

Parul Bhandari, *Matchmaking in Middle Class India: Beyond Arranged and Love Marriage*

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Based on an interdisciplinary approach that weds sociological analyses with ethnographic methodologies, *Matchmaking in Middle Class India: Beyond Arranged and Love Marriage* focuses on interwoven narratives of romantic desires, family values, and middle-class aspirations to highlight the matchmaking practices in urban India today. Parul Bhandari's work underscores the continuities found in middle-classness, family, and modernity as she not only explores the relationship between the middle class and the claims to modernity but also indicates the multiple ways in which individuals construct their sense of self vis-à-vis social expectations and family values. Bhandari elaborates on the notion of a "good match" by "tracing its four main constituents—caste, class, 'exposure,' and good looks," all of which not only possess a class-based undertone but also maintain class boundaries and status (87). Through participant observation and in-depth interviews with more than one hundred individuals, families, and professionals like matchmakers, Bhandari argues that while the criteria of what constitutes a "good match" is flexible and ever-changing, class category remains the dominant criterion for urban middle-class individuals and families involved in the matchmaking process. This book, therefore, provides rich ethnographic data centered around the matchmaking processes to display the continuities between the individual and the family, and the middle class and its complicated claims to modernity.

Bhandari does not place matchmaking processes into the categories of love versus arranged because she problematizes the notion of "individualistic choice" that is associated with love marriage and considered absent from arranged marriages. Since love marriages have become synonymous with individuality and arranged marriages with the family and are often seen in contradiction to each other, Bhandari does not use such a dichotomous model in her own analysis. Instead, she explores matchmaking through the avenues of "formal" and "informal" processes of spousal-selection to highlight how the "individual-informal practices of spouse-selection interact with the family-formal-arranged practices, not always challenging each other but working in tandem" (2). She views these formal and informal processes as "analytical prisms rather than deterministic or idealistic approaches to matchmaking" (176) to capture the variety of experiences and priorities that middle-class individuals and families have while finding their "good matches." Bhandari's decision to use these processes as analytical prisms is productive in highlighting how individuals' desires and expectations coexist with those of their families. Even in many "love" marriages, the individuals' choice of spouse is based on characteristics—such as caste endogamy or class homogamy and/or hypergamy—that their families also consider important. Therefore, Bhandari makes these continuities between the individual and the family visible through her discussion of the formal and informal processes of spousal-selection.

Furthermore, Bhandari engages with the discourse on the "new" middle class in India that became visible in the post-liberalization period of the 1990s. Even though she explores the aspirations and anxieties of the "new" middle class as they navigate the matchmaking processes, she does not use the "new" middle class category as central

in her analysis. Bhandari argues that even though “post-liberalisation has shaped the social and cultural orientation of the middle class in a certain way” (10), for instance, their aspirations to become global citizens, it has not reduced the importance of family ties, values, and cultural identity that have existed since before the 1990s. By mapping this continuity between the various middle classes in India (old and “new” in scholarly discourse), Bhandari effectively complicates the “newness” of the middle class in contemporary urban India. Therefore, for her, the “new” middle class is not a new category in and of itself but rather refers to a subjectivity that caters to new aspirations, values, and morality. These new aspirations and morality are deeply embedded in the matchmaking processes and become visible through the emphasis placed on the middle-class status and its reproduction while finding a “good” match by its several actors—individuals, families, and matchmakers.

Lastly, Bhandari persuasively complicates the notion of “modernity” as she traces continuities between ways in which individuals themselves identify as “modern” and their preferred criteria during spousal-selection processes that align with their family values and cultural identities. Bhandari disagrees with modernization theorists by treating the modern as not “a neat category which only champions values of rationality and progress” in her analysis (9–10). Instead, she argues that the idea of being “modern” is never disconnected from one’s social and cultural values and backgrounds. While couples display their desire to be “modern” and act in ways that facilitate such associations, like engaging in premarital relationships, their ideas about who is a “good” match are never too far removed from the characteristics that their families or kin group would hold as valuable. Bhandari even considers the increasing role of technology and online professional matchmaking services in aiding couples to find romance but grounds her analysis in the evidence that suggests that technology “can ascertain ‘old’ values as it can also enable new imaginings of companionship and practices of romance” (12). Therefore, the claim to modernity for middle-class individuals and families is not based on tensions between individual and family values but rather in the coexistence of the two.

Bhandari’s work highlights how the “modern” couple in India that comes out of the matchmaking processes remains closely tied to “the social histories of being Indian middle class” (111) and embedded within strong networks of family ties and cultural identity. It is important to acknowledge that her powerful analysis is based on evidence collected mostly from urban centers like New Delhi in North India and from upper-caste Hindu families. How would this analysis change for urban centers in South India, especially in terms of importance given to caste status during matchmaking? How would the matchmaking processes look for other religious communities in India who also constitute the middle class and claim to be “modern”? These questions foreshadow avenues of constructive future inquiries.

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