

DIGITAL ROMANCE AND CHANGING NORMS: THE NEW LANDSCAPE OF MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIPS IN INDIA

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Abstract

There has been incredible growth in the use of internet and smartphones in the previous few decades and this digital era has permeated into most aspects of our lives, including relationships and family. The rise of online dating platforms in India has altered the landscape of romantic interactions, with many people prioritizing virtual connections over face-to-face meetings. This digital shift comes with immediate gratification and enjoyment, rather than long-term commitments and the establishment of a family. In modern India, especially in the urban spaces, relationships and marriage trends are characterized by increasing rates of unmarried individuals, rising divorce rates, changing family structures, and shifting gender roles within marriages and families. This shift in relationship norms reflects broader social and cultural changes in India, particularly in how relationships are initiated, maintained, and valued. More women are pursuing careers and asserting their independence, which is leading to an egalitarian dynamic within marriages. Attitudes towards relationships and marriage have changed, with many individuals prioritizing personal growth, career advancement, and autonomy over settling down. In this trend toward individualism and self-expression, traditional relationship

models have been replaced by fluid, diverse, and non-traditional forms of partnership. In this article, the trends in relationships and marriages in India in the previous decade was reviewed using research articles, reports, news and other secondary sources. The role of online dating and marriage apps was particularly highlighted, and the implications of the changing relationship and family dynamics on individual wellbeing and society at large were also discussed.

Keywords: *Marriage, Relationship, Online dating, Indian society, Gender dynamics, Socio cultural factors, Digital transformation*

Introduction

The proliferation of the internet and smartphones has led to the digital transformation of romantic relationships in India in the previous two decades (Parekh, 2024). This has altered how people network and communicate in interpersonal relationships, and how they form romantic relationships and marriages. These changes along with the gradual westernization of lifestyle and values in urban spaces in India have supposedly led to the decline of the marriage and family institutions and the norms, morals and rituals embodying the traditional Indian culture and philosophy (Gandhi, 2023). The rise of online dating and matchmaking, and the changing perceptions and values of Indian people on relationships and marriage reflect broader social, political and economic forces at play (Sahasrabuddhe, 2023). Hence, understanding these dynamics is vital because they have far-reaching implications for the future of Indian family and community systems, and individual health and wellbeing. In this article, the trends in relationships and marriage in modern India over the previous decade have been examined to assess the influences of sociocultural factors and the recent rise of online dating and matchmaking platforms. The implications of these changes have also been highlighted in terms of its effects on the marriage and family institutions in India and also the mental health and wellbeing of the individuals involved. The data for the trends in relationships and marriages were inferred through secondary sources such as scientific articles, books and official statistics.

History of Relationships and Marriages in India

The Hindu civilization in the Indian subcontinent has existed for more than 4000 years, and there have been documented evidence since the Vedic period (2000BC to 600BC) of various practices in marriages and family structures. Most Indian communities have had a vertical collectivistic culture for most part of their history and family relations and social harmony are emphasized over individualistic needs and aspirations (Kanth et al., 2024). Hence, marriages in India were always based on family and community functions such as child rearing, safety and group integrity and alliances. It was only in the Vedic period that marriages evolved into sacrilegious rituals and customs within the Brahminical hegemony, and it led to family systems becoming more patriarchal with common practices of polygyny and caste based hypogamy, which also led to the loss of autonomy for women (Roy, 2018; Sarma, 2022). Throughout most part of the Indian history, pre marital romantic and sexual relationships were considered taboo and strongly discouraged and even regulated (Manohar, 2008; Bhandari, 2017; Mody, 2002). Hence, arranged marriages have historically been the norm in India and its boundaries were further specified along ethnic, regional and religious lines through the Mughal and Colonial eras.

During the medieval period (600AD to 1600AD), influences of Islamic invasion and culture led to other changes such as the decrease in age of women in marriage and increased economic transactions for marriages, which impacted women's freedom and autonomy, and also furthered patriarchy and caste based social hierarchy (Paranthaman et al., 2019; Kanth et al., 2024). During the colonial period (1600AD to 1947AD), the British administrators attempted to civilize the various marriage practices in India through enactments of common laws (such as the Child Marriage Prevention Act of 1929 and the Civil Marriage Act of 1872) and prohibitions of unfair practices like paying for the bride, which later led to the emergence of the dowry system (Chitnis & Wright, 2007). Despite efforts at modernization of marriages in India, it still remained a communal practice entrenched in patriarchy and class hierarchy even at the start of the modern post independence era (Prajwal, 2018). Until this period, divorce was also non existent in India with no state sanctioned processes or laws governing it (Dommaraju, 2016). In the post colonial period, progressive legislations were introduced to liberalize marriage

practices, and the Western influences from the Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization (LPG) era also brought changes in norms related to marriages and relationships, particularly in urban spaces and among high income and educated groups (Kanth et al., 2024). However, for majority of Indians, the century old practices of arranged marriages, dowries, and patriarchal kinship still persist to modern day, and marriages are still considered a communal and religious affair.

Current Patterns in Marriages in India

In contemporary India, there has been an increase in individual preference or love marriages, although majority of marriages still take place through traditional family or community based arrangements (Rukmini, 2021; Singh & Pandey, 2023). Marriage liberalizations and reforms have led to decrease in consanguineous marriages and increase in inter-caste and inter-religion marriages; however, their rates are still very low (Kanth et al., 2024). The age old practices in mate selection and marriage rituals still persist but there have been other positive changes in other aspects of marriages in recent times. The average age of marriage, for particularly Indian women has gradually increased and factors such as urban living, education and employment have contributed to the delay for both sexes. However, India still has the highest worldwide rates of child marriages (UNICEF, 2023). Marriages in urban areas have particularly transformed with higher rates of love marriages, late marriages and adherence to Western style values in relationships and marriages (Girase et al., 2016). Since urban living is associated with higher economic status, occupational involvement and educational attainment, most of the modern trends in marriages are also more evident in urban areas in India. Moreover, divorce rates have also increased rapidly in recent years in India and the rates are more pronounced in major cities, leading to speculations of its causes (Grover, 2024; Kondamudi & Ashok, 2024).

The provisions for divorce were non-existent for most part of Indian history and the revolutionary divorce laws enacted post independence have also transformed from a fault based system to more liberal ones that emphasize individual choice and agency (Yadav et al., 2023). In the past, due to the entrenched nature of marriage unions and lack of autonomy afforded to women, divorce rarely occurred despite breakdown of marriage or relationships. However, in the current Indian

scenario, many factors have contributed to increasing rates of divorce. Due to improvements in legal processes and increased societal acceptance, divorce is no longer considered as a last resort but a logical resolution to marital breakdown (Kondamudi & Ashok, 2024). The empowerment of Indian women and their rights have also contributed to increasing divorce rates, as more Indian women are choosing divorce in marital situations of incompatibility, domestic violence, sexual infidelity, etc. (Ariplackal et al., 2015; Khanna et al., 2023; Maiti, 2024). These trends also highlight the increasing importance that Indians are placing on individual wellbeing and happiness over societal image or status, and this changing mindset and attitude towards marriages and relationships are gradually transforming the Indian family system as well (Sharma, 2023).

Current Patterns in Relationships and Dating in India

There has been a significant rise in pre marital relationships and dating in India during the previous half century. Indian dating culture is rapidly transforming, and is influenced by globalization, evolving gender roles, and the interplay of traditional and modern values. Young Indians are increasingly seeking romantic autonomy, often preferring self-selected marriages over traditional arranged unions (Kanth et al., 2024). This shift is particularly evident among urban youths, whose partner preferences are based on personal attributes such as appearance, intelligence, personality, economic/ employment prospects, etc. rather than solely on familial approval (Prakash & Singh, 2014). Young Indians are increasingly interested in romantic relationships that align with their desires rather than traditional norms (Ganth, 2017). There has also been an increase in singlehood among women, which reflects broader societal changes, particularly the empowerment of women in expressions of identity, occupations, family roles and relationship and marriage choices (Lamb, 2022). The emergence of the "New Indian Woman" reflects changing gender dynamics, where women assert more agency in their marital choices (Titzmann, 2013). Overall, these trends indicate a significant change in the dating landscape in India, characterized by a blend of traditional values and modern aspirations.

In recent years, social media and internet have played a crucial role in influencing dating and relationship experiences, particularly among young adults. The most popular platforms such as Facebook, Instagram,

and WhatsApp, facilitate better communication and networking beyond proximal groups, and this has aided people in online dating and relationships (Nayar & Koul, 2020; Dar & Nagrath, 2022). These platforms enable users to establish connections, share personal experiences, and engage in romantic interactions, which ultimately also impact their choices and decisions in initiating relationships or even marriage (Ahmed et al., 2019; Dar & Nagrath, 2022). Furthermore, dating-specific sites such as Badoo, Tinder, Hinge, etc. have emerged and become popular in India for their ease of access, further expanding the online dating landscape (Miguel, 2018; Sharma, 2024). The same online model has worked well for matrimonial sites as well, and Indians are also increasingly finding potential partners through online mediums (Titzmann, 2013; Parthasarathi & Agarwal, 2023). The role of extended family in matchmaking has diminished, with online services taking precedence in the matchmaking process (Seth, 2012). While these platforms offer opportunities for connection, they also present challenges such as miscommunication and the potential for superficial interactions, which can complicate relationship dynamics. Moreover, the new generation of digital native Indian youths are increasingly using social media and online dating sites at younger ages, and this can inevitably influence their attitudes, behaviours and decisions related to relationships and marriage.

Digital Transformations of Relationships and Marriages

The rise of affordable and accessible smart devices and internet in India has made it easier for individuals to connect with potential partners, often blurring the lines between real and virtual interactions (Yakushina, 2023). Online dating has become a preferred method for meeting partners and it is now the second most common way to form romantic connections (Tong et al., 2016). Technology-mediated communication fosters emotional closeness, allowing partners to express feelings and maintain intimacy through texts, calls, and social media (Kwok & Wescott, 2020). The use of mobile phones has softened traditional gender roles, enabling both men and women to navigate relationships more freely and assertively based on personal choices rather than family or community standards (Khunou, 2012). It has also enabled individuals to initiate romantic connections without the fear of immediate rejection, allowing for a more casual approach to dating (Khunou, 2012). The internet has also expanded

personal time spent together (McDaniel et al., 2021). The absence of physical presence in digital interactions can undermine trust and commitment, as the ease of connecting with multiple partners may reduce the motivation to maintain a single relationship (Yakushina, 2023). The absence of non-verbal cues in digital communication can lead to misunderstandings and a lack of genuine emotional connection (Haz et al., 2019). The constant flow of digital communication can lead to feelings of stress and anxiety, negatively impacting emotional well-being and relationship satisfaction (Holkar, 2022). The higher levels of personal sharing of information afforded through online mediums can increase trust and intimacy among couples; however, there are also chances of oversharing personal details online, which can be misutilized by deceptive and dishonest individuals (Nayar & Koul, 2020). The ease of initiating contact through these platforms can lead to a lack of commitment and depth in relationships, often resulting in ghosting and emotional detachment. It can also lead to feelings of loneliness and psychological strain among individuals seeking romantic relationships, despite the apparent advantages of connectivity (Yakushina, 2023). While digital tools offer convenience and connectivity, they also pose challenges that can strain relationships, highlighting the need for a balanced approach to technology use in romantic relationships.

The rise of the digital age in relationship has also affected individual mental health and wellbeing. Digital technologies have emerged as vital tools for social support which is crucial for positive mental health, yet they also pose risks that can negatively impact wellbeing (Powell, 2016). The ease of online communication is generally believed to enhance social connectedness and support; however, it can have detrimental effects as well (Sadagheyani & Tatari, 2020). The personal negative impacts of digitization are related to excessive screen time, social media use and online harassment. Excessive use of digital devices and social media can lead to negative mental health outcomes, including anxiety and depression (Berryman et al., 2018). The prevalence of cyberbullying can exacerbate mental health issues, particularly among youths who make up large proportion of online users (Dar & Nagrath, 2022; Ogugua et al., 2024). In terms of relationships and marriages, the trends of casual dating, late marriages and divorces also mean that a significant proportion of current youths will not enter long term

commitments, find suitable life partners or start families, and this can have detrimental effects on their mental health and overall functioning.

Moreover, the recent trends in relationships and marriages have also led to the gradual shift in traditional Indian collectivistic values and norms that emphasize family living and social harmony. In urban areas in particular, there have been concerns that the breakdown in orthodox Indian marriages will eventually affect Indian family and community systems (Vision IAS, 2024). With focus on individual choices for mate selection, the traditional functions of marriage such as strengthening of community ties, stability, child rearing, etc. have assumed less importance which can ultimately lead to weakening of social ties (Kanth et al., 2024). This along with increasing inter group relationships and marriages have also meant that traditional values and identities based on religious, regional or ethnic lineages are also losing relevance. Although the rise of internet, social media and online dating has meant that people are more connected than ever, there have been doubts over the quality and depth of such connections, and also their implications on the future of Indian families and communities (Yukushina, 2023). Also, with increasing number of single parent and nuclear families, divorce rates and emphasis on individual careers and work life, there have been concerns about their effects on children within families, particularly the quality of parenting and social support afforded to them (Kondamudi & Ashok, 2024). However, most of these negative effects have been speculations so far without sound evidence, and many still believe that the essence of traditional Indian family values still remain intact as majority of Indians still prioritize family and community values and still prefer arranged marriages (Agrawal, 2015; Girase et al., 2016; Rukmini, 2021).

Scope for Further Research and Intervention

The changing dynamics of marriages and relationships in the digital age in India, and its effects of Indian families and communities are still not fully understood. There have been increasing number of reports and statistics about the changing trends in online dating and relationships, marriage and divorces, etc. from India; however, the reasons behind the same or their implications on individuals, family and society have not been adequately scientifically explored. There remains huge scope of research on various unexplored aspects of modern relationships and

the scope of romantic possibilities, including inter caste, inter religion and inter community relationships, which have become increasingly common in India (Maguire, 2016). This has been prevalent for both online dating as well as matchmaking for marriages (Parthasarathi & Agarwal, 2023). Due to these reasons, the number of Indians using Internet based apps for romantic relationships has steadily increased in recent years, and this transformation is evident in the non urban spaces as well, where internet access has improved over the years (Sharma, 2024).

Dating apps have fostered a culture of post-romantic love, where interactions are gamified, and influence of traditional morals and values have diminished (Bandinelli, 2022). Over the last few decades, online dating platforms have gained immense popularity, influencing how people initiate and maintain relationships (Grand View Research, 2024). This has contributed to changing trends in relationships and marriages in India, including pre marital dating culture, late marriages and higher rates of unmarried individuals, increased divorce rates, and shifts in gender roles within marriages (Kanth et al., 2024; Parekh, 2024). There is a noted trend of individuals, especially women, prioritizing career advancement, autonomy, and personal growth over traditional commitments like marriage and family (Mukherjee, 2023; Mordor Intelligence, 2024). The gradual shift in values in relationships and marriages towards individualistic ones happening in previous few decades in India has been accelerated with the rise of internet and smart phones. Although this transformation offers new avenues for connection, it raises concerns about the depth and quality of relationships, suggesting a complex interplay between technology and human intimacy (Statista, 2024). There have also been speculations about how the changing landscape of relationships and marriages in India, fuelled by the internet age, is leading to the dissolution of traditional Indian family and community systems, and also leading to other individual, family and societal problems.

Implications for Individual and Family wellbeing

The digital transformation of relationships and marriages in India has several implications. There have been concerns that the overreliance on interactions and communications through screens have negatively affected nature of human relationships. The reliance on technology can intrude upon face-to-face interactions, leading to a decline in the quality of

marriages in India, and scientific research is also crucial in formulating interventions, strategies or policies to reduce any negative effects. While the focus on individualistic values has been a gradual change spanning decades and reflect aligning of values to Western liberal ones, the digitization of relationships and marriages is a recent phenomenon and warrants consideration and further study. The scope of research on the digitization of relationships and marriages encompasses three dimensions; the impact of technology on relationship dynamics, the effectiveness of digital interventions, and the consequences of excessive technology use. Since most online platforms for online dating and marriages are privately owned, questions have also been frequently raised about the need for regulatory frameworks to reduce their negative effects (Phan et al., 2021). For romantic relationships, online tools can be considered a double edged sword because despite the purported harmful effects on individual and family wellbeing, they also provide vital avenues for mental health services and support, including virtual therapy and mental health apps, which can reduce barriers to seeking help (Doss & Hatch, 2022; Ogugua et al., 2024). Overall, there is still huge contention regarding whether the transformation of relationships and marriages in India can be considered negative or positive, or a mix of both (Barrientos, 2021).

Conclusion

The landscape of relationships and marriages in India is evolving rapidly under the influence of digital transformation and shifting sociocultural norms. The emergence of online dating and matrimonial platforms has reshaped traditional pathways to partnership, prioritizing immediacy, convenience, and self-expression. As more young Indians embrace technology for romantic connections, there is a visible trend towards individualism, with a focus on career ambitions and personal growth over traditional family structures. Women, in particular, are redefining gender roles, seeking more egalitarian and autonomous relationships. However, these transformations have come with both opportunities and challenges, and there is a need to explore these trends in more detail. The interplay between modern liberal aspirations and longstanding Indian cultural values and norms continues to shape India's evolving relationship patterns and balancing these changes while

addressing potential adverse effects on individual and societal wellbeing is crucial for a harmonious future.

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