**Doing it our way: Love and marriage in Kolkata middle-class Families**

**Abstract**

With the exception of a few anthropologists working on gender much of the

recent literature on emerging intimate modernities in South Asia seems to

support a view of social relationships evolving in a kind of linear

development towards free choice, individualism and sexual identities. In this

article I argue that apart from the ostensibly overwhelming transformations

that individualism, discourses on coupledom and the public display of

affection among the young may suggest, the new ways of being intimate, of

choosing a spouse and of conducting conjugal relations among middle-class

urbanites have to be interpreted in relation to less conspicuous discourses,

which are equally powerful and significant, in particular the resilient ideology

and practical implications of the joint family. Based on fieldwork with

Bengali-speaking middle-class families in Kolkata spanning two decades, the

article charts continuities and supple shifts in the way love and marriage are

conceived in this setting.

‘I will not marry someone I don’t know, I will make my own choice – how can you live

with someone you hardly know, someone you don’t love – just because your parents liked

the family?’

Leela, student 26

‘You know, you have to understand, we don’t marry for the looks like you do, we marry

for the family.’

Mrs Das, housewife, 49

When returning to Kolkata after several years I was stunned by the transformations the city was

undergoing. Entire new townships, malls and markets had sprung up, all embraced by the burgeoning

middle class They had been vowed by the ruling Left Front through urban restructuring programmes, a

tactic that did not succeed in keeping the latter in power.

Amongst the most striking changes was the consumption-orientated youth culture displayed in public

places, located mostly in over-designed and segregated spaces of middle-class leisure activity, which

can today be found across the country. During earlier periods of fieldwork a very different picture of

what youth culture comprised prevailed. This earlier patterns had involved student-run cultural events,

even party youth organisation, but largely been focused on schools and university campuses. Until the

mid-nineties concerns about young people of different sexes mixing in public places like cinemas and

parks had forced the municipality to take preventative measures and I remember my amusement at the

decision to install floodlights in some of the smaller parks popular with couples. Public debates about

such moral issues were inevitably phrased in terms of women’s safety, but addressed the allegedly

increasing popularity of so-called love marriages as well, which were portrayed in the press as the

likely outcome of such affairs. Often love marriages were presented as an aberration and associated

with looming spectre of a ‘Western’ culture. The assumption was, as Mrs Das comment above points

out that whilst romantic involvement among young people is encouraged and adolescents begin to mix

freely as part of youth culture early on in the West, the ‘Indian’ way of life was ‘family-orientated’ and

this self-chosen matches resulting from such behaviours were unsuited to the local situation. More

specifically, because Indians liked to live in multi-generation families (referred to as joint families), and

patrilocality demanded that daughter-in-law would move in with her husband’s family, arranged

marriages were a must. The validity of the far-reaching claims based on this opposition was soon put

into question when I discovered that self-chosen marriages (nicher biye), as love marriages were

referred to in Bengali, which were depicted in the literature as exceptions leading to elopement, were

common amongst my middle-class friends and interlocutors (Author 2002). Moreover, my ethnography

showed that they were often incorporated into the joint family set-up. However, as I was about to find

out, this did not contest the conceptual association of Indian middle-class lives with arranged marriages

and the ‘West’ with love marriages, even amongst many of those I interviewed in the mid-90s about

their own love matches and this increasing trend in Kolkata. What became obvious as two decades went

by was that actual matches were still defined as exceptional, but that larger cultural shifts, evident in

new spaces of consumption, and the associated anxieties displayed by parents, did challenge the easy

opposition of India and the West. In Kolkata as elsewhere urban space itself became productive of new

norms and behaviours that challenged ideas about love and marriage. Assumption that new forms of

being in the city where indicative of new kinds of relationships are not only put forward by my

interlocutors, but is also supported by social scientists. Thus, Oza pointed out that from the mid-90s

onwards many media surveys, opinion polls and feature films suggested that the transformation of

urban space reflects transformations of ideas and behaviours with regards to romance, sex and marriage

(Oza 2006). However, in this article, I suggest that changing ideas about sex, love and institutions like

marriage and the family are created, reproduced and debated as much in the family as in the mall and

media representations. While anecdotal evidence and the often superficial surveys presented in the

media signal new attitudes, and the changing built environment invites presentations of a new

cosmopolitanism that is anchored in global middle-class forms, continuities and counterpoints to these

hegemonic representations need to be taken into account. In this article I will discuss the new mores

with regards to the transformation and enigmatic role of ‘the critical institution of marriage’ in India

(Uberoi 1993: 36), which allows me to situate new ideas about love, intimacy and debates about

morality in middle-class India within a more encompassing framework. Contrary to the assertion of

Appadurai and Breckenridge (1988), who suggested the middle class had to be studied through an

analysis of public cultures, which still dominates the literature on recent transformations, the article will

focus on the way such discussions relate to the practices marked as private and the domestic sphere.

Not only is the family the main site of middle-class socialisation, but a discussion of domestic debates and practices brings together a much wider range of discourses on appropriate personhood and social

relationships than the focus on consumerist identities and individualism may suggest.

**Marriage and its discontent**

This article deals with these transformations through the prism of debates around love and marriage,

which from the 19th century onwards have served as a marker of middle-class lifestyles and sensibilities

(Majumdar 2009). My own research is based on fieldwork undertaken from 1995 onwards in Calcutta,

later Kolkata, where I initially worked with Bengali-speaking Hindu middle-class families in a rather

conservative, heterogeneous and centrally located neighbourhood, and later on with a wide range of

women belonging to middle-class families across the city, in particular a number of families settled in

so-called former refugee colonies, today affluent neighbourhoods (Author 2008). Around the time of

my first fieldwork in the mid-90s, debates about globalisation and post-liberalisation reform focused on

love and marriage as interrelated themes, which threatened the ‘joint’ family. Mothers, fathers and

young adolescents of both sexes would allege rising divorce rates, cite new sexual mores including pre

marital affairs, and the supposed rise in so-called ’love marriages’ as indicators of problematic social

change. Though I found that love marriages were rather common, often cutting across caste and intra

class divisions, seeing those as markers of modern family life and personhood had remained the

preserve of a small, liberal upper middle-class elite. In the decade to follow, it appeared that many more

conservative interlocutors embraced self-chosen marriages as an alternative to arranged stranger

marriages in theory, and joined yet not married girls and boys in citing a change in attitudes towards

love marriage as a sign of the times they fervently endorsed (pace Derne 2005). The pros and cons of

either form were often discussed in the course of extended conversations I had with mothers and their

young daughters, grandmothers and mothers-in-law, many of them middle-aged housewives living in

joint families. Over a cup of tea and while we were watching one of the endless TV serials, mothers did

their utmost to explain ‘marriage’ to me, explored the various kinds of love they recognised, and linked

these cultural forms to the quotidian aspects of conjugal life (Author 2002). They also registered the

rising level of anxiety around the themes of love and marriage, with the new youth culture and spaces

of middle-class consumption like malls and coffee shops indicative of far reaching changes in attitudes

towards intimacy. And while they recounted weddings, successful matches and unhappy unions, they

elaborated on how these new developments posed a threat to ‘Indian culture’, centred as it was in their

view on the joint family and therefore the ideal of arranged marriages.

This stood in stark contrast to the verve with which young women discussed their desire for a self

arranged nicher biye (one’s own marriage), as love marriages are referred to in Bengali. Given the very

high number of love marriages in Bengali middle-class families and in particular in the Central Kolkata

neighbourhood, neither reaction was surprising (Author 2002). One could have mistaken the mothers’

rather stoic accounts of the advantages and disadvantages of different kinds of unions for the ‘modern’,

liberal or individualistic outlook displayed by representatives of the bohemian cultural establishment,

which are regularly put forward in progressive media. In fact, during the early stages of my fieldwork

attitudes to questions about love and marriage among my middle-class interlocutors appeared to be

markedly homogeneous, with most succumbing to serendipity in match-making. The views of Sonali’s

mother, whose daughter was 19 and near completion of her studies when I first met them both, were

common: ‘love finds its way’ and ‘you can’t do anything if they fall in love’.

Our conversations reflected not only my increasing comprehension skills and privileged status as an

outsider, but also facilitated wider debates about emerging class-based lifestyles. Initially, during my

first fieldwork, as a Western woman, I was obviously an expert in those, and so mature women

belonging to various castes and different religious communities shared accounts of intimate

relationships as well as their take on the recurrent debates about love and marriage. However, when I

got to know some respectable housewives more closely, and in particular after I had started to conduct

my research without the help of a local assistant and began to include families not living in the same

neighbourhood, discussions of illegitimate, inappropriate liaisons and failed matches as well as socially

problematic practices like premarital courtship and sex came to the fore. Sonali’s mother, it turned out,

was sympathetic to the idea of love marriage in theory, but a very stern believer in arranged marriages

were her own son and daughter were concerned. Like others, she argued fervently in favour of the

longevity of arranged marriages, weighing their pragmatic foundations and orientation towards the

greater good of the family against the short-term goal of emotional and sexual fulfilment of only the

couple. Like most others, she did felt that there was more mileage to be gained from letting mature

adults take such far-reaching decisions. Like others, she assumed patrilocal residential patterns would

prevail amongst the young and therefore it was considered vital for a daughter-in-law to be chosen by

her future affines, as she had to ‘fit in with the culture of the house’. Conversations with mothers of

other unmarried children confirmed, that Sonali’s mother was not alone in either her belief that brides

would move in with their in-laws and the ‘joint’ family would prevail.

The ideas that young adults expressed about their own preferences with regards to finding a spouse

were markedly different. While the older generation focused on the prospect of a good match, mostly

by discussing problems encountered by acquaintances and relatives in arranging a marriage, their

daughters gave examples of friends who were involved with a boy and planned on having a love

marriage even if they did not have the consent of their parents. The latter, the consent of parents, was a

crucial part of all such discussions, as even love marriages could be normalised by parental consent, a

proper wedding ceremony, and patrilocal residence. These younger interlocutors are today much more

likely than two decades ago to hint at the possibility of premarital sex but even then described a self

chosen match as an important marker of suitably modern middle-class identities (see Liechty 2003).

However, it also appeared that there were different versions of the idealised selves presented here, each

in its own right. Thus, young women like Sonali, when interviewed at home, agreed that romantic love

did not often lead to a fulfilled conjugal relationship. Today, these young people are not only citing the

alleged rise in marital breakdown but even threats like HIV/Aids to show that marriages are too serious

to be based on emotions alone. Furthermore, whilst some members of the younger generation had

professed a preference for arranged marriages in the 90s as well, it is important to note that arranged

marriages are positively embraced by a sizeable number of younger people even today. Earlier,

daughters argued often that they themselves grew up in a joint family, and that they preferred to marry

into a similar environment. All younger interlocutors were keen on having a say in the choice of spouse,

and whilst consent is too strong a word for what they implied, I regularly heard that the wish to meet a

spouse and a period of getting to know each other rather than a full love marriage was on top of their

list.

Significantly, marriage was firstly not negotiable and was secondly ideally not something that was just

‘going to happen’ to them. True to the idiom of choice and self-assertion they wanted an active role in

it, and if this meant to have a love match so be it, but to choose a partner did in no way imply

elopement or dispensing with parental advice and consent. On the contrary, as Amrita, a twenty-year

old student pointed out, ‘If I am seeing someone that is only possible if he is also acceptable to my

parents’.

Quite clearly, desire and wishful thinking were interpreted in the light of long-standing debates about

conjugality, emotional fulfilment, and the family by both generations. Furthermore, in practice, it was

often the reality and direct experience of patrilocality, which made the binary opposition between

arranged and love marriages persuasive. Rather than debating different types of union or ideal types

theoretically as Derne’s male Varanasi informants seemed to be doing (Derne 2005), here interlocutors

could draw on experiences of love marriages. But it also appears that both generations were aware of

the need to make matches compatible with numerous perspectives and demands. Referring to the role a married woman had to play mothers would emphasise the demand for an ‘orientation towards the

family’, and her ability to ‘adjust’. In the younger generation marriage was talked about more in terms

of spouses and coupledom, with ‘choice’ often standing in for idealised conjugal relationships, but also

through the idiom of motherhood in terms of the role of the daughter-in-law as a potential parent to

future family members. In the older generation, care for a husband’s parents, and the way a daughter-in

law fitted in with existing constellations were paramount, whilst happiness – even of one’s own son,

clearly took the backseat over her ability to work hard and fit in.

This is not to say that mothers like Sonali’s were immune to ‘modern’ ideas. Quite a number mentioned

or had experienced pre-marital courtship (though usually in the form of coy forms of contact), and some

had self-arranged their marriage. Others had experienced prolonged periods of romantic courtship after

they had agreed to an arranged marriage, and were keen to point out that their experiences were equally ‘modern’. The decisive point was for them that courtship did not preclude parental choice of a suitable boy or girl.

For daughters, on the other hand, the post-millennium period brought the possibility of pre-marital

affairs out into the open. Clearly, such liaisons had existed before, as the many love marriages that had

occurred earlier testified (see Author 2002). But, far from being exceptional, such affairs were

nevertheless conducted in a clandestine way and were not hailed as the appropriate way for middle

class boys and girls to conduct themselves. Thus, even where love marriages took place and were

accommodated by the respective families parents were usually upset about the behaviour of the bride

and groom even if nobody else was. This indignation suggests that arranged marriages confirmed

crucial values of the society, namely the importance of parental authority.

In the two decades since I have started to work with Bengali middle-class families love- or, self

arranged marriages, and pre-marital courtship – have become a hallmark of ‘modern’ urban culture.

Whilst earlier generations of middle-class women in these families may have had love marriages, they

were adamant that nobody ‘bragged’ about choosing their own spouse. Today, on the other hand, young women (and men) are under immense pressure to come up with a suitable storyline regarding ‘modern’ love and marriage, especially where they agreed to an arranged match. As important narratives of the self focus on a rhetoric of ‘true companionship’ and choice, and romantic love and courtship are increasingly related to self-assertion and financial independence, these discourses have to be reconciled with the claimed ‘Indianess’ of arranged marriage and the ideal of the joint family. This tension brings marriage as a pivotal institution in discourse of Indian modernity to the fore again, this time in a

thoroughly competitive and consumerist setting.

What’s love got to do with it?

In many respects marriage itself, rather than love-marriage, has changed the way Indian middle-class

families functions today, with all my friends agreeing on the fundamental difference the expectation of

affectionate bonds between husband and wife has made to the lives of married women. In their accounts

whether the ideal of the modern companionate marriage is realized does depend on the set-up a young

couple enter, as this nuanced account of a marriage that took place in the 1950s shows:

‘My husband is a modern man, he has always taken my side, and we learned to love each other after we

got married. It was not always easy but we managed, and because we lived in Rajasthan, away from my

in-laws when the boys were growing up, I had a very good relationship with my husband. These were

the best years, after that we had a hard time when we fell out with his elder brother, with whom we

were living here in this flat together with my mother-in-law. I don’t know why my son had to have a

love-marriage, it makes things so difficult, I can’t tell you how many problems I am facing because of

this, the only thing that keeps me going is my granddaughter. My daughter-in-law, even her own family

don’t want anything to do with her anymore, and she did not even stop working when she had the

child.’

Sushmita Banerjee, a very agile 70-year-old mother of two sons, had been married as a young girl of 16

to a much older man of 28. Sushmita was extremely open with me, and compared her arranged

marriage with her son’s ‘own’ marriage. Central in her account was that both were ‘modern’, as ideas

about love and companionship played a part in the way conjugal relations developed. She was eager to

point out that in this sense her own marriage was very ‘modern’. However, she also insisted that the

single most important point to consider where marriages are concerned was a strong sense of filial duty,

and a commitment she expressed in the words ‘the family comes first’, which would in both scenarios

be expected from young women, who’d make the best of the situation. Sushmita acknowledges that

many young wives of her generation had a hard time when they first entered their sasur bari (in-laws’

house) and counted herself lucky as her husband’s postings outside Calcutta worked in her favour. Her

account reflects the conflicts that are associated with the relationship between a daughter- and a mother

in-law in a joint family, which is as affectively charged and in the past was often closer than that of a

husband with his wife. Her experience also testifies to the deep impact the idea of modernity has had on

the institution of marriage in Bengal, and the fact that such a distinctly Indian has certain traits in

common with other such contexts – the idea of conjugality as a prime field of self-formation through

emotionally fulfilling relationships between husband and wife - for example. But Sushmita does not fail

to emphasize significant points that distinguish urban Bengal from other contexts; especially contexts

with higher percentage of middle-class migrant populations, in the way ideas about companionship and

intimacy are embedded in the actual life cycle of the joint family (see for example Fuller and

Narasimhan 2008). In this context, regardless of a woman’s modern outlook on marriage, the demands

of the couple have to be weighed against, and ultimately subordinated to, the needs of the wider family,

its past and future generations.

The comments of students and younger, married women, who embraced the idea of love marriages,

have to be situated within this framework. If, as Wardlow and Hirsch point out, love is often ‘seen as a

trope through which to assert a modern identity’ in a globalising world (Wardlow and Hirsch 2004: 14),

then this trope is powerful across generations. But it does not – in the way these authors and public

discourses in India may suggest – necessarily lead to a full embrace of individualism as the main value

guiding personal decisions.

The validity of this last caveat or provision was highlighted when I looked at my conversations with

Tanu, who was 20 years old when we first met in the mid90s. At the time, she lived in a joint family,

comprising of her parents, grandmother and her uncle’s family in a decaying ancestral home in the city

centre. Their lifestyle was modest and geared towards keeping the joint family together, the inevitable

tensions of such an arrangement notwithstanding. Tanu was studying biochemistry, and had done

exceptionally well in a subject that is not only oversubscribed but promises employment and, indeed, a

career. Marriage was still not on the cards, though her parents had begun to look for a suitable groom so

that they could arrange for her wedding by the time she finished her degree in 2003. Tanu herself told

me repeatedly that her problem would be that she was not a ‘modern type’. Like her younger cousins,

she had been raised in a joint family and living ‘separately’ after marriage was not an option she

fancied. Her explicit desire to marry into such a set-up made her a *bhalo meye* (good girl) in the eyes of

her parents and the all-important community of family, friends and neighbours. It did, however, also

restrict her career choices. It was clear that affines with similar ideals would not accept a daughter-in

law who worked in a laboratory and made a career. As it turned out, she found a compromise, which

was somehow daring but within her reach. She found herself a boyfriend from a joint family, and they

married with the consent and support of both families.

However, since their wedding things have been rather difficult for this self-professed ‘good’ daughter,

who desperately wanted to marry into a traditional setting. She has been struggling to come to terms

with the fact that her affines, and in particular her husband’s mother, are extremely demanding and at

times commandeering. When we met two years after her wedding, she showed me the photos taken on

her honeymoon in North Bengal, an occasion for the young couple to enjoy the privacy and intimacy

generally associated with newlyweds in ‘love’. Tanu recounted their short trip, the only time during

their marriage that they spent more than an afternoon or evening on their own, whilst she depicted her

married life so far as miserable and longed for the bond she and her husband had earlier established.

Since then, she has taken a job as a part-time teacher in one of Kolkata’s most prestigious colleges, has

given birth to a daughter, and has moved back in with her parents during the week. Whilst this

arrangement is officially cutting the time she travels to work and her daughter’s nursery, it is hardly a

secret that she finds living with her parents much more relaxing and that she has limited her

considerable duties as a daughter-in-law to visits during the weekends.

Such complex arrangements, whereby young women, who are more often than not single children,

organise their marital relationships around the needs of two sets of parents are becoming more common

(see Author 2014). Here, as in other cases, the tolerance towards a daughter’s love marriage has also

meant that her obligations to her parents after marriage continued. As has been pointed out by feminists

again and again, it is the proximity to a natal family and the constant reaffirmation of bonds with her

parents and siblings that often allows a married woman to carve out more time and resources to fulfil

individual desires. However, in the middle-class families I work with, women increasingly do so by

embracing the joint family ideology, redefining it as a matter of parental authority rather than merely

the patriline. In practice this kind of acceptable love marriage demands extensive negotiations as well as

a committed husband not afraid to stand up for his wife. These modern love lives look distinctly Indian

and unite love, choice, individualism, filial duty and adherence to a traditional imagery.

**Marriage as Modernity**

As it apparent in the case studies above, discussions about marriage in these middle-class families

reflect underlying global desires which increasingly determine the meaning of ‘love’ and ‘marriage’ in

relation to ideals of modern selves more generally (see Hirsch and Wardlow 2006).

The spread of the iconography of romantic love and coupledom, Hindi movies celebrating a range of

arranged marriages, ‘Western’ rituals and representations like white weddings as well as the contractual

reading of marriage in modern nation-states are all indicators of the role discourses around marriage,

the family and intimacy have played in debates about modernity and processes of globalization.

Giddens argued already in his first tract on globalisation that intimate selves play a major role in

imagining modernity, and moved on to state that among the most significant transformations that

globalization has brought about are those affecting the institutions of marriage and the family. His

analysis takes the rise of marriage contracts involving the state as its point of departure, which,

supported by a culture of coupledom and a unified discourse on affective engagement, free choice of

partners and sexual identity, emerges as a marker of globalising modernity. In the course of these

transformations, the individualistic tendencies modern societies foster make partner choice and sexual

relations a prime focus of modern selves. Intimate relations become a major component of who we are,

and sexual relations in particular become a site of self-realisation. Giddens and others claim that

eventually such modes of being oneself lead to the abolition of marriage as the main institution within

which such relations are contained (Giddens 1990; 1999). Along a similar vein Povinelli interprets the

tension between love and marriage in public discourse as a result of colonial trajectories and asserts that

the emergence of modern identity politics privileges sexual relationships over marital status in the

creation of modern selves. Thus, formal arrangements associated with group-based identities and the

institution of marriage are expected to give way to ‘chosen’ relationships between lovers. In this

scenario, intimate bonds created through sexual relations represent the most significant location for

notions of gendered agency, and therefore for liberal selves to emerge (Povinelli 2002).

There can be no doubt that a ‘culture of coupledom’, either within companionate marriage or more

broadly intimate relations has indeed been shown to constitute debates on modernity and global

lifestyles in South Asia, it is clear that far from being abandoned or disconnected, the institution of

marriage has a wide currency here. Thus, I would argue, modernity, love and marriage are so closely

related in public discourses today that it is almost impossible to disentangle them.

Much of the literature on emerging modernities in South Asia seems to assume that social relationships

evolve in a kind of linear development towards free choice, individualism, sexual identities and

citizenship. Laura Ahearn’s ethnography of the impact of literacy on young rural Nepalese shows how

modernity is here imagined through love letters that lead to elopement self-chosen marriages. This

narrative matches accounts from around the glove (see for instance Hirsch and Wardlow 2006), which

demonstrate that debates about modernity and ideologies of what it means to be suitably modern are

increasingly conducted in the global idiom of intimate recognition and vice versa.

Yet, we also need to acknowledge that the modernity of romantic object choice can coincide with a

revival of ‘traditional family values’, which cannot simply to be attributed to ‘backward’ thinking.

Ahearn for instance speaks of such bonds as simultaneously created by sexual desire and the notion that

they allow for modern selves to emerge, but within marriage (Ahearn 2002). In this, as well as other

ethnographies, like Puri’s based on interviews with middle-class women in Delhi (Puri 1999), women

in particular seem to distinguish between (hetero-)sexual desire, experienced as intimate and enhancing

personal well-being, and the purposeful organisation of marital lives, located in the realm of kinship

and therefore wider society. Mark Liechty, who is one of the few ethnographers working across

generations, confirms my findings above, namely that for middle-class subjects in Kathmandu a

‘modern’ attitude’ implies that affectionate conjugal relations are highly valued, and choice and consent

were seen as important markers of modern marriage, which plays an increasingly role in becoming a

proper citizen (Liechty 2003). But like my Indian middle-class interlocutors, his ethnography suggests a

process whereby the question of individual fulfilment and choice not so much to romantic love and

affairs as to marriage and its multiple meanings and institutional determinants.

**Marriage, Indian marriage and ‘Indian’ marriage**

Unlike in China, and a number of other globalising contexts, the relationship between love and

marriage has in the past fed into the broader discourse by which an emerging middle class constructed

an ‘authentically’ ‘Indian modernity’ under conditions of colonial domination. Within this framework

reforms had to emphasise that new arrangements and legal codes were rooted in tradition, and produce

a class-based discourse from as early as the late 19th century (Chatterjee 1993). This opposed the

ordered family home to its hedonistic, individualistic ‘Western’ counterpart, but also the pluralistic

‘customs’ of uneducated, backwards internal ‘others’ like lower castes and the working class. Within

this middle-class context, arranged marriage has therefore not only figured prominently as a means to

reproduce actually existing inequalities through alliance and strategic hypergamy, but also as an

important discursive site to establish modern class-based identities and inter-class relations.

Anthropologists have only just begun to deconstruct the straight opposition between arranged and

‘love’ marriages by focussing on the discursive links between love and romance, and alternatives to the

traditional arranged match between strangers, guided by ideal of hypergamy and endogamy (see Parry

2001; Mody 2002; Orsini 2006; Osella 2012).

In the light of a growing interest in middle-class lives marriage in upwardly mobile, globalized and

fully urban communities has been studied with special reference to discourses and practices beyond

arranged marriage (see Puri 1999; Fuller and Narasimhan 2008, Osella 2012). However, it has social

science considerably longer than their ‘informants’ to realize that the rigid rules governing the

organization of caste and community through endogamous marriage do not provide much insight into

what marriage means in the lives of an increasing number of middle-class urbanites.

In urban Bengali middle-class families, as increasingly elsewhere, the relationship between love and

marriage is deeply implied in discussions of ‘modernity’ as problematic, and feeds into constructions of

racial difference but even more so of differences in class-based identities. Following the reform of

(Hindu) family life that commenced in the 19th century, marital age among the urban middle-classes

sored and the age gaps between spouses decreased (Borthwick 1984, 1990; Chatterjee 1993; Walsh

2004). But while marriage and modernity can hardly be thought independently of each other in this

context, my ethnography testifies to the persuasive power the opposition between

arranged/Indian/traditional marriages and love/other/self-chosen marriages still holds. And last but not

least it is the persuasive power and popularity of films, which perpetually address the tension between

individualistic desires and the demands of the family through various marriages in order to provide

katarthis through family-arranged marriages (see Uberoi 2009). Where arranged marriages are here

depicted as ‘traditional’ and ‘Indian’, talk about love and marriage is also very important in establishing

and maintaining ethnic collective identities, especially in a heterogeneous setting like the multicultural

neighbourhood of Central Kolkata. Boundaries between local communities, and thus love and marriage

as possible links between members of different communities, figure here prominently in exclusionary

tales and practices which confirm ethnic and religious affiliation and/or class. Here as elsewhere in the

city, existing matches are subject to structural constraints, key among them the expected patrilocality,

which sits uneasily with Povinelli’s assertion that in modern societies sexuality and nationalism

substitute for the site provided by contractual marital relationships and interdependency within the

family. It is clear that in India, the need for the middle class to become modern by re-inventing tradition

at the same time saw a reformulation of patriarchies within a changing social landscape, with

companionate marriage and consent (in this order) gradually emerging as an aspired ideal, but

patrilocality and joint family life as the structural framework within which this was to be realised. With

regards to the joint family Uberoi rightly emphasises that the joint family is an important moral

institution even where it is not the pattern of residence (Uberoi 2001: 326). It is this tension between a

rigid ideal and the modern desires and possibilities for self-centred affective ties that determines

modern gendered constructions of the self and consequently modern Indian middle-class marriages.

It is tempting to look at South Asian histories and assert that the discourse on ‘love’ as affective

‘attentive individualism’ is certainly not of recent or exclusively Western origin (see Ahearn 2002;

Chatterjee 2004; Orsini 2006). But as Wardlow and Hirsch point out it is ‘primarily these [European

companionate] models of love and marriage that have been, and are being, globalized through

missionarization, through mass media’ (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006: 6).

Given colonial histories these models shaped what it is today understood as Indian marriage, and as

work on Indian legal discourses on marriage suggests, these models have become intertwined with the

norm of heterosexual, life-long and monogamous unions (see Majumdar 2009; Uberoi 1996).

It is, however, equally important to acknowledge that companionate marriages are not so much

European as modern – how else could they be realised in widely different contexts? Furthermore, while

the notion of companionship in marriage is premised on ideas about egalitarian relationships and

affection, which were not that prominent in the case of hegemonic notions of high-caste unions, diverse

sexual and marital practices existed and are certainly prominent in specific contexts today. Thus, apart

from the new possibilities queer rights campaigns have brought, a range of alternative marriage

arrangements exist, often at the margins of earlier hegemonic cultural formations in South Asia

(Chatterjee 2004; Tiwari 2008; Holden 2003; Parry 2001).

In this sense, the ‘traditional’, ‘Indian’ arranged marriage as it is presented today is as much a modern

phenomenon as ‘love’ marriages, and the discursive construction of this opposition gained its

ontological status in the course of the colonial encounter. As Stoler has shown, concerns about marriage

and intimate relationships did lie at the heart of colonial productions of racialized subjects and gendered

bodies across the empire (Stoler 2002).

**Marriage, courtship, and affairs**

As I recounted above, I was surprised when I saw the couples holding hands in public during my last

visit to the city: ‘God, we have been away too long’ seemed to sum up how I felt. Visiting after two

years, the pace of the changes the city was undergoing was truly mind-boggling. But apart from the new

locations associated youth culture and romance, conversations about romance and marriage would still

inevitably take a predictable turn: young people would launch into a rant about how everything was

possible in modern metropolitan India, and how they were different from their parents’ generation in

their mixing, mating and marriage patterns. Most of those I met then and earlier would also swear that

in their case a love-marriage was the only option, as Chandra, a 19-year-old volunteer for an NGO put

it, when we were having lunch during my first few months of fieldwork in the mid-90s:

‘I am not marrying a man I don’t know and have not chosen myself; my parents wouldn’t dare to even

ask me to agree to an arranged marriage. The problems you have if you are not married to someone you

love – I have seen it with my cousin, her marriage is basically an arranged marriage, and she is not

happy, not happy at all. Her in-laws are ok I guess, but she just cannot adjust to living in their house,

they don’t match.’

Often, like with my then 20-year-old assistant in earlier years, these exchanges ended with a concrete

example and, sure enough, the revelation that the young woman had fallen in love or had at least been

flirting with a male classmate or neighbour. Regularly, young women would tell me that they definitely

would choose a partner themselves, or share details of a secret relationship. In the case of my assistant,

who had helped me with numerous interviews on love and marriage, our conversation confirmed that

she was actually falling for a classmate at college. She confided in me out of the blue while we were

having tea:

‘You know, in my class, there is that boy, and he is very nice, we are going out and want to marry, I

really like him, he is a very fine man, but he is from a very different background, a really rich family, so

I don’t know what to do, my parents will kill me if they find out.’

Today, young Kolkatans do no longer rely entirely on coeducation, as having a boyfriend or going out

with a classmate has become increasingly feasible as sites for such affairs have proliferated. But it is

important not to overstate the degree to which the visible transformations of middle-class lives have

challenged the conservatism for which the city’s middle class is known. This is still an environment in

which couples who fall in love and get married against their parents’ wishes are unable to rent a flat in

any decent neighbourhood and where the police or party officials are frequently employed by parents to

forcibly return young women married against their parents’ wishes. This happened in at least two

families I worked with, thus, the much publicized case of the inter-community love-marriage between

Priyanka Todi and Riznavur Rahman was by no means an exception.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Thus, while talk of love and romance was quite common, mothers framed these debates entirely in

terms of the opposition of arranged marriages and self-chosen or love-marriage, and made their

preference for the former very clear. During my earlier fieldwork in the mid-90s, most did not see

affairs or romance as a possibility one’s children would openly pursue, and the concept of parental

consent to courtship before marriage, common in some diaspora communities and often referred to as

‘marriage by introduction’ at the time, was entirely alien. Up until the mid-90s there were also very few

actual places for middle-class youths to meet, and dating was largely restricted to specific semi-public

spaces like a few cultural centres, on campus, or the cinema. Consequently, the majority of young

women in these households were in the 1990s not allowed to visit cinemas and cultural performances

unaccompanied, and parents would frequently not even allow a bright young woman to join a college or

university deemed too ‘progressive’, a code for co-ed institutions. Even among students in these

institutions only the most brazen ones would join married couples and ‘office goers’ in search for some

privacy and meet in public places, and apart from those belonging to well-known liberal families, few

young women went around boasting about the when and where of their affairs.

**Love and its other**

When we discussed courtship and the youth culture that was emerging, it appeared obvious to mothers

that the problems with young people dating before marriage was one of long-term and short-term

perspectives and the opposition between individual gains and collective strategies. In our conversations

arranged marriages in India were contrasted with ‘Western’ marriages, which encompassed choice of a

partner, courtship and a trial phase, as well as the possibility of divorce. ‘Indian’ marriages were

therefore not defined by love or its absence, but by the acknowledged authority of elders, who initiated

and authorised them. Western unions where, on the other hand, those in which parents and the wider

family had no say until they were presented with a fait accompli, which denied parents the authority and power of legitimation they rightfully demanded. Thus defined, talk about idealised Indian marriages

was not a refusal of love as attachment and intimate, mutual recognition, but a refusal of love as the

main basis of marriage. Love, as I have discussed elsewhere was not so much discussed in terms of

sexual desire, (prem) or bhakti, self-less devotion, but described as (bhalobasa), a mutual, egalitarian

relationship associated with popular devotional cults.

Mothers, among whom many had love marriages themselves, tried to guard their children, especially

girls, but boys as well, against such attachments, against getting matches where the partner was self

selected with parental consent after an initial phase of contact – the so-called love marriages. They

argued that unions that were solely determined by the couples’ feelings for each other, which made

them differ significantly from arranged matches, not so much in the way they came about but in their

impact on other kinds of socially important relationships: for mothers, as well as their daughters,

marriage presented a sacrosanct ‘Indian’ institution defined through its link with the joint family ideal,

and arranged marriage was seen as its most sociable form. [[2]](#footnote-2)

Many explorations of this theme, which often took on a patronising air, were conducted by married

women for my benefit, as Mrs Das’ exasperated remark cited above, shows. This mother of an old

friend, was wondering whether I really got the significance of the different kinds of marriage available.

In her view this difference was located in the way those how were seeking match and those around

them understood marriage. On the one hand, there was the European’s individualistic, short-term and

superficial attraction that was based on an understanding of marriage as a personal, single-handed,

spur-of-the-moment decision by the couple concerned. ‘Love’ therefore only vaguely covered what

made such matches an unappealing and alien concept. On the other hand, there were ‘Indian’ ideals

and, more to the point, realities. Ms Das had reasons to hold up this mirror to me, as she was at the time

trying to explain the problems her older daughter had faced in her marriage. In the course of such

private discussions the rising divorce rate just provided more evidence for general claims about love

and marriage. However, holding seemingly contradictory views, the same interlocutor - in this case

middle-class housewife Mrs Das - also rallied against too much pressure on children to marry a partner

their parents had chosen. In her view, the idea of parental force or pressure on a child was irreconcilable

with her self-image as a ‘modern’ Bengali woman . Thus, like many others I spoke to, she blamed

parents in ‘other’ communities – a barely veiled comment on Marwari business communities - or low

caste and poor families, for ‘selling their daughters like cattle’ as many of my interlocutors expressed it.

Consequently, consent played a major role in her account of how and ideal Indian marriage would look,

but consent also assumed that parents would not only be consulted but have a major say in who her

second daughter would marry. As it was, this young woman had other plans, and like her older sister

married a man she had chosen herself, who did not even belong to her own community.

Significantly, the preferences expressed by Mrs Das were only partly a result of her desire to dominate

her daughters’ lives, although this was clearly possible motivation for her as for Sonali’s mother. Her

preference did also present a rational and socially acceptable decision-making process impacting the

whole family, which was driven by the ideal of having a young couple live with the older couple. As

she asserted her right to suggest suitable matches, the privilege of having a say in her daughters’

marriages was important to her identity as an Indian mother and a middle-class Indian citizen. Like the

men interviewed in Derne’s earlier study of Varanasi traders’ approaches to love and marriage, she

emphasised arranged marriages with the whole family in mind as the ideal, and demonised ‘love’

marriage as dangerous and selfish (Derne 1994:289pp). But unlike his middle-aged and caste-conscious

informants, in conservative Varanasi, the naturalized distinction between ‘Indian’ and ‘Western’

matches did only emerge in conversation with me as clear-cut as this. It certainly did not reflect the

multiple meanings and experiences of marriage recalled by others in the course of my extended periods

of fieldwork. Rather than providing an underlying logic or way of thinking about young people’s

passions in terms of the West and its other, such a binary distinction justified parental authority by

emphasising a long-term perspective. Marriage does move at this point of a conversation from a

lifecycle event into a strategic decision that affects two or three generations. Thus, it is not surprising

that love and choice were not what was on the mind of this mother, and in this sense, courtship and the

prioritization of romantic love – which is in many societies (including non-Western ones) fairly

institutionalized, could not be presented as relevant, meaningful or a preference (see Hirsch and

Wardlow 2006; Jankowiak 2008).

If we agree that as Wardlow and Hirsch assert, courtship and self-selected unions lie enable the

‘crafting of a more modern gendered self’ (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006: 8), debates about love and

marriage bring inter-generational conflict to the fore. However, the ontological status of such ideas has

to be established within a much broader context of social relations than those constituted by a couple.

As Povinelli shows, women belonging to an indigenous Australian community used love and marriage

to discuss change, and argue on various occasions arguing about the meaning of marriage, kinship and

sexuality, drawing with ease on local idioms and translocal/global discourses as kinship comes to be

linked to other facets of new social identities (Povinelli 2006). In this context debates about legitimate

matches draw on a history of cousin marriages, and stranger sociality enters as a main trope of change

linked to identity formation into local discourses. But, ‘thickening one set of social relays, thinning

others’ it also provides the site for conflict and new aspirations, imaginations of kinship become

discussions of future possibilities (Povinelli 2006:72).

A comparably powerful rhetoric around affective ties and intimacies has emerged in India in debates

about love and arranged marriage, and although the practices and values involved in match-making

have always varied considerably between different communities, new identities are tested in and

through these debates in public discourse. The fact that identity formation has become intrinsically

linked to idioms of ‘love’ and ‘choice’ may go some way in explaining the surprising conformity

characteristic for the views and practices among middle-class families in Kolkata.

Returning to Mrs Das and our conversation about love marriages, it is important to note that – unlike

Serena Nanda’s informants, who apparently claimed in the 1990s that middle-class children in India

lack opportunities to meet with members of the other sex – she was not naïve (Nanda 1991). She did not

for a minute suggest that anyone relied on arranged marriages, but insisted that the norm of patrilocal

residence prevented the prioritization of individual fulfilment and mutual affect in choosing a partner.

To her and all others I met, falling in love (prem pora) was an inevitable part of young people’s lives,

and given the massive influence of media templates for romantic love, which ranged from Hindi movies

to Santa Barbara initially, a scope that broadened considerably in the decades since, were given ample

opportunity to identify with lovers and their stories. However, at the same time, young people are

habitually constructed as liminal and vulnerable, prone to emotional upheaval through love and its

consequences. Thus, whilst in theory many of the mothers I spoke to were as laid back about self

chosen unions as the North Indian small town residents surveyed by Corwin in the seventies, who

tolerated ‘love’ marriages, which did not ‘come into direct conflict with other concepts involving social

stratification and family structure, which are characteristic of upper- and upper-middle-class Bengali

society’ (Corwin 1977), the realities of multi-generational households prevented the same approach to

be applied to their own children.

**Mothers and Children**

If there is one reason for love marriage to play a significant role in debates about new middle-class

identities the experience of social stratification surely provides one explanation. The changing nature of

Indian middle-class culture brings about heightened anxieties around intimate relationships. In the

families I work with, the general tolerance towards love marriages, and the experience of such matches

within families sit uncomfortably with mothers’ increasing inability to patrol their children’s every step

and parents’ aspirations for ever better matches and hoped for social mobility. Thus, mothers in

particular and society at large employ a host of measures that emphasize the dangers of falling in love,

especially for girls who might be lured into starting an affair by the allegedly more carefree and often

cunning attitudes of their classmates. The practice of Ahearn’s written ‘invitations to love’ were

widespread as well, as stories about neighbourhood courtship through letters and relatively chaste

romance at school and on campus abound. Most mothers were hoping that scare stories, the cultivation

of a close relationship and moral appeals to the duties of children towards their parents suppress selfish

desires and that respectable behaviour would deter hostile advances. Girls themselves, were always

highly articulate about the evil intentions of even the mildest flirtation.

Mrs Das was, therefore, not the only one who stated that prolonged courtship – not love – was alien to

Indian culture, and that a love affair could certainly ruin even the most respectable family. In her view,

Indian children, unlike Westerners, had to learn how to distinguish between love and marriage and, as

they had to ‘wait for love’ to develop within marriage, they needed to be pre-occupied with their family

affairs and educational pursuits until then. Like other mothers, she maintained that to monitor

daughters’ and sons’ behaviour and remind them of the dangers of romantic involvement was an

arduous task, especially in co-educational environments and within the heterogeneous urban setting.

Ideally, mothers like Sangita (aged 38) told me, her 18-year-old daughter would find that the partner

chosen by her parents met the requirements of the couple and the family involved. This would then

allow her to realise parental expectations, and if anything, would affirm the respect of the young people

for their parents. It would also enhance the chances of realizing a modern, but essentially ‘Indian’,

family ideal based on sharing of resources and residences with the husbands’ parents. Lastly, such a

successful match would provide a positive environment for bringing up future grandchildren, an aspect

that seems to me to have become more important in the last two decades. Marriage was here, like in

Derne’s earlier study with men, represented as a function of joint family life, but unlike in his sample, is

here no longer one including co-habiting brothers. In this context ‘joint’ family life did usually mean

patrilocal households of a son’s family and his parents, and sometimes the additional ‘cousin’-brother

sharing a property.

In many conversations it appeared that media representations were seen as a threat to parental authority

and films in particular where interpreted as promoting globalized notions of romance as available and

desirable. Mothers were on the one hand extremely anxious about the influence of media images and

the surrounding ‘culture’, yet young girls were always encouraged to watch TV as it made them stay at

home. It was therefore not so much the consumption of films, but the sociality going on around a visit

to the cinema, that fuelled maternal worries. Just like families had earlier on invested in VCRs to rent

and share a film in a family setting, parents now shared visits to the mall or multiplex with their

children.

Furthermore, whilst the emotional effect of what was actually shown on screen (with the exception of

nudity) was never problematized and discussed in the context of love and marriage, the imagery of

consumerism, often targeting young audiences quite directly, presented an ongoing bone of content (see

Dwyer 2011). In my own work noticeable shifts appeared in the discourses about media. Earlier,

conversations about images focused on sexually explicit content and ‘improper’ femininities, especially

daughters-in-law. In the mid90s these discussions were still dominated by the opposition of ‘Western’

lifestyles, signified by shows like ‘The Bold and the Beautiful’, and the opposition between homemade

soaps and Hindi movies. But in the intervening years, other media, especially local newspapers and

private TV in the vernacular, have helped to modify this simplistic picture. They have inserted new

‘issues’ into the circuits of representations accessed by my interlocutors. Thus, discussions of the family

and marriage would often draw on news items, but also the way that social themes like abortion among

schoolgirls, transmission of STDs, and premarital relationships are depicted in the ubiquitous soap

operas. Where in the 90s such concerns were only addressed in extraordinarily frank phone-in radio

shows and on the agony pages of Bengali-language women’s magazines, an inter-generational

discussion is now possible.

However, even where novel themes are discussed, Uberoi rightly concedes that there is an obsession

with family breakdown that has been a pervasive theme in media representations (Uberoi 2001), which

my interlocutors found more pervasive. If asked they would cite this as the main social problem

reflected in those movies. Confronted with a popular culture that borrows freely from global discourses

on love and romance and constructs liberal ideologies in conjunction with the promotion of youth

consumer culture, fashion and media images, parents felt that they needed to engaged with these issues

and integrate them into their representation of the sacrosanct domain of the family in middle-class lives

(see Liechty 2003). But they did so under the umbrella of the older subject of the dissolution of the joint

family.

As the movies show, the separation of courtship from love, of marriage from arranged marriage, and of

intimacy from coupledom, has made the encompassment of affective recognition and ‘modern selves’

within the institution of marriage possible. But, in real life, this requires an adjustment, which makes

stranger marriage difficult, and thus most mothers publicly subscribed to the view that meetings before

marriage and even self-arranged matches ensured that these new demands were met. However, the same mothers would admit in private that they would not hesitate to arrange such a match for a daughter

should the need arise. Whilst marriages arranged between strangers are presented as old-fashioned and

indeed are looked down upon as are expected to put their children’s happiness first, – the safety and

financial security of the bride-to-be and her parents are more obvious concerns guiding the selection of

a groom. Distinctly, intra-class distinctions play a role her as well, as stranger marriages are shunned by

the upper middle class, who do not depend on the added value of a work permits and green cards as

their children are likely to possess the necessary capital to make a living. To avoid any association with

old-fashioned arranged marriages parents in such households engage in elaborate and costly strategies

including pre-engagement meetings abroad, to avoid any association of stranger marriage and to keep

their daughters and sons happy.

But whilst consent is associated with modern middle-class marriage I have evidence that stranger

marriage with a distinctly contemporary flavour experiences a revival at the lower end of the middle

class spectrum as well. Here, the association of marriage with choice and the embrace of liberal values

and women’s empowerment are easily cast aside as social mobility becomes ever more pressing. Not

only are marriages a major strategy for the assertion of middle-class status per se, they open ever mote

new avenues for the advancement of the whole family. Among many a lower middle-class family,

many of whom are hit by disinvestment in state institutions, parents of young, well-educated women

from less affluent backgrounds have their heart set on a professional migrant groom working either in

the Gulf or in the US. In one such case a young woman of 22 years I met in 2003 was coaxed by her

girlfriends to reveal that she was awaiting her impending wedding with a coveted green-card holder,

with who she had only been in touch via email for the preceding six months. This match, like others of

the same kind, was arranged solely on the basis of meetings between the parents involved, and she was

expected to return to the States with her husband after the wedding.

As the discussion above indicates, the values of companionate conjugality are today very much part of

middle-class self representations, and the ‘Indian’ arranged marriage which involves parents as well as

their offspring offers varying degrees of choice and agency, so that the self-chosen ‘love’ marriage is

only one variation on the main themes.

Careful ethnography has shown that the concept of companionate marriage has become popular among

the younger generation in upwardly mobile communities across the globe (see Hirsch and Wardlow

2006; Jankowiak 2008). But while ‘modern marriage’ is commonly represented in globally acceptable

liberal terms as a chosen and voluntary union between equals, it is clear that more often than not,

modern, legally binding marriage substitutes egalitarian, or at least flexible, arrangements between

husbands and wives. In South Asia, monogamous, life-long and legally formalized marriages may

introduce patriarchal, caste and class-biased readings of earlier arrangements into new contexts and as

has been shown by many colleagues these may substitute less enduring, more affect-driven and

personal ideas of the ideal life course among members of various communities (see Parry 2001; Kapila

2004; Tiwari 2008). These ethnographies acknowledge that life-long, legally binding marriages and an

element of choice are by no means the preserve of the urbanized middle-class. However, the ideal that

companionate marriages have to be cognitively separated from discourses on ‘love’ and romance, and

that a successful marriage with a view on upward mobility makes a mature person is probably nowhere

as much part of identity formation as among the more affluent and allegedly ‘modern’ middle-class

city-dwellers. Sylvia Vatuk’s observation on the 1970s situation among white collar migrants in Meerut

that ‘[o]lder conventions prevail even though many young people, particularly boys in their late teens

and early twenties, profess a desire for more control over the choice of their mate’ (Vatuk 1972: 87),

held true for Calcutta at the time. But even this brief passage indicates that alternatives to arranged

marriages have been popularized since the 1960s.[[3]](#footnote-3) My own research, especially in Central Kolkata

quickly revealed a significant number of love-marriages in 1970s. Furthermore, although arranged

marriages were far more common, love-marriages seemed to be easily accommodated within the

patrilocal and joint family setting. This is not to say that such matches did not cause predictable

conflicts, but that many women presented these matches as an alternative available ‘modern’ form of

marriage in an environment where stranger marriage was the accepted norm. Among my interlocutors

even the elderly acknowledged that in most instances there was no need for the couple to elope,

although love-marriages were and are seen as problematic on various counts. Apart from the problems

they may cause between a young woman and her parents, most significantly such self-chosen matches

disturb the symbolic and real domination of younger women by their mothers-in-law, and thus are often

depicted as problematic for the household as a whole. It seems that more so than in other metros,

Kolkatans belonging to different communities, but certainly Bengali-speaking families, still organize

ideas and practices around the ‘joint family’ ideal, which serves as the backbone of middle-class

lifestyles. For the time being at least, for a majority of young women the prospect of life with affines is

an important aspect of their search for an identity.

Secondly, love-marriages disturb the image the middle classes have of themselves as a group that is

family-oriented and therefore more representative of the positive attributes ‘Indians’ presumably share.

Thus the allegedly rising number of such matches, and the underlying related reformulation of conjugal

ideals, ideas of the self and of ‘culture’, are sometimes presented in person and by the media as a trend

that threatens established middle-class ways of life. Firstly, the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’

seem to become blurred in the process. Secondly, love marriages defy filial duty, increasingly they are

interpreted as disrupting the duty of care towards on parents regardless of whether a boy or a girl are

concerned.

But, my ethnography also shows that in Bengali middle-class families love-marriages are more often

than not treated in the same way as arranged marriages, once they have become inevitable and public

knowledge (see Author 2002). In most instances, such a match does not jeopardize the long-term

priorities of the joint family and the perceived threat to the collective world view by challenging

communal and caste boundaries is becoming less of an issue as long as ethnic boundaries are kept

intact. In all, but the exceptional cases where an inter-community marriage involves Hindus and

Muslims or Hindus and North Indian business communities, such love marriages can be integrated

surprisingly well. Many a couple was neither marginalized nor forced to elope, in fact a good number

did not even have to consider to resort to a civil wedding or pretended that theirs was an arranged

marriage (pace Mody 2002). While this statement does of course hide a methodological predicament, in

that those love marriages that did not come about cannot be researched, my data also indicate that even

(or particularly) in this metropolitan area attitudes towards love-marriages are distinctly ambivalent.

While they have become more common, self-chosen unions are not normative in the way superficial

interviews solely focussing on young people’s view may suggest. On the contrary, as my material

suggests and Lukose’s Kerala ethnography with lower middle-class students confirms, romance and

affairs present a very problematic arena especially for women, which needs to be contained within the

normative discourse on marriage (Lukose 2009). Thus, we should not be lured into emphasizing the

exceptional status of such unions, thereby ignoring the true variety of practices found in contemporary

urban India, but also retain a sensibility for the problematic ontological status of love in the context of

marriage and the wider arrangements that this institution enables and supports. As Caplan suggested in

a different era, we need to ‘consider the possibility that the ideas and practices surrounding marriage in

India might also have been influenced by historical events and circumstances in the wider political and

social order’ (Caplan 1998:3). It is in the context of wider challenges to the ideas of marriage and love

that a discussion of love-marriages makes sense.

**Conclusion**

It is clear that affectionate ties between spouses became a positive attribute of a successful match quite

early on in Bengal, but neither ‘love’ nor consent figured as a necessary predisposition for the vast

majority of matches. Up the 1970s the debates about self-chosen or love-marriages remained so

exceptional that Fruzzetti, who conducted research in a Northern Bengali small town in the 1960s, still

referred to ‘marriage by choice’ as elopement (polayan kora) (Fruzetti 1982), although many cases of

love marriage I documented throughout my own fieldwork in Kolkata date back to that period (see also

Debi 1988:20). Thus, while marriage is clearly implied in the project of being modern - to be suitably

middle-class – as Liechty has it, this project depends as much on new sites of desire as on rigid ideas

about respectability and traditional family roles (Liechty 2003).

In the West, authors like Giddens and Povinelli point out, contractual understandings of marriage as a

relationship between families and groups, are decreasing, because intimate relationships have become a

site of identity construction around values of individualism, choice and (sexual) subcultures. According

to this narrative, the ‘West’ has moved from companionate marriage towards the recognition of less

formally acknowledged, intimate relationships as a source of self (Giddens 1999). Povinelli goes even

further and expands on a well-worn argument about the conjunction between imperialism, race and

marriage as an institution by stating that in the postcolony identity politics serves to develop liberal

subject through specific kinds of intimacies, sexual identities and meaningful social relations. In her

view the movement away from marriage as the site for such relationships eventually leads to the demise

of marriage as a main institutional site for subject formation.

A host of recent ethnographies on South Asian communities can be cited in support Povinelli’s claim

regarding the importance of discourse on love and intimacy and liberal discourses on social change (see

for example Lukose (2009). In South Asia as elsewhere, these are bound up with processes whereby

modern self-formation, specific emerging globalized consumption practices and debates around gender

and sex, come together as evidenced in work on alternative sexualities (Vanita 2002; Srivastava 2004;

Reddy 2005). However, few ethnographers have cared to review how hegemonic discourses on

normative forms of intimate relations are reframed at the same time, which, as I have shown above

present an equally important site for debates about South Asian modernities, and have been remarkably

resilient, if not positively flourishing, in an age of globalization.

It is therefore illuminating to analyse the institution of marriage and discourses around love in various

contexts and draw comparisons because in the case of India for instance, anecdotal and ethnographic

reference suggest that while sexual identity politics inform urban middle-class debates on choice and

consent, marriage is still very much part of the framework through which notions of modern selves are

realised (see for example Fuller and Narasimhan 2008).

Furthermore, I am suggesting that if we situate the question of ‘intimate recognition’ within the wider

context of kin-relations and networks of care, that is look at the family as a site of reproduction, it

appears that far from being displaced, marriage is often strengthened by realities that make discourses

on modern Indian middle-class intimacies and identities dependent on the organisation of the two

‘generation’ family. Far from being marginalized, the institution of marriage emerges as a necessary

precondition for the development of a recognizable modern ‘Indian’ middle-class identity based on

family-orientated members and of stories about intimate relationships, which are not necessarily sexual

affairs. Furthermore, whilst parental authority and filial duty are still largely associated with

patrilocality and affinal relationships, increasingly young women and their parents emphasise bonds

with a wife’s family to the degree that uxorilocality becomes an alternative.

The ethnographic evidence suggests that the space for affairs and assertive story-telling based on

intimate relationships before marriage and sexual exploits only emerged very recently, and that access

to such new publics is not only dependent on class, but also extremely gender-specific. It took much

longer for the interpretative community for such stories create to emerge than it had taken love

marriages to become a common theme to actually speak in veiled ways about these issues. Marriage

provided a framework amongst my interlocutors of both generations to speak about desires, but also

anxieties related to new lifestyles. As Plummer observes, stories of less institutionalized encounters are

more difficult to share with a public:

‘[Whilst stories] can be heard amongst isolated individuals, they can gain no momentum if they stay in

this ‘privatized’ mode, and personal narratives remain in the private sphere of dim inarticulateness,

having no group to sustain them. For stories to flourish, there must be social worlds waiting to hear.

Social worlds are not like communities of old: no locale is required, only a sense of belonging, sharing

traditions, having common memories.’ (Plummer 2003: 34)

In the given context, there exists a community to listen to stories about love and marriage within the

framing narrative of marriage (Uberoi 1996), and about romance beyond the youths’ market. As the

success soap operas (Das 1995), short stories shows, there is still a wider community waiting to listen to

narratives of sexual encounters retold by young women and their parents, which does not focus solely

on the individual affair.

Fieldwork made me aware of the transformation these debates are currently undergoing as global

imagery and the ideology of a modern, consumerist middle-class are challenging the representation of

marriage. But writing the ethnography the lack of in-depth research into hegemonic discourses on love,

marriage and sexuality more generally, emerged as a problem. It has also sensitized me to the pitfalls of

research that does in such intimate matters not take the domestic environment and the constraints

produced by patrilocality seriously (see for instance Puri 1999). While a more sexually permissive

subculture is emerging within certain contexts, either by virtue of their relative homogeneity as shown

in caste- and class-endogamous marriages among professionals in high profile workplaces and

exclusive educational institutions, or in the context of same-sex relations in urbane settings, the

socialization of young people into the role of responsible adult members of their wider families is still a

major theme. This commonly demands the subordination of the desires of the young, and makes

relationships before marriage a distinctly problematic arena for young women. Indeed, as earlier

certainties about jobs and pathways laid out for middle-class youth to succeed diminish, and

aspirational lifestyles become more constitutive of middle-class status, many parents keep a tighter grip

over a daughter’s movements, whereabouts, etc. than their own guardians might have done in the past.

In these circumstances exclusivity and privilege encourages those from a matching background and

similar financial standing to choose their own partners within existing networks determined by class,

even where these are ostensibly explained in terms of caste and tradition, as Fuller and Narasimhan

have shown for Tamil Brahmin software engineers in Chennai (i.e. Fuller and Narasimhan 2008).

However, their embrace of an ideology of choice and consent should not make us believe that this

necessarily leads to self-chosen marriage preceded by premarital affairs or romantic courtship. Among

the middle classes such new patterns are on the one hand based on social privilege, but are restricted by

anxieties about social status and upward mobility, and do not necessarily indicate the appropriation of a

wider ideology of individualism. The new-found freedoms embodied in public cultures, for example as

IT professionals choose from a pool of colleagues, happily co-exist with their opposite, love marriages

that don’t allow for a redefinition of the role of daughter-in-law and arranged marriages within which

young men and women have a say, but which may unite virtual strangers across the seven seas. As my

ethnography suggests, aspirational parents and their children share a concern with the reproduction of

middle-class lifestyles and upward mobility in generations to come.

Clearly it is therefore significant that whilst different discourses on marriage prevalent in contemporary

middle-class Kolkata, an environment where to remain unmarried is (still) not an option as

responsibilities towards ageing parents necessitate patrilocal residential patterns, can coexist.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In the given context, simplistic assumptions about marriage as coupledom and the embrace of an

ideology of individualism are clearly misguided, most significantly because the reality of patrilocality

and the ideology of the joint family determine where love is located in the discourse around marriage

that precedes a match. My ethnography reveals the tensions between a ‘liberal’ view of individuation

through coupledom and partner-choice based on emotional attachment, and modern selfhood conceived

by different generations in terms of wider responsibilities and securities. While young men and women

have different ideas about love and romance than their parents and grandparents, filial duty and the

normative character of arranged marriage as the basis of joint family life are vastly important to middle

class personhood. Mothers and their daughters agree that finding a suitable partner is still considered a

parental privilege and that as long as companionate marriages are a realistic option, conjugal life within

the joint family, filial duty and future children’s needs have to be balanced against selfish impulses in

selecting one’s own partner.

The issue of consent is, therefore, not only one relevant to the study of the younger generation, but

demonstrates how marriage is part of long-term reasoning and mutual dependencies present within any

given social setting. This directs attention to the underlying model of subjectivity assumed by those

who assert that modernity by definition leads to self-chosen marriages. Firstly, intimate recognition is,

as I have shown, part of arranged marriages as well. Secondly, the distinction is not so much one

between individualism and collective interests, but one between different modes of individuation.

Following Hallward a conceptual distinction between a singular mode of individuation and the specific

mode of individuation maybe fruitful here:

‘ A specific rather than singular mode of individuation yields elements whose individuality can

only be discerned through the relations they maintain with themselves, with their environment,

and with other individuals. The condition of identity of such an individual is that it be constituted

through and persist in relation with others’ (Hallward 2001 :4).

As long as we do not lose sight of the lived experience of conjugal relations, romantic love, and sexual

desire, it is worth emphasizing as well that, as classical anthropological approaches have it, such

relationality is often established through exchange. Thus far from being limited to modern selves,

ideologies of marriage do everywhere and at all times, as Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry point out,

tend to entail elements of long-term reasoning directed at the reproduction of the collective and ‘short

term exchanges associated with individual appropriation, competition, sensuous enjoyment, luxury and

youthful vitality’. As it happens, even in postmodern India, the latter are only ‘morally acceptable as

long as they remain subordinated to, and do not compete with, the long-term restorative cycles’ (Bloch

and Parry 1989: 24–5). The example of middle-class Kolkatans’ ideas about love and marriage shows

that the notion of the modern self is indeed built around the idioms of love and intimacy, which

determine how marriages are interpreted, but that such notions do not necessarily lead to a full embrace

of individualism as a lead value. Here as elsewhere, the globalising idiom of ‘love’ has to be related to

the wider social world – the long term perspective, and the relationships it implies, and it is in this sense

that marriage, its imagination and experience, shapes love, not the other way round.

**NOTE**

Extended periods of fieldwork were undertaken in 1995-1996; 1999-2000 and 2001-2002 and were

generously supported by the Economic and Social Research Council. Shorter periods of fieldwork

followed. An earlier version of the article was presented at seminars at the Delhi School of Economics

in 2008, the LSE in 2009, the Centre of Modern Indian Studies Göttingen, 2011 and the conference of

the European Association of South Asian Studies in Nanterre in 2012. I am grateful for all comments

made on these different occasions.

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1. This much publicised case involved a Marwari woman and her Muslim lover

   Riznavur, who was found dead on a railway track in August 2007 after allegedly being

   threatened by his wife’s family. His family filed a case against the girl’s family. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A more detailed discussion of the co-existence and ambivalent relationship between

   the former can be found in Author 2008: 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See the classic accounts of Bengali kinship by Inden and Nicholas and Fruzzetti’s

   work on kinship and marriage rituals, as well as the marital histories presented by

   Manisha Roy (Roy 1972; Inden and Nicholas 1977; Fruzzetti 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I have commented on the multiple variations on the theme of patrilocality in this

   context elsewhere (see Author 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)