

Marriage by choice or convention?

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The most popular trend in the institution of marriage in India is a mix of a love and arranged match. Its implications need to be studied in depth

It is said that a successful marriage requires falling in love many times but always with the same person. This idiom can be interpreted in different ways in India where the practice of marriage is determined by diverse factors such as region, religion, ethnicity, caste and socio-economic status, among others. For a long time, a majority of marriages were 'arranged' in large parts of the country, which meant that parents and other family members played a prominent role in selecting spouses for their children, who were usually neither expected nor encouraged to form a relationship or even an acquaintance with their potential partners before getting married. Indeed, once the alliance was finalised, the wedding was regarded as the beginning rather than culmination of the negotiations that the family members indulged in while formalising the union between the couple.

In recent times, however, there has been a move away from marriages in which the prospective couples play no role in spouse selection. Such a shift has been fuelled by rising levels of education, growing urbanisation and increasing age at marriage. Print and visual media have also played a role as they popularise the ideal of exercising agency in partner choice. These trends in nuptial arrangements are also revealed by the India Human Development Survey (IHDS), a survey of over 40,000 households undertaken jointly by the National Council of Applied Economic Research and the University of Maryland. During the first wave of the IHDS in 2004-05, less than five per cent of the ever married women respondents aged 25-49 years reported selecting their spouses on their own, while around 60 per cent reported some participation in spouse choice along with parental intervention. This figure went up to 66 per cent in the second wave of IHDS in 2011-12, but the proportion of self-choice marriages remained constant at five per cent.

Although the element of choice is emerging as a distinctive feature of marriages in the country, the percentage of women who have had the opportunity to meet and get acquainted with their husbands at least a month before the wedding is modest. Indeed, 65 per cent of the surveyed women reported that they met their husbands for the first time on the day of the wedding itself. Do self-choice marriages offer women greater autonomy than parent-arranged marriages? One way to assess this is in terms of the decision-making authority women have post their marriage.

In the IHDS, women's autonomy is measured in terms of their ability to take certain decisions in the household, viz purchase of expensive items, treatment of a sick child, number of children to have, and selecting a spouse for the child. Such an analysis is relevant because empirical evidence indicates that women in India, like their counterparts in neighbouring Pakistan and Bangladesh, have limited say in household decision-making. Research indicates that women in self-choice marriages have more authority as compared to those who married according to their parents' wishes. Interestingly, however, even in arranged marriages, women gain autonomy over time, gradually catching up with women who selected their marital partners.

Another key question is: Are marriages of choice characterised by greater longevity than marriages bound by convention? In an article titled, "Modern Lessons from Arranged Marriages" in 2013, *The New York Times* pointed out, "whether arranged marriages produce loving, respectful relationships is a question as old as the institution itself. In an era when 40-50 per cent of all American marriages end in divorce, some marriage experts are asking if arranged marriages produce better relationships in the long run...than those in which people find each other on their own and romance is the foundation". In fact, Robert Epstein, a senior research psychologist at the American Institute for Behavior Research and Technology in California, avers that the key to the success of arranged marriages in India lies in parental intervention, with parents "screening for deal breakers", while anticipating and preventing anything that could go wrong in advance to drive the couple apart.

However, the jury is still out on the criteria for evaluating the quality of marriage as decision-making authority and longevity are only two of the many aspects that influence marital relationships. Keera Allendorf, a sociologist at Indiana University, Bloomington, who studies marriages in India and Nepal, too, argues that marriages must be assessed on parameters relevant to the local cultural context. Clearly, the popular marriage type in India is a hybrid that has the characteristics of both love and arranged marriages. What are the implications of this trend for the institution of marriage and for society at large? It seems demographic surveys on marriage in the country have hitherto only touched the tip of the iceberg and need to venture deeper into uncharted territory.

(The writers are associated with the National Council of Applied Economic Research. Views expressed in this article are personal)