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THE CHANGING STRUCTURE OF MARRIAGE: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS WITH REFERENCE TO INDIA

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ABSTRACT For many years, marriage has been treated as the foundation of family and kinship. However, it is changing in form, timing and meaning. This paper examines the changing structure of marriage in India by reviewing secondary sources and drawing on Parsons, Goode, Giddens, Beck and Cherlin, as well as Indian studies of caste, kinship and gender. It analyses how education, women's employment, urbanisation, digital media and legal reform are reshaping who marries, when, how and why. The paper argues that Indian marriage shows hybridisation, not convergence: choice and companionship are rising, yet caste, family and economic considerations persist, producing forms such as arranged-love marriage. The analysis is conceptual and does not rest on primary data. It links theories of individualisation to the persistence of kin control in a non-Western setting. Change is uneven across class, gender and region, and its consequences are mixed, expanding autonomy for some while leaving others with little protection. The paper concludes that locally grounded empirical research, including in Assam and the wider North-East, is needed to test these propositions.

KEYWORDS : Marriage, Family Change, Individualisation, India

1. INTRODUCTION

Marriage has been more than a union of two people. It has regulated sexuality, organised property, allocated labour between men and women, legitimated children and joined families into networks of kinship. Sociologists treat it as a core institution whose structure reflects the economy, family system and moral order of its time.

In the contemporary period that structure is shifting. People marry later, choose partners more freely, divorce more openly and, in some places, avoid marriage altogether. In India, these changes unfold alongside strong continuities of caste, community and family authority. Existing accounts either assume Western-style convergence or treat Indian marriage as static; few explain why individualisation has arrived in India in a kin-regulated form. This paper argues that theories of individualisation explain the direction of change in India but not its form, which kin and caste shape.

The objectives are:

(1) to review sociological theories of marriage and family change;
(2) to identify the drivers of change in India; and
(3) to assess which features of marriage are changing and which persist.

2. Methodology

This is a conceptual paper based on secondary sources: published books, journal articles, national survey data (NFHS-5 and Census 2011) and legal judgments. It follows an interpretive approach, reading Indian evidence through established sociological theory. It presents no primary data, so its claims are propositions for empirical testing.

3. Theoretical Perspectives

Functionalism and Modernisation. Parsons and Bales (1955) argued that industrialisation favours the nuclear family, specialised in emotional support and socialisation. Goode (1963) proposed that industrial societies move towards conjugal families, with freer spouse choice and weaker control by wider kin.

Economic Approaches. Becker (1981) treated marriage as an exchange in which partners gain from specialisation. Critics note that it assumes the gender roles it should explain and overlooks power and norms.

Individualisation. Giddens (1992) described the "pure relationship", continued only while both partners are satisfied. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) argued that love becomes a project of choice and risk: people are freed from fixed scripts but must build their own biographies.

Deinstitutionalisation. Cherlin (2004) argued that the norms governing marriage have weakened, so that it becomes a marker of achievement rather than a starting point.

Feminist Critique. Feminist scholars stress that marriage has distributed power and unpaid labour unequally, so change must be judged by its effect on women's autonomy and security.

Propositions. Drawing on these perspectives, the paper examines three propositions in the Indian context. P1: education and employment delay marriage and widen consent. P2: caste and family control persist through screening and pressure rather than open prohibition. P3: change is uneven by class, gender and region.

4. The Traditional Indian Marriage Structure

The dominant ideal was an alliance between families, arranged by elders within the same caste or community (endogamy), with restrictions on kin and clan (Karve, 1953). It was a religious duty and a lifelong bond, particularly for women, with patrilocal residence and an extended household. Dowry accompanied it in many communities, and Srinivas (1984) analysed how it spread and hardened in the modern period.

This was never a single pattern. The matrilineal Khasi and Garo of the North-East, and the many plains and tribal communities of Assam, follow distinct customs of descent, residence and marriage payment, so the traditional model is best read as a dominant ideal rather than a universal practice.

5. Drivers of Change

Education and Employment. Longer schooling, especially for women, delays marriage and widens the idea of a suitable partner. Paid work gives some women income and a voice in decisions.

Urbanisation and Migration. Moving to cities loosens daily supervision by kin and exposes people to peers from other communities.

Digital Media. Films, social media and matrimonial platforms have promoted romantic love and changed how people meet, although platforms often reproduce caste preferences.

Law. The Special Marriage Act (1954) and Hindu Marriage Act (1955) created statutory routes to marriage and divorce. Adultery was decriminalised in 2018, and courts have repeatedly affirmed adult consent and autonomy.

Economic Aspiration. The rising cost of weddings, housing and child-rearing influences when and whom people marry.

6. Changing Features of Marriage

Table 1 summarises these shifts.

Table 1 ***Dimensions of Change in Marriage***

Dimension	Traditional pattern	Emerging pattern
Spouse selection	Arranged by family, within caste	Greater consent; self-choice; matchmaking apps
Age at marriage	Early, especially for women	Later, especially among the educated
Basis of union	Kin alliance, duty	Companionship, compatibility
Roles	Breadwinner and homemaker	Dual-earner, negotiated
Duration	Lifelong; divorce stigmatised	Separation more visible

Note. Author's synthesis of the literature reviewed.

Consent and Choice. Arranged marriage remains dominant, but its character is changing. Allendorf and Pandian (2016) show that arrangement is declining more slowly than often assumed, while the couple's participation in the decision has grown. Uberoi (2006) describes how popular culture promotes romantic love while family

approval stays valued. The result is a hybrid, the arranged-love marriage, in which families and individuals share the choice.

Caste Endogamy. Banerjee et al. (2013) found that caste still shapes mate selection among urban, educated people using matrimonial advertisements. Inter-caste and inter-faith marriages meet family resistance and sometimes violence, so endogamy is policed as well as preferred.

Later Marriage. Desai and Andrist (2010) relate gender scripts and education to age at marriage. Postponement is most marked among urban, educated women, while early marriage persists in poorer and rural settings. NFHS-5 (2019-21) puts the median age at first marriage at 19.2 years for women aged 20-49 and 24.9 years for men aged 25-49. For women aged 25-49, it rises from 17.1 years with no schooling to 22.8 years with twelve or more years. Marriage below the legal age of 18 fell from 47 per cent among women aged 45-49 to 23 per cent among those aged 20-24, yet it remains high in Assam, where about 32 per cent of women aged 18-29 married below the legal age (IIPS & ICF, 2021).

Roles, Divorce and Singlehood. Where both partners earn, housework and decision-making are contested, and women often carry a double burden. Divorce remains uncommon and stigmatised, especially for women, but is more visible. In the 2011 Census, divorced people were only 0.24 per cent of the ever-married and separated people were 0.61 per cent, so separation is far more common than formal divorce. Women make up about two-thirds of the divorced and separated (Registrar General of India, 2011). Some educated urban women marry late or not at all by choice.

Cohabitation and Same-sex Unions. Live-in relationships are rising in some cities but remain contested. Section 377 was read down in 2018, yet in October 2023 the Supreme Court declined to recognise same-sex marriage and left the question to Parliament, showing that the legal definition of marriage is itself a site of struggle (*Supriyo v. Union of India*, 2023).

7. Continuity Amid Change

Family approval, caste and financial status continue to shape marriage. Dowry persists despite the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961); weddings remain displays of family standing, and marriage stays close to universal. Individualisation is real but filtered through kinship obligation, so people combine choice with duty. This fits Eisenstadt's (2000) argument that societies follow multiple modernities rather than a single Western path.

8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Three points emerge. Change is real but uneven: class, education, region, religion and gender produce very different experiences, so claims about "Indian marriage" must be qualified. Change also takes hybrid forms: the arranged-love marriage, the dual-earner couple living near parents and the online profile screened by caste are stable adaptations, not transitional curiosities. Finally, consequences are mixed. Greater choice can widen autonomy and companionship, but it can also bring conflict with families and leave divorced women, single people and same-sex couples with limited protection.

Marriage is being renegotiated rather than abandoned. As a secondary-source study, this paper cannot show how these processes work in particular communities. Surveys and interviews in specific regions, including Assam and the wider North-East, are needed to test these propositions.

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