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Changing Identities of Indian Migrants in the West: Sanjana Sakhrani on Arranged Marriages

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to initiate a broader discussion concerning the identities of Indian migrants and their perceptions of arranged marriage. Through an oral testimony and a detailed life history of one interlocutor, my research explores my mother's marital experiences, including the involvement of her family, the arrangement of the marriage itself, and the challenges that come with adjusting to marital life. Within the framework of this topic, larger theoretical and cultural phenomena are addressed such as the role of immigration, acculturation, changing notions of individualism, and identity in relation to diaspora. Such topics shed light on how Indian marital practices and related societal perceptions of identity such as gender norms, are changing for Indian migrants.

Keywords: Arranged marriage, family, gender norms, acculturation, India

experience is — for lack of a better word — layered. Indeed, in addition to selecting an arranged marriage for herself despite having other options, her narrative showcases the multifaceted, overlapping perspectives of a daughter, a wife, and a mother.

My mother, Sanjana, was born in Mumbai, India, in 1971. Despite the fact that her parents had a love marriage and shared “a very good relationship,” Sanjana’s mother was quite “strict” and conservative about relationships. She believed in traditional Indian socio-centric norms, such as cultural endogamy, the practice of marrying within the same cultural group. My grandfather, on the other hand, has always been understanding and “liberal.” As my mother articulates, “They both balanced off.” I think that Sanjana’s beliefs are in part a combination of both of her parents’ mindsets and personalities. Moreover, she “always looked up to [them].” This resulted in Sanjana wanting her mother and father to arrange her marriage. Thus, at the age of 27, my mother got married in India. For the first few months after her wedding, she lived with her husband and mother-in-law, taking care of chores and her first-born daughter. In 2000, my parents decided to start a new life in Canada. Moving to a Western country, as well as the challenges that come with immigration and being an Indian woman, have certainly played a role in not only shaping Sanjana’s marital life, but her principles as well. All of these factors are worth interpreting as they might shed light on not only my mother’s identity, but potentially the overall shifting identities of Indians living in a Western setting.

The aim of this paper is to learn about the significance of an arranged marriage to my mother to obtain a sense of why this tradition, even amongst many families living outside of India, persists. While the practice of arranged marriage extends to multiple religions in India, this paper specifically focuses on Hindus given that my mother comes from a Hindu family. Furthermore, my research aims to dismantle ongoing stereotypes associated with this tradition. One such stereotype comes from my own past biases, such as the idea that arranged marriages are regressive. This misconception is also promoted in the recent reality television series *Indian Matchmaking* on Netflix. For

I was thirteen years old when I learned that my grandfather had what we colloquially call in India a ‘love marriage.’ This came as a surprise to me since I thought that everybody in my family had had their weddings arranged; my own parents’ relationship was arranged. Typically, in Indian arranged marriages, parents select their child’s future spouse based on their cultural background and “social and economic standing [...] there is little or no contact between the prospective spouses prior to marriage” (Allendorf and Pandian 2016, 435). In contrast, in Western marital customs, individuals traditionally select their own spouses “on the basis of compatibility or affection, usually gained through interactions before marriage” (Allendorf and Pandian 2016, 435). As such, my maternal grandparents’ marriage reflected Western standards. This made me wonder why my mother had *chosen* an arranged marriage, despite her parents being more lenient regarding the matter. My mother’s justification was that, as she put it, “I always wanted my parents to select [a] boy for me.” As a second-generation Canadian, this made me question the values and beliefs behind Indian matrimonial practices and views on romantic relationships.

Allendorf and Pandian (2016) discuss that, although modernization theory had predicted the decline of arranged marriage in non-Western countries, India’s current marital practices showcase that traditional values hold across the country (458). In addition, it appears that such matrimonial customs are prevalent even outside of India (Bhopal 2011; Pande 2016). This research therefore focuses on the experiences of those who *choose* an arranged marriage over a love marriage. More specifically, this paper looks at the case of my mother, Sanjana Sakhrani, whose overall

instance, it portrays arranged marriage as an outdated practice in which astrology is more influential than the agency of the individuals involved in the arrangement of the marriage. More importantly, however, are the gender stereotypes depicted in Indian society, despite changing values in recent decades. One such example from the series is the idea of discouraging women from pursuing their goals and dreams in order to find a suitable partner. Ankita, a young fashion entrepreneur, was advised by a middle-aged matchmaker to prioritize marriage over her career. While the stigma surrounding single women is a common issue in patriarchal countries, Indian women's priorities have changed, especially when considering the increase in female literacy rates in India in recent years (Chandra 2019, 3). Ankita was open to having an arranged marriage, but her leaving the show indicates that modern values like hers no longer align with the old marital customs depicted in *Indian Matchmaking*. Times have changed, resulting in the standards within arranged marriages changing as well. Indeed, arranged marriages can be quite elastic, especially when considering the families' individual experiences and values.

This example showcases the shift in Indian marital trends in recent decades. Ethnographic research allows for people to share their different and unique marital experiences which adds to the discussion surrounding Indian arranged marriages. Therefore, my paper specifically addresses arranged marriage in Western countries. Most researchers focus on people living in India, where societal norms and values differ from Western societies. Recent studies have looked at the cultural values that shape the experience of pre-marital relationships in modern India (Bhandari 2017), the reasons why many young Indian students choose an arranged marriage (Nanda 2015), and three main factors, family, faith, and happiness, that contribute to the experience of arranged relationships amongst Indians living in India (Bowman and Dollahite 2013). My mother's story, however, provides a different perspective on arranged marriages which highlights how diasporic identities are shaped by processes of migration and acculturation. Therefore, this research introduces readers to a

female immigrant's perspective on arranged marriages.

Through my oral history research, this paper will explore the importance of family involvement in matrimonial practices, the arrangement of Sanjana's marriage, and the challenges that come with adjusting to a new life in Canada. One of the reasons why life history research was chosen for this paper is because it reflects "a specific set of values and aspirations" (Goodson and Gill 2011, 42) on the interviewee's part. In effect, an individual's past experiences contribute to the shaping of their social imagination. This phenomenon, combined with our current lived realities and expectations for the future, becomes an ongoing process, which "involves...the co-construction of meaning and a re-constitution of selfhood" (Goodson and Gill 2011, 42). This, in turn, is what shapes a person's values and hopes. Such phenomena were articulated by my mother when telling her story. Both her principles and experience have shaped her identity, which may also reflect the contemporary identities of other Indian migrants. Overall, Sanjana's narrative is only one of the many untold stories of arranged marriages that may contribute to clarifying misconceptions about the practice and enlightening readers on why numerous Indians choose arranged marriages.

Marital Trends and Changing Practices

Despite India's shifting notions of marriage, gender, and family, changes in marital practices have been quite slow, meaning that the majority are still arranged (Allendorf and Pandian 2016, 459). Yet, when looking at national trends, Allendorf and Pandian (2016) showcase the increasing choice women have when it comes to marriage. Indeed, "the increasingly dominant pattern [is] for both parents and daughters to be involved in the selection" (Allendorf and Pandian 2016, 443). Despite such changes and the rise of the importance of "love [and] interpersonal compatibility" (Allendorf and Pandian 2016, 435) between man and woman in recent years, love marriages are not nearly as popular as arranged marriages with love marriages

constituting only six percent of all marriages in India (Allendorf and Pandian 2016, 444). Inter-caste marriages are also less common, and similar to the rates of arranged marriages also account for only six percent of all marital relationships (Allendorf and Pandian 2016, 444). Despite this shift in marital practices, these numbers indicate that India still “express[es] the most contractualistic value-orientations” (Theodorson 1965, 24). As a matter of fact, in their study, Srinivasan and James (2015, 4) highlight that the “religio-caste variable has the most effect on Hindus” and holds more importance than “achieved variables such as place of residence, education, and wealth.” In effect, 85% of Hindus marry within the same religion (Srinivasan and James 2015, 5). Even today, most people view inter-caste and inter-religious marriages as socially unacceptable. The preference for marriages within the same caste and religion is mainly linked to their “economic and emotional benefits” (Srinivasan and James 2015, 5). Therefore, “the stability of the institution of marriage in India [is rooted] in religion, caste, and the high social and economic costs of marital breakdown” (Srinivasan and James 2015, 6). My own mother’s experience is reflective of this. Despite the increasing flexibility of arranged marriages over the years, my research shows that such principles are still prevalent amongst the younger generations of Indians.

Although traditional marital practices are shifting slowly, the changes thus far have been quite significant, especially when considering the trends among various Indian diasporas. For instance, Raksha Pande’s (2015) research explores the beliefs and experiences of first and second-generation Indo-British which posits marriages have become “increasingly flexible” (383). Indeed, the spectrum of arranged marriage includes four trends: traditional, semi-arranged, love-cum, and arranged weddings. Traditional arranged marriages do not allow acquaintanceship before the wedding. Semi-arranged marriages involve the parents and the child jointly selecting a potential spouse and allowing the couple to court before the wedding. Love-cum arranged marriages consist of self-selecting a spouse and then seeking parental approval.

Finally, in arranged weddings, the only role parents have is planning the wedding ceremony. Pande’s (2015) research shows that the two former types of marriages were more common among the first-generation Indo-British. The latter two practices were more popular among the second-generation Indo-British (Pande 2015, 388-390). As for my own parents, their marriage can be described as semi-arranged.

What differentiates all these types of marriage are the level of parents’ involvement and the degree of freedom the children have. However, these various degrees and levels of arrangement in arranged marriages depend on the families’ preferred practices as well as the children’s own values and beliefs based on their cultural identity. The second-generation participants stated that no matter the choice they make regarding the type of marriage, parents’ wishes are also important to consider. Such a perspective was reiterated in Parul Bhandari’s (2017) research which highlights that pre-marital relationships among the youth of India, although based on emotional compatibility, also “abide by the moral framework set by the family” (3). Hence, both individual choice and parental influence guide the selection of a partner among participants from both studies. Pande (2016) notes that the second-generation participants also chose to incorporate “the demands of modernity such as the ideas of romantic love” in their practices, therefore embracing both tradition and modernity (394). Pande (2016) concludes that the Indo-British’s modern identity could be described “as a progressive self but within the limits of religious and community boundaries” (395). Similar ideas are also reflected in Bhopal (2011) in which the highly educated Indo-British women are accepting of both the traditional practices of arranged marriage and the changes it has undergone in recent years, thus embracing both British and Indian norms. In the end, “whilst respondents were describing a change in interpersonal circumstances, they were also detailing a social structure in which the prioritisation of family and community capital remained important” (Bhopal 2011, 444).

Identity, then, is integral when it comes to the choices Indians make regarding marriage. While Srinivasan and James' (2015) research reveals more contractualistic practices among Indians living in India, the Indo-British interviewees in Pande (2016) and Bhopal (2011) incorporate both Indian and British values, showcasing the flexibility of arranged marriages. Therefore, one should consider how acculturation affects the identities of the various Indian diasporas and the choices they make. Pande (2016) is only one example of the fusion of different values and practices. In addition, the interviewees revealed how marital trends differ from one generation to another. Indeed, the first-generation Indo-British were associated with more traditional practices. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that they were born in India, where, unlike Britain, people often prioritize cultural endogamy and the fulfilment of their parent's wishes over individual desires. As for the second-generation participants who were born in Britain, Pande (2016) shows that their values aligned with Britain's individualist culture. However, because these participants grew up in an Indian family, their beliefs incorporated traditional Indian principles as well. The children therefore abide by a more accultured perspective. As for the immigrant parents, the immediate thought might be that cultural values remain static amongst diasporic communities. In effect, first-generation immigrants, unlike their second-generation children, often have a harder time adopting the norms of their host country. This acculturation gap, also known as intergenerational cultural dissonance, can lead to family conflict, among other things (Kane et al. 2019). However, my paper looks at whether my mother, a first-generation Indo-Canadian, is open to bending her principles for the sake of her children, namely when it comes to marriage. Indeed, part of better comprehending the change in Indian arranged marriages is to explore whether parents are willing to adopt the accultured values of their children.

Gender Norms

Despite the evolving trends' breaking of societal standards, one important thing to mention is that the practice of arranged marriage is still

rooted in traditional gender norms (Santhiveeran 2005, 27). Because "Indian women tend to be valued by society in relation to their role in a family—as a wife, daughter-in-law, and mother" they face greater pressure (Srinivasan and James 2015, 5). As a result, Indian women are often controlled by their partners and in-laws (Raval 2009; Bhandari 2017). Unfortunately, in a society where "family pride is partly based on the conformity of the girls to family tradition and by the standards set by the family and the community," women are far from attaining gender equality in marital relationships (Santhiveeran 2005, 33). In sum, these gender norms are what defines a woman's status in society. India's socio-centric culture therefore also plays into marital customs, namely arranged marriages.

Methods

This paper was initially written for my research method class focused on family history, which is why I chose the topic of arranged marriages. Arranged marriages are very common in my family, and this research paper was an opportunity to provide further insight into what it means to have an arranged marriage. The aim of my research was to contribute to the scholarship of a specific historical topic, in this case, Indian arranged marriages, by capturing the unique life experience of a family member. Indeed, because this paper was written in the span of one college semester, I was asked to conduct my research with one family member only. While focusing on a single individual can be prone to overgeneralization, I made use of several forms of scholarly literature to draw parallels with my mother's experience to further the discussion on Indian arranged marriages outside of India.

My research involved interviewing my mother. Before undertaking my interview, she signed a consent form provided by my professor, which mentioned that her name and experience would be discussed for academic purposes. I also asked permission to use photographs. I made it known to her that she had the right to withdraw from the interview at any point in time. Throughout our discussion, I made sure to remain sensitive and respectful to mitigate any possibility of harm. Finally, I would

like to mention that I only interviewed my mother once, as instructed by my professor given the time constraint.

To learn more about my mother's experience, I conducted an in-depth semi-structured interview with open-ended questions. Not only did this allow my interviewee to produce "elaborated and detailed answers" but it also gave me the freedom to improvise some of the questions when interesting points were brought up during the conversation (Griffin 2013b, 186). I prepared about twenty questions beforehand. Some of them were inspired by my literature review, and others were more specific to my mother's case. These questions were asked chronologically; the first questions were mostly lighthearted and pertained to her life before marriage, such as "did you have a crush or boyfriend growing up?" whereas the latter questions, some of them being heavier, were more in relation to her marriage and her life after marriage, like "what was going through your mind on the day of your wedding?" I was also advised to ask questions pertaining to her regrets, achievements, and changes in perspective, which allowed me to get a sense of how my mother may feel towards her personal experiences. The interview was recorded and was almost ninety minutes long. I later listened to the recording and transcribed bits from our conversation, which were divided into three broad themes: family involvement in marriage, the arrangement of my mother's marriage, and her marital challenges. These were recurrent topics throughout the interview, which represent the key themes of my findings.

These subjects are discussed alongside my findings from the literature review. Bhandari (2017), Nanda (2015), and Bowman and Dollahite (2013) address the marital experiences of those living in India, whereas Bhopal (2011) and Pande (2016) discuss marriage amongst the Indo-British. These authors provide insightful information on contemporary Indian marital experiences and expectations and also provide a sense of how these aspects differ between the different diasporas. While there is abundant research on Indians living in India, there is not robust literature on Indians outside of India, especially

in Western countries. Indeed, because my paper addresses the Indo-Canadian diaspora, the most relevant articles, ones that concerned Indians living in a more Western setting, were those of the Indo-British (eg. Bhopal 2011; Pande 2016). My mother's story, then, is a further contribution to the study of Indian arranged marriages and diasporic identity.

Oral history research and life history research were appropriate methods for discussing arranged marriages with my mother. Even though my research only focuses on one individual, a single life history can reveal a lot about the society in which the person lives. In effect, when it comes to oral research, the discourse is often invested, meaning that it "contributes to the (re)production of power relations in society and to the interpretive schema operating within a given society" (Griffin 2013a, 98). The subject of family involvement, for instance, reveals the significant and influential role of family within Indian society, including marriages. Indeed, my mother's consistent use of the words 'boy' and 'girl,' rather than 'man' and 'woman,' when speaking about future spouses, suggests the reinforcement of the parent-child dynamic in the context of her marriage arrangement. More importantly, the reason why an interview was more efficient for my research topic is because people have different experiences and perspectives on the matter. My mother's story itself is quite unique as it sheds light on her experience as a woman and migrant. Oral history is "therefore [...] necessary for a history of the non-hegemonic classes" (Portelli 1981, 104).

This leads me to address the ethnographic aspect of oral history. Both ethnographic fieldwork and oral history, while being separate fields, aim "to give voice to the voiceless" (Di Leonardo 1987, 3), or the unheard. In the context of ethnographic practices, however, interpreting oral history can be tricky. Contemporary ethnographic theorists are concerned with ethnographic authority, the idea that anthropologists have a "right to describe others' realities" (Di Leonardo 1987, 8). In order to conduct ethnographic research more ethically and efficiently, Di Leonardo (1987) highlights the importance of one's self-

consciousness, meaning being aware of one's preconceived notions, one's sense of unease when conducting ethnographic research, how one might affect what the interviewee says.

In this vein of self-reflexivity, the reason I selected the topic of arranged marriage is because I was unsure whether I opposed the practice or not. Most of my relatives have had an arranged marriage, but as a second-generation Indo-Canadian, I have long been confused about this custom. I always understood arranged marriage as something that was done strictly to please the family, namely through ensuring that parental requirements and expectations are met, and through maintaining endogamy, given that most of my own relatives married within the same ethnicity, religion, and caste. Given that India is a society wherein most women have no status without a husband, I perceived arranged marriages as an obligation, rather than a choice, imposed on women (Srinivasan and James 2015). While I have always cared about my family's happiness, when it comes to romantic relationships, I believe in prioritizing my own choices and happiness, which is why I viewed arranged marriage as being conservative and backwards. As a result, I have always been curious to know why my mother, whose parents shared some of the same values as me, selected an arranged marriage.

Knowing that my stance on arranged marriage could bias my research, I tried my best to keep an open mind and disassociate myself from my own views as well as my knowledge on the matter. The whole marital system in India is a socially complex phenomenon, with nuances and customs varying from one region to another. Things also become more complicated when considering the various factors that come into play: family, caste, religion, social benefits, gender norms, and so forth. In particular, when it comes to oral life history research, Di Leonardo (1987) emphasizes "the self-conscious analysis of the intersubjectivity of the interview" (20). One example she gives is how interviewees say different things to different interlocutors on the same topic, because of differing perceptions of social power, or other reasons (Di Leonardo 1987). In the case of my paper, Sanjana may

have been speaking to me as my mother. Her positionality and "complexity of social life" as a wife and daughter-in-law is also important to consider in the interpretation of our interview (Germeten 2013, 615). Being aware of such things allowed me to distance myself from my preconceived notions and better "grasp [my mother]'s point of view, [her] relation to life, to realize [her] vision of [her] world" (Malinowski 1922, 19), which in turn contributed to my understanding of shifting identities of Indians living outside of India.

Findings

During our interview, my mother addressed the role of her family in the arrangement of her marriage, the arrangement of the marriage itself, and the challenges she underwent throughout her marital life. By bringing up these topics, I gained an understanding of how immigration, acculturation, individualism, and identity are interwoven. These aspects not only reveal what Sanjana's marriage means to her, but also shed light on why this custom is still significant and practiced in our ever-evolving society.

Family involvement

My mother claimed that, before her marriage, she had never fallen in love with anyone else or even "had a crush as such." Rather, Sanjana preferred letting her parents, whom she trusts, do the worrying of finding the right spouse. My mother selected this route, despite having open-minded and understanding parents. As previously mentioned, my grandparents had a love marriage, which was not common back in their days given that India was not accepting of such individualistic ways when it came to marital practices. In fact, Sanjana shared that at the time of her parents' marriage, there was "too much objection from [her] dad's side [of the family]." "The whole family [...] were against the marriage," so much so that almost none of their relatives "went for the wedding." For my mother, however, times had changed. Her parents did not impose an arranged marriage on her. Yet, because she described herself as being the most "obedient" child as well as being her "*maan kee betee*," 'her mother's daughter,' Sanjana trusted her parents in selecting a suitable husband for her.

Given that she was the second daughter in the family, it was her turn to get married, “the oldest girl [...] usually get[ting] first priority” (Santhiveeran 2005, 30). She had no objection to it because “even [her] sisters, [her] cousin brother [...] it was all arranged marriage [s].” Besides, my mother claimed to have always wanted her family’s support in whatever she did. One might argue that Sanjana’s choices may simply be a product of societal standards. However, her story reveals that she was always close to her relatives. The relationship she had with them might have in part influenced her decisions and strengthened her familial values. That is to say, this choice was made, in part, to make her family happy. Furthermore, Sanjana believes that an arranged marriage is more than just two people being united; it is a “bond between two families.” When asked about love marriages, she said, “Because I think... I think in a love marriage ... The boy and the girl they only think about themselves, like *their* happiness, what *they* want.” At first, it may seem as if my mother was criticizing her own parents’ relationship, which she initially described as being “strong” and “loving.” However, when she talks about the supposed selfishness of a love marriage, she is simply referring to the idea that the individuals in that relationship do not necessarily consider their parents’ wishes and requirements. Once again, Sanjana made it clear that in her case, she wanted her parents’ happiness and approval over anything else.

Even so, it is important to note that generally in Indian arranged marriages, much agency ultimately rests with the man and the woman who are about to get married, no matter how much they involve their parents. In my mother’s context, there was no forcing individuals into arranged marriages, despite what the term *arranged* suggests. Parents and relatives merely facilitate things for the children by introducing them to people and financially contributing to their wedding (Pande 2016, 385). When asked about whether she had the ability to back out of the relationship before the wedding, Sanjana answered affirmatively. Arranged marriages do involve some degree of individuality, which dispels the idea that the individuals involved have no agency in the matter.

This level of choice is also reflected in Sanjana’s expectations of her future husband.

Typically, Indian parents have very specific requirements when it comes to selecting the right partner for their child. Religion, ethnicity, and caste are usually the most important factors. As mentioned earlier, marrying within the same religion and ethnicity is more advantageous. Caste is an important factor to consider because it displays one’s inherited social status (Sharma 2021). People from higher castes are generally more respected in society as they are associated with purity. The caste system is obviously more complex, but the important thing to note is that parents are more likely to follow the custom of caste endogamy when selecting a spouse (Allendorf and Pandian 2016). The same can be said about my mother’s parents. However, one thing to note is that Sanjana wanted that as well; she wanted to marry someone from the same caste background. As she articulates, “if your culture and religion are same, it becomes more easier” to adjust because you know what to expect. If I want to get married, I want to get married to a *Shikarpuri*,” was my mother’s condition given that her own father is a *Shikarpuri*—a subcategory of Sindhis, originating from the Sindh province of Pakistan. Sanjana even believes that Indians should continue with this tradition to prevent any cultural clashes between a wife and a husband.

In a way, my mother ended up following societal standards by being endogamous to her culture and religion, even though it was her decision. Despite the fact that she has been living in Canada for over twenty years, she still remains firm in her identity and her principles: wanting the support of her family. To this day, my mother thinks that involving family in whatever you choose to do is important. “If your parents don’t agree with [your choice], make them understand, make them agree, make them see *your* point of view.” This is exactly what she expects of her children. She acknowledges that times have changed and that the younger generations do not necessarily favour socio-centric marital practices. This goes to show that Sanjana is accepting of individualistic ways, all the while wanting to preserve aspects of her Indian identity. Pande (2016) states “The [Indo-British] approach to modernity was more in line with a desire for an identity that could be described as a

progressive self but within the limits of religious and community boundaries” (395). Overall, Sanjana’s identity and beliefs include both traditional and modern values. My mother’s case, and those of the Indo-British in Pande (2016) showcase the shifting principles of Indians, which is partly due to immigration and the fusion of different cultural values.

In the end, Sanjana’s values include abiding by her parents wishes. That is a choice she made. While it might also be in part a product of India’s societal norms, Sanjana exercised her individuality to a certain extent. The importance she attributes to individuality extends to the expectations she has of her children as well. Indeed, she does not expect her daughters to get an arranged marriage as she is understanding of their beliefs. She simply wishes that they involve family in their decisions, just like she did. Once again, Sanjana’s principles incorporate both Indian and individualistic, in this case Canadian, values. Perhaps this is what defines many other first-generation Indian migrants. As such, the shifting identities of Indians are also based on their children’s wishes. My mother, and many other Indians, are accepting of change partly because of that. Family involvement in marital practices, then, does not necessarily prevent Indians from exercising their choices, but simply allows them to preserve their Indian customs and values by having their families’ support.

The Arrangement of My Mother’s Marriage

The arrangement of my mother’s marriage took place over six months. Despite some moments of hardship, everything that led up to her wedding day worked out perfectly for her. The arrangement started with a matchmaker. The matchmaker was given my mother’s biodata as well as her pictures and a list of requirements regarding potential matches. The matchmaker later called Sanjana’s house to announce that a family living in Mumbai was interested. After both my parents’ families met for the first time, my father asked to meet my mother alone. It was rather uncommon for an unmarried man to meet with an unmarried woman unaccompanied back in the 1990s, which is why Sanjana’s parents were reluctant at first. Being

permitted to talk before marriage was something that many Indians were not accustomed to, certainly not in my parents’ days. For a woman to meet her future husband, especially alone, before their wedding was a privilege (Santhiveeran 2005). However, my grandparents acknowledged that times were changing, and therefore my mother met my father at a restaurant not too far from her neighbourhood. While such detail might seem small, it was a significant change from the standard practices within traditional arranged marriages. Indeed, unlike traditional arranged marriages in which couples are not allowed to court before the wedding, my mother, after agreeing to get engaged to my father, courted her fiancé for six months before their wedding.

During their first meeting, my mother realized that she and her potential suitor shared quite a few things in common apart from their cultural background. Sanjana added, “he also — your father, at the age of seventeen, he started... like, he lost his father, so there was a responsibility on his shoulders to take care of his sisters [...] so your father took a big responsibility at a very young age. Me too.” This responsibility, though not explicitly stated, also consisted of getting married as nearly every Indian parent wishes for their child to be wed. This is especially true for their daughter since a woman’s status and value are defined by her role in a family (Srinivasan and James 2015). These kinds of societal gender norms were important to my mother’s family.

Although Sanjana did not quite mention it, my father’s story might have touched her. Given that my grandmother’s health was not the best at the time, Sanjana also believed that it was her responsibility to get married before it was too late. My mother put her own mother’s needs first because she valued her over anything else. Sanjana noticed that her suitor shared the same principle. As a matter of fact, the reason why my mother agreed to marry my father is because both prioritized their families. Once again, my mother made a choice that aligned with her upbringing, yet she exercised her individuality by marrying a man whose beliefs matched with hers.

After their engagement, my parents often went out together, and eventually “there was

more and more bonding between the two of [them]" prior to the wedding. Given her own pre-marital experience, Sanjana believes that it is important for a couple to establish trust and build a loving relationship before getting married. This shows that my mother's views differ from the traditional Indian ones. Despite the fact that her marriage was arranged, Sanjana adopts a perspective which prioritizes love. My parents' courting came to an end due to my grandmother's increasingly deteriorating state, and it was important for everyone that she be present for their wedding (see Figures 1 and 2). Although her wedding was a moment of joy for her, Sanjana was still tense given her mother's health. Unfortunately, my grandmother passed away nine days after the ceremony. However, my mother ensured that her last wish was fulfilled.

Overall, my mother's experience suggests that India, at least in large cities such as Mumbai, was slowly becoming more modern, and that marital practices were changing. For one, despite her family's involvement, Sanjana was still able to take part in the selection process, and court her suitor with her parents' blessings. Such things were uncommon in my grandparents' days. In addition, while my mother's views reflect traditional values, her decisions can be considered individualistic in and of themselves. She was able to cultivate a relationship with a man whom she liked and respected, which is partly why today her opinion on marriage aligns with relatively modern views. Lastly, my mother's expectations of my sisters and I reveal that she is accepting of change.

Marital challenges

Because many couples in North America live together before their marriage, getting married does not bring much change to their lives, but in the case of an arranged marriage, it is a completely different story. My mother talked about some of the challenges that she had to go through that are particular to arranged marriages:

You are going in a new place, in a new house, surrounded by different people... You leave your home where you are protected, and you're surrounded by your sisters and brothers and aunts and uncles and father



Figure 1: Sanjana's wedding ceremony. Photo by Sanjay Nichani.



Figure 2: Sanjana's mother is seen in a wheelchair during the wedding ceremony. Photo by Sanjay Nichani

and mother, and you go to a new place. You don't know if you'll get the same love, same affection, same uh... what do you call? Protection.

In India, most children stay with their parents even as adults and are close to their extended families as well. They live in the same environment for years which is why adjusting to a new family can be difficult, especially for women, according to my mother. In effect, women are the ones to leave their homes and are expected to adapt to the lives of their in-laws. My mother explained that when she lived with her husband and mother-in-law during the first couple of months after their wedding, she too had to change her ways. For instance, although she knew how to cook, she still had to learn to make food the way her mother-in-law did. She also had to adopt new manners such

as praying in the morning, offering sweets to the Gods and the elders first before eating them herself, and so on. This cultural and familial adaptation is similar to the experiences of many Indian women. The female participants of Bhandari (2017) reported that even before marriage, they would be tamed by their partners in order to fit the expectations of their families. This did not sit right with most of these women. Even today, familial expectations are in part shaped by gender norms. Sanjana acknowledged this fact but seemed to be indifferent to it, perhaps because her own experience was not traumatic. In effect, she claimed that adjusting to her new family was rather easy as she felt welcomed by everybody.

Even though my mother got closer to my father during their courting months, things became rough between them once they started living with each other after their marriage. Sanjana stated that, in arranged marriages, it takes time for the wife and the husband to build understanding and to get along. She added that one cannot fully understand a person until one lives with them. Although she did not go into much detail about the early years of her marital relationship, Sanjana mentioned that her “ego” and “immaturity” often got in the way, which created bigger rifts in her marriage. Sanjana did not mention any other problem that might be caused by her husband or her in-laws. She claimed that overall, her marital life was not that challenging. I believe that that is not entirely true. Indeed, Sanjana’s life before marriage was quite different. She was independent and earned for herself, and she did not have the responsibilities that come with being a wife and a daughter-in-law.

When she came to her new home, things changed a lot. She entered as a stranger and had no choice but to adapt and conform to the role given to her by her husband’s family (Bowman and Dollahite 2013). Over the years, my mother asserted that her understanding grew, and she assumed her role as both a wife and daughter-in-law by learning how to adapt to her new life. Her experience is quite similar to the participants of Raval (2009) in which the Gujarati women claimed, “that as daughters-in-law, they had to find a way to deal with

[inconvenient] situations, and that it was their responsibility to negotiate in these difficult situations without being disrespectful or disobedient” (498). Even though my mother’s experience was seemingly not challenging, the case of the Gujarati women shows that for some, it can be difficult. Women are the ones expected to compromise their needs, but whether that is a problem particular to arranged marriages or Indian society as a whole is not definitive. Some arranged marriages do in fact have their downsides, but it is also important to consider that experiences may differ from one family to another.

Immigrating to Canada in 2001 was another challenge for my parents, both financially and emotionally. Being away from their families was not easy. Not only that, but they had to leave behind their first-born daughter in India because they were unsure whether they would be able to provide for her in a new country. This is probably the biggest sacrifice my parents had to make coming to Canada. They were only able to reunite with their first child in 2007, nearly seven years after having left her. Despite these hardships, Sanjana and her husband were able to work things out together. Today, my mother has a good relationship with her in-laws as well as her husband. She describes her marriage as being “smooth,” “stable,” “strong,” and “loving.” My parents have been together for over twenty years, and despite all the challenges she had to encounter, my mother claimed that everything, including her arranged marriage, was “very much worth it.”

Suggestions for Future Research

Sanjana's narrative is just a small fragment of Indian immigrants’ experiences and perspectives regarding arranged marriage. There are numerous stories to be heard. For future studies, researchers could also document the challenges of Indian men living outside of India to be able to compare their issues to those of women. Secondly, this scholarship could also benefit from learning about the beliefs of older generations to be able to highlight the evolution of Indian values and mindsets. Another suggestion would be studying how immigration affects the marital lives of couples. My own research barely

addresses Sanjana's experience as a migrant, but there is a lot to be said about the challenges that migrants, particularly Indian couples in arranged marriages, deal with when moving to a new country.

Finally, the last suggestion is a bit more complex. I believe that throughout the interview, my mother's positionality affected the way she talked about her arranged marriage. In effect, I think she only wanted me to hear about the good side of her marriage, which is why she barely spoke of the initial struggles in her marital life. She did mention them, but she refrained from going into too much detail. Perhaps she did not want me to have any doubts about arranged marriages in order to avoid any conflict. Narrators often tend to "unconsciously [slant] their accounts" (Yow 1995, 56) when they either identify strongly with something or want their loyalty to remain unquestioned. Either that or the fact that my positionality as her daughter might have prevented her from talking about certain aspects of her marriage. Whatever the reason may be, this "unconscious advocacy" (Yow 1995, 55) is a common issue when it comes to oral and life history research. Nonetheless, this positioned perspective can be quite telling. I speculate that, no matter how much Sanjana's views might have changed, her core principles still lie in traditional values, meaning India's socio-centric principles.

Because India is a collectivist society, "men and women are required to honor the choice of their parents and elders in their family" (Santhiveeran 2005, 28). Moreover, women are often taught to accept their husbands "as is" no matter what (Santhiveeran 2005, 28). This is probably why Sanjana refrained from complaining about her marital life. The same can be said about the Gujarati participants in Raval's (2009) research. They, too, tended to silence themselves by trying to negotiate their needs and desires with those of other members of the family instead of being upfront about their issues. This leads to the question: what socio-psychological effects does this have on Indian women? Though I am no expert in the field of psychology, future researchers could find a way to study these

effects to further talk about the challenges of Indian women.

Conclusion

Sanjana's story is one example of the changing identities of Indians, especially when it comes to migrants. Her identity can be described as a mix of both traditional Indian values and Canada's individualist principles. This incorporation of both socio-centric and individualist values is the product of Sanjana's experiences. Her close relationship with her family is in part what shaped her familial values, which is why she always put her family's happiness before her own. Sanjana therefore believed that it was her duty to have an arranged marriage. This is why, even today, Sanjana believes that it is important to involve her family in whatever decisions she makes.

In addition, her pre-marital relationship with her fiancé reveals that love is, in fact, an important factor to her, which was not common back in my grandparents' days. Another thing to note is that, throughout the interview, Sanjana spoke very positively of her marriage, and even encouraged the idea of marrying within the same culture. However, because she is aware of the fact that her own children's beliefs might not align with India's socio-centric norms, she is accepting of modern ways. Besides, Sanjana has been living in Canada for almost 23 years. Surely the effects of acculturation had an impact on Sanjana's mindset, similar to the Indo-British in Bhopal (2011) and Pande's (2016) accounts. Overall, it is safe to assume that this mixing of cultures is partly responsible for the evolving customs within marital practices amongst Indians.

Given all her experiences, one cannot deny the role Sanjana's arranged marriage had in her life. In effect, her marriage has in large part defined who she is today. Her marriage is also responsible for the expectations she has of her daughters. Furthermore, the fact that she speaks so positively of her marriage, without once mentioning the issues she might have had with her husband or her in-laws, is quite telling. Sanjana does seem to regret her decisions, which showcases how significant her marriage is to her. Given the importance of family in Indian society, even younger generations agree

with considering their parents' wishes and desires, no matter the type of marriage (Pande 2016). Indeed, "in a country where every resource in life—a job, a house, a social circle—is gained through family connections," it is essential to maintain one's family support (Nanda 2015, 127). Therefore, arranged marriages in today's society, at least in large Indian cities and amongst Indians living outside of India, preserve such notions, but do not prevent individuals from making their own choices.

In effect, Sanjana's marital experience does, in fact, reflect some level of individuality. For one, going forward with an arranged marriage was *her* decision. Sanjana deeply values her family, which is why she wanted to include her relatives in her marital decisions. Furthermore, I believe that her core principles still lie in socio-centric values, which is why she wanted to marry someone from the same cultural background as her. Secondly, when it came to selecting a spouse, my mother actively engaged in the selection process. As a matter of fact, she agreed to marry my father because she found him compatible. Lastly, throughout the whole process of arranging the marriage, Sanjana clearly stated that she still had the possibility to back out of the relationship if she wanted to. My mother's arranged marriage, then, was not restrictive, as is the case for many other Indians, indicating a shift in marital practices. Sanjana was able to exercise both her individuality by making choices that aligned with her principles and her sense of family by including her parents in that decision.

It is important to mention, however, that many arranged marriages do have their downsides. While my mother does not speak of her own marriage's shortcomings, her marital experience, as well as those of other women, was still affected by India's gender norms. Even today, women are often the ones expected to adjust to their husband's lives. While expectations differ from one family to another, this phenomenon is still important to keep in mind. Whether this issue is related to Indian society as a whole or specifically to arranged marriages is not certain, but there is a need for change. However, times are evolving, and with that, mentalities and customs are slowly shifting too. Over the years, arranged marriages

have become more flexible, and the proof of that is the changing identities of Indian migrants in the West.

As for my own views, at first, I did not know whether I opposed this tradition or not. I still am unsure, but I can say that reading several articles discussing the experiences of others and interviewing my own mother has broadened my perspective on arranged marriages. I initially had a negative opinion of this type of marital union, but I know now that arranged marriages are not inherently meant to be oppressive or restricting. Rather, they are meant to deepen familial bonds, or at least that is the way I see them. As mentioned before, family is important in Indian society, and today's ongoing practices, even in other countries, demonstrate that this principle resonates with many people.

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