

Matchmaking 2.0

The Representation of Women and Female Agency in the Indian Online Matrimonial Market*

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1. Introduction

For centuries, Indian families have sought help from relatives, marriage brokers, and, more recently, newspaper advertisements to marry off their sons and daughters. They have relied on kinship and caste networks, on marriage bureaus and on “word of mouth”. But the global media age has opened up a whole world of new possibilities. The first India-based websites dedicated to matrimonial matchmaking appeared on the World Wide Web in the late 1990s and the number of users has increased ever since. These websites provide a complex picture of young Indians searching for life partners. A detailed analysis of the matrimonial profiles offers a remarkable insight into the changing concepts of marriage, love, and gender roles. The sheer fact that millions of profiles containing personal information are accessible via the internet proves how significant medialisation is. The media permeate very intimate and personal domains, thus becoming part of social change.

India’s matrimonial market can be here seen as paradigmatic. On the one hand, marriage as a central social event is being medialised. On the other, changing gender roles, social concepts, and values are reflected in the design of websites and advertisements as well as in user profiles. An analysis of Indian matrimonial websites overlaps with multiple other issues. The global Indian online matrimonial market includes a strong transnational component, which deserves special attention. With regard to gender-related debates, matrimonial websites are interesting sources for observing the construction and mediation processes of femininity.

* The title points to the term Web 2.0 which describes a new generation of the World Wide Web comprising more interactive and collaborative elements.

The following article focusses on the latter aspect and is based on research conducted over the past three years both online and through field-work in India, mainly in Mumbai. I analyze how women are portrayed in the advertisements that appear on these websites, in the so-called “true” and “success” stories, which are meant to attract more users. The other part of my media content analysis consists of profile analyses of female users and their self-representation online. My field research comprises personal interviews with users and media producers or operators. An analysis of these aspects shows not only how the medium is used, but also how gender roles and ideals are negotiated in contemporary India. I close this article with observations on the Indian online matrimonial market’s transnational dynamics using the Gujarati marriage market and its global medial and political network as an example.

Unfortunately, Indian matrimonial websites have so far received very limited attention from academics. The focus of most literature lies primarily on matrimonial print advertisements in India (see Shukla/Kapadia 2007; Majumdar 2004; Sharda, 1990; Rao/Rao 1990; Choudhury/Choudhury/Mohanty 1995; Banerjee 2009). Hardly any study contains more than one reference to online matrimonials (see Hankeln 2008). Exceptions are Seth and Patnayakuni’s “Online matrimonial sites and the transformations of arranged marriage in India” (2009) and Sharma’s “Caste on Indian Marriage dot-com: Presence and Absence” (2008), which focuses exclusively on the Indian diaspora in North America. Equally worth mentioning is Jha and Adelman’s study on the significance of skin colour in the Indian online matrimonial market (Jha/Adelman 2009). Apart from this, the bulk of existing literature is either journalistic or anecdotal and gives merely a first impression (see Pepper 2007).

2. The Indian Online Matrimonial Market

To contextualize the following analysis, I will briefly outline India’s rapidly growing online matrimonial market.

The rise of online matrimonial websites is part of a general boom that has taken place in the Indian media landscape since the 1990s, alongside economic liberalization and privatization (Munshi 2001: 79; Schneider 2007). The exact number of online matrimonial websites is unclear but there are roughly 2500; half of which are Indian, or at least South Asian (Kaur 2002). This is not surprising. Marriage arrangements through newspaper advertisements, marriage bureaus, and family networks have a long tradition in South Asia. The internet is only an additional medium used to simplify the search for a partner. India is not called the new IT nation without reason.

The growing number of young, educated computer users fluent in English explains the overwhelming response matrimonial websites receive. Overall, India's 38 million internet users make up the world's fourth largest group (IAMAI's Report on Matrimonial Search '2006': 2). According to a study conducted by the internet and Mobile Association of India, about 80 percent of the users of matrimonial websites are between 18 and 35 years old, have at least a college degree and live in one of India's mega-cities.¹ The study finds a rapid and continuous rise in user numbers since 2005. It estimates that there were about seven million users of matrimonial websites in 2006 and 2007 (IAMAI's Report on Matrimonial Search '2006': 2).

The online matrimonial market is led by three main websites: Shaadi.com, BharatMatrimony.com, and Jeevansathi.com², of which Shaadi.com claims the highest number of users and successful matches. Shaadi.com's biggest competitor is BharatMatrimony.com, which has developed a different business strategy with regional affiliations. The portal consists of 15 regional sub-sites, called TamilMatrimony, BengalMatrimony, Marathi Matrimony etc. BharatMatrimony.com has a stronger hold in South India (Pepper 2007). In comparison to Shaadi.com, Jeevansathi.com seems to attract fewer Non-Resident Indians (NRI) and educated urban candidates, and is consequently rated as less effective by many of my interviewees. Apart from these big websites, there are a vast number of small sites which attract plenty of subscribers: IndianMatrimonials.com, Pyar.org, LifePartnerIndia.com, Matri Search.com, and MeraSathi.com. New sites are constantly being created, for example the recently launched SimplyMarry.com, "India's only metro-monial site", which addresses mainly an urban clientele. Furthermore, there are many websites which cater to specific communities or customers: SikhingYou.com for Sikhs, Nikah.com for Muslims, TrinityMatrimony.com for Keralite Christians, are only some examples. I have come across several Gujarati websites such as glagna.com and some which even specialize in particular castes such as the Patels³, Kutchi Lohanas⁴ or Brahma Kshatriya Sorathiya Vaishnavs⁵. The number of websites designed for an exclusive audience is growing steadily.

¹ Most users are located in Mumbai (17 percent), followed by Delhi with 16 percent, Chennai, Kolkata and Bangalore (5-6 percent). See: IMAI's Report on Matrimonial Search '2006': 3-4.

² Shaadi (Hindi) = Marriage; Bharat (Hindi) = India; Jeevansathi (Hindi) = Life Partner.

³ www.patelvivah.com.

⁴ www.kutchilohana.com.

⁵ <http://shaadi.brahmakshatriya.com>.

In 2007, the creators of Shaadi.com bridged another gap in the market by launching the website SecondShaadi.com, which is promoted as the “No.1 Re-marriage site for Indians”. The site now operates independently from its mother-site Shaadi.com. By creating a marriage market for seekers of a second marriage, i.e. for divorcees and widowed people, the founders broke with traditional resentment since re-marriage, at least for conservative Hindus, has long been a taboo and is still not accepted all over the sub-continent. Even the general matrimonial sites contain the profiles of a significant percentage of widowed and divorced seekers, although the overwhelming majority of users have never been married (IAMAI’s Report on Matrimonial Search ‘2006’: 3).

3. Medialization and Mobility

To analyze this phenomenon, I use the concept of “medialization”, the growing impact that the media are having on culture and society. Hepp’s model of “media as moulding forces” (Hepp 2010) in conjunction with social change offers a suitable theoretical starting point. He names three dimensions of medialization: individualization as social dimension, deterritorialization as spatial dimension and an increasing immediacy as temporal dimension. These three dimensions are suitable for examining the medialisation process of the Indian marriage market. Individualization as a dimension of social change and the trends of media usage are found in the following media content analysis. An increasing immediacy is primarily present in terms of changing forms of communication and technology. Communication with prospective candidates has become much faster and more direct through the internet, Email, and mobile phones than through “middlemen” such as marriage bureaus or advertising departments. The third dimension, deterritorialization, is only too apparent on the online matrimonial market. Hepp’s concept applies as far as transnationality and translocality are concerned but excludes the important factors of regionalization and localization or reterritorialization (see Schneider/Gräf 2010). A medial trend towards regionalization was mentioned above with the increasing number of regionally specialized sites and linguistic- as well as community-based differentiation on leading websites such as BharatMatrimony.com, which has inspired most of the other matrimonial websites to arrange their search criteria along regional and language affiliations. These dynamics will be examined later. On the basis of the general increase of social, physical, and medial mobility (Hjorth 2009; Morley 2000; Urry 2007), I prefer to use the term “physical mobility” than to talk only of deterritorialization as a spatial category. Similarly, it seems necessary to expand Hepp’s social dimension

of individualization to include changing agency and gender roles. Again, the Indian online matrimonial market shows diverging trends. Individualization is one, but increasing community oriented websites another trend. Although these may be seen as incompatible, an increasing individualization might equally take place within the realm of community orientation. Later in this article the term “family-oriented individualism” is introduced to describe a possible conflation of individual and social preferences (see 2.2). The term “medial mobility” again overlaps with Hepp’s concept but not only includes increasing immediacy but also trends towards intermediality and media convergence, which are important components of the medialisation of the marriage market. Thus, Hepp’s concept serves as a useful starting point but needs to be expanded to accommodate diverging trends of media development (Schneider/Gräf 2011: Introduction).

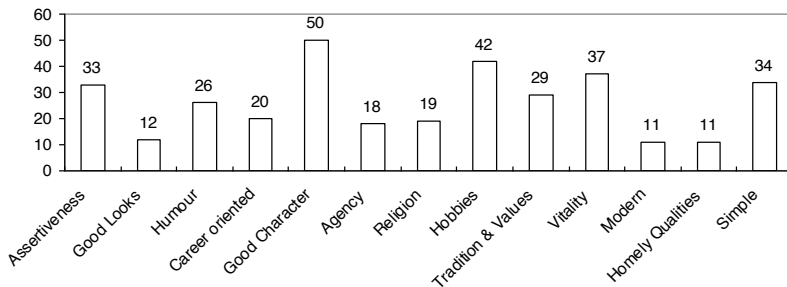
4. Women on Matrimonial Websites: Medial (Self-)Representation

The first sample I analyzed consisted of a random selection of 100 female profiles that had been posted on the matrimonial website Shaadi.com in 2007. The only activated filter options were Mumbai as the location and the age range of 20 to 25 years. Interestingly, the sample composition resembled the actual figures of linguistic and religious communities in Mumbai.⁶ While 70 percent of the users in the internet sample said they were Hindus and 17 percent declared themselves Muslims, the 2001 census for Mumbai found 67.4 percent Hindus and 18.6 percent Muslims in the city. Christians and Sikhs were slightly over-represented in the analyzed sample compared to the population statistics, while Buddhist users were under-represented. This can perhaps be explained by the considerable number of Dalit converts to Buddhism in Maharashtra (Fuchs 1999). The majority still belongs to the under-privileged segments of Indian society and not to the middle and upper classes, which are the prime target group for online matrimonial services.

47 of the 100 women from Mumbai had created their profiles themselves. The rest had been posted by parents, siblings, friends, or others. The analysis concentrated on the profile section “About Myself” or “About Her” (if posted by others) which comprises self-descriptions or essay-like descriptions of the respective candidates. I examined these texts according to 13 categories (Figure 1).

⁶ Census of India 2001.

FIGURE 1: Shaadi.com: Description of Self (in percent)



My study showed that many women present themselves as “confident” and “assertive” (33 percent) but emphasize their connection to traditional Indian values (29 percent), so-called “family values” or “respect for elders” for example. Simultaneously, many stress their ambition to combine career and family life as demonstrated by quotes from the profile texts:

[She] would like to have a joint family and [is] ready to manage family responsibilities along with professional goals.

I am confident of striking a balance between my personal & professional life.

These were recurring statements, which contrasted with rather traditional descriptions such as being “homely” (11 percent) “beautiful” (12 percent) or “religious” (19 percent). The most prominent features were the descriptions of one’s own favourable character (50 percent), hobbies (42 percent) and zest for life (“vitality”, 37 percent). Under the category “Agency” (18 percent) I summed up narratives describing precise future plans, emphasis of “one’s own way” and independence.

What is striking is the constant attempt of female users to combine seemingly contrasting aspects. While describing career ambitions and adventurous outdoor hobbies, many describe themselves as “simple girls” who respect traditions. Typical sentences read: “I am a smart, urban woman with traditional values”, “I would call myself a good mix of east and west”, or “thinks rationally still values traditions”. These narratives of self-perception lead to the concept of the “New Indian Woman” who pursues a global lifestyle but sticks to “Indian values” (Munshi 2001; Fernandes 2000; Rajan 1993). The concept of the “New Indian Woman” was constructed and has been increasingly referred to by the media since the 1980s (Mankekar 1999 and 2009; Schneider 2005: 52). The online matrimonial market is also influenced by such medial constructions of femininity. Portraits of success-

ful users and their stories are published by almost all websites as part of promotion strategies for proving success. Most of the advertisement illustrations or representatives of “True Stories” are female. The constant attempt to combine “modern” and “traditional” elements in these depictions is a dominant tendency. Priyanka Joshi’s “True Story”, which was published by Shaadi.com on “Hindi Matrimonials”⁷, shows a career woman with a laptop and dressed in western clothes, but also tells us that she included her parents in her marriage arrangements and thus adheres to Indian traditions: “My father spoke to his parents and we are planning to get married next month in Agra.” The inclusion of her parents here stands for “family values” which in many discourses form an integral part of “Indian cultural identity” (Mankekar 2004: 427; Uberoi 2001: 323 and 327; Fernandes 2000; Sonawat 2001). The “face” for “Urdu Matrimonials” on shaadi.com conveys a similar message but the other way round. She is dressed in traditional Indo-Muslim clothing but the attached message tells us “Heena Khan’s story”: “We chatted and spoke on the phone for hours”, thus implicating agency, independent communication, the use of technology and thereby “modernity”. A third, purely visual example is the image of SimplyMarry.com’s “Tamil Matrimonials”⁸ showing a young woman wearing a South Indian sari and further traditional attributes such as flowers in her hair, a bindi on her forehead, and jewellery. At the same time, she wears a headset, holds a phone in her hands, and is sitting in front of a laptop. Again, she represents a combination of symbols depicting traditional “Indianness” and progressive, global technology, signifiers of medial mobility. These are but a few examples from many, which demonstrate how the matrimonial media promote the image of a “New Indian Woman” and thus represent an ideal “Indian” who is global and local at the same time.

The same applies for matrimonial media as a market. The whole idea of dating websites, which first appeared in the USA, has been taken and transformed for the Indian market by including features which seem to be typically “Indian” such as filter categories according to “Caste” or “Horoscope”. This tendency has been termed as “nationalizing the global” by Leela Fernandes (Fernandes 2000). Media producers are well aware of these developments. Advertisement, film, and television makers have actively appropriated the trend in view of the increasing profits: “They have consequently begun to enlarge the range of feminine subjectivities which will increase consumption” (Munshi 2001: 81). New concepts are then trans-

⁷ The “True Stories” for “Hindi Matrimonials” and “Urdu Matrimonials” were derived from <http://www.shaadi.com> in December 2009. They are no longer available online.

⁸ <http://simplymarry.com/tamil-matrimonials>.

ported far beyond urban centres due to the contemporary changes in India's media landscape towards localization and linguistic differentiation. Thus the image of the "New Indian Woman" is "shining" beyond the middle and upper classes, where it is primarily located, generating desire and longing in other segments of Indian society as well. Mass media products such as matrimonial websites are continuously permeated by advertising messages such as Shaadi.com's "True Stories", thus defining what is perceived as the norm and as a desirable existence (Dörner 2001: 42). The profile analysis shows that these medially constructed images and their inherent messages do have an impact on the users' self-representation. Many of the analyzed profiles include statements which point towards a subjectivity that bears strong resemblance to the concept of the "New Indian Woman".

Mae identifies women as biological and cultural reproducers of the nation, which well applies to the Indian context (Mae 2007: 43). The field of gender is where notions of "Indianness" are negotiated (Chaudhuri 2001; Fernandes 2000; Puri 1999; Runkle 2004), and through the global reach of matrimonial media, even Indians or people of Indian origin living abroad can be integrated not only into the transnational Indian marriage market but also the transnational Indian media landscape, which further contributes to the transnationalization of "Indianness" itself (Schneider 2005: 76).

5. Partner Expectations

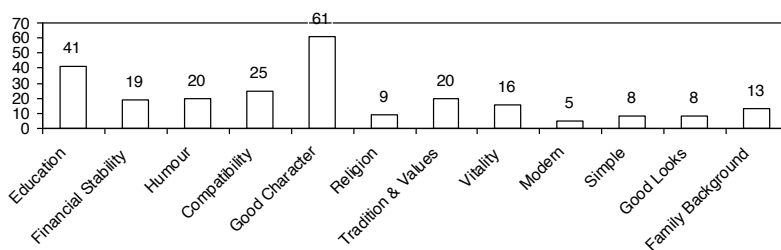
In my attempt to link the above findings with the theoretical approaches of individualization and social mobility as key factors of medialisation, it proved useful to include additional profiles from other websites.

Apart from the comprehensive examination of 100 female Shaadi.com profiles, an additional 50 female profiles on other online portals were thus included in my analysis: 20 from the website SecondShaadi.com (a re-marriage website), 10 from a specialized website for the Hindu Gujarati Brahma Kshatriya community⁹ and 20 profiles of NRI subscribers on BharatMatrimony.com. In terms of subjectivity, these control samples showed similar tendencies although the self-descriptions were less detailed than on Shaadi.com. All samples confirmed a substantial change in the desired qualities of a future partner towards personal or individual preferences in contrast to family-related criteria. This does not necessarily imply a greater agency on the part of the searchers, it reveals simply a change in the aspects emphasised in the search process. In their study of print matrimonial advertisements in Gujarat, Shukla and Kapadia distinguish between criteria that are

⁹ <http://shaadi.brahmakshatriya.com>.

“individual-oriented” and “family-oriented” in partner selection (Shukla/Kapadia 2007: 42). They assign factors such as religious and caste membership, family background, and horoscope to family-related criteria, while character, hobbies, and looks are considered to be individual-related criteria. Their study finds a remarkable shift towards a “family-oriented individualism” (Shukla/Kapadia 2007: 53) which corresponds with the observed effort to incorporate “modernity” and “tradition”, e.g. individual and familial demands (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: Shaadi.com: Description of Desired Partner in percent (100 female profiles)



The desire for a “loving”, “understanding” partner and a “romantic soul mate” was a recurrent narrative in most of the profiles analyzed, especially on Shaadi.com and BharatMatrimony.com. Puri draws a comparable conclusion in stating that “understanding” was the most commonly used adjective for a desired partner among her female interviewees in Mumbai and Delhi (Puri 1999: 142). Descriptions on SecondShaadi.com and on the Brahma Kshatriya website showed similar tendencies but laid more emphasis on profession, career, and education (Figures 3 and 4).

What is interesting to note are the subtle differences in the self-descriptions as well as the partner-descriptions on SecondShaadi.com. The romantic undertone is less pervasive and emphasis lies on maturity and understanding. Mention of past failed marriages is either non-existent or allusive: “I am looking for a person who is non-dominating, understanding, caring, simple and adjustable”, for example. The request for a “non-dominating” partner did not exist in any of their other profiles and conveys the impression that the woman writing must have suffered under a dominating husband. The adjectives “adjustable” and “simple” assigned to a future husband are also interesting since they are mostly found in descriptions of brides and are, from a conventional point of view, the attributes of a “good wife”.

FIGURE 3: Brahma Kshatriya Shaadi: Description of Desired Partner in percent (10 females profiles)

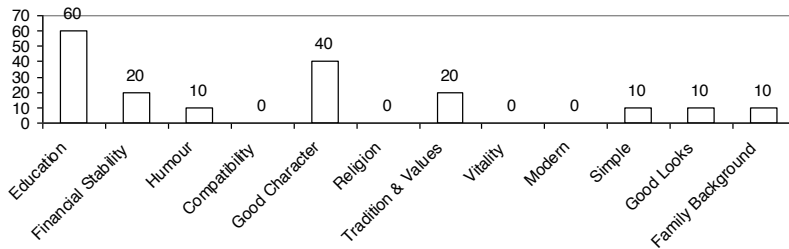
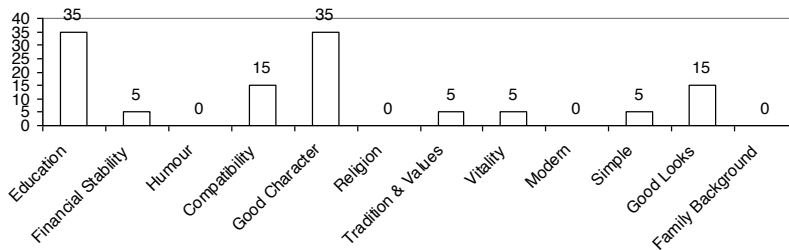


FIGURE 4: SecondShaadi.com: Description of Desired Partner in percent (20 female profiles)



The women in my random sample were between 24 and 43 years old, so their average age is much higher than in the other samples where most women were in their twenties. This fact combined with the experience of divorce or widowhood seems to make a difference in self-perception and self-representation. Although descriptions were remarkably short, many included statements indicating their rejection of compromise and a clearly expressed selfhood. "I wish to make my existence matter on this planet", writes one woman, and another: "Motto in life: to achieve the dream's of my life." This leads us to the question of female agency, which will be addressed in the next section.

6. Female Agency on Matrimonial Websites

Changes in awareness, knowledge and the questioning attitude towards the world may not always lead to social transformation in the short term, but new possibilities may arise from this heightened capacity for critical reflection and questioning that serve as the basis for agency, that is, the socially constituted and differentially produced capacity of human beings to engage in action. (Kim 2008: 10)

The new technologies create space for new forms of representation, subjectivity, social interaction, and the negotiation of gender roles. Be they social media like facebook which provides space for self-production and multiple forms of interaction or chatrooms which are beyond parental control. The opportunities to interact, express opinions and invent a desirable personal identity are manifold. Increasing female agency is definitely supported by the new media, which is not to say that media uni-directionally produce social change. My point is that, as Kim states, the “capacity of human beings to engage in action” is expanding.

7. Challenging Existing Notions of Love and Arranged Marriages

Researching matrimonial media is also an invitation to rethink and revise existing concepts such as “arranged marriage versus love marriage”.

Today, the vast majority of marriages in India are termed as “arranged”. But the term’s construction in opposition to the category of “love marriage” implies a simplified polarization which cannot mirror actual social change. “We chatted for months and decided to go ahead before his parents spoke to my father” says “Sweta Jhoshi’s story”, another “True Story” advertised by Shaadi.com.¹⁰ This leads to Kishwar’s concept of “self-arranged marriage” (Kishwar 1994: 12) instead of the fixed dualistic categories of love versus arrangement. This example demonstrates the necessity of rethinking supposedly fixed categories to make processes of social change visible even within seemingly traditional concepts such as arranged marriage. A first impression might suggest that traditional patterns are perpetuated through the design and set-up of matrimonial websites. But examples derived from my case study in Mumbai 2008¹¹ reveal a considerably more complex picture: A survey conducted by Shaadi.com on the topic “What women want” included the question “After your marriage how would you like to live?”,

¹⁰ Retrieved from <http://www.shaadi.com/introduction/true-stories.php>.

¹¹ The case study consisted of 10 qualitative, guided interviews with users of matrimonial websites. All names have been changed.

which was answered by 59.6 percent of the respondents with “does not matter as long as you love your spouse” (Mehta 2008).

This clearly shows how significant the term “love” is even in an arranged-marriage context. For most of my interview partners the term “love marriage” had a positive connotation and for many an arranged marriage would have been the second choice. A male interviewee stated: “A person who is not able to make it to a love marriage then he can go for arranged marriage but if you are able to find someone on your own – nothing like it.”

The internet offers the positive aspects of arranged marriages by enabling a systematic and selected search for specific criteria. These criteria, described as “equalizers” by an interview partner, maximize the chance of high compatibility regarding cultural and socio-economic background. The major difference with regard to conventionally arranged marriages would be that many of these marriages are arranged by the individuals themselves. And this points once again to Kishwar’s definition. She replaces the term “love marriage” with “self-arranged” and thereby differentiates between the family and the individual as agents (Kishwar 1994: 12).

Whether termed as arranged or not, the concepts promoted through matrimonial websites clearly favour prior contact and active involvement of the prospective brides and grooms. Even “Heena Khan’s” already mentioned simple sentence “we chatted and spoke on the phone for hours” (Shaadi.com: Urdu Matrimonials) alongside the photo of a female user carries a concept and intimates that communication and getting to know each other are important when choosing a partner. Moreover, the fact that this statement is assigned to a woman implicates her agency in the process.

Findings from an analysis of 16 “success stories” confirmed my assumption of an increasing family-oriented individualism. 11 out of 16 couples had initiated first contact independently and half of them took the final decision to get married independently of their parents. Five couples mentioned they had taken the decision jointly with their families. Only in two cases was the family seen to be the key decision maker. Therefore, most couples have become active themselves or have been actively included in the marriage arrangement process, though families continue to play an important role. My decision not to opt for an inflexible categorization of arranged versus love marriages is supported by some of the success stories analyzed which reveal the unclear grey zones between these dichotomous terms.¹² For instance, a newly wed bride writes: “Now our families are

¹² See also Puri (1999): 140ff.

doubting whether to call this an ‘Arranged marriage’ or a ‘love’ marriage??...
... what difference does it make, as long as we all are happy.”¹³

The number of proactive couples that did not marry for purely romantic reasons validates once again Kishwar’s approach of “self-arranged marriages” and deconstructs the existing dichotomy.

8. Dynamics of Deterritorialization and Localization

As mentioned above, the “Indian online matrimonial market” automatically covers more than the Indian subcontinent and refers to processes of deterritorialization. Media transcend territorial boundaries but, as the example of the Indian diaspora shows, also cause a return to territory as an identification point (see Schneider/Gräf 2011).

Although at the beginning of the “online boom” most users, especially NRIs from the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Gulf region, were from outside India, this has undergone a huge change. At the moment, about 70 percent of users come from India itself.¹⁴ They are either searching for a suitable partner within their respective diaspora community or looking for Indian candidates from the subcontinent itself. This also implies a trend towards growing medialisation in India which goes beyond the cosmopolitan metros to small town contexts as well. At the same time, the interaction of users in India with potential partners abroad is increasing. The online matrimonial market is expanding as an Indian phenomenon but is not tied to a specific territory. Globally accessible matrimonial websites serve the Indian diaspora all over the world and provide it with the opportunity to connect with a transnational ‘Indian’ media and marriage market. Thus, to be Indian or “marry the Indian way”, one does not need to live in India or hold Indian citizenship.

The Gujarati marriage market serves as an interesting example to illustrate processes of deterritorialization as well as regionalization. Gujaratis make up the majority of Non-Resident Indians and are thus active in the transnational online Gujarati matrimonial market. On BharatMatrimony.com’s regional sub-site GujaratiMatrimony.com, almost 18 percent of the female users aged between 18 and 40 were located outside India. Thus, they lead the NRI percentage, followed by Punjabis with 11 percent.¹⁵ Moreover, there exists a very diverse specialized Gujarati marriage market, consisting

¹³ Shrabonee & Rahul, BharatMatrimony.com, Wedding Date: 04.02.2010.

¹⁴ Interview with Shaadi.com PR manager Gunjan Sinha, 16.4.2008.

¹⁵ Statistics were derived from BharatMatrimony.com’s sub-sites (06.10.2010).

of hundreds of websites and marriage bureaus in Gujarat as well as in many other parts of India and abroad. Though the idea of marrying within one's own community is by no means unique to the Gujarati community, they seem to be particularly active in the matrimonial media market – probably due to the vast number of community members living abroad. The highly stratified Gujarati matrimonial landscape reflects a very strong regional emphasis while being transnational at the same time. In the case of Gujarat, the matrimonial market reflects an overall tendency to reterritorialization with an underlying drive of community production. Politically, the diaspora's social inclusion is actuated through campaigns by right-wing Hindu nationalists aiming for a re-orientation of NRI-Gujaratis towards their homeland. The General Administration Department Government of Gujarat has a specific NRI Division which organises for example "Vatan Sewa" ("Service to the Native Land") programmes. Through these programmes, NRIs are requested to donate and invest in social projects, such as schools, hospitals or community centres. In his message for the "Vatan Sewa" programme, Gujarat's Chief Minister Narendra Modi states:

Geographically, Non Resident Gujaratis are staying thousands of miles away from their native land but in their hearts and souls the heritage of Gujarati language, literature and culture is kept alive. Whenever there is a call from their native, they have responded munificently. Gujarati is not only a word, it is a sentiment. Gujarat does not exist merely in physical form, it throbs with its cultural heritage. (Government of Gujarat)

The statement itself suggests there is a global Gujarati community irrespective of religious affiliation. Here, it is crucial to note that Narendra Modi, Gujarat's chief minister since 2001, is a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which has a strong Hindu nationalistic orientation. His role during Gujarat's anti-Muslim pogroms in 2002 has been criticised. He is accused of not intervening and actively supporting anti-Muslim groups (Engineer 2003; Otto 2004; Sprung 2005). Against this political background, we can assume that Modi is not referring to an inter-religious Gujarati community but engages in the hegemonic construction of a transnational Hindu Gujarati community.

These trends are also apparent on the online matrimonial market. Muslims are strongly under-represented among Gujarati users. Furthermore, there are few Muslims in the visual representations posted on the matrimonial websites except for Urdu-language sub-sites or exclusively Muslim matrimonial websites such as Nikah.com. These user patterns can be contributed partly to the general trend of diversification but interviews with Gujarati marriage bureau and website operators confirmed my assumption that Muslims are widely excluded from a regionally defined Gujarati matrimonial market. For example, Vishal Shah who operates a specialized

Gujarati matchmaking service in Mumbai claimed on the one hand that he offers his services to any Gujarati community but on the other hand he stated that he would not offer them to Sindhis, Christians or Muslims. Thus, he implicitly identifies Muslims and Christians regardless of their regional affiliation as not belonging to “Gujarati communities” in his understanding.¹⁶ Field work in Ahmedabad showed that while most other religious communities (such as Jains and different Hindu castes) are part of a broad Gujarati marriage market, there exists an entirely separate market for Muslim matchmakers in the city.

9. Conclusion

The matrimonial websites discussed reveal a clear tendency towards representing women in line with the concept of the “New Indian Woman”. As self-descriptions of users show, media images and texts seem to influence female users’ self-representation to the extent that their narratives resemble each other in the way they try to accommodate contradictions such as modernity and tradition or working woman versus family values. Media discourses thus permeate women’s subjectivity and agency in multiple ways. Here, the Indian online matrimonial market is a striking example of the development towards a society whose medial imprint is ever increasing.

Talking about the permeation of social and cultural life by the media brings us back to Hepp’s three dimensions of medialisation: Individualization, deterritorialization and increasing immediacy. The data presented above show an increasing “family-oriented individualism” as well as growing agency from the woman’s side, both in the search for a partner as well as in the decision-making. The growing capacity to act and decide can equally be attributed to the category of “social mobility”. A change in regard to spatial dimensions or physical mobility is clearly visible in the above-mentioned dynamics of transnationalization and global interconnectedness. As the Gujarat case shows, a re-orientation towards “home territory” is taking place simultaneously. The term “mobility” here describes the change in a multidirectional way. Medial mobility, which includes Hepp’s temporal dimension of increasing immediacy, is visible not only in the changing forms of communication between users on websites but also encompasses tendencies such as media convergence and intermediality. As I have shown elsewhere, media partnerships between print, online and television are present in the matrimonial media just as they are in the general Indian media landscape (see Titzmann 2011).

¹⁶ Interview with Vishal Shah, manager of vivathematchmaker.com, 28.01.2011.

In conclusion, India's online matrimonial market not only reflects changing social dynamics and gender roles, but also mirrors the general tendencies of media development on the subcontinent and among the Indian diaspora. Taking this phenomenon as a paradigmatic example enables us to expand our understanding of the entanglement of media, gender and society in the Indian context.

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