Match Fixing in India: Where Tradition Marries Technology

by

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of the University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2009

The Report committee for Samantha Iyer

Certifies that this is the approved version of the following Report:

Match Fixing in India: Where Tradition Marries Technology

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2009
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They say marriages are made in heaven, but in today's digital, wired world, they are increasingly made online. But they still have to be solemnized in the offline world, especially in India, where the entire extended family is involved in the sacred process. It is this echoing sentiment in the Indian cultural code that is driving singles to matrimonial Web sites – creating a concept where tradition marries technology.

And despite the constant evolution of these sites that include membership fees and increased risk of the misuse of personal information displayed in members' profiles, there are more users now than ever before. But this is not because they do not have problems with these issues, but because they are unable to circumvent several problems that it poses.

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Matrimonial Web sites are like dating sites present across the world, where individuals have the opportunity to "court" potential mates before they make their final choices. "Except here, the aim is not just to find a date, but a life partner," says Mahalakshmi Jayaram, professor of New Media at the Asian College of Journalism, Chennai, India. Essentially, a matrimonial site functions as a service that primarily facilitates Indian men and women in finding their mates from a pool of Indians from anywhere in the world.

Matrimonial Web sites are not a new concept in India. They have been around for almost 15 years and are still gaining momentum, especially among Non Resident Indians (NRIs). Social scientist Rina Ghose defines NRIs as temporary and permanent immigrants to the USA and other countries such as the UK and Australia, from India. The Indian Census Bureau estimated the NRI population to be 17 million in its latest report, dated 2001.

With the introduction of the Internet to the Indian matchmaking equation, people have sought ways to match both their horoscopes and interests online; trying to make this wedding a 'love' marriage. A horoscope, in Indian parlance, is a detailed layout of the positions of the zodiac and planets at a person's time of birth. According to Vetrikodi Tamizhchelvan, a freelance matchmaker in Chennai, India, it is like a picture that maps heavenly bodies at an individual's exact time of birth.

Thus, it is not unusual for Indians across the world to turn to matrimonial portals to serve as matchmakers. Be it parents in India looking for suitable matches for their children who are abroad, or singles across the world looking for an appropriate match, they go to matrimonial portals.

Match Fixing

Marriages in India are either arranged, where parents have a strong or complete control of the choice of spouse, or a 'love match,' where one chooses to wed a partner of his or her own choice. The Indian government does not differentiate between love and arranged marriages in its statistics, but those interviewed say love marriages are infrequent. But for a little over a decade, people have been resorting to matrimonial sites to pick spouses, albeit with parental supervision. After picking their potential spouse, individuals get their parents' approval of the match.

In this way, these sites act as matchmakers, setting up marriages by ensuring that both members of the couple come from the same religion, caste, sub caste and socio-economic status. Apart

from the stray cases that have a love marriage, where they choose their spouse without any parental interference, many resort to matrimonial sites to find their spouses – a concept that parents have accepted wholeheartedly.

Traditionally, parents handed out their children's horoscopes at family meetings and celebrations and also relied on family and friends, apart from professional matchmakers. Apart from them, parents and individuals used to rely on matrimonial advertisements in newspapers and magazines. However, this equation is fast changing with the introduction of matrimonial Web sites. In the last decade, the innovative harnessing of the Internet to perform the traditional matchmaking role has spawned a multitude of matrimonial Web sites, each boasting of millions of members.

"As compared to earlier generations, the baby boomer generation had small, nuclear families, making it difficult for them to find spouses for their children," said Swarnalatha Iyer, a professor of sociology at Christ University, Bangalore, India. India's population control scheme in 1976 under the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, ensured that most families understood the financial and social problems of large families. Now, these small, nuclear families are finding it increasingly difficult to find matches without help from large families. This spawned matrimonial advertisements in newspapers and magazines, which have now moved online.

India has one of the youngest populations and the fourth largest Internet population in the world, according to Internet World Usage Statistics. Having established an expanding multi-million dollar empire, these sites have made India's brick-and-mortar marriage bureaus obsolete by offering more choice and convenience.

Despite the widespread influence of Western cultures, India still maintains its traditional values, especially when it comes to the sacred institution of marriage. The India mentioned here, refers to the educated middle class, where the incidence of arranged marriages from matrimonial portals continues to be high. The lower socio-economic classes do not have as much access to the Internet as compared to the middle class, so the sites have evolved offline mechanisms to cater to those without stable/regular Internet access.

Indian children have been taught to uphold their culture and roots and respect their parents in all manners; especially when it comes to marriage. To have a wider range to choose from and still keep their culture, Indians abroad choose their spouses from matrimonial sites. In this sense, parents only organize and pay for the wedding, ensuring that the marriage takes place according to tradition.

Caption: Parents have become more of presiding deities, with one hand raised in blessing and the other hand immersed purposefully in the wallet to pay for the wedding.
Graphic By: Kabir Rao

As far as marriages in India are concerned, parents play an important role in the decision-making process. Though NRI youth search for life partners on their own, the final decision still lies in the hands of its parents. Members themselves post 70 percent of the profiles on Shaadi.com and parents' post 17 percent of the profiles. "I know my son better than anyone else, so making his profile will ensure that I will accurately describe him and specify characteristics I would like the potential matches to have," says Uma Jaishankar, a homemaker in Bangalore. Like Jaishankar, many parents maintain control over their children's matrimonial profiles, speaking volumes of their being tech-savvy.

Since their children are either unaware that their parents are looking to get them married or are unable to make their matrimonial profiles themselves, tech-savvy parents fill out elaborate profiles, including relatively sensitive information such as phone numbers and addresses. Companies like Buoyancee in Bangalore, India, offer computer classes, where adults and the elderly can learn how to access and use computers. Here, they learn how to go online, specifically how to chat and IM their NRI children and also use other emerging communication technology such as Skype and Google Talk.

Others have found ways to get what they want and also secure the parental seal of approval. "I picked a girl based on her education, looks and interests; someone who I thought would best suit me. I then suggested her to my parents who will take it further," said Manish Handa, a freelance architect in Los Angeles. And while this is a modern method, it by no means abandons or represents a break in tradition, nor does it resemble dating. The ingrained trait of respecting their elders has ensured that children let their parents pick their potential spouses online.

Why Matrimonial Web Sites?

"While there was initial skepticism towards the service, over the years people have realized that the medium works beautifully for them," said Anupam Mittal, Chairman and Managing Director of People Group, which owns Shaadi.com. User-friendly and convenient to use, Bharatmatrimony.com, another leading portal, says that it receives over 145,000 visits per month from members in the United States alone. Started in 1997, the portal has more than 10 million members across 15 regional portals and charges up to $227 for a nine-month premium membership, allowing paying members to contact potential spouses. Individuals register with these portals, divulging information such as religion, caste, physical attributes, and even alcohol and tobacco preferences. All matrimonial sites have a free registration section with limited services, while paying members can access details such as problems with their horoscopes, religion, caste, education and physical attributes. But not all registered members pay for premium usage. While many find the payment a one-time investment, there are others like Ranjit Dongaonkar, an Assistant Research Scientist at Texas A&M University, who wait for responses from members before paying for membership. Basic information including email address access is free for most sites. So many, like Dongaonkar, wait for an expressed interest from someone. Paid customers, in his opinion, are a lower risk. "Sometimes, membership is for three months, and there is no guarantee that I can find someone that soon. So when I have shortlisted a few candidates, I'll become a member and take the relationship forward," he said.

Much like looking for a roommate on Craigslist.com, individuals cite preferences, and looking, in many ways, for the ideal roommate. Many, like Aishwarya Ananthapadmanabhan, a journalist with The Indian Express in India, many think that marriage is more of a cohabitation exercise. "You just need company; someone who will be there with you through thick and thin – like a best friend. So it is important that you have similar lifestyles so you can get along better," she said.

Also, with more Indians completing graduate studies and taking high-stress jobs, it leaves little or no time to date. "It cuts down on a lot of bad dates!" exclaims Jeswini Seetharam, a software engineer with Gymboree, on matrimonial Web sites. Like Seetharam, many Indian professionals do not have the time to date or be in a relationship long enough to make it work or even see where it goes.

Moreover, since most Indians maintain their Indian culture when they are abroad, dating is not an option as it is not socially acceptable in India. According to Supriya Sukumaran, a graduate student at Colorado State University, Indians who are flexible with this 'culture,' do not find time to date or find it hard to maintain a relationship. Therefore, they rely on matrimonial sites as it also reduces the pressure of both social stigma associated with a love marriage, and the worry of 'shaming' one's parents by choosing spouses independently.

With widespread influence of the West from television and the Internet, concepts like dating and premarital sex have become new trends in Indian culture. But these concepts are also taboo on profiles. "New trends from the West can cause individuals to misrepresent what could be conceived as vital information such as prior dating and sexual contact with members of the opposite sex on matrimonial Web sites," says Jasmeen Patheja, a feminism activist and founder

of Blank Noise, a community-public art project that seeks to confront street harassment, in India. According to her, such information could potentially be disastrous for a single woman looking to get married, as there is a stigma involved with the loss of virginity.

Since dating is a problem, it is not surprising that there are more than 20 million users on over 150 matrimonial Web sites, including Shaadi.com, Bharatmatrimony.com and Jeevansathi.com — the three biggest and most popular matrimonial Web sites. Also, there have been news reports of more than 100 operational matrimonial portals in India, having a projected growth rate of 120 percent per year.

According to India Online 2007, a survey conducted by research firm Juxt Consult, 48 percent of Internet users in India use matrimonial sites, making the industry one of the biggest 'gainers' in users. The same study states that matrimonial search is the thirteenth most popular activity on the Internet among 12 million urban users in India. The Juxt Consult study indicates that Bharatmatrimony.com group of Web sites leads the online matrimony business with 35.5 percent of users preferring it, followed by Shaadi.com with 28.2 percent. Incidentally, both matrimonial Web sites have completed more than ten years of being online.

Yet, gauging the success rates of matrimonial Web sites is hard, as many registered users may not provide information about their marriage decisions or get back to the site after they get married. Nevertheless, Shaadi.com boasts a rate of 50 marriages a day, with Bharatmatrimony.com claiming a success rate that is eight times higher than Shaadi.com. Mittal claims that the Indian wedding industry is growing at an average rate of 25 percent per annum, with the online matrimonial business standing at $1.4 billion — reflecting the number of people that are logged onto matrimonial sites these days.

The Matrimonial Process

Naitra Muralykrishnan, a 26-year-old graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, wanted an ideal husband. Muralykrishnan, who was born in India and is pursuing graduate studies at the University of Austin at Texas, wanted to begin searching in a way that blended both Old and New World sensibilities. In March 2007, she signed up with Bharatmatrimony.com, after her mother decided it was time she got married. Women in India are usually married by the time they are 25 years old and men are married by the age of 30.

After her mother picked suitable matches, Muralykrishnan then contacted the men to get to know them better. In December 2007, she got in touch with Venkat Narayan, a software engineer for Gymboree. Several e-mails and hours of conversations later, the couple decided to let their parents take the relationship to the next level. A week after the parents in-law had met, Muralykrishnan and Narayan exchanged rings while their parents held a traditional engagement ceremony in February 2008 in Mumbai, India — barely two months after they started interacting with each other.

"A lot of my American friends think it's insane that I'm marrying a stranger," Muralykrishnan said. Like her, many Indians do not find this unusual. In contrast, Indians are used to meeting

their better halves for the first time at the altar. Jayaram believes this system works well because both parties know why they are registered at the portals. They want to be married.

Muralykrishnan wanted to marry an Indian, but was not comfortable with an arranged marriage. Like her, many Indian singles do not subscribe to marrying a stranger. "My mother wanted someone who met all her criteria and whose horoscope matched mine," Muralykrishnan said. Avanti Sreedharan, a software engineer for Hewlett Packard in Bangalore, India had a similar problem. "I know my father is going to have issues with the men I pick, so I asked him to do the primary filtration. I then choose from his selections and get to know the guy better," Sreedharan said. After picking a potential spouse from the pre-approved pool, individuals like Sreedharan get their parents' final approval for the match.

To rope in more members and reach out to the offline market, matrimonial sites are also expanding offline. To cater specifically to the needs of parents looking for potential spouses for their eligible sons and daughters, Shaadi.com started the Shaadi.com Centre – the offline matchmaking retail enterprise in 2004. Other sites like Bharatmatrimony.com and Jeevansaathi.com have also harnessed cellular technology and television.

Portals have also gone regional, with Bharatmatrimony.com being first portal to harness the vernacular markets by launching regional sites according to India's states and their corresponding languages. "We are making it easier for users by bringing out vernacular matrimonial websites which is attracting a large section of the online matrimonial search users," Uday Zokarkar, Business Head, Bharatmatrimony Centre, said on the company Web site. As the Internet penetration into semi-urban and rural markets is increasing, such localization will see another spike in popularity. And while waiting for this spike, matrimonial sites have digressed into the offline world. Recently, Shaadi.com and Star Plus partnered for a television reality show that traces the journey of participants from finding a suitable match to getting married and living alone as a nuclear family. At its end, Bharatmatrimony.com announced its partnership in January this year with Idea Cellular to launch customized matrimony services for mobile users. Idea subscribers can access Bharatmatrimony.com's services on their GPRS-enabled handsets, across the country. This makes it the portal's third partnership with a cellular service.

Digital Malpractice

Matrimonial sites are not without controversy. With matchmaking becoming more digital by the day, it is also increasing the number of cyber duping cases, making matrimonial sites take defensive measures and plead helplessness beyond a certain point in checking the problem. Individuals create highly personal profiles, despite knowing that there is a possibility of members providing falsified information on individuals' profiles and other similar issues. However, a lack of such information on profiles will ensure that they will not be able to effectively participate in this activity and avail its benefits.

When the online world leaves much for misrepresentation, it is intriguing that one can trust a profile enough to marry the person just with what is written on it.

Matrimonial portals went under the scanner after the arrest of Liaquat Ali Khan, in 2007, who allegedly cheated more than 50 women into marriage in India. He advertised himself as a UK-based Indian engineer owning two homes. What they did not know was that Khan was already married, had a daughter and lived locally in India where he ran an Internet café. In their gullibility and enthusiasm for a groom from abroad, they failed to check his claims. After the online preliminaries, Khan would meet the women, which eventually led to 42 engagements and eight marriages.

The UK-based *Daily Mail* reported that Khan then fleeced them of thousands of Indian Rupees, saying he needed the money for the wedding arrangements, their passports and visas for the UK, and the honeymoon. For most Indian women, having sex before their wedding night is unthinkable but Khan, police reports say, insisted on sleeping with them beforehand. The Indian media reported that his fraud came to light only in May 2007 when computer studies student Sangeetha Dineshan, 21, filed a complaint with the police.

Girish Mahadevan, a member of Jeevansathi.com, said that many individuals are not aware of ostentatious profiles. Sanjana Reddy, who found her husband on Shaadi.com, is in the middle of a painful divorce. Married for three years, Reddy cited irreconcilable differences with Shravan Rao. "A month after were married, I found that he completely misled me about himself in his profile," said Reddy about Rao. In his defense, Rao said that his father had made the profile and was not aware that Rao smoked, drank socially or that he ate meat although his religion does not permit him. The couple worked through these basic differences, but eventually found that there were too many.

Like Jaishankar, many parents who create profiles of their children on matrimonial Web sites, either consciously or unknowingly, omit details that may prove detrimental to their children's matchmaking possibilities. In Shravan Rao's case, his father, Vimal Rao did not know several of his son's acquired habits such as drinking, smoking and eating meat, all of which are important criteria. As Shravan Rao had not told his father about these, more than three years after creating Shravan's profile, his father, Vimal, an attorney, ironically is dealing with his son's divorce papers.

This kind of misrepresentation and the more recent global recession are affecting these portals.

The effects of the global economic recession have made it difficult for foreign-based men to find brides from India. Recession has made parents think twice about looking at NRI profiles for their daughters. Also, the concept of Indian women marrying NRI grooms has been slowing down since the recession. Valini Dsouza, Assistant Manager of Corporate Communications at Shaadi.com's Mumbai office, confirmed this phenomenon: NRI men and women want Indian spouses based in India. But she said the phenomenon would pass and would not deter users. This decrease in members since the recession, is increasing business for local marriage brokers and also temple priests across the world, who were also traditional matchmakers. This is because the recession has not affected people in India to a large extent, despite the strong economic connections between India and countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom.

Before matrimonial sites, individuals placed advertisements in newspaper classifieds, especially in Sunday classifieds sections. Traditionally, Indians have arranged marriages through relatives, marriage bureaus, and paid matchmakers who are also known as bride brokers. In addition, publications like *The Hindu* and *The Times of India* carry classified ads, usually placed by parents looking for prospective brides and grooms.

According to Ghose, the Internet has introduced another variable to the matrimonial equation. "It is like a catalyst," says Usha Vijayaraman, a homemaker from Chennai, India, about marriage Web sites. "Newspapers and magazines restrict my search to just India, but the Internet gives me access to look at matches from across the world for my son," she added. In her opinion, online matrimonial advertisements have a global reach, allowing Indians across the world can look at each other's profiles and not be restricted by city, state or even country.

Aparna Singh, a graduate student at the London School of Economics, says that matrimonial Web sites are a thriving business as they are a lot better than placing advertisements in newspapers or magazines. Although these are still prevalent, the revenue is not as high as it used to be.

Matrimonial sites have also evolved and/or have started catering to niche markets, with portals like Overweightshaadi.com for people who are overweight and Positiveshaadi.com restricted to people who are HIV positive. Such niche market penetration proves that entrepreneurs like Aditi Gupta, CEO of Overweightshaadi.com, will continue to make money as long as there are members for such Web sites. Gupta invested $60,000 in the site and says the company will break even within three years of launching the site, which is run by 12 employees apart from Gupta and her sister, Megha Singhal.

Social Capital and Matrimonial Web Sites

With the advent of the Internet, social capital, like matrimonial advertisements, has gone online. So it is time to map the concept of social capital to online social networks, in this case, matrimonial Web sites, as they exist today. Individuals who look for potential spouses online, in many ways, bond and bridge social capital, which Robert Putnam defined in his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, as a cross-disciplinary concept that mostly refers to the benefits of social networks, including problem-solving related to mutual interests. "This is a dimension of social capital that goes unnoticed," said Jayaram. Like her, many scholars claim that the use of these Web sites maintains Indian culture, and thereby, social capital, with regard to matrimony.

While 'choosing' their partners online, some indulge in communicating with their potential spouses. "I don't want to marry a complete stranger," said Muralykrishnan. "Before choosing the man I want to marry, I want to get to know him first via emails and chatting before I meet him and decide," she added. Like her, many are 'socialising' with their potential matches before committing to marriage. "If it doesn't work out, we can always remain friends," she said. According to Jacob Neduncherian, a student of new media at the Asian College of Journalism, this communication helps in building social capital. And since most users of these Web sites are

NRIs, it helps them stay connected to other Indians of the same age or similar interests – much like Social Networking Sites like Facebook and Myspace.

However, there are others like Divya Natarajan, who believe that it would be awkward to be friends with someone who she once considered as a potential spouse. "It would be really weird, because when I am married, I might compare my husband to the other guy or think what could have been," she said.

The impact of social networking sites on social capital can be seen in several ways. For instance, common interest groups could help users coordinate themselves for 'collective action.' Users of matrimonial Web sites can arrange face-to-face meetings, talk about problems with their horoscopes or even look at other members of their community to interact with. As part of its offline initiatives, Kalayanamalai.com organizes such meetings across India.

Such initiatives have ensured that portals like Shaadi.com have over 8,22,073 matches to their credit as of March 2009. However, Mittal said that for every 10 matches that are made on the site, eight don't get back to the site to inform them of their success.

Since arranged marriages have become a difficult proposition for many, matrimonial Web sites help people circumvent these problems. But for Indians, love, loneliness and the frustration of being single have chiefly been resolved by a concept called 'arranged marriage.' The arranged marriage model is clearly contrived, but it also offers a more certain outcome – a reassuring actuality for India's young population.

With more than half of the Internet consumers in India using matrimonial Web sites, it can be said that these portals are a source of thriving business. And since arranged marriages are still the norm, people have now switched to matrimonial sites, picking their potential mates through Internet profiles. Also, in the future, these sites could possibly help in creating, maintaining or bridging social capital apart from preserving Indian culture.

SIDEBAR/PULLQUOTE
The Quintessential Matrimonial Process
- Making a horoscope
- Creating a profile on a matrimonial portal or placing advertisements in newspapers
- Corresponding with potential mates
- Coordinating meetings with both families
- The engagement
- The wedding
- The honeymoon

The typical Indian wedding is nothing short of a spectacle, as portrayed in films like Monsoon Wedding and Bend it Like Beckham. So arranging the big fat Indian wedding is very challenging – right from picking the bride and groom to planning the honeymoon.
It lasts for three to four days, but setting up the match takes years. More importantly, it is accepted as a legitimate way of finding a mate.

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