on to analyse the pros and cons of matrimonial agencies, matrimonial brokers, and matrimonial websites, to gauge their relevance in diverse contexts. The author rejects a dichotomous conceptualisation of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’; and instead, concentrates on how ‘good middle-class upbringing’ (ibid., p. 81) requires straddling between the two.

In Chapter 5, Bhandari unravels how the sense of ‘modern’, global, middle-class self is contingent on the social construction of a ‘good match’. The features of ‘good match’ are flexible enough to find novel ways to articulate itself. The efforts to instill middle-class identity renders the process of spouse selection as a complex negotiation between historically relevant criteria (for instance, caste) and contemporary features of middle-class(ness), that are embedded in a framework of modernity and mobility. The ‘new’ ideals of exposure, cosmopolitan lifestyle, good professional status, social networks, and ‘taste’ fosters class homogamy in most cases, since it eases ‘relatability’ among marrying individuals. Furthermore, the author provides a nuanced analysis of moments of ‘compromise’ and fractured modernity, for instance, the idea of ‘presentability’ and socially constructed standards of physical beauty dominate the construction of a ‘good match’.
Chapter 6 critically interrogates the practices and expectations that define ‘modern’ coupledom. Despite ongoing negotiations to establish oneself as a ‘modern’ couple based on egalitarian principles, gender asymmetries are abound in inter-personal dynamics. This is often invisibilised behind the trope of companionate marriage and the web of middle-class moralities that goes into the construction of a ‘good’ husband or ‘good’ wife. Bhandari lists a series of new vocabularies in the new imaginings of modern romance or coupledom that is often embedded in new regimes of control. Such analysis could be hinged against the backdrop of the contemporary debates on public versus private sphere, where ‘new’, modern and gendered middle-class moralities provide an illusion of freedom. However, women are not entirely passive recipients of gendered expectations, but also assert subtle forms of agency through acquiescence, instead of radical transformation. Interestingly, Bhandari notes how certain historically relevant practices, like hypergamy for women, is not elusive to Indian modernity; rather, it is couched in a language of ‘respect’.

In Chapter 7, the author explores the dynamics in inter-personal relationship among marrying individuals. She suggests the complementary significance of both middle-class moralities of family honour and parental consent on one hand, and individual preferences of love and companionship in the choice of spouse selection on the other hand. Contrary to the idea of passionate attraction, the author unpacks the centrality of practicality, rationality, and similar socio-economic backgrounds in situating the idea of love. It is interesting to note that the self-defined love marriages are not often transgressive of, but embedded in an array of familial expectations. The author is quick to assert that narratives of love and compatibility exemplifying a caste-free selection is often paradoxical, since caste-free consideration is not so free as it seems to be, that is, it is contingent upon factors like elongated singlehood or specific moments of ‘compromise’.

Chapter 8 discusses the dark side of matchmaking, namely how emotional experiences of rejection, heartbreaks and humiliation during pre-marital romantic encounters or during the formal process of spouse-selection, affects marital preferences as well as notions of compatibility. Such romantic misery has wide ramifications, ranging from abysmal self-confidence among marrying individuals to lack of interest in marriage altogether. Interestingly, these dark experiences often re-embed one in familial preferences during spouse selection. Bhandari notes how such re-embedding breaks the dichotomy between arrange/love marriage, traditional/modern; and situates arranged marriage in a framework of the ‘modern’. Counter-intuitively, when formal spaces fail at matchmaking, both parents and marrying individuals resort to informal methods; and consequently, situates this deemed ‘love’
marriage in a range of middle-class moralities of duty and family honour. Bhandari notes subtle problematic forms of ‘compromise’ in inter-personal relationship, wherein latent and manifest forms of violence gets normalised in the name of love and adjustment.

Thus, Parul Bhandari’s work situates the importance of education, professional status, exposure, lifestyle, hard work, parental approval, and family honour as crucial parameters to gauge ‘modern’ middle-class moralities. However, it is worth noting that middle-class is not a homogeneous category. The moralities associated with being a ‘modern’ middle-class might significantly differ if one undertakes the affective dimensions of matchmaking among other professions or socio-cultural backgrounds that constitute the middle-class, for instance, the ones in government bureaucratic positions. Thus, one must refrain from universalising contemporary middle-class moralities. Moreover, I feel that the ethnographic study on the construction of ‘modern’ middle-class identity would have been more nuanced if the author had incorporated the experiences of non-upper caste professionals. Additionally, the author’s exclusive attention on caste and class marginalises other fundamental considerations like religion.

To conclude, what seemed pertinent in most of the discussions is the importance of ‘commonalities’ of some form or the other to establish ‘connection’ among marrying individuals. This wonderfully refutes contemporary representations on films, web-series and the like, that ‘opposites attract’. Even the methodological focus of the author was to create ‘spaces of commonality’ (ibid., p. 17) with her interviewees, to ease the process of eliciting data from them, especially while confronting them in an environment of pre-conceived ideas of the author’s background. Finally, this is indeed a relevant sociological as well as an anthropological read since it contributes significantly on the construction and flexibility of ‘modern’ middle-class identity of both individuals and their families via the formal and informal processes of spouse selection, and its consequent bearing on individuals’ lived experiences.

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