

Chapter XIX

Online Matrimonial Sites and the Transformation of Arranged Marriage in India

Nainika Seth

University of Alabama in Huntsville, USA

Ravi Patnayakuni

University of Alabama in Huntsville, USA

ABSTRACT

Online personals have been a remarkably successful in the Western World and have been emulated in other cultural contexts. The introduction of the Internet can have vastly different implications on traditional societies and practices such as arranged marriages in India. This chapter seeks to investigate using an ethnographic approach the role of matrimonial Web sites in the process of arranging marriages in India. It seeks to explore how these Web sites have been appropriated by key stakeholders in arranging marriage and how such appropriation is changing the process and traditions associated with arranged marriage. The key contributions of this study are in that it is an investigation of complex social processes in a societal context different from traditional western research contexts and an exploration of how modern technologies confront societal traditions and long standing ways of doing things. Our investigation suggests that the use of matrimonial Web sites have implications for family disintermediation, cultural convergence, continuous information flows, ease of disengagement, virtual dating and reduced stigma in arranged marriages in India.

INTRODUCTION

Online personals have been a remarkable success story in the United States, attracting as many as 40 million unique visitors at their peak in 2003 (Mulrine, 2003). At a time when e-commerce ventures were being viewed with suspicion by investors and as the stock market hit new lows subsequent to its run up in 1999-2000, this was a significant phenomenon. Online personals typically cater to singles, providing them an opportunity to find mates or dates beyond their traditional social networks of friends, school, work, neighborhood or place of worship. Adapting to a different societal context, one that is more conservative and traditional, Web sites that assist in brokering marriages have emerged in India. In 2006, some 7.5 million users used their services, increasing from 4 million in 2004 (Lakshman, 2006). As in the case of online personals in U.S., which have the potential to affect how we arrange our social selves, online matrimonial sites can influence the process of arranging marriages with wider implications for family structure and relationships.

Marriage is viewed differently in India as compared to the West where it is largely a matter of individual choice. In India, marriage is viewed not so much as a union between two individuals as the beginning of an enduring relationship between two families. Weddings are usually protracted events that mark the end of lengthy negotiations between two extended families including aunts, uncles, and even cousins once step removed (Seymour, 1999). Referred to as 'arranged marriage', they are rarely based purely on individual preference, choice or love. Marriage symbolizes and affirms the collective nature of family and larger kinship units in which the families are embedded. In contrast, the western notion of marriage labeled as 'love marriage' is frowned upon by the more traditional family elders (Dion & Dion, 1996).

Globalization of the economy, urbanization and the increased influence of western popular culture from books to movies and television shows, have brought about changes in the society. 'From joint family to nuclear family' is an oft repeated phrase that is used to summarize changes in the family in India during modern times. The decline in the influence of extended and joint family ties has resulted in structural holes in family networks, making it difficult for families to find suitable life-partners for their children. This led to the emergence of matchmaking services and classified advertisements (referred to as matrimonials) in newspapers. With the advent of the Internet, a new channel in the form of matrimonial Web sites has emerged as an alternative way to find partners for marriageable members of the family. The introduction of technology in the form of matrimonial Web sites in an otherwise socially-enabled process provides the setting for a fascinating exploration of changing social mores and the interaction of technology and society.

Research on electronic dating, online personals, matchmaking and social networks is limited (Close & Zinkhan, 2003; Fiore & Donath, 2004), more so in the type of societal context provided by India. This chapter investigates the impact of matrimonial Web sites on the process and practices associated with arranged marriage in India. Specifically, it seeks to answer the research questions: (1) how are the affordances provided by matrimonial Web sites appropriated by stakeholders in the process of arranging marriage; (2) what is the impact of such appropriation on the process; and (3) how does the use of such technologies shape traditions and norms associated with marriage. The investigation is informed by the theory of social construction of technology where the central premise is that technology as designed provides users with a range of possibilities which shape usage and are in turn shaped by users. The intent of the study is not to propose and validate hypotheses but to gain a deeper insight into the phenomena and an understanding of the

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