

**Situating marriage in contemporary India: Expectations of young, urban,
educated women and men from heterosexual marriage**

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Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic exploration of the relatively under-researched area of marriage among middle-class, urban, educated, young men and women in the age group of 25-35 in India today. The study focuses on expectations that young people have from marriage as an institution, which get articulated in terms of expectations from current and potential partners, aspirations for conjugal relations; current or potential, and the wedding ceremony itself. In exploring these expectations I have situated marriage in India within dominant discourses of tradition and modernity in Indian society, using the dimensions of caste, class, religion and gender as units of analysis. The premise of the thesis is that examining marriage as located within a web of social relationships will provide for insights into the operation of larger social structures.

My research relies on data collected from in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 men and women belonging to the demographic cross-section mentioned above and participant observation conducted at three wedding sites in the Indian cities of Delhi and Pune. My study documents the experiences of young men and women as they try to realize their hopes and aspirations while at the same time negotiating aspects of caste, class and religion that dominate the Indian social landscape. In doing so I demonstrate that young men and women reformulate notions of love and romance to align with and accommodate communal and familial interests as well as social realities in order to reproduce and reinforce notions of traditional Indian marriage, while also participating in a modernist discourse.

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Setting the stage for Indian Marriage

“This Pandit (Sanskrit/ Hindi word for priest) doesn’t know what he is doing! He isn’t even chanting the right mantras¹ for this particular wedding ritual. In fact this mantra is never chanted in a wedding ceremony at all. It is better not to have these ceremonies if people don’t know what they are doing and it’s all just for fun anyway.” Bridegroom’s aunt aged 56 years, at a wedding

“I wasn’t particularly keen on having a traditional wedding to be honest and the rituals that were conducted as part of the entire ceremony do not even really influence my day to day conjugal relations² at all. I mean I don’t even know what that Pandit was chanting let alone how it can possibly apply to my married life. If there is any reason I still felt the urge for a traditional wedding, it was for all the fun, the teasing and ribbing, being the center of attention for one day that I had seen in other weddings that I felt like I did not want to miss out on after all.” 29 year old woman who has been married for a period of 9 months (M)

Why study marriage

It seemed rather apt, indeed of some significance to introduce my thesis by quoting two of my participants’ quotes. In doing so, my express intention is to provide a very quick glimpse into the dissonant chords that emanate from middle class Indian society with reference to marriage in particular. In this particular case the two quotes refer to rituals and their significance in the context of marriage and weddings and are representative to an extent of the ways in which different people (in this particular instance, belonging to different age cohorts within Indian society) make sense of rituals and traditional Hindu practices. The quotes of these two participants are also implicated in marking marriage (and in this particular case the wedding ceremony itself) as sites of contestation where

¹ Mantras are chants used for various purposes such as being adopted as a motto to live by or to solemnize certain events such as marriage. Most Indian rites of passage are marked by the chanting of specific mantras derived from religious scriptural texts.

² For purposes of this thesis, conjugal relations/conjugal life refers to the range of relationships (between spouses as well as with immediate and extended families) processes, activities, responsibilities, roles and duties that are performed as part of being married by either spouse.

divergent discourses come to intersect. These two discourses can be loosely grouped as appeals to modernity and tradition (based on the participants' own definitions).

This study emerges from an urge to open up and discuss these discourses, particularly those surrounding class, caste, gender, traditionalist-modernist distinctions, religious, regional and tribal discourses, understand their influence on expectations from marriage and lived conjugal relations and how they come to be negotiated between different agents (spouses, immediate and extended families of either spouse) in contemporary Indian society. Paraphrasing Eva Illouz, to study marriage or love is central and not peripheral to studying society with reference to modernity in particular (Illouz 2012: 9). Furthermore she adds that romantic love provides one of the most relevant sites for inspecting the often conflicting views that govern an understanding of modernity; and I contend tradition as its contra point; and therefore society itself (*Ibid.*). In the course of this thesis then I intend to demonstrate – by using heterosexual marriage as a lens – how often otherwise divergent discourses intersect at the site of marriage to produce social relationships and interactions that constitute larger societal structures such as gender relations and roles, issues of caste, class, tribal, regional and religious identities.

The personal is political after all

The motivation to embark on such a study emerges from personal reasons as well. My experience of marriage (that lasted for a period of almost 5 years) had been a revelation. More than being unpleasant, it was startling and one that jolted me out of some illusions that I apparently had. Although I cannot say that at the age of 28 – the age at which I got married – I had any rosy notions of love and marriage, in retrospect I think I had very particular expectations of marriage such as it would be a partnership based on mutual trust and respect, that it would lead to more emotional security and that I and my partner would make time for each other, to listen and try to address each other's issues and talk about important decisions. My primary expectation from marriage was that it would be a partnership based on mutual respect for each other's wishes and ambitions and that both would have a say in major life decisions. This expectation also stemmed from the fact that I had known my partner for a period of 4 years (and cohabited with him for almost the same period). Since our

marriage was ‘for love’ my expectation that it would be different from many others during the time³ became even stronger. I cannot honestly claim that this expectation remained completely unfulfilled, however I quickly came to realize that marriage (particularly in the Indian context) far from being between two individuals (even when it is a love marriage) involves the intervention of relatives from either side, often involving the extended families as well. This intervention continues to extend well into the married lives of a couple and influences intimate areas and major life decisions such as having a child. These kinds of intervention indeed often bordering on intrusion are firmly grounded in and stem from notions of how things are done traditionally stemming from a sense of having a Hindu identity, which often gets translated into ideas of Indian-ness and how these continue to be relevant in the current context as well.

Here I provide a telling incident that occurred during the time that I was married, which almost magically encapsulates all the discourses mentioned earlier.⁴ My partner and I had never discussed having children before, the communication between us had already been poor and he had only mentioned a passing that marriage without children is not a good idea. I had been married for at least three years at the time and for everyone concerned. It was high time that we ‘started a family.’ I routinely heard statements such as ‘what are you waiting for,’ ‘you are not getting any younger’ and so on, from assorted relatives (usually from my partner’s family). However, these were stray statements that I could manage to dodge. Things came to a head when one of my partner’s female relatives came from a different city only to meet me and convince me to have a child. She said that at my age (I was 31 then) it would get more and more difficult to bear and raise a child, and that the idea that women should delay pregnancy even into their late twenties is rather a western concept, that women are absolutely able to conceive from 16 onwards, the earlier the better so that the chances of having a healthy child are higher and mother and child grow together and finally that if highly

³ Although many people marry for love in India, few cohabit before marriage. Any couples that do cohabit, do so in the larger metropolitan cities, which promise anonymity and distance from their families (who are usually not aware of such an arrangement). As a result there are no statistics to this effect.

⁴ The incident I narrate is almost tailor made for the purposes of this thesis, although it happened several years ago it remains etched in my mind. I would like to make it absolutely clear however, that this actually took place and is not a fabricated version.

educated people from ‘good’ families don’t have children, people from lower classes will be the only ones that have children and society would only have these types.

In addition to the references to caste, class and gender this narrative is also important because of the people involved. I resented the interference from his relatives because he didn’t try to first talk to me and keep his relatives out of it and while his relative spoke to me, he didn’t at all intervene or try to make his position clear. He had been talking to his family about the issue of having a child but he never spoke to me about it or try to warn me about the possibility that they might try to talk to me. It almost appeared as though he was trying to hide all these facts. My partner and in-law were of the opinion that I was too individualistic⁵ and that it was common for older relatives to intervene in the life of a couple if they were perceived as not performing their responsibilities. This relative herself is highly educated and retired as a bank manager. She also happens to be well-versed in Hindu scriptures and received this education in Sanskrit early on in life. By no means do I want to imply that women with western education break away from tradition completely or even sympathize with other women who do or that they should do so. I do want to point out however, how fluidly, almost automatically different apparently conflicting ideologies coexist and become clear in certain situations.

This conflict and coexistence is what troubled me intensely during the time I was married. I felt uncomfortable with how I was required to be an independent, earning woman (wife) on the one hand (because it is impossible to run a household on one salary in urban India) while on the other hand when at home I was expected to perform traditional gender roles and duties of a wife such as starting a family at the right time, cooking, cleaning and keeping touch with relatives from my partner’s family as well. I was resentful of the ways in which everything became my responsibility rather than being shared; as I had imagined. I remember my mother-in-law telling me soon after I got married that keeping in touch with relatives of either side was the woman’s responsibility since men were no good at it. It was fairly commonplace to be subjected to this kind of advice, indeed most new

⁵ In the Indian context individualism is seen as something undesirable young people are often accused of being individualistic because of their exposure to western education, media and television. Discourses of individualism and modernity are seen as being detrimental to Indian tradition and society. I will discuss these discourses in detail in the course of the next chapters.

brides and young wives are regular recipients of this. However, while I perceived such occurrences as showing a double standard, others seemed to be able to deal with such issues with apparent ease (while complaining about it), leading me to wonder if I had allowed my education and orientation in feminism at an early age⁶ to influence my view and perception of marriage, making it difficult for me to adjust and compromise (Adjustment and compromise are words that appear almost constantly in the vocabulary of advice given to new brides and wives). I therefore turned outward with the hope of either getting validation for my way of thinking or to understand other negotiated this tricky terrain.

Meanwhile; the lives of others

These couple of anecdotes were to demonstrate a few of the reasons for my discomfort among other larger more detrimental ones that ultimately led to the breakup of our marriage. However, in addition to my personal reasons, a quick look around revealed that a lot of couples seemed to be going through similar motions. As a child growing up in the eighties and nineties in India divorce or legal separation was not a commonplace occurrence. The *few*; and these few were not from within my family or friend circle; that I did hear of were those that were reported in the news most likely between famous couples and so on. Sometimes even in the presence of abuse, women would not separate from their husbands legally but stay with their parents, if the parents were sympathetic, for indefinite periods of time because divorce carried a deep stigma in Indian society. However, there has been a steady rise in the divorce rate overtime in Indian society and although there is no official registry of the divorce rate, it is estimated that as compared to 1 in 1000 marriages a decade ago, it now stands roughly at 13 per 1000, which is still low compared to the United States for example (500 per 1000) (Dutt, 2015). Echoes of discontent were apparent among couples around me as well, reasons for unhappiness ranged from boredom to severe emotional and psychological abuse, which was not

⁶ For as long as I can remember I have found it difficult to accept norms that were handed down as being ‘something that girls should or shouldn’t do,’ which is a fairly everyday experience for most girls growing up in India. However, I was fortunate enough to have a family that wasn’t too caught up sexual and gender norms and therefore home provided a safe environment. It was while doing my masters in social work however, that I really engaged with gender and sexuality as concepts for the first time. During this time I also started engaging with feminist groups in Mumbai and other cities and this widened my understanding of other issues in India that were intertwined with gender especially that of caste. This kind of orientation is seen in most societies as detrimental to the preservation of the family. Women internalize such a discourse often leading them to doubt their own estimation of situations where they might be subjected to double standards or discrimination and I was no different.

considered a good enough reason – and to some extent is still not considered as one - as it is seen as something that can be *fixed*.

The argument and the questions

What then is changing? Has there been a fundamental reconfiguration of marriage in the imagination of a generation of young men and women so that they are unwilling to settle for less than their ideal of what a marriage should be? My guess is probably, and this is the premise with which I decided to take on this research project. To reiterate, my objective is to look at how young people construct marriage in their imagination and how this construction affects not only their marriage but also processes that precede and take place during the wedding itself (such as selection of prospective partner and decisions about wedding rituals- whether civil or traditional).

Towards this end my research questions include:

1. What expectations shape young people's ideas of marriage and what are their expectations from prospective or current partners?
2. How do notions of gender, caste, class, religion, region and tribe figure in these expectations?
3. How do these expectations play out in married lives and in the processes preceding marriage?
4. How do young people make sense of tradition and modernity and the interplay between the two, especially in the context of their marriage or impending marriage?
5. How is gender implicated in the process of shaping gender roles within marriage?

Who:

For the purpose of this research I considered a sample size of 20 comprising 2 categories, 5 men and women each who had been married for a period of 1-5 years and 5 men and 5 women who were awaiting marriage. I focused on participants who identified themselves as being middle class, were in the age group of 25-30 years, lived in any one of the bigger metropolitan cities – I conducted

interviews with participants currently living (irrespective of where they hail from) in Mumbai, Bengaluru, Pune and Delhi – with the exception of one couple that resides in a small town of the north-eastern state of Assam.⁷ The caste composition was diverse, although almost all participants with the exception of one (Tribal, Christian) were Hindu. All the participants have received university education, are professionally qualified and hold down jobs.

The reasons for using each of the above criteria for selecting participants were as follows: Middle class composition- Indian middle class cannot be neatly captured in any particular description or definition because of its sheer heterogeneity (Fernandez, Heller 2006: 499). No other class grouping has been as central to the political and economic fortunes of India as the middle class and investigating any social phenomenon in the post-liberalization phase of India is impossible without considering this class category (*Ibid.*). I posit that using this category is central to a study of marriage in India today. This is because marriage and the middle class represent key sites of transformation and contestation and are central objects in modernization projects in Indian society. The continuous proliferation of an Indian middle class implied blurring of boundaries of gender roles, caste, religion and tribe to a certain extent. However, nowhere do these boundaries become sharper and perceived of as worthy of preservation than in the context of marriage⁸. How the middle class aligns itself with respect to different discourses of gender, caste, religion and tribe in the particular context of marriage is important to demonstrate the continued presence and operation of these categories in Indian society albeit thinly veiled and under the aegis of specific institutions such as marriage.

Age-group of 25-30- the selection of this category is largely based in two criteria, firstly the average age at marriage in India continues to be below 18 despite government sanctions against this (Desai, Andrist 2010: 7). However, among the educated middle classes, the age at marriage is higher at 25 years of age. Therefore the likelihood of meeting people in this age group who are in the process

⁷ The reason I interviewed them in any case was because they fall into the category of middle class and although they do not live in a metropolitan city, they do live in an area that constitutes the category of urban, which was important for the purpose of the research (I will explain the importance in the section on field description).

⁸ This is evident in several ways but becomes obvious in the content of internet matrimonial portals (websites quite like dating websites where people set up profiles with the express intention of seeking a matrimonial alliance) where there are exhaustive categories such as religion, caste, sub-caste, annual income to name a few which people can use to filter prospective partners as well as classify themselves.

of looking for a partner is high and since my sample size also required men and women who were awaiting marriage, this age group seemed viable. Secondly and more importantly, the first few years of marriage are crucial in deciding the future life of a marriage. A major chunk of those filing for divorce in India are in the first few months or years of their marriage and are divorced before 30 (Dutt, 4 January 2015). This age group is therefore representative of the generation that is in the midst of major change as mentioned earlier in the chapter and needs to be the point of focus.

The where:

Choice of urban sites- I chose urban areas of India using the idea of a multi-sited ethnography⁹ since marriage is the social phenomenon under consideration, which cuts across these sites. Since I am not considering the influence a particular city on marriage, I made the decision of interviewing participants belonging to the specified cross-section irrespective of the city they resided in at the time. The reason for focusing only on urban areas is that cities represent flux much more than any other geographical location.

Cities are also seen as the major site for escaping caste based restrictions and hierarchies, what M.N Srinivas refers to as the ‘status trap’ (Srinivas 1977: 232). Therefore a large number of men and women migrate to cities from their native towns (semi and peri-urban) seeking higher education and employment and these cities then become their homes. Srinivas contends that caste based structure break down in the city scape allowing for men and women to reconfigure their status depending on their income and education (*Ibid.*). The possibility to be able to gain access and membership to and even renegotiate the boundaries of middle-class become easier in a space that has fewer restrictions of caste and gender.

Often some of the contestations within couples arise out of the physical and psychological demands that cities place on individuals. These demands are entwined with the demands that a middle-class lifestyle places on peoples. Such as long working hours followed by even longer and tiring commutes to and from work in crowded public transport facilities and then inevitable household

⁹ George Marcus’s proposed method of ethnography with a view towards resolving the problem of studying and analyzing phenomenon which is not restricted to a particular region but extends across different geographical areas (Marcus, 1995).

responsibilities. The city therefore produces a classed space which makes it an important backdrop in the lifecycle of a couple's relationship. Large cities are also more likely to provide to attract (or already be home to) young men and women belonging to the cross-section I want to focus on and therefore the choice to focus on couples based in urban spaces.

The how:

For the purpose of this study, I chose multi-sited ethnography as a methodology and used the participant observation method in 3 weddings in the cities of Pune and Delhi during the months of January and February 2016 (as this is marriage season with the most auspicious dates for weddings). I also conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 men and women. 5 men and women each awaiting marriage and 5 men and women each who had been married for a period of between 1-5 years. The methods of sampling included purposive and snowball sampling methods, first approaching people I knew socially who fit my criteria and then using their contacts to get in touch with more participants.

I used the participant observation method at three wedding sites, one of which was my brother's wedding in the city of Delhi, India. Using this method gave me several advantages, firstly as the groom's sister I was involved right from the beginning with all the preparations preceding the wedding and got the chance to interact with relatives and friends from both families, and even the priest who presided over the wedding rituals at close quarters. It also meant that I did not need any special introduction as being from the boy's side (and especially his sister) is a position of privilege in Indian weddings. I had told key people who were involved in the wedding such as my parents, brother, his fiancée and her parents and sister that I was going to use the wedding as my research field. They had no objections to this proposition and were extremely cooperative throughout the process. Secondly, being an Indian observing an Indian wedding, practical issues such as language or ease of interaction with people was not a problem. In addition to this, as a younger member of the family, any interest I showed in certain rituals, chants or procedures was entertained with enthusiasm by elders in the family and I received rich and ample descriptions and explanations. Resulting in an understanding of how people construct meaning through different acts and conversations and how

interpretations tend to change depending on circumstance (Emerson et al. 1995:4).

There are some perils of being a ‘cultural insider’ however (Ganga, Scott 2006:2), as an insider there is always a possibility of taking for granted one’s own knowledge about specific cultural practices and missing out on what is actually occurring in the field. I was constantly alert to this possibility and questioned the knowledge I thought I had based on what I had observed as a non-researcher over the years. Another limitation of being an insider, particularly the groom’s sister was that I had to be involved in some key rituals and pre-wedding preparations and it would mean not being able to make field notes. However, following the wedding, relatives lingered on and there were many opportunities for talking about specific instances from the wedding filling in any gaps.

Conducting in-depth unstructured interviews was the only way of talking to people about an area as intimate as their married lives. As a one-on-one process men and women from either group were enthusiastic and willing to talk about their marriage. They found the questions thought provoking and were keen to engage with them. This was not surprising since many of them already knew me or of me. While this was an advantage, I was also concerned about how much they might be willing to divulge or truthfully admit to, given that I did share a personal relationship with almost all of them. Since all of them are also well educated (and some of them in social sciences and humanities) I was concerned that they would be likely to give me ‘right’ answers as opposed to what they really felt. However, as soon as I started the process of interviewing, I realized that none of the participants had really ever had a chance to reflect on the questions that I was asking and they took their time to formulate answers. Many of the participants also spoke about intimate areas of their life, which most people would be uncomfortable talking about. These facts laid many of my initial fears to rest and made data collection and analysis a rewarding and valuable experience.

Theoretical formulation

In order to investigate marriage in India I find myself reverting to Illouz’s assertion that far from being the products of individual psyches, the experience of and desire for romantic love and marriage emerge from the ways in which societies and social structures construct these (Illouz 2012:3). Through this assertion, Illouz stresses the need to examine love, which I extrapolate it also

to marriage sociologically – to examine the social determinants and influences that come together in order to shape understanding and expectation from romantic love and then from marriage. In this sense Indian society provides for a complex background comprising a colonial heritage, ever present post-colonial undercurrents and currently strong neo-liberal leanings among others. These forces have played a critical role in shaping dominant discourses about tradition, modernity, gender, caste, class, religion, tribe and region. I situate narratives about marriage – collected through my ethnographic work – within this complex web of discourses and relationships in order to understand how these influence people’s decisions, expectations and perceptions of marriage in contemporary India. In order to do so, I will rely on feminist critiques of love and marriage, including post-colonial feminist critiques of marriage and kinship structures. I also situate my research in a post-colonial critique and account of modernity and tradition with a view towards understanding marriage with respect to these two concepts. Finally I look at kinship structures in the Indian context and their relationship gender in order to understand how these continue to operate.

I will explain this framework in much greater detail in the chapter on literature review and theoretical framework.

Structure of Thesis

Following the introductory chapter there is a chapter on the theoretical framework, which explains and emphasizes the theoretical concepts that I use in the research including feminist and post-colonial feminist critiques of marriage, post-colonial critiques of modernity and tradition and kinship structures and gender in India to complement the narratives and ethnographic accounts collected for the purpose of this research.

The chapter that follows documents and analyzes the narratives with a view towards providing an understanding the calculus undergirding young people’s expectations from marriage and prospective and current partners. I analyze these narratives using feminist critiques of love and marriage as well as critiques of caste in India.

The third chapter engages with young men’s and women’s discourses about tradition and modernity and how they make sense of these ideas in their lives and in the particular context of

their conjugal relations and at the site of the wedding. I use post-colonial critiques of modernity and tradition in order to situate these narratives

The final chapter illuminates people's understanding of domestic roles within their marriage, what they think of the gendered aspects of the performance of these roles.

The concluding chapter documents the findings of the study and their relevance their implications for further study and research.

Chapter I: Situating marriage in theory and scholarship

In this chapter I review literature and theory relevant to analysis of the questions that I investigate through this research. I will start by outlining feminist and sociological critiques of marriage and romantic love that I have used in the thesis to explain processes relating to marriage such as partner selection in contemporary India. I will talk about the different ways in which modernity and tradition have been theoretically conceptualized; particularly with a view towards investigating marriage in contemporary India; in post-colonial terms. Finally I will elaborate kinship systems especially those relating to marriage and concerned with the ritual aspects of weddings and kinship. Across all these themes I will use gender as the primary units of analysis. This chapter therefore provides a conceptual framework within which the narratives of participants in this study come to be situated to illustrate how marriage is constructed in contemporary India among middle class young adults.

Feminist critiques of marriage and romantic love

Ideas of romantic love and marriage typically come to be framed in terms of the private or the personal. This binary of private and public has met with severe criticism from feminists who have continually challenged the idea that marriage and love are personal matters and have emphasized the need to situate these in light of larger social structures. Consonant with the relegation of marriage into the realm of the private is the idea that what transpires in relationships is a product of individual interactions (Illouz 2012:6).

However, Illouz's contention is that far from being the products of individual psyches, love¹⁰ is the outcome of broader societal structures that influence and shape people's understanding and need for love. She further elaborates that love is not exterior but integral to a project of studying society and societal structures, particularly heterosexual love provides for a peerless site to understand

¹⁰ While Illouz talks about romantic love in her book *Why Love Hurts* (2012), I am extrapolating her arguments to marriage, as her sociological explorations of love also provides for one of the reasons for marriage. I am interested in exploring the idea that modern society's conceptualization of love provides the basis of marriage and how this idea gets expressed through young people's narratives, particularly in my study. However, love is just one of the motivations that I am investigating as part of this thesis, I also look at other aspects and situate the institution of marriage in a post-colonial framework in the following sections of this chapter.

modernity as the last few decades have been witness to a radical reconfiguration of ideas of freedom and equality in intimate relationships (Illouz 2012:9).

This conceptualization comes alive through the narratives in my study as these reflect the many negotiations that take place between modernity and tradition, social systems of caste, class and religion and the cross-cutting theme of gender within contemporary Indian society that have been and are closely associated with love and marriage. It is also significant that Illouz brings up class and mobility and the role they continue to play in processes of selecting potential partners. She says that modernity has been implicated in shaping the individual in rational, emotional, economic and romantic terms all at once and while in such a conceptualization the role of love in marriage has increased, economic (class) considerations continue to play a very significant role. Illouz makes a significant point when she points out that considerations of economic and social ranking of potential mates has now been integrated into the psychology of love and unconscious structures of desire, and that individuals have internalized these factors so that instead of parental guidance and/or pressure there is now an internalized radar that identifies the *appropriate* mate (Illouz 2012:13).

Laura Kipnis (2003) talks in a similar vein of the continued presence of economic rationality as a deciding factor in the process of selecting a potential partner (Kipnis 2003: 62). She goes on to emphasize that despite the presumption of freedom (freedom from parents' interference and economic considerations, for example) in the process of selecting mates, people continue to select partners that are remarkably similar to themselves – similar in economic, social, educational and racial terms (*Ibid.*). Kipnis also emphasizes the preoccupation with looks and says that more often than not couples are well matched in terms of their levels of physical attractiveness and therefore the idea of 'falling in love' freely without consideration of any of the above factors is one that is not necessarily visible in social reality.

My study focuses on similar determinants such as caste,¹¹ class, religion, region, education and the role of physical appearance that have traditionally played a central role in the selection of a mate (usually arranged by parents and families). In contemporary India have been

¹¹ I will explore the concept of caste in some detail in the section on post-colonial modernity and tradition.

internalized so much so that people deny the part these factors continue to play in marriage and love. The process of mate selection actually reproduce and reinforce the same patterns by selecting ‘appropriate’ partners with marginal variations¹². Illouz’s and Kipnis’ sociological explorations of love are of considerable importance to the purposes of my thesis as I use their conceptualization to develop a framework to problematize the idea that romantic love is the only determinant in partner selection and that there are other forces, which are of equal if not more importance in such situations.

I find Illouz’s conceptualization of imagination; with regard to love and its role in the formation of expectations; valuable in understanding young men and women’s motivations for choosing particular kinds of partners (Illouz, 2012). Using Adorno’s suggestion, she argues that modernity is characterized by the ‘institutionalization’ of imagination, which has in turn transformed the nature of romantic desire (Illouz 2012: 198). Further she suggests that modernity in large part has been implicated in processes of reimagining emotional bonds as central to and even constituting the route to personal happiness. These ideas are in turn reinforced by consumerist culture, which continually frame self-actualization through the fulfilment of emotional needs (Illouz 2012: 203). This continuous invocation of love and romance comes to shape expectations (which, following from Illouz falls into the realm of the imaginary) necessarily leading to disillusionment. In studying marriage in India I am interested in understanding the kind of expectations that men and women have from marriage and prospective partners and whether (in the case of those who are already married) these expectations are realized. My initial assumption had been that modern conceptualizations of marriage in India are set up for disappointment and Illouz’s argument provides force to such an assumption. However, at this juncture Illouz’s contention serves as a point of departure for my thesis in order to illustrate that young people’s expectations from marriage are firmly grounded in practicality and imagination has (though important and becoming increasingly so) a limited role to play in the kind of expectations that are expressed. In this sense Illouz gives my thesis a basis from which to propose an alternative way of understanding marriage in the Indian context where there are

¹² By marginal variations I mean that people will probably compromise on such issues as regional difference or class based consideration in India if other determinants such as religion, caste and/or educational status of a potential partner are appropriate.

many other determinants that seek fruition in addition to and above the attainment of personal happiness.

While Illouz argues that notions of love and romance come to be shaped through imagination fueled by consumerist modern societies, bell hooks on the other hand speaks to the need of thinking of love in more practical terms (hooks, 1999). She argues for the need to think of love not as an act of surrendering one's will and intention (as the term *falling* in love suggests) but as a conscious act, one that is not mired in illusions but comes from a place of practical consideration (hooks, 1990:184). In such a framework expectations from love and future love relationships are realistic and based on mutual agreement of certain requirements. Much as such a formulation of love is deemed as the end of romance, this kind of love is less likely to be set up for a fall or disappointment (*Ibid.*). I use hooks' proposition and Illouz's contention (as a point of departure) in my thesis with a view to situating the expectations and aspirations of young people from marriage in contemporary India, specifically in the ways in which they express these ideas and seek to enact them in their conjugal relations. The basis of the way in which modernity was constituted in India is different and therefore needs to be explained while talking about marriage in contemporary Indian society.

The exploration of post-colonial ideas of modernity and tradition is one of the major focal points of this thesis and while I do talk about modernity and tradition in much detail in the following section, I would be remiss if I don't speak of post-colonial feminist critiques of marriage. The critiques of white feminists are of significance in bringing to attention the oppressive basis of marriage (towards women), however, these criticisms were leveled at a homogeneous understanding of marriage and family (Mohanty 1984: 341). While this in and of itself was a task worth embarking on, it is important to understand the different kinds of marriage and family structures that were/are in existence in other societies with a view to problematizing the very basis from which these critiques emerge. I make this proposition particularly because the ways in which marriage and family were conceptualized in India (prior to British colonization) were markedly different as compared to the western ideal of marriage and the nuclear family. Marriage and traditional kinship structures underwent reformulation in India following colonization and independence with the complicity of

Indian elite in the project of modernizing India (Menon, 2012; Srinivas 1977: 227). India had several indigenous forms of marriage prior to colonization and in some regions, particularly the south these were centered on matriliney and matrifocality affording women considerable autonomy in marriage and family life. The homogenization of marriage that occurred in this context served to strengthen patriarchy, “*patriliney*” (property passing from father to son) and “*virilocality*” (wife moving to husband’s home) (*Ibid.*). These developments evidently led to considerable weakening of women’s autonomy within marriage. These developments also mean that on marrying a woman must change her surname to her husband’s surname- Menon points out that the phenomenon of having surnames is in itself a product of British colonization. Prior to which, there were different ways of naming that did not involve reference to caste or marital ties. The practices therefore of taking on the husband’s name - in some communities her first name— move to her husband’s or his parents’ home irrespective of whether she is living with her parents or independently as a professional and have her children bear her husband’s family name are relatively new and in fact modern practices in this sense rather than traditional (*Ibid.*).

The structures surrounding marriage in contemporary India (such as the caste system or kinship structures) mentioned earlier, which are seen as oppressive and traditional are in fact constituted by colonialism. A critique of Indian marriage therefore requires placing what gets framed as tradition in perspective as opposed to approaching it from the false assumption that Indian tradition was always already in existence and was essentially oppressive. For example, the process of naming mentioned earlier is affected by caste (most family names are caste based following colonialism) and the caste system has come to be seen as one of the primary means of oppression in India. Here, however, Nicholas Dirks’ work on tradition and colonialism is illuminating and provides an alternative means of understanding and making sense of tradition. Dirks points out the critical role that British colonialism played in “*producing*” and “*identifying*” (emphasis added) Indian tradition and that modern debates about modernity and tradition in fact do not take into account that the different customs, rituals, beliefs and practices that are categorized as being traditional are in fact the (by) product of a colonial legacy (Dirks 2001: 9). I will explore the themes of caste further in the

section on modernity and tradition.

My study investigates the performance of gender roles, young people's perception of these roles and the impact on conjugal life. To this end I will use M.N Srinivas' work on women's position in modern India (1977) of which I will provide a more detailed explanation in the section that follows on modernity.

An analysis of gender roles is incomplete without considering the economic roles that women are now performing in addition to traditional roles in India today. While the Indian labor market is not remarkable in terms of women's participation¹³ there has been a considerable increase in women's workforce participation and educational attainment today as compared to the eighties (Bhalla, Kaur 2011: 12). At a global level this has meant a change in the traditional model of breadwinner/homemaker to double income models (Mannon, quoting Reskin, Padavic 1994, 2006: 511). This is also the case with India as urban survival demands that both men and women contribute to the family income. However, whether or not the increased economic independence of women contributes to more egalitarian roles within the family is a different matter. While some say that women's economic independence has led to more equitable family relations (Mannon quoting Blood and Wolfe 1960 2006: 512), others contend that the influence of traditional gender norms are not likely to allow for positive change at the level of the family (Mannon quoting Hochschild 1989, 2006: 512). However, Mannon contends that empirical data from different areas show support to both these theories leading to the understanding that the relationship between economic independence and autonomy within marital relationships is contingent and needs to be situated in the specific context that these relationships are enacted (*Ibid.*). In the Indian context these negotiations are further complicated because the question is not just about whether increased economic autonomy of women leads to the negotiations for more equitable gender relations within the family. It also extends to whether women *are allowed* or not to work outside the house. As demonstrated by reports, women's work force participation has actually decreased from 31% to 24% between 2004 and 2011 in India

¹³ The ILO ranked India 11th from the bottom in 2013 in the world on women's workforce participation (International Labor Organization, key indicators of the labor market database, 2013).

(Why Aren't India's Women Working, Pande, Troyer-Moore, 23 August 2015). Gender norms- that get constructed as traditional – can place restrictions on women in terms of accessing employment on the one hand while on the other hand increased educational attainment and the demands of rapid urbanization and neo-liberalism call for women to seek paid employment. Purnima Makekar aptly sums it up as the conflict that women must negotiate between expectations of being a good daughter and the middle-class demand to enter contribute to the family income (Mankekar 199: 123).

The theories and conceptualizations that I have discussed evidently cannot be seen as separate from each other and there is considerable overlap between different conceptualizations, however I expect that this flow between different themes provides for a coherent framework within which the empirical data from my study can be situated.

Tradition and modernity; how the twain collide in India

This section explores the twin recurrent themes in this thesis that is, tradition and modernity. These terms are profoundly contested in Indian society because of the ways in which they have come to be historically constituted and are currently spoken about in a contemporary society. I draw heavily from the work of Partha Chatterjee, Nicholas Dirks, M.S Srinivas, Lata Mani and Andre Beteille to formulate an understanding of these two terms. It is important to situate these two concepts historically as this helps put people's perceptions about social structures and systems as being traditional or modern into perspective.

To begin with what is seen as tradition is in itself produced, identified and constituted by the interplay between colonial forces and select aspects and sections from the Indian elite such as Indian nationalists (Dirks 1992: 9; Chatterjee 1989: 622; Mani 1987: 132). Lata Mani demonstrates this through her work on the abolition of *Suttee* (1987). Mani talks about how the practice of *Suttee* got framed as tradition using the discourses of people who were seen as being representative of this custom like the Brahmin priestly class that was seen as providing sanction to this practice, upper caste Hindu reformers who were interested in 'modernizing' Indian society through reform and finally upper caste Hindu women as the oppressed emblems of this custom (Mani 1987: 122-124). The production of such a discourse necessarily resulted in the conceptualization of *Suttee* as being a Hindu

(Indian) tradition that was prescribed in Hindu scriptural texts as opposed to being a custom practiced by specific people of a particular region (*Ibid.*). I give this background to demonstrate that far from being always already in existence, tradition comes to be homogenized and institutionalized through very specific processes and with the complicity of specific players. This understanding is particularly important to situate the invocation or rejection of certain traditions by people. I contend that these contestations come into sharp relief particularly at the site of marriage, wedding rituals and kinship systems in India and provide for fertile ground for analysis. This can be seen for example in Menon's argument about the practice of taking on the husband's family name after marriage and the dissolution of traditional (those that existed before colonialism) kinship structures. While I explore this in detail through my empirical data in the chapters that follow, I would like to illuminate an important concept here that is central to the institution of marriage in India and one that was reinforced and reified as a result of British colonialism, namely the caste system. I do so in order to provide a background to the narratives that constitute the substance of my study.

Nicholas Dirks provides an influential commentary on the caste system in India. He suggests,

“The singular currency caste has today in terms of organizing, expressing and most importantly systematizing India's diverse forms of social identity, community and organization, is a product of British colonialism in India.”

However, seen out of the context of its post-colonial antecedents, the caste system comes to be seen as a uniquely Indian traditional system – one that was always already in existence – which typifies Indian society in its entirety and is the biggest impediment to India's modernity. The particular relevance of caste in the context of marriage is precisely this, the rejection of the caste system by people in contemporary India is based in an understanding that the caste system is part of the traditional composition of Indian society and is an undesirable one at that because of its exclusionary and oppressive nature (and therefore being opposed to modernity). However, this rejection of caste is an ideological one and does not necessarily translate into practice. As Beteille says in the context of marriage Hindus continue to adhere to caste irrespective of the ideological stance they may take

towards the caste system (Beteille 2002: 81) and in fact marriage is one of the primary institutions through which caste continues to be perpetuated. However, what often gets ignored is that there was much more fluidity within the caste system in pre-colonial India as opposed to during colonialism with its emphasis on codification and classification. As a result, as Srinivas points out caste gets ‘mistakenly’ described as a traditionally closed system (Srinivas 1977: 227). Through this exposition on caste what I basically contend is that people’s ideas of which tradition should be rejected and what should be retained is in itself based in a historically inaccurate basis and understanding of caste. This contention becomes important specifically with respect to my thesis because it helps put into perspective many of the notions that emerge from the narratives of the participants in this study and in understanding how particular discourses get shaped.

The British colonial project was implicated in more than just codification and standardization of certain systems and practices. This project extended from simply colonization towards a civilizing mission as well, which led to the creation of tensions (particularly for Indian nationalists) between notions of modernity and tradition. This civilizing project relied on various methods but the underlying basis of this project remained the same; making Indians feel that their culture was degenerate and oppressive, especially towards women (Chatterjee 1989: 622). Indian nationalists and reformers therefore felt the dual pressure of adopting western modernity on the one hand and on the other hand to maintain and preserve that which was good about Indian tradition as cultural and national identity (*Ibid.*). Chatterjee provides an understanding of how this tension was resolved by suggesting that the realm of culture was seen as being split in two domains – the material and the spiritual – the material world was dominated by the British because of their superior political and scientific expertise (Chatterjee 1989: 623). In this sphere therefore Indian nationalists justified and advocated for imitation if Indians were to overthrow the yoke of domination (*Ibid.*). In the spiritual sphere however, the east claimed superiority over the west and therefore the need for imitation was neither desirable nor necessary, the rationale behind such a split tied in smoothly with the nationalist agenda of consolidating a national identity as well as embracing western modernity (*Ibid.*). This split continues to be used as a means of rationalizing the adoption of specific western ideals of modernity

on the one hand and the preservation of tradition as a means of maintaining and preserving Indian identity in contemporary Indian society. The evidence of this is in the resonance of this theoretical conceptualization with the voices in my narratives and will become clearer in the analytical chapters.

This ideological split is also used analogously to explain another aspect of Indian life, which is at the level of the household and about the split in social space. Here the spiritual comes to signify the inner world or the home and the material comes to represent the outer world (Chatterjee 1989: 624). In this analogy the outer world becomes the domain of men and the inner world comes to be represented by women. The differential basis for the adoption of modernity and tradition therefore also extended to women and men in that women's adoption of modern or western ways of being came under criticism and derision (Chatterjee, 1989: 627). Such a conceptualization had (and continues to have) two implications for women. Firstly, the assignment of the inner/spiritual world to women implied that women came to be seen also as the primary bearers of tradition and cultural identity. The preservation of a national identity embedded in cultural and traditional values was framed as women's responsibility, as Srinivas puts it women became the primary '*custodians*' of everything at the level of the domestic including tradition, culture and ritual (Srinivas 1977: 229; Chatterjee 1989: 628; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989: 7). The fulfilment of such a responsibility was dependent on the assurance that women were kept away from western influence. On the other hand, women's¹⁴ education was also seen as important aspect of the modernizing project, which came in conflict with the idea of keeping women away from western influence (Chatterjee 1989: 628). This conflict was resolved when the Indian intelligentsia opened schools for women and ensured the creation of a language and literature that was suitable for women's consumption (*Ibid.*). Suitable implies education that is aimed not only at the acquisition of skills pertaining to the material world but the preservation of traditional values. This was the consolidation of the image of the 'new' Indian woman who embodied western ideals of freedom balanced by a strong foundation in tradition. This

¹⁴ Chatterjee refers to women belonging to a middle class, upper caste Hindu composition and particularly Bengal. However, such a process took place in other parts of the country particularly South India, where women's education was an important aspect of modernization. Elsewhere, Srinivas has also contended that reformers' reasons for advocacy of women's education was to ensure that upper caste Hindu widows did not fall into prostitution. This reason was true specifically of Bengali society (Srinivas, 1977:234).

new Indian woman was superior to western women with their concentration on the material world and the women from lower strata who could not appreciate the value of freedom (Chatterjee 1989: 628). This idea of a new Indian woman has changed since colonial times but continues to be framed as such and even in contemporary Indian marriage is based on how well she can balance tradition and modernity.

Gender and Kinship structures

India is complex and diverse culturally and given this diversity, it is difficult to give an overview of or a comprehensive picture of kinship systems or marriage patterns in Indian society (Desai 1994: 18). Having said this however, Desai talks about three broad regimes of marriage in India, which include: The north India tradition of exogamy where a woman must marry outside of her extended family and village, the south Indian tradition of marriage within the family, also followed among Muslims, and matrilineal kinship systems which have a variety of marriage systems and patterns of residence (*Ibid.*) These three broad kinship patterns have been seen to bestow differential levels of agency and power to women, with the north Indian kinship system being seen as the most disempowering since women are completely uprooted from their natal families and have to move to the new marital home and the south Indian system allowing for some power and agency within marriage (Dyson, Moore, 1983: 52). Matrilineal kinship systems are perceived as providing higher levels of autonomy and power to women (Desai 1994: 18). Another important element that typifies Indian marriage include hyper gamy in which parents go to extreme lengths to ensure that their daughters marry above (or at least within) their own social class and/or caste. I would like to contend that not only is it difficult to give an overview of kinship structures and patterns of marriage in India given its diversity, it is also difficult to take the above mentioned categories as watertight compartments, more so with respect to the urban middle class where inter-caste marriages have become common. In addition to this, the process of moving to the marital home post-marriage has changed somewhat, particularly in urban India. Even though the basic premise remains that the bride moves to her in-laws' house (patrilocality), this actually happens at a symbolic, more ritualistic level today rather than in actual practice. This is primarily because young couples where both spouses are

educated and employed are likely to be working in metropolitan cities away from either of their families. So the practice of actually staying with the in-laws is now far less prevalent. Having said this though, in cases where both spouses' parents live in the same city as the couple, the bride is most likely to move to her husband's parents' house. Living in the same city in different houses is a concept that has still not taken root in most Indian families (however, such a trend is slightly on the rise) even though people may own multiple houses in the same city in the name of financial investment.

Education, employment and modernity notwithstanding, not only is a woman expected to move in to her in-law's house after marriage, there are elaborate rituals surrounding her departure from her natal home. As Leela Dube points out, the change in a woman's relationship with her natal home after marriage constitutes the content of many wedding rituals (Dube 1988: 12). In many communities the last part of the ceremony comprises the bride standing with her back to the natal home (or symbolic natal home) and throwing rice over her shoulder, which symbolizes her giving back the grain she ate in her natal home for all the years before marriage (*Ibid.*). In the context within which I propose to undertake this study, most women are unlikely to stay in their in-laws' house but the ritual continues to be practiced as part of the other wedding rituals. The interlinking of tradition and modernity in order to preserve and perpetuate essentially patriarchal and patrilocal kinship orders is an area that gets thrown into sharp relief and one which I contend makes for an extremely important issue to be investigated. As part of this investigation I would like to explore how women and men view and negotiate kinship systems and rituals that preserve these systems in the current urban scenario and why they think such a preservation is important.

Chapter II: The construction of a marriage- how it all begins

I felt that there were some basic things that I needed to get right and in place before I got married and once I did get these basics right I would be 'eligible' for marriage. I expected that the person I ended up getting married to- the right person would also have certain basics in place. (M- Has been married roughly for a year)

Through this chapter I map and unpack the very 'basics' that the participant M refers to when she speaks of her idea of qualities she thinks her partner should embody. Although M was the only participant who spoke of qualities of her partner in terms of basics, I thought such a usage of the word provided for an interesting approach towards understanding what qualities young men and women were unwilling to compromise on in their search for a potential partner and also because almost all the participants in the study used similar terms to explain their journey of finding a suitable partner. These basics change somewhat from one participant to another, however, because of the homogeneity of the sample size particularly in terms of class; there is a resonance between the different narratives in terms of what qualities and expectations are framed as being beyond compromise. Most visibly the common threads that run across the different narratives include a 'good' education, respect for self and others, adherence to certain traditional and cultural values and the ability to 'live well.'

In addition to the qualities that are explicitly expressed in the narratives of the participants,; there are those aspects that are not expressed vocally, and are as a matter of fact denied as playing any part in the matrix of desirable qualities at all. However, these have ways of becoming apparent in the narratives of the participants, which will become clearer in the course of the chapter.

The substance of this chapter therefore lies in providing an analysis of how and why these expectations get articulated using the demographic characteristics of the sample as a frame of reference and explaining the historical and social context in which these demographic characteristics have been constituted. In doing so I provide a calculus underlying the construction of marriage in India and how marriages get arranged in India, sometimes literally.

Selection of spouse/partner:

I interviewed men and women in the age group of 25 to 35 years who were either waiting to be married or who had been married for a period of between 1 to 5 years. The selection of a suitable partner is of course the very first step towards the entire process of marriage and all of my participants had chosen their partners on their own or at least with very little assistance from their parents or other relatives.

2.1 A matter of love or arrangement

The very first contestation presented itself at this site. I had asked participants in the study how they had met their current partners or the people that they were going to get married to. While most of the participants said that they had had or were going to have "love marriages"¹⁵ and had met their partners at their workplace, or at university or through common friends. There were those who didn't say with absolute certainty that their marriage was for love or arranged. M, a 29 year old advertising executive who got married 9 months before I interviewed her, met her partner through a matrimonial website. Matrimonial services are a common way of arranging marriages in India and different kinds of matrimonial services are available such as agencies where people have databases of suitable and eligible young men and women. More recently there are web-based matrimonial services (much like dating sites) where people register themselves and look for suitable partners. These websites are tailored for people belonging to different caste, class, religions, educational and professional compositions and depending on the primary preference, people decide which website to register on. However, while speaking of her marriage, she said, "I would say my marriage was a love marriage or well this is how I like to put it, it was a blind date set up by my parents but when I met him I really liked him almost instantly. In fact it is interesting we had decided that we would not continue the meeting if the first fifteen minutes were too awkward. However, much to my surprise I

¹⁵ In the Indian context because of the presence of a system in which parents and other members of extended family played a role in finding a suitable match for young people; referred to as the arranged marriage; the alternative is referred to as a love marriage. However, it was common place for people to think that love marriage necessarily meant that the couple had eloped and therefore alternative formulations of the love marriage were coined in common usage such as love arranged marriages, which meant that the couple had met each other prior to marriage without the intervention of their respective families but the families had approved of the match and supported the marriage.

found him easy to talk to and be with. I found him very considerate and he seemed to remember small things that I had mentioned earlier, when we had spoken on the phone. These things endeared him to me and in the next meeting I fell in love with him. So I think I can call it a love marriage." While talking to M's mother, she mentioned in passing that M's marriage was a "pure" love marriage. What becomes evident here is that notions of love marriage or arranged marriage cannot be seen as separate watertight compartments. The lines between the two are not only blurred but also intersecting, making it impossible to decide which kind of marriage constitutes which category.

There are other factors about the family that M has married into, which further complicate the idea of a distinction between arranged and love marriage. In what is considered the traditional¹⁶ sense in an urban Indian middle-class ethos an arranged marriage not only entails that the alliance be fixed by parents (and families) of the prospective groom and bride but more often than not, it also means that the two families have the same composition in terms of caste, religion, class, language, and in the case of India even region. Some factors are more important than others and if they match, others might be overlooked (Uberoi 1993: 153). Therefore, for example, if the caste is right, then region or class might be overlooked. However, it is also important to note that there are families that insist that all criteria be met. M's narrative provides for an important case in this sense. While talking to me she said that when her partner Ra (a 29 year old professional in finance from a Hindu upper caste, middle class family) registered on the matrimonial website he did not tick the boxes of caste, class or regional considerations; he did, however, tick the religion box; his main condition was that the girl be 'well' educated and they should have the same 'wavelength'; which translates into having similar ways of thinking. The definition of well¹⁷ is variable. If a computer professional, specifically a man is looking for a partner, he may or may not look for a partner who is as qualified as himself, but is likely to want a partner who has an English and university education and is qualified enough to seek and access paid employment if she wants or if necessary. Highly

¹⁶ I use the words tradition and traditional very loosely as following from the literature review and conceptual framework, it becomes clear that ideas of what constitute tradition are extremely contested in themselves.

¹⁷ I make these claims based on observations and anecdotal evidence as well as some data from my study although only some of the respondents got married through matrimonial websites.

qualified women on the other hand (this refers to engineers, doctor, lawyer or finance professionals) usually tend to seek equally qualified partners if not more qualified than themselves. The result of such a selection or condition was that M turned out to be of the same caste (although not same sub-caste) and class composition as Ra but from a different region in India. A little further in the chapter I will explain how notions of caste and class are deeply intertwined with the condition of 'well-educated' and of 'same wavelength'. Traditionally it was rare for people from different regions to arrange a marriage; not only because of practical problems of access, but also because of differently organized kinship systems, as I have mentioned in the chapter on conceptual framework; modernity,¹⁸ and modern means such as the internet allow for the possibility of such a marriage to be arranged (Uberoi 1993: 153). Furthermore, with changes occurring within the caste system and greater differentiation within caste groups, endogamous groups have become more porous and allow for greater width in terms of partner choice (*Ibid.*).

A similar but not altogether same view was expressed by another participant, K, who wasn't married at the time that I interviewed her but had chosen a partner and was waiting to be married. K is a software engineer who had just graduated from engineering college and was finishing her internship in a reputed corporate company in Delhi although originally from the state of Kerela in southern India. When I asked her about how she met her partner she said, "I would say that it was an arranged marriage although not completely arranged in the traditional sense either you know, because we met online first through a matrimonial website. You know how it works, your family is involved from the get go, right from registration to 'screening candidates' (they are referred to as candidates) to the final decision, there is a lot of deliberation and back and forth between different people before the final decision is made. So yes I definitely like him as a future partner and we meet regularly while we wait to get married, but I don't think this qualifies as a love marriage." In both narratives more or less similar procedures were followed but the ways in which they get perceived and presented are completely different. While one of them thinks of her marriage as for love; even

¹⁸ The role of modernity cannot be seen as an absolute here as in the light of the chapter on conceptual framework that kinship structures as they exist in India today are products of colonialism.

when a standard definition of love marriage doesn't really fit into this perception. K perceives her marriage as being an arranged marriage, although by standard definitions, the process through which she met her future husband doesn't qualify as an arranged marriage either. It is as Sharangpani calls it, "A profoundly modern discourse of tradition," where modern means are deployed towards fulfilling traditional ends (Sharangpani 2010: 265).

2.2 An approved love

Parental and familial approval come across as important determinants for marriage. The male participants' responses to this question did not provide as much detail as the female participants' responses in terms of the process that they underwent when choosing a partner, they do speak of how parental approval was an important consideration for them while selecting a partner. They also answered in very certain terms (bordering on the monosyllabic) when asked if they considered their marriage as being for love or arranged. I will demonstrate this through the narrative of, Sh, a 30 year old computer and management professional who has been married for a year and a half. He said, "Ours was a love marriage for sure. It wasn't as if I was actively looking for a partner at that time, we were studying in the same university at the time and we fell in love." However, when asked about the rest of the process and his and her families' involvement he said, "My mother and father were not really open to the idea of us getting married initially because she was from a different caste and regional background. I am an only son so they had this thing that the girl I marry be of the same caste, I guess so that the lineage remains intact or something. Both my sisters married into the caste and everything. But well I was very sure that I wanted to get married to my current partner because I thought we were a good match. However, they finally came around to it with some persuasion from one of my sisters." I asked him if he would have still married his partner if his parents had not agreed to the match. He responded by saying, "I think I would have. But it would have been much more difficult to make it work, because my parents and family are important to me and I would want them to be on board. Even though I don't live with them, I do turn to them while making important decisions. So I guess I would have really tried hard to convince them."

However, here it is important to point out that although parental and familial consent are

important considerations, there is room for dissent and asserting one's own choices within these negotiations. Ra, a 29 year old finance professional who has been married for 10 months said, "My parents could access my profile on the matrimonial website I was registered on. So they could see who had shown interest and who could be considered as a potential partner. My father was insistent that I consider one of the women who had shown interest. However, I somehow did not think that she was right for me. I mean there was nothing wrong with her but I just didn't think we were quite compatible. My father sensed that I did not like her physical appearance and tried to convince me that looks and appearance are not everything. That her family background and education were also worth considering and finally the fact that she already lived and worked in the same city and profession as I were important factors. But I told him that I wouldn't consider her as a potential partner because I felt very strongly that we weren't compatible. This did upset my father a little but I knew I could convince him in the long term and he would come around."

The narrative demonstrates how contradictory forces can operate at a site and often need to be negotiated by young people in order to come to a resolution that is satisfactory to everyone involved. Ra was sure that he didn't want to consider his father's recommendation but ultimately he still sought his approval, as he pointed out, 'I knew I could convince him and he would come around.' Others who spoke of having strained relations with their parents, were also clear that they sought their parents' approval in a life decision as important as marriage. It becomes clear that different terms get negotiated between parents and their children when it comes to mate selection and depending on the parties involved some terms get precedence over others. For example, in Sh's case the caste and region of his future partner were reasons for objecting to the match. When I asked how his sister convinced his parents, he said, "My sister basically argued my case by telling my parents that the girl I chose belonged from a *good* family like ours with service class parents, she is well mannered and they look good together physically, she makes him happy what else do you want?" The term that takes precedence here is that of family. The fact that her family was good – by good she implied like themselves, of respectable background i.e. the middle class – was what won the battle for Sh and his partner. In this sense, then, class becomes a particularly important determinant as it overrides caste

considerations (Uberoi 1993: 153). However, these variations or deviations from the norm or what is seen as tradition can occur only ‘within reason.’ Parents in India have become more willing to accommodate the wishes of their children in terms of future partners but young people who select partners that are ‘socially not inappropriate’ (Uberoi 1993: 153) marry only after getting their parents’ consent.

2.3 Caste, class, religion: an unholy trinity

While responding to questions about the influence of caste and class M had responded on somewhat similar lines. She said, “Growing up we were taught to respect everyone irrespective of what caste, class or religion they belonged to. But there was also this sense that it was important to stay grounded i.e. not lower ourselves to the very poor strata or to try to impress the rich by being like them or something. There was always this sense that the very rich do not have value or respect for others and so we would keep our distance anyway. When it came to choosing a partner, also I kept this rule of thumb in mind.”

In the above narratives, class factors in as an important influence in the lives of people. In fact it is impossible to ignore its constant presence and reminder through different institutions such as school, university and place of residence. Much as people deny thinking of class, the social arrangements in which they are placed and the accompanying discourses shape their understanding of their own and other people’s class positions. In M’s case she was clearly raised with the feeling that people belonging to richer or poorer backgrounds were somehow different and that there was no need to aspire to be like either. In Sh’s case, his sister was able to convince their parents by highlighting the class-based factors of the girl’s family that were similar to their own. An important factor here is the need to be firmly grounded in a middle-class ethos. There is a covert emphasis in both narratives (as well as in others) on the middle class being a desirable location and people belonging to this class composition having desirable qualities such as respect for people, a good (comprising factors mentioned earlier) educational background and . Liechty refers to this as the notion of “social middleness,” which refers to being positioned between social others who are seen as having conflicting values and dispositions (Liechty 2003: 67). None of the participants in this study

is married or was going to marry someone from an extremely different class position. The narratives also point to the opinion that being firmly grounded in social middleness was a desirable state although nobody said that this necessarily went into deciding who their partner would be.

I would like to point out here that while caste and class considerations are important for parental approval, they also inform the internal calculus of young people while selecting a future partner. I demonstrate this using some of the narratives. When I asked the participants how caste had been important in their upbringing, almost all of them denied the role of caste completely in their upbringing. As R, a 29 year old Hindu middle class woman who works as a computer professional and has been married for a year and a half and works in a reputed firm in Mumbai said, “Growing up the influence of caste was very minimal. We knew what caste we belonged to because people around us would ask what caste we belonged to. I would ask my parents and they would tell me what it was. My upbringing was with the orientation that of course the caste system was very oppressive and that people had been discriminated against because of its prevalence. But beyond that my parents were more insistent that I respect other people – especially elders. Since questions of caste are generally posed by older people I could not really go as far as challenging people and telling them how bad caste was etc. So I would say that caste was something outside of the house that came up rarely but we never really talked about it at home.” I asked her if caste had played a role in the process of selecting a spouse. To which she said, “Well no, I met him at university and we fell in love. I didn’t even know what caste he belonged to until later. And even then it just came up casually. I didn’t really ask him.” I finally asked her, what had attracted her to him, to which she said, “Well you know, there were certain dos and don’ts which my parents had spoken about, particularly with respect to marriage such as don’t marry a Muslim, marry someone who respects women and elders in particular, marry someone who is balanced and controlled in responses and is family oriented i.e. values family relationships and has strong traditional values. In this sense I would say my partner embodied all these qualities. The more I got to know him, the more I felt that he was the right person for me.”

R went on to marry a man who does not belong to the same caste as she but is of the same class composition, had a similar educational background and is ‘well-suited’ to her in terms of

appearance. R's internal calculus therefore while not overtly proclaiming caste or class as a determinant of who she would select as a future partner, in fact internalized certain important dos and don'ts (as she calls them) and used these as a rule of thumb to select a partner. So while there is an overt denial of these factors, they continue to operate and influence beneath surface. This theme is repeated throughout narratives in which people deny the operation of dominant social orders in the process of selecting partners but continue to reproduce these same order through its continued internalization.

Rk, a male participant in his early thirties, was probably the only participant who said that factors such as caste or class did in fact play a role in the selection of a partner. However, he said this after taking some time to think about the question (were caste, class or religion play a role in your decision to marry your partner). He said, "Honestly when I first met my current partner, I did not know what her caste was, I just found her very lively and attractive and that's all, however, I think beyond appearance our shared common heritage or background, which is probably related to the fact that we are of the same caste, sub-caste and class, did make a difference in consolidating our relationship. I am not sure if this is truly the case but I guess it could be, at an unconscious level." While Rk's analysis of the reasons for selecting his partner are at a much more conscious level as compared to any of the other participants, however, while framing his response he was not very sure if these factors actually played a role. He did not immediately say that these were important but took some time and even at the end said that 'these factors could' influence marriage decisions.

Caste as a category of consideration becomes contested as people try to make sense of whether it plays a role on one hand, while at the same time choosing from within a wider range of options that continue to be caste bound (Uberoi, 2003: 153). Sociologists claim that it has a diminished role to play in marriage (Beteille quoting Srinivas 2002: 82). However as argued by Sheth (1999: 2502), following de-ritualization different castes now occupy horizontal positions in society and compete for entry into a constantly evolving heterogeneous middle class.

I reiterate at this point that what gets dismissed as being immaterial in shaping expectations and aspirations of young men and women occupies a central position in informing people's choice of

partners. While Rk is the only participant who questions this about himself and the possibility that this did affect his decision, others deny but tend to manifest it in their choice of partners. These narratives go to reinforce Kipnis' (2003: 63) contention that no matter how much the decline of the arranged marriage and parents' intervention in matters of matrimony are celebrated (particularly in the west), people still continue to marry people who are exactly the same as they in economic, social, educational and caste based terms

2.4 So finally, because of love or because it works

In this section I examine the romantic and emotional narratives of love that tie into the process of shaping expectations from marriage and prospective partners. The initial position from which I approached this study was that young people in India were reconfiguring the terms of marriage and that there was a greater emphasis on looking at marriage in terms of a partnership. However, the interviews with participants and the data that emerged from these interviews, revealed a slightly different process at work. When asked what people's expectations from marriage and partners were or are, almost all the participants said that they did not have any expectations. On probing further and during the course of the interviews, it became clearer that there were expectations, just that the ways in which they got articulated were different from the initial assumptions I had gone into the field with.

One of my female respondents Sm a 32 year old Hindu, upper caste woman who works as an assistant professor said, "Before meeting my current husband, I was in a relationship which was emotionally abusive. I was in this relationship for a period of almost 6 years. I truly believed that I loved him. His family was of the Catholic denomination and there was a lot of opposition from my family against our match. After I decided to end the relationship, I met my current partner, he loved me and cared for me in a way that was real. For the first time after a long time I felt secure and cared for, which I had not felt earlier. With my current partner also I was (and am) in love, but I feel more grounded with him and he lets me be." Sm's narrative demonstrates her need for being in a relationship that was based in something real and not the kind of abusive yet passionate relationship she had had earlier. Her current partner belongs to the same caste and class composition as she and has other personal characteristics that she finds compatible with her personality. She says, "I didn't

really expect anything from marriage at all.”

When I asked Sm what she means by a ‘real’ relationship she says, “By real I don’t mean devoid of love and based only in practical considerations, my relationship with my partner is based in love of course, but it’s about more than just love. He cares about what I want and he respects my aspirations and hopes. My earlier relationship took a huge toll on me. It really damaged my self-esteem because the person I was with would just laugh at some of the hopes I would express but he would ardently profess love towards me. And I know he did love me in a lot of ways, but that’s what I mean by real you know, to make a relationship real you need to have more than love, there are practical aspects that need to be met.”

A similar sentiment comes from M’s narrative, she says, “Before meeting my present partner, I had met all kinds of jerks and disrespectful men who did not have respect for anything, leave alone what I cared for. But when they are in front of other people they pretend to be so respectful and caring. With my partner I know where I am. He is with others the way he is alone or with people that are close to him. There is no pretense of any sort so you know where you are with him. The same goes with me, I can be who I am with him without the fear that he will use my weak moments or points against me when I am really down and out and I realized that for me this was a very important consideration. There is another thing as well, I feel that my partner completes me and I mean this in the most practical sense. Where I lack, he makes up. So when I am very emotional and reactive he holds me back or gives me perspective. On the other hand he can be very naïve about society or the way people are. I am able to give him perspective in this regard. So you see I would say we complement and complete each other in very practical everyday ways.”

Not all participants had similar stories of heartbreak to narrate, but almost all expressed an understanding that love and passion alone do not comprise the foundation of a successful marriage and that there are other issues that need to be considered in equal measure. Two themes have emerged from almost all the narratives, which are of importance. Firstly, people seem to express a reconfiguration of the ideal of love in the way they talk about intimate relationships. Through their narratives, it comes across that the idea of love needs to be reconfigured. As Sm and M contend love

needs to include aspects other than passion as it is often made out to be such as, mutual respect, care and some common goals and aspirations. There is a sense that the participants have made a critical assessment of what they want from intimate relationships instead of giving themselves up to ideas of romantic and passionate love (hooks 2000: 172). In this sense they are trying to establish a middle ground between the ideas that people have no control over who or the kind of person they fall in love with on the one hand and arranged marriage of the kind where there is no possibility of even getting to know a prospective partner. From the narratives described earlier in the chapter there is a sense that in the Indian context young men and women from the middle-class are trying to strike a balance between personal likes and preferences and considerations of what their families expect and want for them. As I mentioned earlier, parental approval is a very important consideration in the process of selecting a partner.

The second important element that came through these narratives was with regard to people's romantic aspirations from love. Most of the participants said that they had absolutely no expectations from prospective or current partners in this respect and that they wanted to get married so that they could have somebody to spend their lives with. As I have mentioned before, people's expectations became clearer through the rest of the interview in terms of parameters such as educational background and class. However, in terms of romantic notions, none of the participants mentioned having any expectations that were couched in very romantic ways. One woman R responded with sarcasm to the question, "Oh you know I had this vision of a prince on a white horse who would come and whisk me away and then we would get married and live happily ever after. What do you think? Of course not, when I met my partner I was 25 and while I was taken with him because I thought he was good looking, sure, but that's because he is and that is certainly not why I like him or decided to be with him. We were friends to begin with and then I started seeing this side of him that was considerate and family oriented. He was respectful towards elders and women in general, which so many men these days are not. In that sense he and I were a very good fit especially because he represented all the things that I had been brought up to believe, were important."

In this narrative R clearly stated that she did not have any prior expectations from a

prospective partner. The values she grew up with did ultimately influence her choice of partners, but she did not use these values in order to build an image or an expectation of who she wanted to be with. A similar notion was expressed by Sm in the narrative quoted earlier. She repeatedly said, “I had no expectation, really, I had no expectations at all. I just wanted my partner to let me be.”

Male respondents had similar stories to tell. Rh a 29 year old financial professional reported, “I had rosy notions growing up about love and romance, fueled mostly by I have to admit, but in university I realized that it definitely doesn’t work like the movies, women and men are looking for different things and most are not even willing to give time for love to develop. I was in a couple of very short relationships. These relationships basically taught me that this process where you start like somebody based on an idea that you have had doesn’t work. I didn’t want to go through anymore heartbreak so I asked my parents to register me on a matrimonial website. ”

Similar if not more prosaic views were expressed by those who were waiting to be married. Ka a woman in her mid-twenties who was going to be married in a few months when I interviewed her said, “I wouldn’t say I had any expectations of who I wanted to marry and settle down with. My parents did most of the searching and I trusted their judgement. I like the partner that I and my parents have chosen together and I meet my fiancé often enough so that we get to know each other.” Through these narratives it becomes clear that young men and women do not have a pre-conceived imagination about the kind of person they want to marry.

Illouz speaks of the role of imagination in modern society in shaping people’s expectations from intimate partners (Illouz 2012: 198). I contend that since these expectations emerge from an imaginary perception from potential partners, these are set up for disappointment. The narratives throughout this chapter demonstrate that young Indian middle class men and women tend to modify and shape their expectations using markers other than imagination (Illouz 2012: 203). Considerations such as familial and parental expectations, stable companionship and membership to a family with a common background played a much bigger role in deciding who they would eventually marry. This is not to say that they did not have any romantic aspirations whatsoever, however, these aspirations had already been disappointed through relationships gone awry or people perceived love and romance

as matters that were not meant to find fulfillment through marriage.

The narratives throughout this chapter are reflective of the ways in which young men and women navigate dominant social structures with a view towards finding marital partners. These structures however operate beneath the surface and are not visible in their articulation of expectations from potential life partners. Marriage is understood not only as a means of attaining personal happiness but is also geared towards the achievement of family and communal interests. And finally young men and women are not taken in by notions of romantic love but are redefining love in order to accommodate more practical needs that they have from future partners.

Chapter III: Treading on the intersections of modernity and tradition

Ours is the modernity of the once-colonized. The same historical process that taught us the value of modernity, also made us victims of modernity. Our attitude to modernity, therefore, cannot but deeply be ambiguous [...] But this ambiguity does not stem from any uncertainty about whether to be for or against modernity. Rather, the uncertainty is because we know that to fashion the forms of our modernity, we need to have the courage at times to reject the modernities established by others. In the age of nationalism, there were many such efforts which reflected both courage and inventiveness. Not all were of course, equally successful. Today, in the age of globalization, perhaps the time has come once more to mobilize that courage.

-Partha Chatterjee (2010 :152)

Chatterjee's invocation to seek new forms of modernity by rejecting the ones handed down by 'others' provides a broad glimpse into what this chapter sets out to do. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze narratives of young men and women in urban India to illuminate the different pathways that are taken to negotiate discourses of modernity and tradition that continuously intersect in the quotidian. As I have mentioned throughout the length of this thesis, nowhere do these discourses come into sharper relief than at the site of marriage and conjugal lives. This chapter tries to provide an intimate understanding into how exactly young men and women make sense of notions of modernity and tradition, how these ideas manifest in their engagement with processes relating to marriage and later conjugal life in particular, their partners and their families and finally how these different narratives build towards a common understanding of modernity and tradition among a certain class, which far from being dichotomous can be seen as a continuum with each enabling, supporting and reinforcing the other (Sharangpani 2010: 265); one that can be referred to as a 'modern discourse of tradition' (*Ibid.*).

3.1 Preserving tradition: preserving identity

Decisions and expectations relating to marriage and wedding rituals are continually associated

with notions of modernity and tradition. While talking about marriage in these interviews it was inevitable for these concepts to come up to frame the ways in which people see tradition and modernity at work in their conjugal lives as well as in all the processes leading up to marriage. As I mentioned earlier there is a constant interplay between the two notions and neither can be viewed in isolation. All the participants without exception said that they located themselves somewhere between the two *extremes* of modern and traditional, in that they assigned themselves degrees of how modern or traditional they thought of themselves. However, what became evident through the narratives is that tradition provides for the firm foundation from which people derive (or think they should derive) their sense of belonging and identity, which is necessary to be able to enjoy the benefits of modernity without allowing it to take over one's life, to the point of becoming western¹⁹. People who don't have this grounding in tradition are seen as rudderless or confused.

The following narratives supply ample evidence to this effect. The first participant M is a 29 year old woman, at the time I interviewed her she had been married for a period of 9 months. She was the perfect participant in her willingness to share intimate details about her marriage and her candor while expressing opinions on various issues. She is an advertising executive who takes pride in her career and work. I asked her what she thought about modernity and tradition, she took a moment and then followed up with extraordinary clarity of conviction. The way in which she talked of tradition almost verged on the nostalgic, at one point saying that tradition to her meant "her grandmother's blessings." However, her description of what constitutes the modern was less elaborate, for M modernity loosely translates into the opportunities that it affords especially to women in terms of the ability to access education and paid employment and the freedom that comes with it. However, in her view, this freedom comes with a price tag and it is important to never lose sight of this, to become 'too' modern is to become headstrong and inflexible, which is not a desirable quality in a woman/wife/daughter-in-law. She said:

"It is interesting that you should ask what I think of tradition and what constitutes modern for

¹⁹ In this sense westerners become the *others* but not because they are necessarily seen as undesirable, rather it is because in compromising one's own tradition there is a corresponding loss of identity and by extension pride in one's culture and heritage. I will return to this later in the thesis (or in Chapter X)

me, I don't think I have really thought about these, you know. I guess I am moderately both traditional and modern. I guess tradition is something handed down across generations that makes up a sort of a guideline about how to live better, when I say better, in the traditional sense it means to be able to live well-adjusted lives with others around you, especially your elders. I think tradition is a good rule of thumb you know. It gives you direction at pivotal points in your life, when you are not sure of what to do. I think it also teaches people to be flexible. So for example in my family (and community) girls and women do not touch the feet of elders as a mark of respect²⁰ however, my husband's family doesn't make this distinction. So of course I am willing to follow the tradition in his family, because if it's the culture in his family I would like to respect and maintain that. I have noticed that he himself doesn't like the practice but I say if I am doing it you better do the same. After getting married I asked my mother-in-law to tell me which festivals²¹ are celebrated following marriage in their family so that I can observe them, I feel it is important to celebrate these festivals, if we don't do it these beautiful traditions will just disappear with time. I also don't wear certain clothes around my in-laws (immediate and extended) because I think that there are certain behaviors that a bahu (Hindi term used for daughter- in-law) should be mindful of and one of them is dressing properly. Personally I want to be safe and so I avoid wearing shorts and dresses in front of them. Even though my husband keeps saying that I should. I feel like if I do wear western clothes in front of my in-laws I will be remembered for that one 'mistake' that I made. I think my husband is a little muddled and a confused desi (colloquial term used for Indians). He should have been born in some other country, I sometimes

²⁰ In Indian society, it is a cultural practice to touch the feet of elders as a mark of respect. By cultural I mean that the practice is not bound by caste, class or even religious factors and cuts across these layers. There are several such practices in India which are marked as cultural because as they are performed across the board.

²¹ Here is an example of the diversity present in Indian society. M is married into a family that belongs to a different region. While both families are Hindu and Brahmin and many of the religious practices, rituals and festivals are basically the same, there are significant differences based on the region either family belongs to. Regional differences have significant bearing on the cultural practices so that sometimes irrespective of the class, caste or religious difference, people belonging to the same region follow certain practices and traditions specific to the region. The family M is married into originally hails from Maharashtra in south-western India, while her family belongs to the northern state of Punjab. So it is likely that she wouldn't be familiar with rituals unique to her marital family. Almost all regions have their own unique rituals to celebrate new weddings even months after the wedding has taken place. Regional difference has somewhat lower significance today with respect to marriage alliances than earlier thanks to online matrimonial websites, which allow access and interaction between people from different regions. However, stereotypes about men and women from different regions (for example women from Pune – a city in Maharashtra think they know everything and too highly of themselves or men from Kashmir are cheats) continue to influence people's choice of partners.

feel like he is born in the wrong country. On the other hand I feel that too much of modernity can lead to inflexibility, like a lot of girls these days become so headstrong about their careers for example or what the things they are willing to do or not especially in their marital homes. I think that it is important to be able to manage a job, and I am lucky to have found my dream job while, but it is more important to be able to manage relations with your family, and manage them well.”

The ideas M expressed are reflective of the ways in which ‘new Indian woman’ is imagined in dominant discourses (Sharangpani 2010: 265); who is *sufficiently* modern but not western i.e. a woman who continues to embody the ‘Indian’ virtues of modesty, tradition and duty but at the same time pursues modern values of education and a career (*Ibid.*). The regularity with which this narrative gets reinforced is staggering. Another participant in the study, R, is a successful computer professional who has been married for a year now spoke of the importance of tradition in a slightly different way but to the same effect: “I don’t think tradition is something that is imposed on people, I think it is a good way of remaining balanced. I mean I agree that issues such as the caste system are quite deplorable in this day and age, but I don’t see the value in going out of your way to challenge people’s (especially elders’) ideas about it. I think here respect for elders is more important than expressing your views about a social issue.” The common thread running through R and M’s narratives is that it is important to have an education and have independent opinions but it is important to be flexible and not get too opinionated. However, here it is

Male participants in the study spoke along similar lines albeit with lesser enthusiasm for the performance of tradition. One participant, R.K., a 30 year old assistant professor in a social work institute, has been married for 3 and a half years and said that he thinks of himself as moderately traditional or modern leaning slightly more toward tradition. R.K acknowledges that he has a traditional lower middle to middle class upbringing in a semi-urban area. When I asked him why he thought of himself as more traditional than modern he responded,

“I think we were fairly traditional in the way we were brought up, in the sense that we were told folk stories, we accompanied our parents to temples. I also think this is possibly because of where I was brought up. In rural areas you know one is generally just more exposed to traditional folklore

and practices. We didn't really perform many rituals at home on a regular basis, but we were aware of what rituals are practiced on what occasion for example, or what the traditionally prescribed way of doing things is. These things I feel are just there because people need to have some sense of their roots and of course tradition is important in this sense. We never grew up with any prejudice against people of a certain caste or religion. We lived in a small town where a lot of our neighbors were Muslim or belonged to other castes, this kind of coexistence helped us in not getting caught up in this whole business of communalism and casteism. Being traditional doesn't mean that one needs to hate or shun those that are different, in fact quite the opposite. Tradition teaches how to love and respect other people. I also feel that tradition is not necessarily about the religion one subscribes to, sometimes it is also about the locality that fosters a kind of tradition. Traditionally in my locality there hasn't been any communal tension or caste based hatred."

It becomes evident from these narratives that tradition comes to signify a rather nebulous concept, which acts as a sort of moral compass that provides guidance and direction to people and based on the ways in which people have framed it, is regarded as superior to modernity. The resonance of these narratives with Partha Chatterjee's conceptualization of a post-colonial Indian modernity is striking. I will explain his framework to explain the Indian nationalist project and then go on to demonstrate how the narratives in this study echo similar (if not identical) notions.

The British understood their colonial project in India as being more than simply a colonizing project. To the colonizers, many of the Indian traditional customs and practices appeared barbaric and oppressive towards women in particular (Chatterjee 1989: 622). In this discourse the practice of *Suttee*²² was specifically used by the British to demonstrate just how primitive and barbaric Indian traditional customs could be (*Ibid.*). As a result the British set about the task of 'civilizing' Indian society through means ranging from proselytization by Christian missionaries to state action and sanctions (Chatterjee 1989: 623). The premise underlying any of these means was to bring about a feeling of unworthiness among Indians about their traditional customs (*Ibid.*). It is no surprise

²² The Hindu upper caste practice of burning a widow on her husband's funeral pyre practiced in particular regions of the country including Bengal and Rajasthan.

therefore, that the Indian nationalist movement was faced with the task of resolving contradictory forces of reforming that which was seen as barbaric and inimical to development with preserving Indian tradition as a marker of national identity. In order to do so Chatterjee suggests that a split was affected in the domain of culture into a spiritual realm and a material realm (*Ibid.*). The might of western colonizers in the material domain was recognized as coming from superior technological knowledge and expertise as well as competence in political and state organization (which was also pivotal in being able to colonize). Imitation of these aspects of western modernity was therefore seen as desirable by the colonized (the nationalist movement) with a view towards overthrowing the yoke of western domination (*Ibid.*). However, it was only in the material realm that imitating the west was seen as desirable, in the realm of the spiritual, the colonized claimed superiority over the west (*Ibid.*). The formulation of the nationalist project therefore rested on the appropriation of western expertise in the material realm while retaining and bolstering the spiritual character and identity unique to the country (*Ibid.*).

This discourse of the material and spiritual in nationalist ideology becomes far more powerful in the analogous delineation of inner and outer worlds (Chatterjee 1989: 624). To explain this in quotidian terms, the inner and outer realms constitute home and the outside world respectively (*Ibid.*). It follows therefore that home is the sacred space (inner/spiritual) which represents the nation's true identity or essence and is much more worthy of preservation than any aspects of the outer/material world (*Ibid.*). Finally as long as the inner realm of the home remains untouched, Indians remain strong enough to face the demands and onslaught of an ever changing and therefore confusing and threatening outer world. The narratives of my interviewees presented above (indeed almost all the narratives in the study speak to a similar sentiment) are almost tailor made in the ways in which they resonate with Chatterjee's conceptualization. Tradition is seen as a refuge from all the confusions and chaos of the outer world, which during colonial times was represented by a colonizing force and is currently represented by forces of neo-liberalism and westernization on the one hand as well as domestic threats in the form of a hostile neighboring state (Pakistan) and people within the country

who are seen as the *others*.²³ In one of the weddings I observed as part of my ethnography, I was struck by the rather incongruous appearance of this discourse. During one of the rituals preceding the wedding, the priest presiding over the ritual looked at the groom and said, “The chants in this ritual remind you of your duty to your family as a householder, to your community as a contributor and to your nation as a protector against that most awful of neighbors Pakistan!” I can’t describe my astonishment enough as it was a most unlikely space to bring up such a discourse. Others present at the place were quite amused by such a statement although some also a wedding was not the appropriate place to bring up such a discourse. However, it becomes evident that tradition serves as a conduit for a nationalist agenda even in the most intimate of spaces precisely with the intention of emphasizing the need to preserve tradition and identity through the creation of *others*.

In this sense the cross-section of people that is represented in my thesis comprising middle-class, urban men and women becomes especially relevant. Most of my participants were born between the mid-eighties to the early nineties, which was the period that bore witness to the beginning of liberalization in India. As a result this generation of men and women are more likely to have received western education, be fluent in English, be conversant with western popular culture, media and references and be employed in corporate jobs. This cross-section then experiences tensions between being seen as most likely to break with tradition while at the same time bearing the expectation to maintain and preserve tradition. In Chatterjee’s conceptualization too, the middle-class (particularly Bengali middle class) was pivotal in the process of maintaining the distinction between inner and outer worlds. As a result of this tension and based on the narratives that emerge in this study I contend that the urban, young, middle-class feels compelled to prove its allegiance to tradition on the one hand while on the other hand also feels the need to adopt distinctly modern practices for the sake of

²³ Notions of Indian tradition and culture often get collapsed with Hindu tradition and culture. Anybody who is seen as threatening to this sense of traditional and cultural identity is framed as the *other*. India’s relationship with Islamophobia is neither new nor a product of global discourses of Islam. It emerges from the post-independence partition of the country into Pakistan (Islamic republic) and India (secular). Pakistan’s presence poses a threat to traditional and cultural identity of India and even though India has been constituted as a secular nation, its traditional and cultural identity almost exclusively gets couched in Hindu terms. As a result, Indian Muslims who are seen as not being able to prove their patriotism get framed as *others*. Members of lower castes and tribes (referred to as scheduled caste and tribes in the Indian constitution with a view towards providing affirmative action) are seen as *others* because of their assumed (and real) disdain for Hinduism arising from the injustices of the caste system.

progress and development of Indian society at a global stage. I will talk more about which practices are perceived as being important and worthy of preservation and which are not in the following paragraphs. These tensions unwittingly and inevitably manifest themselves in relationships and nowhere more so than in gender relations. The next section will explore and demonstrate how these processes come to be deeply gendered and are manifested in gender relations.

3.2 Entangled: gendered discourses of tradition

While the above section demonstrates how tradition continues to be something important in people's lives in contemporary India, this section will examine how the performance and observance of tradition is profoundly gendered and how men and especially women in contemporary Indian society negotiate the often conflicting demands of tradition and modernity on them.

3.2.1 "That one ritual once a year"

As mentioned in the earlier section, tradition as a word and as an idea seems to be of particular significance to both men and women. They derive comfort and a sense of belonging and identity from the idea of tradition. However, when one looks further into the gendered dimensions of tradition or specific demands that are placed on women and men by tradition the situation gets more complex. Men and especially women seem to accept and agree to the observance of tradition that is not at the level of the everyday. Traditions that need to be performed less frequently are acceptable and women and men willingly take on the mantle of performing them. As M says, "I don't see what the problem is in going that extra mile in terms of practicing a certain ritual, or observing a certain festival. People's emotions and good wishes are invested in these things and I do not want to be the one to disappoint people. What is the big deal really? It's not as if somebody is asking me to cut my hair or convert to another religion." Another participant R said, "I don't want to hurt people by saying no, it's not like anybody is asking me to do these things on a daily basis. We are anyway so absorbed in and busy with our work and careers, I think these festivals and rituals are a good way of getting back to our roots and the simple fact is if we don't do it, who will?" Another female participant, K, who got married about 6 months before I interviewed her and is a qualified computer engineer, said rather explicitly. "Why should my education be regarded as a sure sign of breaking away from

tradition and becoming western? We are after all Indians aren't we? I have studied hard to become a computer engineer and of course I wanted to marry somebody who would allow me to pursue a career, otherwise what's the point of working so hard? But this is a two-way street I think, my in-laws and husband understand my need to pursue a career and professional development, I think I owe it to them to accept some of their terms. So if they want me from time to time to observe some festivals or rituals I think it is important that I respect and comply with these *soft* demands. In fact I don't even understand why people see this as pressure coming from in-laws, it wasn't as if growing up my family was any different in this respect."

Most of the times these infrequently performed traditional practices are related to marriage and so young men and women are amenable to performing them as they also serve as some kind of novelty or a way in which one gets to meet extended family members who are otherwise not in touch. These rituals are also associated with the process of making memories and so they are seen as desirable. Almost all the female participants (both married and waiting to be married) expressed the opinion that traditional weddings were more meaningful to them because they grew up seeing these kind of weddings. As Ka, a 27 year old woman working as a social worker in an international NGO who is currently engaged to be married, said, "I think marriage needs to be commemorated in a special way and to me this is the traditional way. I have grown up seeing my cousins, uncles, aunts and family friends getting married in the traditional way. There is so much fun and teasing and merry-making associated with the traditional wedding. It can never be the same if one is having a civil court ceremony." The external trappings of tradition as well as the possibility of meeting old family and friends seems to play a significant role in deciding the kind of wedding ceremony that men and women choose. I have explained the motivation and basis to do so further along in the chapter, which ties in with the more secular aspects of following tradition.

Men's narratives echo similar strains, one of the participants, Sh, married for a year and half and working in a corporate enterprise, says, "It is not as if I have some intimate knowledge of rituals or tradition, I don't. Whatever my family does in the name of tradition is handed down by my mother. I feel that this much I owe her and anyway it's not as if we have to do these things every day and

whenever I have needed advice or spiritual guidance²⁴ my parents have helped me out. So this is the least I can do for them.” This kind of narrative is common among young men, who see their role vis-à-vis tradition as a duty towards their families specifically towards their mothers. A similar sentiment was echoed by another male participant Ra who said, “She doesn’t ask for much, if she wants me to get married in a temple with all the traditional trappings, I will toe the line, after all they are paying for everything.”

Two aspects come into focus here, firstly the role of women as custodians and bearers of culture, ritual and tradition (Chatterjee 1989; Srinivas 1977; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989). Almost all the male participants in the study attributed the performance of tradition in their families particularly by themselves to their mothers’ wishes. The split between the inner (home) and outer (outside world) realms, is extended to imply women’s domain and men’s domain respectively (Chatterjee 1989: 624). With the split into these two domains, women come to exert more power at the level of the household especially because of the Sanskritized Hindu expectation of them to maintain purity of household, its members and ritual (Srinivas 1977: 229). Through the insistence on ritual and tradition, women, particularly older women in upper caste families are able to exert considerable power in their families and households. This kind of pressure on women is however not unique to the Indian context. Micaela di Leonardo (1979) talks of similar pressures on women in USA to perform a range of activities aimed at maintaining and preserving kinship ties in families referred to as ‘kin-work’. This also works to the advantage of the men as they are relieved of performing this additional task but can also boast of having completed an essential religious requirement. This sort of discourse allows for women to exert their agency and will with their children, and based on the recurring of theme of respect in the narratives, it comes across that young men and women preserve tradition as an entire edifice, which includes the wishes of their mothers in particular. I find this interesting also because it seems from the narratives that women are seeking to preserve those

²⁴ When I ask what he means by spiritual guidance he says that whenever he and his wife need to make a substantial new investment, they consult his mother, who in turn looks at the Hindu lunar calendar for determining the auspicious date and time to make the investment. This *vedic* (scriptural) means of determining auspicious times and dates for purposes ranging from marriage to when to buy a car is referred to as *Panchang* and is quite commonly practiced to this day.

traditions that are of value to them while rejecting those that serve patriarchal values more and this seems to be happening in quiet ways than taking to protests on the streets. I will explore and elaborate more on this aspect in the next sub-section.

The second aspect that comes to light is that there are more practical ends to following tradition (Srinivas 1977: 229). Srinivas contends that the reason for the longevity of Hindu tradition (ritual) is that it perfectly aligns with the fulfilment of material needs and desires (*Ibid.*). In saying this, he basically implies that Hindu ritual has practical, or non-spiritual goals which explains why it continues to be attractive and has lasted (*Ibid.*). In addition to practical goals Srinivas states that there are practical dimensions to Hindu ritual as well. This refers to a space where women can socialize with friends and family, dress up and show off their jewelry and riches to people from their own as well as higher strata (*Ibid.*). From Ka's narrative as well as from others that voice similar opinions, it seems that women do in fact want marriage to be seen as a commemorative space where they are allowed to demand expensive and pretty things with impunity and are rather expected to do so.

3.2.2 "I don't wear any of the symbols of marriage"

In the above sub-section I highlighted women's and men's comfort with and preference for following 'soft traditions' especially the wedding rituals. However, there is also a recurring theme of not wanting to follow and perform traditional practices that have to be done regularly and on a day to day basis. These traditional practices can have to do with wearing certain symbols that women are expected to wear on getting married, about which, one of my other participants S, a 33 year old woman married for the past 3 years who was to complete her degree in June 2016 from one of the most prestigious universities in the country, said, "My parents would never stop me from pursuing a career and higher studies. So when I wanted to come to Delhi from the city that I grew up in, they encouraged me. But they are strongly invested in traditional mores as well. As children me and my siblings were exposed to and taught hymns from sacred Hindu texts, we had a strong sense of belonging to our caste and community²⁵ so most of my parents' friends belonged to our caste and

²⁵ S's home state is different from the one in which she was born and grew up in. While she is a south Indian from the state of Kerala, her upbringing and schooling took place in a city in Maharashtra in south-western India.

community. My education in social work and exposure to leftist ideology later in life of course doesn't agree with my parents' way of living but I also feel that when I am with them I really can't challenge their way of thinking or living. After all, it was their strong upbringing that has been instrumental in shaping the person that I am today. I am not necessarily traditional but I will not challenge tradition for the sake of challenging it. When I go to my in-laws' house it is just for a few days, what would I get from wearing western clothes there? I think this is not just about tradition but also about being sensitive to other people's expectations and feelings and just being practical." S has a somewhat different view of tradition and with her education and orientation in leftist ideology she actively questions tradition and traditional practices. However, while she is at ease adopting this stand in her university campus and among friends, she does not believe that she should or can do so with her parents or parents-in-law. When I asked her if she wears the symbols of marriage²⁶ she said that where she comes from, the bride and groom also exchange rings, which she said both she and her husband wear. As to the *mangalsutra*, she said, "Generally when I am not at my in-laws' house I do not wear it, also because I am scared I might lose it since I have never really been used to wearing jewelry especially necklaces. Initially when I used to go to my in-laws,' I would wear the *mangalsutra* and my sister-in-law would also try and get me to wear the *sindoor*, which of course I refused to do because it isn't even part of our (south-Indian) culture. I have to go and stay with them for a few days every year, so I really didn't see why I shouldn't wear the *mangalsutra*. However, I realized that my mother-in-law didn't really notice or seem to care about whether I wore these symbols or not so I have now stopped wearing them when I go to their place. What is surprising however, is that my sister-in-law doesn't approve of it. She insists that I wear the *mangalsutra* and like I said even the *sindoor*. However, there I put my foot down and my partner backed me up." Other female participants expressed similar experiences with the symbols – none of my participants said that they wore any of

²⁶ There are certain symbols that mark marriage in Hindu culture. These symbols are more cultural than religious and have been adopted by Indian Muslims and Christians. Unlike the wedding ring in the west, which marks both men and women as married, in Indian culture these symbols are usually worn only by women. The most common symbol is the *Mangalsutra*, which is a necklace made of black beads and which the groom makes the bride wear to the chanting of specific mantras. Other symbols include toe rings, *bindi*- vermilion dot on the forehead and the *sindoor*- red powder in the parting of the hair, a typically north Indian symbol, which is increasingly being appropriated by south Indian women with the increase of soap-operas and TV shows on satellite television depicting north-Indian storylines and plots.

the symbols on an everyday basis. They said that they wore symbols only when there was a special occasion or festival or when they went to their in-laws' home. The reasons women give for not wearing these symbols are generally practical ones. As Sm said, "I am scared of wearing gold on a daily basis because growing up I was not used to wearing any precious jewelry. Also in the city is just likely to get stolen and so I prefer not wearing it on a daily basis." However, apart from such reasons, none of the participants mentioned not wearing these symbols because of coming across as too traditional or not modern enough.

From the above narrative it becomes clear that traditional practices at the level of the everyday and which were seen as essential to married status by earlier generations are slowly being eschewed by a new generation of women. This refusal to comply with tradition is however, done quietly, almost deceptively. As Sm said, she gradually realized that her mother-in-law didn't notice (or care) and so she just gradually stopped wearing any of the symbols at all. A similar account is narrated by Ab (a 35 year old woman who has been married for a year and a half), "I have to go to my in-laws' place just about once a year and I wouldn't have really minded wearing any of the symbols (which I initially did) but what's the point of wearing these things just for appearances when you don't actually wear them regularly? Also I really don't want to raise their expectations. If they see me wearing these symbols, they would expect me to wear them every time we meet and I don't think that's feasible for me." What is interesting and contradictory in these narratives, is that almost all of these women live away from their in-laws and therefore have to wear the symbols (if at all) only once in a while, just like other traditional practices that have been mentioned in the section above. However, in spite of this fact, these young women refuse to wear the symbols. The justification given for this is as mentioned earlier the unwillingness to wear expensive jewelry on a daily basis. There are other reasons that are given for this refusal as well. Ab said, "I don't feel like wearing these symbols for the reasons that these symbols are meant only for women. Men don't have to wear these symbols, they don't even have any other symbols that are similar to the ones that women are supposed to wear. So I also don't feel like I need to wear them." Similar views were expressed by other participants as well, demonstrating that women resent wearing symbols because of their gendered nature and the

lack of corresponding symbols that indicate the marital status of men.

Based on these testimonies I contend that in cases where women are required to perform traditional practices once in a while and most likely with their partners they comply. In addition to this, women are reluctant to thwart tradition at a larger scale (such as wedding rituals and traditions) not only because of the possibility of more negative reactions and from various quarters but also because it works to their advantage as explained in the above section. However, only women are required to wear symbols of marriage in Indian society, which is most likely leading to a questioning of these norms and quiet every day resistance that is operating at the level of the quotidian and sometimes with the complicity of older women and even partners within families.

The term everyday resistance was first coined by James Scott to describe resistance that is not dramatic and visible but happens at an almost invisible level and is more likely to be disguised and dispersed (Vinhagen, Johansson quoting Scott 2013: 4). Vinhagen and Johansson conceptualize resistance as being a continuum along which lie direct confrontation and hidden subversion (*Ibid.*). Contemporary Indian women (and men) are evidently exposed to various conflicting forces all at once. They have to tread the fields between these forces with care and delicacy. Often the traditions they are quietly challenging are phenomena that they have grown up with indeed grown into. It is therefore not an easy task to challenge these traditions openly and using confrontational tactics. It therefore follows that within such a framework, if given a choice women would much rather quietly subvert than openly question.

Often these narratives are framed in terms of battles that need to be lost in order to win the bigger war. For example, when I asked M if she would take on her husband's family name (which is the norm in India) she responded with barely concealed anger, "I will only do it once we have decided to have a child, only so that the child doesn't get confused. Actually I don't really want to change my maiden name for many reasons but I know it's expected of me and my not doing it will give people ideas. I can ignore most peoples' judgement except my own husband's. As a woman I have already changed my family, my address, my social circle to an extent so changing the name right now isn't something I am comfortable with. But, our culture isn't as open to independence of this sort yet, so

my kids will be asked why their parents have different surnames. It's not like I am not ok with it or question the need. I just wish it was just my decision. I would have already changed it if it was my choice and not dictated by my in-laws or partner frankly, but now he's also taking it for granted that someday I will and I should because "that's how it is". Even my father-in-law has asked me point blank when I will change it. And so I know it's what I need to do. It won't be easy or by choice but I can't pick a fight on this. People don't understand why these things matter to women. See the thing is they think that if I don't take my husband's name it means I don't accept this name or I am still "attached" to my father vs my husband. It becomes 'you are not just theirs anymore' debate which in itself bothers me no end. For people who live with their parents its ok to think *ladki apna ghar peeche chhod gayi hai* (the girl has left her maiden home behind) and *ab humari hai* (now she is ours) etc. But most couples stay alone nowadays so it isn't even picking one over the other but building your own! So for men, the only thing that makes this relationship their own is if women are known by their name. It's upsetting and regressive but just one of many battles I need to fight. So I will let this smaller one go."

In and through this narrative M demonstrates an uncanny practicality and depth of conviction at the same time. Her resistance comes at a level that for her seems negotiable at the point she is at in her marriage (she has been married for a period of 9 months only) and she sees her way out of a situation that she is clearly comfortable with by delaying it for as long as she possibly can. What is particularly noteworthy in her narrative is that she clearly sees a problem and she is critical of this requirement of women. However, she also realizes that she needs to be careful and tread delicately in matters such as this. Throughout her interview she speaks of being 'safe' or 'unsafe' which implies that by not following the kind of tradition that she sees as compulsory she risks judgment and the possibility that she would be reminded of committing a particular mistake forever. This is reflective of how she negotiates notions of tradition and modernity in her everyday life and to what extent can she trespass these lines.

What follows is that tradition is a gendered category and women come to be seen as the primary bearers and perpetuators of it. However, traditional framework of marriage and conjugality,

women (and men) find ways of circumventing traditions that they deem unacceptable. In the final section of the chapter I will highlight narratives that point towards a possible alternative formulation of modernity.

3.3 Towards the formulation of an alternative expression of modernity?

The above sections deal with how young men and women negotiate discourses of modernity and tradition and demonstrate resistance when the need presents itself. However, drawing from these narratives there are alternative formulations of modernity that emerge. One particular narrative was particularly compelling in this respect and provided for a possible means of resolving the traditional with the modern.

In response to the question whether she thought of her wedding ceremony as traditional or modern, the participant Ab said,

“I would say it was a modern wedding. You know why? Because I am a Catholic with tribal heritage, I married a man who belongs to a Hindu upper caste family. In any case we had to register our marriage under the special marriage act.²⁷ I was of the strong opinion that we should have a court civil marriage and then a small reception for close friends and family and just leave it at that, my partner was also in agreement with this proposition. Since neither of his parents are alive and my mother was too ill to travel to the wedding location (a small town in the north-eastern state of Assam, where the participant’s partner hails from) I was quite sure that we would not have to go through any of the traditional motions. Little did we know of the treats that were in store for us! When we reached my partner’s home town we were of course immediately whisked away to be spruced up even for the civil ceremony in the government office. My protests of course went unheard. Following the court marriage we had an elaborate Hindu wedding ceremony with as many rituals as they could get us to perform (my partner would keep protesting and everybody just ignored him). I just gave in to popular demand and let the rest take its own course. The wedding ceremony was attended by my partner’s large extended family - since his parents are no more - both his father’s and mother’s families came

²⁷ The special marriage act 1954 was enacted by the Indian Parliament with a view towards providing a means of getting married to all Indian citizens (non-resident citizens as well) irrespective of the faith or religion followed by either party (Bare acts Special Marriage Act, 1954).

together to make sure that he wouldn't feel the absence of his parents on this special day and family friends. The wedding was followed by a reception which was attended by every possible contact that my partner and his brother as well as extended family in the town. Since we had such an elaborate Hindu wedding ceremony, my mother also insisted on a church wedding, which was preceded by a few weeks of church mediated pre-marital counseling (which was almost a joke as we had been living together for 3 years before we officially tied the knot). You wonder how I can call all this modern. Let me explain, I admit that while it was all happening we were overwhelmed and exhausted to say the least, but in retrospect I have to say that this was a unique experience. Where would you see every possible aspect of a wedding come together (laughs). No but seriously, do you think this would have been possible back in the day? We even traveled together from Delhi to Tezpur, which is quite scandalous, but nobody questioned any of this. If the price is to go through all these traditions, I would say we got off cheaply. Also it was important to do this as a homage to my father and my partner's parents who are no more."

This narrative is compelling in the way it ties together ideas of modernity and tradition - that also resonate with narratives of other participants - in the way it brings together the traditional and modern almost seamlessly to propose an alternate rendition of modernity. Ab never once doubted that the way she got married was modern, for her it was clear, the coming together of different traditions was a uniquely modern occurrence, one which could not have happened in the past and which certainly doesn't happen frequently even now (although it is on the rise). However there is an additional layer to Ab's narrative, which needs deliberation. She asserts that she and her partner traveled to the wedding destination together, which she claims is seen as a modern way of expressing oneself. It follows therefore that irrespective of her ascription to the wedding as a modern one, she and her partner are already seen as modern. This also the position from which she views her wedding and ascribes it as being modern even as it appropriates rituals from different cultures.

This chapter demonstrates how young people alternate between discourses of tradition and modernity to define an alternative way of sense-making. In trying do so they try to strike a balance

between what is seen as traditional and what is perceived as modern. They may not be navigating this territory consciously, however, in the ways that they appropriate the two terms might become a means of challenging existing notions of tradition and modernity and reformulating them in more critical ways.

Chapter IV: Gender roles and agency

In this chapter I examine roles that are performed by men and women in the institution of marriage. In examining these roles I locate them specifically within two primary domains, firstly in the domain of conjugal and everyday household relations. Within this domain there are two overlapping themes, which emerge from the participants' narratives. One theme concerns domestic roles that are performed within the house and the second theme concerns men's and women's roles as contributors to the household income. These two themes are continuously spoken of in conjunction with each other and therefore I will not attempt to examine them separately. The second domain is specifically that of the wedding ceremony and Hindu wedding ritual within which men and women are expected to perform certain roles. By situating men's and women's roles in these domains I aim to address how men and women negotiate these roles with their partners and families and whether these negotiations lead to a reconfiguration of gender roles. And finally if such a reconfiguration is affected, I ask how it impacts gender and power relations within marriage and family life.

4.1 Negotiating domestic gender roles

An important contributing factor to happiness and satisfaction within marriage is the expectation that men and women have from each other about the performance of gender roles at the household level (Lindsey, 1997:176 quoting Glass, 1988, 1992; Fowers, 1991; Wilkie, 1993). These expectations are in turn shaped by the demands placed on men and women by economic pressures i.e. pressures from the what is conceptualized in terms of an imagined outer domain and the continued presence of familial and household expectations and demands i.e. the corresponding inner domain (Chatterjee, 1989:624). Marriage therefore becomes a site where men and women attempt to resolve these contradictory forces. With the emergence and growth of families where both partners work there is a growing conflict between whether to maintain what are commonly understood as traditional gender roles or to actively try to reconfigure them (Ramu, 1987:904).

In my interviews I asked participants what they thought of domestic roles that need to be

performed and what they thought about the gendered nature of these roles. Ra, a 29 year old male finance professional who has been married for 10 months said, “Well here is the thing, currently between the two of us, I am the only one who is working outside the house. She doesn’t have a job yet because she relocated to where I live and it takes time to find a job in a new place. She will eventually start working of course because it would not be possible to live in this city if both of us don’t bring in money. So while she isn’t working we have an understanding that she will take care of household duties; with some help from me of course. When she starts working outside the house, my role in domestic work will inevitably increase. I don’t believe that household work is a woman’s job, it’s just at this point my partner is in a position to do it.”

Sh, a 30 year old male computer professional, married for a year said, “I am not really sure what to say about roles being gendered. I help in such things as cleaning the house on weekends and getting groceries and things like that. But I don’t know how to cook, my partner has always had an interest in cooking and her mother taught her to cook fairly early in life. She is also a very good cook, so we sort of mutually decided that it’s better if she cooks instead of me experimenting in an area that I am not familiar with. So I don’t know whether to call this a gendered separation of roles.”

Sh’s and Ra’s narratives point to a general perception of domestic roles as not being gendered and arising from personal preference for performing certain roles or pressing situations. However, they do not acknowledge the gendered nature itself of these personal preferences or the training that has gone into nurturing such a preference. As Sh points out himself, his partner was taught how to cook at a fairly young age while he wasn’t.

Ra, on the other hand, says that his partner currently doesn’t have a job and therefore he can expect her to take care of household responsibilities. However, he doesn’t take into account that the very reason she doesn’t have a job is because she was expected as a woman to move to his city of residence following marriage. Many women tend to leave well-paying jobs or satisfying careers in order to relocate to their husband’s city of residence. Often the justification for such a move is that the husband earns more and therefore it is not ideal for him to move, or that the husband’s location is more desirable in terms of the opportunities that it provides. However these reasons are in

themselves deeply gendered as ideas such as that the male partner should earn more comes from the belief that of the two partners in a marriage, the husband should earn more than the wife so that the wife need not work out of need but because she wants to pursue a career of her own and use her education (Sharangpani, 2010:257). The phenomenon of women relocating to their husband's place of residence appears to be consistent with the kinship patterns of virilocality; wherein women move to their husband's home after marriage (Menon, 2012). Women are also complicit in these arrangements, sometimes even deliberately choosing partners that earn more than themselves (*Ibid.*). Women also tend to downplay their career aspirations in order not to appear too career-oriented, as such women are seen as unsuitable for the role of a wife (Sharangpani, 2010:258).

Women's narratives are not very different in terms of how they speak of domestic roles and here, too, the gendered aspect comes to light in the way they frame their narratives and not through the content itself. R, a 29 year old woman who works as a computer professional and has been married for a year and a half, said, "Since both of us work and have equally busy and demanding careers, we both have to work towards maintaining the household. I think it's a fair distribution of chores and I don't think one can call them gendered. My partner can't cook and I am a very good cook, so much rather than eat his bad cooking, I prefer to cook myself. He helps in cleaning and getting the groceries home. Let's be very practical here, if heavy stuff has to be lifted it has to be whoever is physically stronger, and usually it is men who are stronger. I am not sure if you can call this gendered division." In this narrative it becomes clear that women, too, miss the gendered aspects of domestic roles or at least put them across in ways that mask the gendered nature of these roles. It became clearer in R's narrative that she didn't really see household work as something men were good at and therefore it was just convenient and best for everyone to keep them out of it as she said, "Well he does help out with cleaning, but you know, I am never really happy with the way he cleans, something is never quite right, so I end up doing some of it again." It becomes clear that women tend to take on roles that they feel their husbands are not able to do well by virtue of their personalities or temperaments as opposed to attributing it to their gender.

The above narratives demonstrate that within marriages, including love marriages, people's

ideas of domestic roles are gendered and their performance of these roles is also reflective of these ideas. When men do household work it continues to be referred to as ‘helping out’ as is visible in R’s narrative (Lindsey, 1997:179). However, it wouldn’t be appropriate to claim that women do not have any agency whatsoever or that their economic roles outside the home do not help reconstitute gender relations in the domestic sphere. It would be more appropriate to look at reconstitution of gender relations in terms of a process; a process that has roots in the ways that some women have started questioning gender roles within marriage as well. But even while trying to frame this as a process, it can only be seen as a beginning as women question but continue to do the lion’s share of domestic work.

M, a 28 year old female advertising executive who has been married for 10 months said, “I understand that if a woman is not working outside the house she is expected to take care of most household chores, however, I really don’t understand why this has to be in absolute terms. What I mean by this is that if women take care of the cooking, why can’t men be responsible for cleaning up? It’s a small thing, even if they have worked outside the house all day, they can surely find the energy and time to perform this small task. But no, women are expected to clean up and even help their husbands into bed if they have gotten too drunk. I think in this sense domestic roles are definitely gendered roles.”

Ab a woman in her mid-thirties who works as a development professional at a senior position in an international NGO and is also the primary bread winner in her family of two said, “I work outside the house all day so the division of roles between us is fluid. So when I come back home after a long day I am not expected to cook and I don’t. But even in this scenario I do have to get after my husband to do the chores. It’s not as if he does them without being told. Also since I wake up early to go to work the morning routine like breakfast and tea and even the lunch that I pack become my responsibility. On weekends when I am home I do most of the chores and of course cleaning because I am very particular about the way I want the house.”

Such narratives go towards questioning and expressing resentment about the gendered nature of domestic work; especially by those women who bring in a major chunk of the household income;

but this is a small beginning at best at the level of the household (a little later in this section I will discuss how contributing to the family income reconfigures women's decision making abilities in other areas) as women continue to shoulder most if not all domestic responsibilities. These narratives support the conclusions of a study by Blood and Wolfe, which point out that husbands feel the need to do more housework when their wives work outside the house, however this feeling doesn't translate into actual action (Blood and Wolfe, 1960:63). It is important to note that this study was conducted more than 50 years ago in Detroit, USA and still resonates with findings from a study conducted in India decades later. I contend that this is because of the late entry of women into the workforce in the Indian context. My interviewees show a similar trend where men tend to think that they need to contribute to domestic work and think that this work is not gendered but don't really end up doing much or women still have to supplement the tasks that they do undertake such as cleaning.

The most telling of these narratives comes from Ru a qualified social worker who works in an international NGO and occupies a relatively high position in the company hierarchy. She said, "I am so exhausted right now, I can't think straight and what's more, I am exhausted all the time. If you ever get married please stick to traditional gender roles." When I asked her what she meant by traditional gender roles, she said, "See it's better to not be the primary breadwinner, that way at least you are not stressed on two fronts. Right now I work almost 12 hours a day and then after all that office work I come home to find that basic things haven't been done. Like my partner has not given the baby her dinner. When I ask him he says she ate some cookies in the evening. Seriously you know men just don't know, I don't know if it's a function of upbringing or they are wired that way but they just don't do household work the way we do it. I don't mean to say they are incapable of it, just that they don't do it." Following the interview, I stayed for a little while longer. During this time her partner walked in and there was talk about getting ice-cream, to which the partner said, "Well better ask Ru, she is the boss after all." This exchange spoke to the tension between the two of them clearly arising from Ru's position as the primary breadwinner and alluded to other areas on the home front where she exercised control. So while her status as the primary breadwinner has led to an increase in her decision-making power and general authority, this comes at a price. That of greater work load in

two spheres and the resentment of her husband, leading to lower marital satisfaction. Here Mannon's (2006) contention that the partner who gets in more income has greater power in the marital relationship gets complicated as it becomes difficult to understand the measure of power if one loses marital satisfaction or earns the grudge of an intimate partner. As Ab's and Ru's cases demonstrate, getting in more income as compared to their partners has not helped lessen their burden in terms of household work and as per Ru's case has also earned her marital discord. It is also not very clear if she has much in the way of decision making power as this was implied by her partner sarcastically and grudgingly and did not come through in her narrative. In this sense in the context of Indian middle class marriages and family life, balancing a successful and well-paying career does not lead to a corresponding increase in marital power and decreased household work.

This sort of narrative reinforces the contention that marriages with traditional husbands and "modern" wives tend to be low on marital satisfaction (Lindsey 1997: 177 quoting Bowen and Orthner, 1983). In this sense, Sharangpani's claim that women tend to show themselves as less career-oriented (and therefore less modern) in order to appear eligible for marriage, is reinforced through participants' narratives in this research. On the other hand men's narratives discussed earlier in this chapter are aimed at portraying themselves as modern through claims such as they don't find role division between themselves and their partners as gendered or that they also contribute in household chores.

4.2 Negotiating major decisions outside the domestic

Through the above narratives it becomes clear that women's roles as breadwinners and contributors to family income play a limited role in negotiations with their partners about who does what on the domestic front. Another area where women negotiate their power is with respect to major decisions in the family. As Ru's narrative demonstrates, her role as primary breadwinner, contested and fraught as it may be, is instrumental in her ability to make major decisions in her household. However, this itself comes with the risk of a grudging partner and lowered marital satisfaction. What happens in the case of women who are not primary breadwinners? R's response to this was, "Of course I am involved in major decision making. Both of us are equally involved in the process of

making any major decisions and I don't think this necessarily emerges from the fact that I am a professional outside the domestic sphere. I think it's just how things are done. It's too much risk for one person to make a major decision such as buying a piece of land or an apartment for example. So far of course we haven't had to make such decisions but I think we would definitely be in it together and would also consult his and my families on such a decision."

A similar view was expressed by M: "In major decision making processes we both are involved. My partner values my opinion on many things and I am very expressive when it comes to things that matter." Male participants were in agreement with this view and all of them claimed that both were involved in major decision making related to the family.

Almost all the participants also claimed that they had independent access to the money they earned and did not have to explain their personal spending to their partners. At the level of joint spending also women and men claimed to spend with mutual agreement. However, this is not necessarily a product of women's economic independence in the Indian context particularly. Women particularly among the Hindu upper caste were seen as the religious or spiritual halves of their husbands (Srinivas, 1977:231). While this did not give them much in the way of power at the household level, they were consulted on major decisions with the passage of time and as the couple grew older (*Ibid.*). Lower castes had even more egalitarian models with women exercising considerably more power and agency. Among upper caste and upper class Hindu women therefore, higher education and access to employment opportunities have served to make their position stronger and they have more say in decision making. Although their role in decision making is in the capacity of a counsellor and confidante and not as the major decision making authority.

4.3 Doing gender in Hindu wedding rituals

In the chapter on modernity and tradition I have spoken in some detail about men and women's professed affinity to tradition. As a result of this affinity, participants reported choosing traditional rituals and practices for their wedding as opposed to choosing civil or court registered weddings. In this sense governed by tradition, ritual is an important part of the Hindu middle-class cultural ethos. These rituals are marked by specific, gendered roles that the bride and groom need to perform. In

examining the importance of ritual in wedding ceremonies, I also focused on the roles that men and women play and what these mean to them. In this section I examine the roles that both men and women play with respect ritual, the meanings they ascribe to these rituals and how these meanings in turn affect their conjugal relations.

Almost all the participants in this study chose Hindu traditional wedding rituals and ceremonies to for their wedding. The performative and social aspects of this in maintaining and preserving tradition are motivating factor that governs this decision. These aspects have been implicated in the role of making memories. As M said, “All the little behind the scenes drama that goes on while the rituals are taking place remain in one’s memory forever. The ritual itself can be so much fun. It is one special day in your life and of course you make the most of it. You get dressed in these beautiful clothes and jewelry that you would never get a chance to wear otherwise. The spotlight is only on you for once in your life and there is so much fussing and preening. I wouldn’t have wanted to miss out on that.” M’s enthusiasm for the wedding ritual can be explained using Srinivas’ work (1977) who contends that rituals provide women with occasions to wear jewelry and clothing and gain the attention and appreciation of people in their social circle (Srinivas, 1977:229), a sentiment that M voices in her narrative.

Srinivas further elaborates that while men are obligated to perform rituals, women are much more preoccupied with ritual performance as they derive considerable power from its performance. Male participants in the study reinforced both these ideas as Ra said, “I wasn’t particularly keen that we have a traditional wedding ceremony, but my fiancée showed some keenness and my mother was also invested in having a traditional ceremony, so I went along with it.” However, such a contention is not unique to the Indian case as Micaela di Leonardo (1987) demonstrates a similar inclination among women in the United States for what she refers to as “kin work.” Kin work refers to the entire range of activities that involve the maintenance of kin ties through the performance of particular rituals and celebrations (Leonardo, 1987:442). Kin work much like the performance of ritual is also a source from which women derive considerable power (*Ibid.*).

I demonstrate the exercise of such power through an incident in one of the weddings that I

attended as part of my ethnographic work. The groom's female relatives, particularly his aunts said that the priest was not performing the rituals properly. One of them said in exasperation, "The mantras he is reciting are not even chanted during this particular ritual. I don't understand why people have to perform these ceremonies if they don't want to take them seriously." The aunt demonstrated her knowledge of the ritual as well as expressed her anxiety at the diminishing value of tradition and ritual in one statement. Her knowledge emerges from a particular system and process through which Hindu girls are socialized, which includes rituals and ceremonies, language and practices and relations within the family (Dube 1988:11). The exposure to rituals and ceremonies was typical of a certain generation of upper caste and class women, to which the aunt belonged. This is also the process through which women are produced as gendered subjects (*Ibid.*). It therefore follows that women belonging to this composition are likely to feel indignation over the erosion of cultural and traditional values that they were brought up with and cherish. Another important factor in this regard, one which I have spoken of earlier is women's role as custodians of culture and purity of ritual (Srinivas 1977: 229). The aunt's exasperation and indignation therefore arises from her understanding of her role as a custodian and preserver of the sanctity and purity of ritual and this is the locus from where she derives her sense of agency and power.

This chapter demonstrates that roles in the domestic sphere continue to be gendered. However, these tend to be framed in ways that mask the gendered nature of these roles. And while women's negotiation power has increased, this increase is marginal with most women balancing demanding careers with household work in equal measure. In this sense, then, wedding rituals and ceremonies almost provide an escape where women find a traditionally carved out space for exercising their agency.

Concluding remarks

The notions of love and romance have been important themes in imagining the motivations of marriage (Illouz 2011: 9). My research has revealed that much more than preoccupations of romantic love, young men and women in India follow certain paths in the process of partner selection. While at first these paths seem to be free from the influence of such determinants as caste, class and religion, a closer look at their narratives as well as who they eventually select as partners reveals that these determinants continue to be influential in the entire process of arranging a marriage, from selecting an appropriate partner to the decision about wedding ceremonies and rituals. In this sense, then, it comes across that young people internalize expectations about caste, class and religion fairly early in life and use these as a mental radar to find social equals as marital partners. In this process they are enabled by modern means such as web-based matrimonial websites that help to screen potential partners using the exact same parameters that they deny using as determinants.

Another important finding of the study is that people's perceptions of what qualifies as a love marriage or arranged marriage are extremely fluid. It is difficult to come up with a definition of either based on the narratives of the participants or to even decide whether any of the marriages belonged to either category based on popular perceptions of what each entails. The salience of parental approval in the narratives of those who claimed to have had love marriages further strengthens the argument that it is difficult to categorize marriages into one or the other kind.

One of the most important areas of investigation in this study was the exploration of the twin discourses of tradition and modernity and their significance in wedding rituals as well as conjugal or domestic relations. Two themes emerged from this exploration, firstly people's notions of tradition and modernity are shaped by popular discourse rather than being historically grounded. A large part of what people consider as tradition in the sense of something that was always already present, was constituted as a result of British colonialism in India. Secondly, arising from their own personal perception of tradition, young people are invested in the performance of traditional practices. These traditional practices are ones, which are not part of the everyday but need to be performed once in a

while for particular occasions or celebrations. On the other hand, women particularly are faced with a conflict between traditional and modern demands on them. Women are resolving this conflict by ‘picking their battles,’ adopting silent strategies of resistance where they find certain demands unreasonable such as wearing gendered symbols of marriage on an everyday basis, while compromising in those areas where they find negotiation not feasible in the current social climate.

Finally my study reveals that people’s performance of domestic roles continues to be gendered. However, there is a difference in the ways men and women perceive and frame these roles. While men tend to deny the gendered nature of domestic roles, women’s description of these roles in their daily lives demonstrates that domestic roles continue to be gendered. Men’s perception that these roles are not gendered is based in an understanding that women’s education and paid employment translates into more autonomy and less involvement in domestic work. Women, however, perceive this as a double burden on them with demands from domestic as well as work fronts. This contrast particularly in the articulation of men’s perceptions, most likely emerges from social expectations that require men to be more egalitarian in their approach towards domestic roles. Gendered roles in the realm of ritual performance are still held in high regard by women, as it allows them the space and prestige to practice and display their agency.

The most important contribution of this study is its illumination of the operation of larger societal structures and forces that are at work even outside the particular context of marriage. In this sense the study also opens up an area that requires further critical investigation. A post-colonial critique of modernity and tradition using other social structures as sites of contestation would provide for greater understanding of how these notions are produced. Finally and most importantly this study reveals how modernist discourses get implicated in the process of reproducing oppressive social structures that are deeply gendered, classed and casteist in nature. Such a revelation calls for greater feminist critical investment particularly in the Indian context with a view towards making oppressive social structures and institutions visible.

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