'ONE'S OWN MARRIAGE': LOVE MARRIAGES IN A CALCUTTA NEIGHBOURHOOD*

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Introduction

Marriage practices in South Asia have preoccupied social scientists interested in a wide range of topics such as caste, kinship, class and gender relations.[1] More recently, discourses on racial difference and construction of acceptable and unacceptable marriages have been scrutinised in the context of colonial and nationalist politics in India.[2] The upper-caste Hindu model of arranged, life-long marriages and the structural implications of these mostly caste-endogamous matches has dominated representations of marriage in the subcontinent. Even where it is acknowledged that marriage practices are subject to historical change, either through the impact of colonial law or the complex effects of urbanisation and new socio-economic conditions, alternatives to arranged marriages are rarely discussed. The rising number of so-called 'love marriages' and the related reformulation of conjugal ideals are recognised by the media, but have not yet been analysed in ethnographies of urban areas. In a typical example, Vatuk addresses the impact ideals of romantic love may have on marriage practices among the youth of Meerut in the following statement: 'Older conventions prevail even though many young

[1] See for instance Patricia Uberoi, ed., *Family, Kinship, and Marriage in India*, Delhi, (1993) 1994.
[2] See Kumkum Sangari, 'Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies', Part I, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, No. 51–52, 23 December 1995, pp. 3287–310, and Lionel Caplan, 'Cupid in Colonial and Post-colonial South India: Changing "Marriage" Practices among Anglo-Indians in Madras', *South Asia*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 1998, pp. 1–27.

people, particularly boys in their late teens and early twenties, profess a desire for more control over the choice of their mate.'[3] This quote indicates the increasing importance the ideal of non-arranged marriages has had since the 1960s, and the reluctance of social scientists to deal with the subject.

The common approach to love marriages emphasises the exceptional status of such unions, and by ignoring the variety of practices found in contemporary urban India, this type of analysis 'fails 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.'[4] Consequently these matches are described either in terms of 'traditional' elopement, or are interpreted as the effect of 'westernisation'. In both cases these marriages lack authenticity and social embeddedness.

This article seeks to clarify, first, what constitutes a love marriage in a specific local and cultural context. Focusing on representations of love marriages among Bengali Hindu middle-class women, expectations towards conjugal relations, interdependence between the generations and notions of love are highlighted.

In order to understand the significance of such unions, parental authority and the incorporation of the married couple into the household in a patrilocal setting are explored. Within this context the most conspicuous types of love marriages, namely inter-caste and inter-community marriages, are discussed. The analysis of local notions of desirable and less desirable matches highlights the importance of group-based identities and local social relations within the discourse on love marriages.

The Setting

The neighbourhood in which fieldwork was conducted from October 1995 to April 1997 is located in the centre of the city in a distinctively heterogeneous area. Bengali Hindus, Bengali Christians and Muslims as well as South Indian Christians, Punjabis and Marwaris live in close proximity, but Bengali Hindu middle-class families represent the politically and economically dominant groups in the neighbourhood.[5]

Most of the Bengali Hindu households would be described as lower middle-class, as earning members are in lower government service positions, run small businesses or workshops. The vast majority of married women are housewives. Only a small minority of mostly unmarried female household members are employed as office workers and government employees. The conservative outlook of the middle-class inhabitants of such neighbourhoods, which is held responsible for low rates of female employment, supports the gender differential in education as well. Thus, men in Bengali Hindu households are normally educated upto high

[3] Sylvia Vatuk, *Kinship and Urbanization: White Collar Migrants in North India*, Berkeley, 1972, p. 87.

[4] Caplan, 'Changing Marriage Practices', p. 3.

[5] Trading communities originally from Gujarat and Rajasthan.

school and above, whereas women over 60 years were rarely educated at school for more than six years, and higher education for women remains a recent and secondary objective. Most Hindu families in the neighbourhood are of West Bengali (*ghoti*) origin, and settled in this area more than 100 years ago when wealthy landlords built their own houses. East Bengalis (*bangal*), Bengali Christians and most other groups migrated to Calcutta around the time of Partition.

In accordance with the patrilocal ideal prevalent among members of all groups, almost all married women spend some years after their marriage in the in-laws' house, though few share their residence collaterally for long, because brothers tend to separate soon after the death of their parents. The joint family constitutes the ideal among all communities, and more often than not consists of the nuclear-extended unit occupied by a son's family and his parents.

The neighbourhood is an important unit of everyday interaction for all its inhabitants who maintain exchange relations, share services, schools and religious facilities. These social relations link members of different communities and class backgrounds, and last but not least households are related by marriage. Not surprisingly, the emphasis on the reputation of a family in the neighbourhood, in particular among the middle-class, is overwhelming and is constantly compared and assessed. As many middle-class families in these old localities (*paras*) are well-established and most have been settled here for more than two generations, individuals possess extensive knowledge of the backgrounds of their neighbours. The status of families is measured in terms of a combination of educational achievements, occupational patterns, political influence and economic means which derived from the much discussed bhadralok culture, though the term is rarely ever used.[6] Women are guardians of family reputation and are responsible for the reproduction of this moral economy and the underlying values in the domestic sphere. But their activities extend beyond the household, and while they rarely venture into the political arena, they are part of extensive networks through kinship, working relations with servants and children's educational pursuits. These traditional values have been integrated into locally accepted class distinctions, and middle-class women are particularly important boundaries between households. They mediate relationships and information flows and mark boundaries of the 'permeable home', which are crucial for class distinctions in the urban setting.[7] The links women establish in the neighbourhood and beyond are particularly useful whenever marriages need to be arranged, when the parents of a candidate

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[6] The emergence of the bhadralok culture is aptly described in a number of works. See John H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal*, Oxford, 1968; Meredith Borthwick, 'The Bhadramahila and Changing Conjugal Relations in Bengal 1850–1900' in Michael Allen and S. N. Mukherjee, eds, *Women in India and Nepal*, Delhi, 1990, pp. 105–35; and S. N. Mukherjee, 'Class, Caste and Politics in Calcutta, 1815–1938' in Edmund Leach and S. N. Mukherjee, eds, *Elites in South Asia*, Cambridge, 1970, pp. 33–38.

[7] Dickey provides a full discussion of the relationship of gender and class produced through the all-important links of middle-class housewives and servants in Sarah Dickey, 'Permeable Homes: Domestic Service, Household Space, and the Vulnerability of Class Boundaries in Urban India', *Ethnology*, Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 462–89.

need to inquire into the background of a family and obtain information from neighbours, relatives and friends.[8] Marriage practices, matchmaking and weddings are among the favourite topics in discussions among groups of women, and the participants of such sessions describe in detail various possible types of match or the characteristics of involved candidates.

In the course of such discussions arranged marriages are compared to love marriages, and though the arranged marriages outnumber love marriages among the middle-class inhabitants of the neighbourhood, many women experience the latter in their own homes, either as mothers-in-law or as daughters-in-law. Since the 1970s when love marriages — or 'one's own marriage' (nijer biye), as love marriages are called in Bengali — have become a widespread practice in Calcutta and other urban centres in India.[9] But while the starting point may be a specific union, discussions highlight more general themes, expectations and values like filial duty and parental responsibility, modernity and change, and group-based identities. Thus, a discussion of changing marital practices will highlight general assumptions about kinship, gender and marriage.

What is a Love Marriage?

Whereas arranged marriages in Bengali Hindu families have been discussed in much detail, love marriages are only mentioned in passing even in comparatively recent ethnographies.[10] The two exceptional examples are a comparative study of inter-caste and inter-community marriages by Streefkerk-Hubbeling, who focuses on inter-caste and inter-community marriages in urban Gujarat, and Debi's exploration of notions of marriage among middle-class working women of Calcutta.[11]

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[8] Nanda sketches the numerous considerations involved in arranging a marriage; see Serena Nanda, 'Arranging a Marriage in India' in Philip R. Vita, *The Naked Anthropologist: Tales from Around the World,* Belmont, 1992, pp. 137–43. Santi Rozario kindly provided me with this reference.

[9] In a sample comprising 35 married Bengali Hindu, Bengali Christian and Marwari women between the ages of 24 and 72, the majority had arranged marriages, and only women younger than 48 years of age had chosen their own partner. However, 12 married women had love marriages and in six cases non-endogamous marriages occurred. Among these marriages are three inter-caste unions and three inter-community marriages. This random sample testifies to the frequency of such unions, as one-third of all marriages are love marriages. Furthermore, love marriages have been reported from all wider families for the age-group below 40 years and in many instances more than one took place among siblings.

[10] See the classic accounts of Bengali kinship by Inden and Nicholas and Fruzzetti's work on kinship and marriage rituals, as well as marital histories presented by Manisha Roy; Ralph B. Nicholas and Ronald W. Inden, *Kinship in Bengali Culture,* Chicago, 1977; Lina M. Fruzzeti, *The Gift of a Virgin: Women, Marriage and Ritual in Bengali Society,* Delhi, (1982) 1990; Manisha Roy, *Bengali Women,* Chicago, (1972) 1975.

[11] See Shelley Feldman, 'Contradictions of Gender Inequality: Urban Class Formation in Contemporary Bangladesh' in Alice W. Clark, ed., *Gender and Political Economy,* Delhi, 1993, pp. 215–45; and Arni Streefkerk-Hubbeling, 'Transformation and Accommodation: The Differential Meaning of (Inter)caste Marriages' in S. Devadas Pillai and Chris Bax, eds, *Winners and Losers: Styles of Development and Change in an Indian Region,* Bombay, 1979, pp. 241–81.

Both studies testify to the frequency with which such matches occur, even in distinctively conservative urban settings like Surat or Calcutta. But most of the time love marriages are handled as a self-evident category, and scholarly as well as popular discourse on changing marriage patterns subsumes a confusing variety of phenomena under the label 'love marriage'. There is evidence for a weakening of the differentiation between love marriages and arranged marriages, in particular among migrant South Asian communities in the West, where partners may be introduced by parents but are dating afterwards; these are increasingly common and are referred to as love marriages.[12] Furthermore, conventional arranged marriages in various South Asian communities often involve an initial meeting between candidates who are made to interact in a closely chaperoned setting. Both forms are, however, clearly distinguished by informants from 'love marriages', who employ a rigid differentiation between marriages initiated by parents and 'one's own marriage'. Thus, the term 'love marriage' may be employed to describe any match that took place between candidates who knew each other beforehand in other settings, but will not be used in this sense among urban Bengalis. Furthermore, the term is not restricted to marriages across caste and communities, or elopement of a couple who married secretly. Indeed, the most common form of love marriage in this context is one within one's own jati.

Marriages across jati, which may or may not involve elopement, are sometimes mentioned, but the arguably much more common form of love marriage takes place within one's own community. Love marriages in general and these marriages in particular are always openly discussed and evaluated from various angles, and merit some attention as part of a wider discourse on marriage practices.

Some love marriages are more easily identified than others, and sometimes ambiguity as to how a match came about may be expressed by different commentators in hindsight. However, a clear-cut definition of love marriages exists. Such marriages are always described in opposition to arranged marriages, which are initiated by parents. Accordingly, a love marriage is agreed upon first by the couple concerned, who may seek the consent of their parents after a period of courtship, and are not introduced by their parents as prospective candidates. Consequently, this definition of a proper love marriage does not depend on the period or mode of courtship, the consent of the candidates or the notion of emotional involvement because women are well aware of the fact that these factors may be present in modern arranged marriages. The *agency* of the partners in initiating a pre-marital relationship is the crucial marker and is indicated by the phrase 'one's own marriage' in colloquial Bengali, instead of love marriage.

[12] See Kathy Gardner and Abdus Shukur, "'I'm a Bengali, I'm Asian, and I'm Living Here'" in Roger Ballard, ed., *Desh Pardesh—The South Asian Presence in Britain*, London, 1994, pp. 157–58, and Suman B. Prinjha, 'With a View to Marriage: Young Hindu Gujaratis in London', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science, 1999. The reverse trend is apparent in south Indian Anglo-Indian communities: see Caplan 'Cupid in Colonial and Post-colonial South India'.

Love marriages are described in the course of marital histories according to a set pattern in which a young woman falls in love (*preme pora*) with a neighbours' son or the classmate of a brother. In most instances the two meet in the house of the young woman, and often the secret relationship develops through letters, conversations and outside meetings on special occasions. The emergence of this new marriage practice among the urban middle-class is interpreted as a function of female education and employment. In the given setting, women born before independence experienced rigidly controlled mobility and various forms of segregation, but their daughters and grand-daughters began to mix more freely with young men related to the household. This trend was enhanced by the widespread acceptance of female schooling, which still provides the pretext for young, unmarried women from Bengali middle-class families to move beyond the confines of the house. Thus, women's education and especially the subsequent acceptance of co-educational schools are rightly held responsible for the rise in love marriages, but opportunities for young men and women to mix are today provided in a variety of contexts. Durga puja, for instance, allows adolescents to roam the area and visit the deities, their classmates, relatives and friends in the locality. This is where young men and women get to know each other, and contrary to assumption about the role female employment plays in meeting prospective candidates, it is important to note that none of the women interviewed or any of their relatives married a colleague.[13] Furthermore, while most love marriages are local affairs, even many arranged marriages take place between families living in the same area, and local exogamy is rarely emphasised as a priority where marriages are concerned.

Parental Concerns

Parents and children's perspectives on local mobility differ precisely because it enables the younger generation to socialise unsupervised in the neighbourhood. While young adults are generally in favour of more freedom to move and engage in leisure activities like movies, sports, clubs and shopping, parents try to control and limit their children's involvement with the outside world. A major concern among mothers and fathers are relationships between boys and girls in the neighbourhood, which damage their reputation. Though daughters' movements are a primary source of such worries, mothers and fathers try to safeguard the name of a family as such, and therefore monitor a son's contacts as well. The worst scenario for parents is based on the expectation that girls and boys easily fall in love, and start an affair, which may involve a person from an unsuitable background, who may be from a lower caste, working class or different community. Once an affair becomes publicly known, the girl's honour and the boy's reputation are at stake, and pre-marital relationships limit the prospects to find a good match.

[13] See Feldman, 'Contradictions of Gender Inequality', and Streefkerk-Hubbeling, 'Transformation and Accommodation'.

But all parents are also exposed to very different and more liberal discourse, which implies that love marriages represent a modern practice and ought to be accepted if not encouraged. The urban Bengali middle-class want to distance themselves from the selfish guardians and backward practices found in other communities, who by arranging their children's marriages sacrifice the happiness of a son or daughter for material gains. In short, parents experience a dilemma, as romantic love and self-chosen marriage partners are widely accepted — as long as other people's children are involved.

The position of sons or daughters is not less ambivalent, as it is their duty to consider the well-being of the older generation.[14] In general, women profess a generally tolerant approach to love marriages, which they claim are unacceptable only if the chosen partner is from a working-class background, a criminal, divorced or disabled. But in all cases, neighbours and relatives tolerate and accept a love marriage much more easily than the parents of a candidate. Thus, whereas the general public presents love marriages in terms of humanist notions of equality and individual fulfilment, emotions involved and cultivated in children should ideally prevent sons and daughters from neglecting their filial duties. Not surprisingly, mothers of children of marriageable age generally advocate arranged marriages for their own daughters and sons, but other women are likely to compare 'modern' love marriages favourably with their own arranged marriages.

In this climate the reactions of parents to their children's wish to marry a chosen partner may vary considerably, and may range from reluctant acceptance to attempts to present a love match as an arranged union. One of the main reasons for parental concern is the general notion of love marriages as cause for tensions between parents and children, and this fact has led various authors to accept a view on love marriages that depicts such unions as extraordinarily divisive and unacceptable for parents. But while children's choice of partner for marriage challenges notions of filial duty and responsibility, we should bear in mind that all marriages are ambiguous and that most parents are tense about their children's marriages. These do not necessarily relate to inter-generational conflicts, which are particularly prominent in cases of love marriages, but to a wide range of financial and emotional issues. Women themselves acknowledge that marriages are generally upsetting for parents and household members. When a new bride moves in with her in-laws, her parents worry about the character of the husband, and the status of the affines is a constant concern. In short, all features which are cited as problematic in the context of love marriages dominate in the context of arranged marriages too, and are closely related to the type of household ideally created through a marriage — a unit shared by two or more generations. In the case of love marriages, however, the ambiguity regarding marriages is probably more openly displayed, partly because the couple claim a separate identity right

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[14] This concern with a daughter's happiness is also prevalent in rural contexts: see for instance Peter J. Bertocci, 'Community Structure and Social Rank in Two Villages in Bangladesh', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, (n.s.), Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 3–28.

from the start, whereas such attempts of differentiation occur later in arranged marriages. It is therefore often more permissible for parents to publicly criticise their children, but these conflicts are rarely resolved through elopement, eviction, or the immediate formation of nuclear households, and parents more often than not welcome a new bride into the house after the initial tension calms down.

Love, Relationships and Marriage

Westerners are often told by friends in India that one of the main differences between the 'West' and 'India' is the fact that Indians 'don't marry for the looks'. Though the preoccupation with physical features and skin colour proves this kind of distinction faulty, choice in an arranged marriage is based on more important factors than mere attraction. In order to understand the significance of love marriages in this setting, it is therefore necessary to outline the emergence of contemporary attitudes to marriage and conjugal relations among the Bengali middle class.

The ideal of conjugal relations prevalent in urban India today emerged over the past 100 years, and the emerging middle-class culture of urban Bengal was profoundly affected by these changes.[15] Though marriage and conjugal relations underwent many redefinitions, arranged marriages remained the norm. While the rulers passed bills to 'prevent social evils' such as child marriages or polygamy which legitimised colonial rule over the backward 'natives', indigenous élites were similarly concerned with changing intra-familial relations and the influence of the new socio-economic order on marriage and the joint family.

Love marriages remained exceptional, but individual choice of a marriage partner figured early in the imagination of educated Bengalis, as the letter Satyendranath Tagore wrote to his young wife (addressed as 'brother') in 1864 exemplifies:

> When we were married you had not attained the age of marriage. We could not marry independently. Our parents arranged it. Isn't it true, brother? (...) as long as you do not attain the age, get educated and improve yourself in every respect, we shall not enter into the relation of husband and wife. Doesn't it agree with your views? You know how much I love you (....) I have written to my father that I shall keep waiting for you, as good seed waits for flowering.[16]

Yet, though affectionate ties between spouses became a positive attribute of successful marriage, neither 'love' nor mutual consent figured as a necessary predisposition for a match.[17] Among the most fundamental changes were the increasing

[15] See Borthwick, 'The Bhadramahila and Changing Conjugal Relations in Bengal', and Sambuddha Chakrabarti, 'Changing Notions of Conjugal Relations in Nineteenth Century Bengal' in Rajat Kanta Ray, ed., *Mind, Body and Society: Life and Mentality in Colonial Bengal*, Calcutta, 1995, p. 304.
[16] *Ibid.*
[17] Incidents of marriage by choice, documented in the literature on nineteenth century Bengal, are confined to the even smaller circle of reformist organisations like the Brahmo Samaj, whose members embraced monotheism, women's education and marriages by choice.

mobility of high-status women and the spread of a conjugal ideal based on affec-
tionate companionship. Nevertheless, love marriages remained so exceptional
that Fruzzetti, who conducted research in a Bengali town in the 1960s, still refers
to 'marriage by choice' as elopement (*polayan kora*).[18] The experience of elderly
women in the neighbourhood, who recall that these marriages implied failure of
parents to arrange a suitable match due to 'bad' looks, a 'rotten' character, a dis-
ability or lack of funds, supports this observation.

Even these elderly informants are however less concerned with the classical
opposition of *prem* (focused on physical attraction) and *bhakti* (focused on
devotional love) than social scientists.[19] Women belonging to all age groups main-
tain that both may coexist in a fulfilled conjugal relationship, regardless of how it
came about, and whether one or the other appeared initially. Changing conjugal
relations brought about new expectations regarding emotional fulfilment and
attachment, and though women of all age groups agree that devotion and *bhakti*
are necessary to make marriage last, *prem* and *bhakti* are not mutually exclusive
categories in this context. Probably owing to the strong influence of *bhakti* devo-
tional cults, which emphasise individualised attachment and the transformative
power of love, the *bhakti* ideal seems to be more easily realised within a love
marriage. These models are present in popular discourses on marriage, like reli-
gious teachings and literary traditions, which depict the ambivalent coexistence
of *prem* and *bhakti* in the relationship of the ideal lovers Radha and Krishna.[20]
Moreover, related themes are reflected in movies and soap operas, which normally
advocate a strong element of *prem* in 'modern' relationships.[21]

The problem with love marriages is not the lack of *bhakti*, which may develop
after *prem*, and thus with the moral quality of different types of love, but the un-
predictability of emotions and the insecurity of a match based on attraction rather
than careful choice by experienced elders. The relationship between parents and
children is also one described in terms of devotional love or *bhakti*, and moral
problems are associated with the violation of related codes of conduct rather than
love as foundation for marriages. Though parents and children reflect on such
notions, the latter may refer to a different type of love, which emphasises egalitarian
relationships between husbands and wives. This theme is often expressed by
younger women through the moderate term *bhalobasha* which, contrary to the
implications of sexual or hierarchical relations, signifies mutual fondness, often

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[18] Fruzzetti, *The Gift of a Virgin*, pp. 10–12.

[19] See Frederick A. Marglin, 'Types of Sexual Union and their implicit Meanings' in John S. Hawley
and Donna M. Wulff, eds, *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*, Delhi, (1984)
1995, pp. 298–315; and for an elaborate exploration of love, marriage and kinship in a South
Indian context Margaret Trawick, *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family*, Berkeley, (1990) 1992.

[20] See Barbara S. Miller, 'The Divine Duality of Radha and Krishna' in John S. Harvey and Donna
M. Wulff, eds, *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*. Delhi, (1984) 1995, pp.
13–26.

[21] For examples of high-brow literature see Roy, *Bengali Women*. pp. 39–70.

between siblings and friends.[22] Even elderly women cite among the advantages of love marriages common decision-making and financial and family planning, emotional fulfilment and trust between the spouses as typical features.[23]

Marriage as a Process

Although parents prefer arranged marriages to love marriages as a more secure and predictable option, the approach of most mothers and fathers is fatalistic, provided most criteria for a 'good' match are fulfilled. Such unions rarely lead to tensions that would otherwise not have occurred.[24]

Once informed of the state of affairs, most parents overcome their disappointment and make an effort to resolve the tension without losing face. Contrary to contemporary settings where love marriages are not accompanied by a wedding reception or affinal gift exchanges, there are numerous examples in the neighbourhoods where parents proceeded with the negotiations typically involved in arranged marriages.[25] Though the reception may be smaller, and the gift-exchange less excessive, most women agree that the best way to deal with love marriages is to treat them as if they were arranged marriages. Given the fact that only a small minority moves out of the joint family home after marriage, all individuals involved have a strong interest in 'normalising' the relationship between affines, especially as they may belong to the same locality. Though the initial shock about the challenge of patriarchal concepts of reciprocity, responsibility and duty has led in many cases to a marked rift between parents and children, only those matches which transgress the socially acceptable group boundaries are represented as deviant. The clearly identifiable cases in which parental distress and social ostracism exceed the range of reactions related to marriages in general are therefore specific inter-community and inter-caste marriages, which are outlined in the following section in more detail.

Marriages across Jati

Love marriages within the same community and caste are easily accounted for and such unions are in most cases successfully incorporated into existing

[22] Nicholas and Inden, *Kinship in Bengali Culture*, p. 22; Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, 'Articulation of Physical and Social Bodies in Kerala', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, (n.s.), Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 37–68; and Trawick, *Notes on Love*.

[23] Debi's survey material includes questions about ideal conjugal relations; see Bharati Debi, *Middle-class Working Women of Calcutta: A Study in Continuity and Change*, Calcutta, 1988.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 60. However, parents and children often depict the rejection and disappointment involved as severe. My point is that compared with other marriages the complaints are the same, but in case of love marriages *any* type of individual dissatisfaction is interpreted as an effect of this match.

[25] This contradicts Caplan's observation that love marriages among Christians in Madras are rarely celebrated and do not involve affinal gift exchanges. See Lionel Caplan, 'Bridegroom Price in Urban India: Class, Caste and "Dowry-Evil" among Christians in Madras', *Man*, (n.s.), Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 216–33.

households. In cases where a marriage takes place within the community and caste, or involves a candidate who belongs to a group considered of equal status and economic standing, most families proceed as they would in the case of an arranged marriage. In most instances, the parents of the prospective candidates meet to discuss the details, arrange gifts to be exchanged, and successfully stage the wedding receptions. But distinctions between different castes intersect with locally developed class differences, which differentiate the three Bengali Hindu high castes (Brahman, Vaidya, Kayastha) dominating the middle-class group of well-educated urbanites from less 'cultured' castes like Banias and other lower service castes. These matches exemplify a more general trend according to which urbanites in India increasingly distinguish between clusters of marriageable jatis rather than individual castes.[26] Thus, while marriages between members of the three high castes are frequently accepted and may even be arranged, members of these high castes treat all other castes as separate and inferior where marriages are concerned. Not only are castes differentiated and described within a local hierarchy, communities are also referred to as jatis and represented in terms of 'culture', including local history and economic standing.

The challenge to parental authority posed by a love marriage is even more pronounced in cases where a match takes place across jati, which are said to adhere to different domestic rules, dress codes, diets and religious practices. Owing to their 'culture' in combination with dispositions like the socio-biological qualities of a person (*gun*), parents who belong to a certain caste and class are able to produce children of that caste (and class). Within this framework, endogamy is represented as a means to maintain the culture of a group and to minimise conflict, which may arise from differences in customs and everyday rules. This is most convincingly explained in the case of a daughter-in-law who marries into the house of strangers and where she has to 'adjust'. In-marrying brides are said to cause trouble, because not all young women can 'adjust' to the 'culture' of the in-laws' house. The problems women and men face are imagined on a continuum of increasingly different cultures, with the least problematic being a marriage into a family of equal caste and economic standing, and the most disparate form a marriage across jatis, namely between Hindus and Muslims.[27]

The idioms of cultural difference and jatis provides flexible definitions of group boundaries, because the attributes of groups may change and 'cultures' may become more easily compatible. At the same time marriage practices, gender and caste or communal identities are linked not only at a symbolic level, but also

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[26] This has been discussed by Béteille and more recently by Mayer. See André Béteille, 'The Reproduction of Inequality: Occupation, Caste and Family', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, (n.s.), Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 3–28; *idem*, 'Caste in Contemporary India' in Christopher J. Fuller, ed., *Caste Today*, Delhi, 1996, pp. 150–79; and Adrian C. Mayer, 'Caste in an Indian Village: Change and Continuity' in Fuller, ed., *Caste Today*, pp. 32–63.

[27] There is no discernible difference between hypergamous and hypogamous marriages in this respect; both are seen as equally determined by cultural differences. However, arranged inter-caste marriages tend to be hypogamous, normally involving a Brahman woman married into a Kayastha family.

through the nitty-gritty of everyday practices like food consumption, dress codes and domestic ritual. Thus, difference and hierarchy are part of the habitus of groups in general, whether these are locally represented in caste, class or communal terms.[28]

If individual mothers-in-law anticipate and experience problems with a daughter-in-law as a result of a love marriage, they routinely blame them on differences in the culture of the 'houses'. But whereas in most cases the culture of houses is defined in more individualistic terms, namely through the performances and histories of the people who live in them, problems with love marriages which involve inter-caste and inter-community marriages are interpreted in terms of entirely essentialised cultural difference.

Endogamy and the hierarchies established between castes and communities through marital practices divide and unite groups at a representational level. But though such marriages are generally described as difficult, they occur frequently and in most cases the couple move in with the husband's parents. However, some jatis are more easily combined than others, as attitudes towards inter-caste marriages with members of agricultural, merchant or Scheduled Castes or Muslims and Marwaris demonstrate.[29]

Women frequently state that inter-caste marriages should be as close as possible, because marriages outside the three mentioned high caste groups decreases the compatibility of the *bichar-achar* or 'rules and customs of the house'. These signify the concept of 'culture' used in this setting and refer to a wide range of practices including education, housework, food preparation and childcare in which women are directly or indirectly involved.[30] Castes and communities are distinguished by minute details like patterns of domestic worship, food items, seating orders or dress codes. Women are generally more knowledgeable about such attributes than men, as they are in charge of the domestic sphere. Thus, differences between the agricultural castes, merchant castes and the three upper castes are normally described in terms of food, dress codes for women, educational achievements and the traditional occupation. While the number of inter-caste marriages with members of Scheduled Castes and agricultural castes is limited due to their generally lower economic and educational status, the merchant castes (Bene) of the area provide another example of a caste which does not belong to the high status group. Marriage into a Bene family (who are mostly wealthy and always middle-class) is much

[28] See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, 1977.

[29] For a detailed description of the Bengali caste system and of the ritual status and aspirations to social mobility of specific groups by the end of the nineteenth century, see Jogendra N. Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects: An Exposition of the Origin of the Hindu Caste System and the Bearing of the Sects Towards Each other and Towards other Religious Systems*, Delhi, (1896) 1995.

[30] 'Culture' is largely produced through women's work in the house, in particular cooking and educating children. The concepts prevalent in the Bengali middle-class setting are discussed in Henrike Donner, 'Women and Gold: Gender and Urbanisation in Contemporary Bengal', unpublished, Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science, 1999, pp. 284–374; see also Dickey, 'Permeable Homes'.

more likely and therefore the worst imaginable inter-caste alliance in the view of many women. The Subarnabanik sub-caste settled in this neighbourhood are traditionally goldsmiths, and though many live off real estate in the *para*, some still follow the traditional occupation. Unlike Bengali Hindus and Christians, the majority of men in these households have a workshop or a business, and only a few are employed in government service. In addition, most people are aware of a certain ambivalence regarding the ritual status of the Subarnabanik that can be traced to medieval sources.[31]

If inter-caste marriages with Bene are disapproved of, members of the Marwari community are seen as even more unsuitable for marriage because of their involvement in business and the assumed community history, signified by low levels of female education, high dowries and a preoccupation with financial matters. The fact that Marwaris are mostly vegetarian Jains demonstrates that marriageability in contemporary urban Bengal is only partly defined by notions of ritual status on which anthropological studies of 'marriage systems' rely.[32] In the language of a multi-caste, multi-community setting like this, concepts like the 'status of women' attributed to a group, a tradition of literacy and occupational specialisation as well as a history of migration have been added and sometimes substitute more rigid definitions of ritual status. Though the differences in 'culture' between jatis clearly mark boundaries, a degree of uncertainty surrounds differences between castes and ethnic groups that do not automatically translate into clearly identifiable hierarchies for the purpose of marriage.[33]

That the culturalist outlook is more flexible than a strict hierarchy of jatis according to ritual purity is exemplified by inter-community marriages, which are described as 'easy'. The most popular match between a Bengali Hindu and a Bengali Christian is, contrary to the cases cited above, generally seen as comparatively less disruptive, irrespective of the fact that most Christians are from agricultural backgrounds.[34] The reason given by Bengali Hindus is an assumption about a shared 'culture' signified by a common language, the regular consumption of fish and rice, the wearing of saris and comparable domestic rituals in the house;[35] and in many instances, matches with Bengali Christians and even the rare marriages

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[31] The ambivalence results from the fact that they are part of the non-polluting merchant castes *qua* profession but were listed below the clean agricultural castes for ritual purposes. See Ralph W. Nicholas, 'The Effectiveness of the Hindu Sacrament (Samskara): Caste, Marriage and Divorce in Bengali Culture' in Lindsey Harlan and Paul B. Courtright, eds, *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religion, and Culture*, New York, 1995, pp. 137–59, and Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, pp. 158–60.

[32] See Uberoi, ed., *Family, Kinship, and Marriage in India.*

[33] Thus patterns of conspicuous consumption, female education, mobility and more specifically 'dowry', are given as reasons for problems within such marriages and the households concerned.

[34] The recent wave of communal violence directed against Christians may challenge this acceptance.

[35] Rozario's contemporary ethnography of the Bengali Christian community in Bangladesh provides more details and testifies to the similarities between the two communities. See Santi Rozario, *Purity and Communal Boundaries: Women and Social Change in a Bangladeshi Village*, Sydney, 1992.

between Bengali Hindus and south Indian Christians, who are equally well-educated and middle-class are seen as more acceptable than those with spouses from other Hindu jatis. But all combinations cited are less complicated and tense than inter-community marriages between Muslims and Hindus, which occur but are by far the least acceptable type of love marriage. Though most of the Muslim families in the area are Bengali-speaking, this fact is rendered irrelevant and distinctions according to regional origin, language and sect are glossed over in representations of Muslims as the archetypal 'Other'. The contemporary representations of Muslim culture as overtly aggressive and masculine is constructed and interpreted in relation with frequent incidents of 'communal violence' on the subcontinent and is mobilised in different contexts.[36]

Given the fact that the inhabitants of this area have seen many incidents of communal violence — the last occurred in 1992 — it is not surprising that the relations between the two communities is tense.[37] Even recent inter-community marriages between Hindus and Muslims are subject to the 'semiotics' of the other community and are more often than not depicted through stories of 'weak' Hindu girls who fell prey to the seductive techniques of Muslim boys.[38] If women admit that such marriages may be love marriages, they state that a Hindu girl would never be able to adjust to a Muslim household. If she has to live with Muslim in-laws, she is expected to suffer due to the alleged conservative outlook dominant in that community, different food habits and rituals. Because Muslims inhabit most of the slums in the neighbourhood from Hindi-speaking backgrounds, differences in religious and marriage practices are commonly acknowledged. Among elder women, many had Muslim classmates while they studied at local schools, and their sons and daughters may also have friends from Muslim families. Whereas contact with Muslim families in other, less heterogeneous neighbourhoods is sporadic and mostly at the level of services, it constitutes an everyday experience in this neighbourhood. Thus an 'affair' between members of both communities is a realistic, and not an unprecedented, possibility.

In contrast to all other marriages, these inter-community marriages are never discussed openly by family members and retain a clandestine character. Such

[36] There are multiple examples of this notion in new writings on the history of partition and explorations of communal violence. See Puroshottam Agarwal, 'Surat, Savarkar and Draupadi: Legitimising Rape as a Political Weapon' in Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia, eds, *Women and Right-Wing Movements: Indian Experiences*, London, 1995, pp. 29–57; Urvashi Butalia, 'Muslims and Hindus, Men and Women: Communal Stereotypes and the Partition of India' in Sarkar and Butalia, eds, *Women and Right-Wing Movements*, pp. 58–81; and Sudhir Kakar, *The Colours of Violence*, Delhi, 1995, pp. 125–82. The contrast between a 'soft' Hindu culture and the 'hard' Muslim culture substituted internalised images of the 'effeminate' Bengali Hindu and the manly, brave British rulers as described in Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Delhi, (1995) 1997.

[37] In the history of communal riots Taltala figures as a hotspot; see Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal: 1905–1947*, Delhi, (1991) 1993.

[38] This common motif is reported in interviews of victims and perpetrators of communal violence, for instance Kakar, *The Colours of Violence*, and Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal*, p. 173.

marriages are the most complicated and in terms of gossip the most conspicuous but least acceptable type of love marriage found. It is this type of contemporary love marriages that comes closest to elopement mentioned in the literature. Such marriages cause irreparable friction between parents, and are more likely than any other match to lead to separation of households. Women, whose daily life centres around cooperation with affines, are more severely affected by these conflicts, the difficulties of a son who brings a bride belonging to the 'other' community notwithstanding. A Hindu family is highly unlikely to accept a Muslim daughter-in-law, who would prepare meals, maintain domestic rituals or take care of her elderly in-laws under normal circumstances. Whereas this may be less difficult in the opposite case (where conversion may take care of concerns about ritual purity), a daughter who marries into the 'other' community is seen as 'lost' in both cases. If she stays with her in-laws and 'adjusts' to their 'culture', her natal family and her previous network are likely to withdraw. This extreme case of marriages across jati contests relations between parents and children, affines and social groups in the same neighbourhood, and therefore exemplifies best why love marriages are termed *nijer biye*, 'one's own marriage'.

Conclusion

In this article I argue that love marriages are represented among Bengali urban middle-class women in fairly stable terms, and are opposed to arranged marriages and variations on that theme by a clear emphasis on choice and agency of the couple concerned. As outlined above, the culturally specific notions of love may be determining factors for the highly tolerant approach to these unions, which are only incompletely perceived in terms of acculturation and westernisation.

The discussion of love marriages provided above describes such matches and their representation within a patrilocal setting and a discourse on marriage and conjugal values, which addresses intra-household authority and social boundaries. Love marriages in this particular setting are defined as 'one's own marriage', a label which indicates the dual character of unions that are entirely initiated by the couple concerned and their assumed prioritisation of their own emotional fulfilment over the competing values of filial duty.

The transgressive character typically attributed to love marriages and the challenge that such marriages pose to the status quo among middle-class urbanites described in the article stems from distinctive but related sources. First, love marriages challenge parental authority and related notions of inter-generational reciprocity, filial duty and parental responsibility. Thus, love marriages are seen as particularly problematic in a patrilocal setting. I have, however, suggested that those who reproduce clichés of secure, predictable and less disruptive arranged marriages and oppose these to the more volatile love marriages fail to acknowledge that conflict, disappointment and ambivalence dominate talk and experiences of arranged marriages as well. Parents who are likely to represent the two types of marriage in terms of dichotomies are more often than not equally dissatisfied

with the outcome of arranged marriages. In both cases the perfect match never seems to materialise and, as emphasised throughout the article, the stance taken on the question of love marriage depends largely on the position of the speaker vis-à-vis the case concerned.

Second, although ancient Hindu law recognises various types of marriages and a wide range of practices coexist in contemporary India, this diversity does not represent a point of reference in the given setting. Whereas eight modes of 'acquiring a wife' are discussed in ancient Hindu law, among them 'marriage by choice' which is defined as a non-dharmya union,[39] discussions among Bengali Hindus in Calcutta are informed by past polygynous marriage practices among Bengal *kulin* Brahmans and, more importantly, present Muslim communities. Both patterns are attributed to a pre-modern 'Other' and notions of this prevalent pluralism do not inform the discourse on marital relations and marriageability in general. With reference to marriage patterns, Bengali Hindus and Bengali Christians highlight the contrast between 'traditional' arranged marriages and 'modern' love matches.

Group boundaries appear on the one hand as historically specific, and on the other hand as determined by political and socio-economic factors — which opens space for redefinitions.[40] It emerges from my analysis of intra-caste and inter-jati marriages that new ways to assert and maintain the status of groups utilising the concept of 'culture' have developed, which incorporate indicators of status and standing employed in the past.[41] Beyond a description of changes in marriage patterns and status assessment outlined above, any discussion of love marriages and perceptions of different types of unions in India is situated within popular political discourse on modernity and change.[42] Here it was one of my aims to provide an insight into some ways the idiom of love marriage is employed and signifies a wide range of concerns, such as gender relations, group boundaries and a criticism of changing kin relations and intra-household hierarchies and, ultimately, wider socio-economic forces.

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[39] See K. M. Kapadia, *Marriage and Family in India*, Calcutta (1995) 1981, pp. 135–36.

[40] Caplan, 'Cupid in Colonial and Post-Colonial South India', p. 25.

[41] This emerges in the work of Borthwick and Chatterjee; see Borthwick, 'The Bhadramahila and Changing Conjugal Relations in Bengal', and Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton, 1993.

[42] This discourse is prevalent in various settings: see Jonathan P. Parry, 'Ankalu's Errant Wife: Sex, Marriage, and Industry in Contemporary Chhattisgarh'. *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2001, pp. 783–820.