Article:
Hussain, Mobeen (2026) 'Brains and beauty plus pedigree':Conjugality, commodification, and capital accumulation in the colonial Indian marriage market. Modern Asian Studies. ISSN: 1469-8099

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101558

‘Brains and beauty plus pedigree’: conjugality, commodification, and capital accumulation in the colonial Indian marriage market

Mobeen Hussain, University of York, mobeen.hussain@york.ac.uk

Abstract

This article traces how and why the ‘competition’ of marriage culminated in the rise of the matrimonial advertisement across early-twentieth-century India. It examines how the matrimonial, as a systematised textual schema, became a constitutive component of a reforming marriage market and integral to how the gendered body was imagined within transforming familial norms. The article draws on the extensive scholarship on labour and marriage in colonial Bengal to argue for the development of an ‘All-India’ middle-class marital marketplace as new forms of networking and work emerged. It does this by undertaking a cross-regional comparative analysis of matrimonials between 1915 and 1950 across urban India — alongside memoirs, colonial ethnographies, and periodicals — to extrapolate strategies of status-making and explore how discourses on conjugality ceded into legislative debates around customary law and property. The article begins by considering the placement and composition of matrimonials before delving into how matches were assessed, arguing that they expressed shifting marital norms, conjugal capital, and caste consolidation which led to the commodification of an expansive marital marketplace. It then examines debates around monetary marriage exchanges (like dowry) as a form of capital accumulation, disentangling how requests were articulated within the matrimonial advertisement through the complex textual grammars of signalling wealth.

Keywords: marriage market; matrimonials; dowry; conjugality; accumulation

Introduction

> Wanted- Virgin or childless widow 20-25 (high-caste) for a Cambridge man, very healthy Agarwal widower of established position and status. Cultured family, gentle manners, affectionate temper, broad social and religious outlook, swadeshi spirit, high education, sound physique, fair complexion, handsome looks and capacity to manage a stylish modern home, essential. Good opportunity for parents to save accomplished youth from pining away in forced widowhood. Correspondence confidential. No reply without photo.
>
> *The Hindustan Times* (November 1931)

Enforced competition for husbands on the part of the higher groups, and the desire to imitate their superiors which animates the lower groups, combine to run up the price of husbands in the

> upper classes… Husbands are bought for the girls, and the family gets its money's worth in social estimation. Bargains, however, must be taken when they are to be had; and no father dares run the risk of waiting till his daughter is physically mature.
>
> Herbert H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1892)

The first quotation is a matrimonial advertisement from a seeking groom or his family requesting desirable gendered behaviours (culture, home-managing capacity, gentle), physical traits (physique, fair complexion, handsome), and seemingly progressive social views (swadeshi spirit, broad social and religious outlook).[1] The seeker offsets his status as a widower by showcasing his foreign education (Cambridge man), wealth ('established position'), a health reassurance, and property ('stylish modern home') as bargaining chips in marital negotiations. The second quotation was published nearly forty years earlier in an introductory essay on 'Caste in Relation to Marriage' in Herbert H. Risley's *The Tribes and Castes in Bengal*.[2] Risley, the administrator tasked with conducting the first All-India decennial census in 1901, delineates the power dynamics of matchmaking in and beyond Bengal.[3] Adapting John F. McLennan's concept of endogamy in *Primitive Marriage* (1865) as marriage between persons of the same blood-connection or community, Risley put forward hypergamy (marrying up) as a key practice of upper-caste Hindu society.[4] He surmised that marriage operates at a highly gendered 'level of competition' which involved bargaining, elevating, and maintaining caste status.

[1] *The Hindustan Times* (Delhi), 23 November 1931, p. 3.
[2] Herbert H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal Vol 1: Ethnographic Glossary* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1892), pp. xci-xcii.
[3] For more on Risley's data collection through district questionnaires, see C. J., Fuller, *Anthropologist and Imperialist: H. H. Risley and British India, 1873-1911* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024), pp. 117-118, p. 122.
[4] Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, p. xlii; Durba Mitra, '"Surplus Woman": Female Sexuality and the Concept of Endogamy,' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 80, no. 1, 2021, pp. 3-26, p. 13.

Both the matrimonial advertisement and Risley's colonial reading of marital customs point to the competitive nature of making and finding matches in modern Indian society. This article traces how and why the competition of the 'marriage market' — a phrase used by social reformers from the late nineteenth century — culminated in the rise of the matrimonial advertisement across early-twentieth-century India. It examines how the matrimonial, as a standardised schema, became a discursively modern middle-class matchmaking tool within a reforming and commoditising marriage market. In doing so, it argues that the matrimonial was constitutive to how the gendered body was imagined within transforming familial and civic projects.

A plethora of comparative studies on matchmaking have used the matrimonial advertisement to map social transformations in spousal selection across globalising India.[5] Post-Independence studies by Noel Gist (1953) and Arthur Niehoff (1953-1954) traced the practice of placing matrimonials to the early 1950s.[6] However, matrimonials have a longer history in colonial South Asia. Dating the earliest Calcutta advertisement to 1870, Rochona Majumdar's study was the first to look at the growth of the matrimonial advertisement in late colonial Bengal as part of a transforming matrimonial culture.[7] She explores how matchmaking became transactional with the impact of capitalism, urbanisation, and print culture.[8] Bengal

[5] Srividya Ramasubramanian and Parul Jain, 'Gender Stereotypes and Normative Heterosexuality in Matrimonial Ads from Globalizing India,' *Asian Journal of Communication*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2009, pp. 253–269; Jyotsna Vaid, 'Fair Enough? Colour and the Commodification of the Self in Indian Matrimonials,' in *Shades of Difference: Why Skin Color Matters*, (ed) Evelyn Nakano Glenn (Stanford: Stanford General, 2009), pp. 148–165.
[6] Noel P. Gist, 'Mate Selection and Mass Communication in India,' *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 4 1953, pp. 481-495, p. 483; Arthur Niehoff, 'A Study of Matrimonial Advertisements in North India,' *Eastern Anthropologist*, vol. 12, no. 2, Dec 1958-Feb 1959, pp. 73-86.
[7] Rochona Majumdar, *Marriage and Modernity: Family Values in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 2-3; Rochona Majumdar, 'Looking for Brides and Grooms: Ghataks, Matrimonials, and the Marriage Market in Colonial Calcutta circa 1875–1940', *The Journal of Asian studies*, vol. 63, no. 4, 2004, pp. 911–935, pp. 912-913.
[8] Ibid., p. 912.

looms large in the scholarship on Indian marriage economies.[9] Scholars of gender and labour, Samita Sen, Deepita Chakravarty, and Ishita Chakravarty have delineated how changes in colonial Bengal's agrarian economy devalued women's labour and reinforced the economic nature of marriage practices.[10] Centring the matrimonial advertisement, this article engages with the scholarship on marriage in Bengal to argue for the emergence of an 'All-India' marital marketplace from the turn of the twentieth century that cut across caste and geographical boundaries. Just as a new kind of 'All-India' space that allowed for local variations was conceived within legislative debates around marital age, consent, and property,[11] a new kind of 'All-India' space developed within matrimonial columns against the backdrop of urban transformations and emergent forms of networking and work. Advertisements were sporadic but became commonplace from 1910 and flourished in the interwar years as part of a transforming marriage market. The article uses matrimonials — alongside memoirs, colonial ethnography, and periodicals — to extrapolate shifting strategies of status-making and corporeality and explore how discourses on conjugality ceded into legislative changes around customary law and property.

My cross-regional comparative analysis of matrimonials between 1915 and 1950, including in Bombay, Madras, Lahore, Delhi, Lucknow, and Calcutta, looks at how the language of matrimonial advertisements permeated broader matrimonial culture. The article starts by considering the placement and composition of matrimonials before delving into how matches were assessed and bargained for through articulations of caste and status indicators, professions and wealth, education, age, health and beauty, gendered requirements, and notions of

[9] Dagmar Engels, *Beyond Purdah: women in Bengal 1890-1939* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Samita Sen, *Women and labour in late colonial India: the Bengal jute industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[10] Ibid., pp. 85-86; Deepita Chakravarty and Ishita Chakravarty, *Wives and Widows at Work: Women's Labour in Agrarian Bengal, Then and Now* (Hyderabad, India: Orient Blackswan, 2023), p. 107.
[11] Leigh Denault, '"A Babel of Law": Hindu Marriage, Global Spaces and Intimate Objects in Late-Nineteenth-Century India,' in *Marriage, Law and Modernity Global Histories*, (ed) Julia Moses (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 149-167, p. 156.

'progressiveness'. As they became standardised, advertisements expressed shifting marital norms and expectations, conjugal capital, and caste consolidation which, in turn, led to the commodification of an expansive marital marketplace. Such changes impacted upper-caste middle-class groups before spreading across society. The article then examines debates around monetary marriage exchanges as a form of capital accumulation, disentangling how requests were articulated and reconstituted within the matrimonial advertisement through complex textual grammars of signalling wealth. The 'competition' for brides and grooms changed how marital payments, as selection criteria in matrimonials, were negotiated and became quantifiable markers in the commercialised marriage market.

Composing and Communicating the Matrimonial

The growing ideal of companionable monogamous marriage was part of social reform and nationalist politics across India and the Middle East from the late nineteenth century, reconstituting the social life of modern middle-class families.[12] Placing matrimonial advertisements in newspapers was a modern practice that expanded the parameters of marriage-making from close-knit geographically bound communities and family networks. Gist, in his 1953 matrimonial study, attributed the use of newspapers for spousal selection to Western media and conceptions of romantic love which affected Indian youth.[13] Contemporary studies also home in on exposure to Western media as catalysts for changing marital norms in India.[14] However, though matrimonials marked a major shift in depersonalising the process, early-twentieth-century matchmaking remained tethered to the family whilst allowing for individual

[12] Mytheli Sreenivas, *Wives, Widows, and Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 67 and pp. 90-91; Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Familial Undercurrents: Untold Stories of Love and Marriage in Modern Iran* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), p. 14; Kenneth M. Cuno, 'Modernizing Marriage in Egypt' in *Marriage, Law and Modernity Global Histories*, (ed) Julia Moses (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 129-148, pp. 129-130; Alan Duben, and Cem Behar, *Istanbul Households: Marriage, Family and Fertility,* 1880-1940 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[13] Gist, 'Mate Selection and Mass Communication in India,' p. 482.

[14] Ramasubramanian and Jain, 'Gender Stereotypes and Normative Heterosexuality,' p. 54.

input from prospective partners. As Kenneth Cuno and Afsaneh Najmabadi observe in Egypt and Iran respectively, the diffusion of new family ideologies did not lead to an abandonment of arranged and negotiated marriage.[15]

This study makes use of systematic and random sampling to compare matrimonial advertisements in newspapers and women's magazines published across India. The systematic sample comprises matrimonials from three English-language dailies: *The Hindu* (published in Madras), *The Hindustan Times* (Delhi, henceforth *Hindustan Times*), and *The Tribune* (Lahore and Ambala post-1947, henceforth *Tribune*), between 1915 and 1950.[16] In the systematic sample, a total of 2217 matrimonial advertisements were collated.[17] The overall yearly average came to 46557 advertisements. The sample was further broken down into 'looking for brides' and 'looking for grooms' (table 1).[18] One issue a week was sampled for each newspaper within specific yearly intervals (table 2).[19] I also examine matrimonials appearing in *The Bengalee* and *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, published in Calcutta, *National Herald* (Lucknow), and *The Bombay Chronicle* (Bombay). Matrimonials also started to appear in two popular Urdu-language, *Ismat* (Delhi) and *Tehzib-i-Niswan* (Lahore) from the late 1920s — their inclusion allows for a linguistic comparison of shifting terminology and desires.

INSERT FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE. LEGEND: Table 1: Systematic sample and average totals.

INSERT FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE. LEGEND: Table 2: Sample totals over time.

[15] Cuno, 'Modernizing Marriage in Egypt,' p. 141; Najmabadi, *Familial Undercurrents*, p. 13.
[16] Each newspaper's first sampling year depended on when matrimonials first appeared, consisting of one per week between 1915-1930 and two per month in 1950 for *The Hindu* and one per week for *Hindustan Times* and *Tribune*.
[17] If a matrimonial appeared more than three times in consecutively sampled issues it was excluded from the total.
[18] Repeated advertisements were not included in 'Looking for Brides' and 'Looking for Grooms' but were counted in overall totals; averages calculated as follows: 'Total from sample' x 7[days] x 4[weeks] x 12[months].
[19] Intervals used due to newspaper availability.

Matrimonials increasingly took up small but consistent sections of classified pages, creating an 'open market'.[20] Headings for matrimonials initially appeared under 'Wanted' and, then, under 'Matrimonial' or 'Matrimonial Notice'. Similarly, Urdu advertisements looking for a *rishta* (match or proposal) or *shaadi* (wedding) used *zaroorat* (required/ needed) as perlocutionary headings. They first featured in the last pages of newspapers but, from the 1930s, most gradually shifted to the second or third pages along with other classified advertisements. Like classified advertisements, matrimonials contained reference numbers to be cited in communication, gesturing to the professionalisation of matrimonial columns and the significant role of newspapers in communicating social needs beyond kinship networks.

Cross-regionally, middle-class groups were most likely to place matrimonials. Defining and designating who counts as 'middle-class' in the late colonial period is sticky business. Historians of colonial India agree that class formations did not occur uniformly and were regionally contingent on the emergence of class-conscious publics — upper-castes and elites, including the northern Indian *ashraf* (noble, respectable class amongst Muslims), marked themselves as middle-class to distance from corrupt elite practices.[21] Across major cities in India, migration since the mid-nineteenth century impacted labouring and employment patterns whereby new social identities were premised on stable and disposable incomes and employment opportunities as well as elements of uniformity in lifestyles and social values for affluent workers and professional, industrial, and landed classes alike.[22] More recent

[20] *The Hindustan Times*, 20 May 1950, p. 2; Majumdar, *Marriage and Modernity*, p. 35.
[21] Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 173.
[22] B. B. Misra, *The Indian Middle Classes: Their Growth in Modern Times* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 11-13 and p. 307.

interventions have attended to how consumption and self-fashioning behaviours alongside income and occupation signalled how different workers claimed the category of middle-class.[23]

In Punjabi and Bengali cities, caste divisions were subsumed into large social formations identifying as middle-class. Anshu Malhotra notes that significant elements of the Punjabi middle-classes included Brahmins, Sikhs, Khatris, mercantile castes claiming Kshatriya descent, the trading Arora caste (mostly shopkeepers and moneylenders), and the commercial Baniya caste prominent in east Punjab and cities like Delhi, Ambala, and Firozerpur.[24] A similar process of aggregation can be discerned in the Madras Presidency whereby scribal castes who had entered colonial educational institutions became a new class of professional elites alongside mercantile and landowning elites.[25] As commercial executive Prakash Tandon notes of the late 1930s, alongside artisans, shopkeepers, and clerks, 'there was a thin layer of the professional class comprising of lawyers, doctors, teachers and government officers' in the 'average provincial town'.[26] Therefore, those identifying as middle-class included the *bhadralok* (Bengali learned folk) and *ashraf*, Brahmin and intermediary castes as well as those employed in white collar and professional services. Cross-regional articulations of class explicitly began to appear in matrimonials with seekers describing themselves as 'middle class'.[27]

Those with some disposable income and social capital were more likely to place matrimonials, particularly in English, suggesting that families from emerging or aspiring middle-class service communities were the key interlocutors of this new forum. Most

[23] Prashant Kidambi, 'Consumption, Domestic Economy, and the Idea of the Middle Class in Late Colonial Bombay,' in *Towards a History of Consumption in South Asia*, (ed) Douglas E. Haynes et al. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 108-136, pp. 110-115.
[24] Anshu Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities: Restructuring Class in Colonial Punjab* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 31-33.
[25] Mytheli Sreenivas, 'Conjugality and Capital: Gender, Families, and Property under Colonial Law in India,' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 63, no. 4, 2004, pp. 937-960, p. 943.
[26] Prakash Tandon, *Beyond Punjab 1937-1960* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971), p. 71.
[27] *The Tribune* (Lahore), 18 August 1940, p. 11; *The Hindustan Times*, 19 September 1936, p. 12.

newspapers, rather than imposing a fixed rate per advertisements, charged per word, line, or inch. *The Bombay Chronicle* charged 1 anna per word in the mid-1930s (figure 1) and costs gradually increased so that, by 1950, newspapers like *Tribune* charged Rs.1 for one line and Rs.10 for an inch.[28] Longer advertisements functioned as a tacit way of displaying wealth. Matrimonial columns, by allowing 'advertising for a wider choice and better selection' reflected the broader contours of migratory patterns, circulating beyond villages, cities, and even regional and national borders.[29] In *Tribune*, numerous advertisements included correspondence addresses from across the Punjab province, including Amritsar and Ludhiana, through to neighbouring cities such as Ambala. Many matrimonials also reveal a transition towards considering cross-regional matches: in *The Bombay Chronicle*, a 'Mohamedan bachelor' was searching from Omalur, a town in Madras whereas in another in *Hindustan Times*, a Ceylonese advocate wanted a 'beautiful Kashmiri Brahmin or Punjabi lady'.[30] From the 1940s and into the post-partition period, matrimonials also appeared for men temporarily and permanently domiciled in Canada, Nairobi, America, and Dar es Salaam.[31] These matrimonials, gesturing to an internationalisation of the marriage market, signal an early trend within South Asian diaspora communities looking for brides (and later grooms) from 'back home'.[32]

INSERT FIGURE 3 NEAR HERE. LEGEND: Figure 1: Notice for 'Tabulated Adlets,' *The Bombay Chronicle* (1934).

Regional dailies became conduits for finding matches through the deployment of communication strategies that were used to define and reconstitute the ideal match.

[28] *The Bombay Chronicle* (Bombay), 30 August 1934, p. 2; *The Tribune*, 27 October 1950, p. 2.
[29] *The Hindustan Times*, 9 September 1950, p. 2; Engels, *Beyond Purdah*, p. 46 and p. 48.
[30] *The Bombay Chronicle*, 16 August 1940, p. 2; *The Hindustan Times*, 31 January 1950, p. 2.
[31] Ibid.; *The Tribune*, 9 February 1940, p. 11; *The Hindustan Times*, 25 August 1950, p. 2; *The Tribune*, 17 December 1950, p. 2.
[32] For more on transnational marriages, see: Katherine Charsley and Alison Shaw, 'South Asian transnational marriages in comparative perspective' *Global Networks*, vol. 6, 2006, pp. 331-344.

Advertisements were usually placed by family members and seeking men although occasionally friends would place one for a prospective groom (never for a bride). Matrimonials often followed a generic pattern, sharing general attributes, competencies, and physical attributes. Both systematic and random samples show that advertisements followed one of three formulas: advertisements solely explicating requirements; advertisements stipulating a 'suitable' match or a one-word descriptor followed by the seeker's attributes; or advertisements listing both desired and a seeker's attributes. It is possible that advert-placers were asked to pick from a list or use a template as the matrimonial format increased in popularity. It is also likely that matrimonials became formulaic and standardised through advert-placers imitating earlier advertisements. The inclusion of certain criterion over time was instrumental to the commodification of individuals in marriage-making, revealing the kinds of value-systems that were perceived as assets or liabilities. Placement fees compelled advert-placers to prioritise information to optimise the *sale* of an individual such as applying an experiential shorthand based on tacit knowledge: 'no C & D' meant no consideration of caste or dowry.[33] The employment of coded, standardised formats, partially premised on tacit terminology, points to an evolving process of matrimonial placement.

Despite their popularity in the late 1920s, concerns about the reliability and authenticity of matrimonial advertisements lingered. In her memoir, Bengali writer and reformer Shudha Mazumdar recalls being tasked with finding her brother-in-law a bride. She noticed a matrimonial for a government official's daughter in a newspaper and implored her husband to make enquiries to which he replied 'advertisements of this sort are fishy affairs... the "high government official" may lick stamps in the Secretariat for all I know'.[34] Advert-placers sought to ensure satisfactory and trustworthy responses by assuring confidentiality and using third

[33] *The Tribune*, 9 September 1950, p. 2.
[34] Shudha Mazumdar and Geraldine H. Forbes, *Memoirs of an Indian Woman* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1989), pp. 192-193.

party/ anonymous correspondence; policing responses via gatekeepers and response types; and asking for photographs and interviews.

Majumdar had noted that early caste journals in Bengal, concerned with the potential menace of unreliable information, had guaranteed confidentiality and promised to investigate claims made by families.[35] It is unlikely that newspapers, catering to wider readerships, were able to provide this vetting service. However, most outputs made sure to address fears around confidentiality and anonymity. The *Bombay Chronicle*, for instance, reserved the right to refuse 'any advertisement without giving ANY reason for doing so' for its 'advertisements of private nature' (figure 1). Most matrimonials asked for replies to either be sent to the advertising newspaper or third party (male) proxies in respected professions including schoolmasters, business managers, survey officers, magistrates, and postmasters and institutions like social reformist organisations, rather than domicile addresses, to keep enquiries and identities anonymous. Using postmasters and court officials like *kazis* (jurists) as proxies was a longstanding practice in provincial cities and rural communities — from the 1860s, they also acted as letter readers and translators for illiterate people or those with little/ no English.[36] In *Ismat and Tehzib-i-Niswan*, correspondence was to be sent to the magazine's address as both had much smaller readerships than regional dailies.[37]

Advert-placers sought to mediate responses through numerous regulatory strategies. Firstly, many matrimonials stated that guardians or parents of girls should respond, warning grooms that only replies legitimatised by familial support would be considered. In doing so, families explored new ways of finding matches but textually re-ascribed previously assumed

[35] Majumdar, 'Looking for Brides and Grooms,' p. 918.
[36] Christopher Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 335-336.
[37] In 1900, *Tehzib-i-Niswan* had around 302 subscribers whilst gaining a pan-Indian Urdu readership: C. M. Naim, A *Most Noble Life: The Biography of Ashrafunnisa Begum (1840–1903) by Muhammadi Begum (1877–1908) translated from the original Urdu, with additional material* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2022), p. 116.

regulations. The second policing strategy was to dictate how respondents should reply. Matrimonials, predominantly from the mid-1920s, asked for interested parties to apply by stating sources of income, residence, and education to determine financial stability — 'only those settled need correspond' was a common refrain.[38] After listing desired and/or seeker attributes, this was another way of reinforcing preferences and curtailing undesirable persons. These specifications gradually became more selective and hierarchical. The value placed on 'highly placed' matches suggests how the matrimonial could operate as a restrictive force within a widely cast net. Yet, this lexicon also demonstrates a rise of new kinds of identity formation in which class, in some cases, was capable of subsuming or even superseding some caste barriers in an 'all-Indian' space. This certainly was the case, as we shall see below, for intermarriage amongst high and middling castes and sub-castes. Increasingly, wealth, profession, and education spoke louder as marriage capital in vistas that had hitherto been restricted by strict(er) caste confines.

The most significant regulation strategy and transition in matchmaking was to request photographs before 'seeing the bride' via in-person interviews. The primacy of the visual increased through eliciting visual representations in an anonymised textual medium. Matrimonials asked interested parties to send photographs with one warning individuals should 'apply with recent photos without which no consideration'.[39] Showing photographs in marriage negotiations became popular with the proliferation of professional studios in the 1920s.[40] Such practices in the making of modern conjugality occurred across the Middle East too.[41] The concept of 'seeing brides' did provoke some criticism. In her autobiography *Jiban Khatar*

[38] *The Hindustan Times*, 19 April 1936, p. 12.
[39] Ibid, 15 November 1936, p. 14; *The Tribune*, 4 January 1940, p. 11.
[40] Geraldine Forbes, 'Small Acts of Rebellion: Women Tell Their Photographs,' in *Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women, and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia*, (ed) Anindita Ghosh (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007), pp. 58–82, pp. 59-60.
[41] Najmabadi*, Familial Undercurrents*, p. 68.

Pataguli, teacher Jobeda Khanam recalls neighbours being scandalised by suitors who came to view her: 'when did Muslim men start seeing their would-be brides? Is there no purdah left?'[42] Yet, by the 1930s, the gradually commercialising process of marriage depended on asking for and showing photographs alongside or before 'seeing brides'. Many Urdu matrimonials in *Ismat* and *Tehzib-i-Niswan* also asked for photographs.[43] As a modern 'technology of visibility', to borrow Lynn Thomas's phrase, photographs illuminated various aspects of private and public life, providing clues about familial status alongside physical appearances (we return to photographs as verification below).[44] Often an amalgamation of these regulatory strategies were deployed in the process of selecting and bargaining the terms of matches.

Professional marriage agencies also burgeoned alongside matrimonials. Many communities had employed the services of traditional matchmakers who acted as mediators and planners of marriage ceremonies. In the Bengali Hindu community, professional matchmakers known as *ghataks* or *ghatakis* (female counterparts) were employed to arrange marriages and align horoscopes.[45] *Ghataks* selected matches as a part of their role as lineage arbiters who ranked and maintained caste hierarchy and purity.[46] Elsewhere, the hereditary barber (also known as *napit*) was a central figure of the Hindu village tasked with finding suitable matches, taking proposals between families, negotiating marital payments, and fulfilling marriage ceremonies.[47] Ethnographies and memoirs elaborate on the fluid role of the *napit* (and

[42] Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, *Elusive Lives: Gender, Autobiography, and the Self in Muslim South Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), p. 194.
[43] 'Zaroorat,' *Ismat*, vol. 61, no. 3, September 1938, p. 269.
[44] Forbes, 'Small Acts of Rebellion,' pp. 59-60.
[45] Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, p. 496.
[46] Majumdar, 'Looking for Brides and Grooms,' pp. 915-916; Madhurima Mukhopadhyay, 'Matchmakers and Intermediation: Marriage in Contemporary Kolkata,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 47, no. 43, 2012, pp. 90-99, p. 92.
[47] Denzil Ibbetson, *A glossary of the tribes and castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province: based on the census report for the Punjab, 1883 Vol 1* (Lahore: The Superintendent Government Printing, 1919), p. 797; Risley, *Tribes and Castes in Bengal*, pp. 306-308; John Nesfield, *Brief view of the caste system of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, together with an examination of the names and figures shown in the census report, 1882* (Allahabad: North-Western Provinces and Oudh Government Press, 1885), p. 42 and p. 58.

priest/pandit) in marriage brokering and arranging dowries amongst kayasthas and various connected sub-castes in Bombay, Bengal, Behar, and the North-Western Frontier Province.[48] In Punjab, Tandon noted that middle-men like the family's hereditary barber broached propositions discreetly to save families the 'embarrassment of a refusal'.[49]

The decline of the traditional or hereditary matchmaker was partly a result of changing modern matrimonial culture engendered by urban social and caste mobility and altering community networks.[50] Tandon recalls that, by the 1930s, 'matchmaking had changed,' married siblings would suggest acquaintances from school or college.[51] After parental discussions, mutual friends rather than family barbers would approach parents.[52] The matrimonial advertisement thrived within these gradually shifting social norms. However, the role of traditional matchmakers was not completely supplanted by the advent of matrimonials. Some matchmakers professionalised into formal institutions, utilising print to meet the requirements of new customers.[53] Others were substituted by marriage bureaus in the early twentieth century, although Madhurima Mukhopadhyay notes that *ghatakis* remained popular in rural West Bengal.[54] Newspapers featured matrimonial agencies, some specifying caste or religious affiliation and, later, other social preferences. One agency advertisement in *The Hindu* supplied information for Brahmin parents and another in *Hindustan Times* advertised a Hindu marriage agency.[55] Some of these agencies mostly likely provided astrological chart-making services and advertisements for astrologists appeared alongside matrimonials in some

[48] Ibid., p.58; Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, p. 446; William Crooke, *The tribes and castes of the North-western Provinces and Oudh, Vol.3* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing India, 1896), p. 195; Mazumdar, *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, p. 83 and p. 188.
[49] Tandon, *Beyond Punjab*, p. 51.
[50] Mukhopadhyay, 'Matchmakers and Intermediation,' p.92.
[51] Tandon, *Beyond Punjab*, p. 51.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Majumdar, 'Looking for Brides and Grooms,' p. 920; 'Bibaha Ghatak Office,' *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (Calcutta), 11 June 1935, p. 2.
[54] Mukhopadhyay, 'Matchmakers and Intermediation,' p.92.
[55] *The Hindu*, 14 October 1920, p. 2; *The Hindustan Times*, 15 November 1936, p. 14.

newspapers.[56] By the 1940s, more professional bureaus, not necessarily connected to older matchmaking networks, expanded and adapted their remits to meet professional and social requirements. *Tribune* and *Bombay Chronicle* featured advertisements for the Global Introduction League which promised introductions for matrimony, friendship, and hobbies.[57] Both matrimonials and professionalised agencies transformed the marriage market into a commercial forum in which attributes were idealised and assessed against a value-scale of assets and liabilities (which we now turn to).

Assessing Matches

The collected data on attributes pertains to the traits of a seeking individual and desired ones. Both demonstrate how the body determined intimate borders — many matrimonials solely indicated 'suitable match needed' and provided seeker information to delineate the kind of partner that should respond.

INSERT FIGURE 4 NEAR HERE. LEGEND: Table 3: Comparative breakdown of categories and attributes.

Status Indicators: Configuring Caste within Religious and Regional Markers

Signifiers of regionality, caste, and religion have been grouped together as status indicators. Their inclusion in matrimonials evince shifting status hierarchies based around caste and class. This category, specifically caste, was most frequently mentioned across all newspapers. Cross-regional readings of matrimonial columns confirm advert generators and respondents were predominantly from upper and middling castes of the aspirant middle-classes. In the three systematically sampled English-language newspapers, *Tribune*, *Hindustan Times*, and *The Hindu*, regionality, family names, or caste was listed 2222 times. Almost all matrimonials

[56] *The Hindu*, 14 October 1920, p. 2.
[57] *The Tribune*, 7 April 1940, p. 15; *The Bombay Chronicle*, 10 July 1940, p.2,

stated the seeker's caste and expressed a preference for a particular caste or sub-caste. References to caste, signalled in a variety of ways, were significant for maintaining endogamous and exogamous functions of marriage. One outcome of late-nineteenth-century colonial legislative attempts to legally define marriage, through shoring up brahminical 'Hindu' and elite 'Muslim' practices and the concomitant delegitimising of low-caste customs, was the imitation of upper-caste endogamy.[58] Advertisements distinguished between 'Brahmin' and 'Non-Brahmin' matches or included specific castes or *gotras*. *Gotras* are exogamous subdivisions within castes which prohibit intermarriage between members descended from common ancestors. Often, a family's *gotra* was included to avoid intra-*gotra* marriage. Kshatriyas and Vaisyas also adopted and expressed *gotras* in imitation of brahminical practices.[59] Internal divisions within a caste became less important so that many adverts referred to 'any *sreni*' (grades within a sub-caste), indicating a willingness to marry across caste subdivisions.[60] Signalling *gotra* or *sreni*, thus, was a means of conveying broader caste aspirations and attempts at upward class mobility through intra-caste rather than inter-caste marriage. In this way, matrimonials also functioned as sanskritisation engines in the pursuit of ideal caste matches.[61]

Broader regional references were employed as families began to use cross-regional dailies to cast wider nets of partner selection for specific caste matches. Regionality, in this study, refer to regions mentioned within advertisements rather than the correspondence addresses that accompanied matrimonials. Regional identity could indicate familial ancestries, racial affinities, or local caste affiliations. In *The Bombay Chronicle*, for example, matrimonials

[58] Samita Sen, 'Offences against Marriage: Negotiating custom in colonial Bengal,' in Janaki Nair and Mary E. John (eds.), *A Question of Silence?: The Sexual Economies of Modern India* (London: Zed Books, 1998), pp. 77-110, p. 84; Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste* (London: Hurst and Company, 2000), p. 33.
[59] Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, p. xlviii and p. li.
[60] Majumdar, 'Looking for Brides and Grooms,' p. 922.
[61] For more on sanskritisation: M.N. Srinivas et al., 'Caste: A Trend Report and Bibliography,' *Current Sociology* vol. 8, no. 3, 1959, pp. 135–151, p. 149.

requested matches for 'Hindoo' Maharashtrian girls whilst indicating 'no caste distinction'.[62] In *The Hindu*, Vadama, a subsect of the Iyer community of Hindi-speaking Tamil Brahmins, was referenced to highlight northern origins. Surnames were status signalling strategies signifying regional caste identities and family ancestries. Surnames, deriving from traditional occupations ascribed to castes or geographies, had become mandatory for colonial bureaucratic identification. Gyanendra Pandey has explored how upwardly-mobile Dalits attempted to neutralise, minimise, or reject caste identification by adopting names tied to places of origins, unmarked administrative positions, higher caste appellations or dropped surnames altogether.[63] Such modernising efforts were also observable among some aspirant middle-class groups even as surnames, alongside caste, continued to signal status — 'Saxena' and 'Ahulwalia' appeared frequently in *Hindustani Times* and *Tribune*.[64] Within the mercantile Baniya caste across the United Provinces and Punjab, Agarwals distinguished themselves from Oswals and discriminated against Agraharis because their women engaged in selling work.[65]

Similar caste innovations operated transregionally within gradually shifting notions of class-caste identities. Denzil Ibbetson's analysis of Punjabi castes had noted a rivalry between mercantile castes of Khatris and Aroras in the 1880s.[66] Though these tensions gave way to new class affinities amongst professional Khatris and Aroras in newly developed towns across West Punjab, some customs of *biradaris* (familial kinship networks) persevered.[67] As Tandon observed, 'Khatris still married only Khatris, and Aroras other Aroras, but there were no longer

[62] *The Bombay Chronicle*, 30 October 1940, p. 2.
[63] Gyanendra Pandey, *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste, and Difference in India and the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 208-210.
[64] *The Tribune*, 3 March 1940, p. 15; *The Hindustan Times*, 15 November 1936, p. 14.
[65] Ibid., 27 June 1936, p. 12; Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 25; Sen, *Women and Labour*, p. 79; In an account of marriage reform, the author emphasises the need for Agarwals to remain united: Gobind Ram, *Anokhi Shaadi* (Lucknow: Gobind Pushtakaliyah, 1917), p. 2.
[66] Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities*, p. 33.
[67] Ibid.; Tandon, *Beyond Punjab*, p. 52.

so strict about the right sub-castes' so that families married those of the same social standing.[68] Despite the consistent appearance of caste restrictions in matrimonial columns, newspapers did function as inter-regional vehicles for opening up rather solely consolidating middle-class caste distinctions from the late 1940s.[69] Though matrimonials for those outside of middling castes were rare, the matrimonial column as a matchmaking forum was a generative one that enabled access to an array of marital and social mobility options within an expanding middle-class seeking well-placed matches.

Matrimonial data suggests that families searching for brides were willing to offset caste, regional background, and familial status against the appearance of women. In *Tribune*, *The Hindu*, and *Hindustan Times*, physical attributes of potential brides outnumbered references to status categories (see table 3). Female physical attributes also featured disproportionally more than caste, regional, and family indicators in *The Bengalee* and *Amrit Bazar Patrika*. Men were more likely to mention their caste, regional base, or family names (1246 times compared to 976 times for women). For men, higher frequencies of status references suggest that marrying a lower-caste woman did not affect familial status as much as a woman marrying 'down,' and that female appearances held greater currency in assessment hierarchies. Gendered hypergamy (marrying a daughter 'up' into a superior status) was an imitable practice amongst many castes across India.[70] Shudha Mazumdar's memoir reveals the impact of brahminisation amongst upper-castes: her kayastha mother-in-law only agrees to consider a lower-caste girl for her brother-in-law because Shudha warned her that another girl may be 'blessed with lineage' but 'lacking in looks'.[71] Malhotra and Durba Mitra also note that this practice left a surplus of unmarried women on one end and marriageable men at the lowest levels — rules were often

[68] Tandon's *Punjab Century* cited in Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities*, p. 37.
[69] One matrimonial requested 'graduates preferably in service or in business' for an educated 'scheduled caste' girl: *The Tribune*, 27 March 1950, p. 2.
[70] Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities*, p. 51.
[71] Mazumdar, *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, p. 192.

breached at lower levels so that men could marry women outside their caste.[72] This surplus also fuelled the 'competition for husbands,' the power dynamics of which played out within matrimonials and dowry negotiations (discussed below).

In advertisements that did not mention caste preferences or sub-caste restrictions, the seeker's caste was still specified to indicate an adherence to caste stratification. These inclusions indicated preferences or anticipated desired responses without explicitly making requests. One matrimonial in *The Bombay Chronicle* from 1940 wanted 'a bridegroom, well educated self supporting and of advanced views for a Bride of Maratha community… No restrictions of caste'.[73] Whilst specifying there were 'no restrictions', the advertisement listed a specific racialised, regionalised caste preference. Phrases such as 'caste immaterial' or 'no caste restriction' came to consistently feature in *Tribune* and *Hindustan Times*.[74] The rise of such phrases was provoked by caste and social reform associations campaigning against the strictest forms of caste discrimination. The Arya Samaj (f. 1875), for example, aimed to reform caste practices. Yet, founder Dayanand Saraswati still discouraged caste admixture so that, as Malhotra puts it, 'the biradari of the Arya Samajists helped in finding suitable grooms for young marriageable daughters from among a more commodious high caste group'.[75] This was certainly the case for matrimonials in the Lahore-based *Tribune*. Therefore, matrimonials that specified caste immateriality often did so to signal reformist views amongst certain middle-class groups, even if this was limited to self-presentation on paper alone.

Within English-language matrimonial columns, religion was not mentioned as often precisely because religious identities were assumed from caste and *gotra* inclusions. Newspapers included matrimonials from various religious backgrounds (Christians, Hindus,

[72] Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities*, p. 52; Mitra, '"Surplus Woman,"' p. 12.
[73] *The Bombay Chronicle*, 23 August 1940, p. 2.
[74] *The Tribune*, 19 May 1940, p. 15; *The Hindustan Times*, 28 August 1926, p. 11.
[75] Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities*, p. 40.

Jains, Muslims, and Sikhs) with some regional fluctuations such as Sikh matches predominately appearing in *Tribune*. Matches remained broadly bound by religion. Many Sikh families, particularly in *Tribune*, sought Hindu or Sikh matches of the same caste and excluded Muslims and Christians. This corresponded with other patterns of cross-religious caste-based marriage in Punjab — amongst Agarwals, Jains, and Hindus would often intermarry.[76] Muslim advertisers also delineated general markers of religion (like 'Sunni'), specific caste groupings (like 'Syed'), and foreign lineages such as Afghan or Persian descent.[77] In *Ismat* and *Tehzib-i-Niswan*, whilst Muslim identities were assumed, matrimonials often delineated descent such as requests for a youth of 'sharif noble lineage' for a girl of 'eminent Afghani lineage' and a bride from a 'nawabi or ruling *khandaan*'.[78] Although restrictions on endogamy were not as stringent amongst Muslims, groups who claimed foreign ancestry, such as Sayyids, Shaikhs, and Pathans, generally only allowed men to marry 'lower'.[79] *Ashrafi* elites justified distinctions that marked them against *ajlaf* or *atraf* (lower orders) by deploying Islamic jurisprudence as precedence for marrying amongst equal groups.[80] In matrimonials, these markers of social stratification were expressed through consistent requests and requirements for matches of '*sharif khandaani*' — referring to *ashraf* lineages as well as to 'good character'.[81] These inclusions sought to maintain caste within a broader Muslim identifier rather than specific religious practice or belief.

Although matches themselves remained bound by religious categories, correspondence practices suggest that modern matchmaking often drew on cross-religious networks. For

[76] Nesfield, *Brief view of the caste system of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, p. 95.
[77] *The Hindu*, 22 April 1930, p. 1; *The Hindustan Times*, 7 November 1936, p. 12; 'Zaroorat Rishta,' *Tehzib-i-Niswan*, vol. 46, no. 5, January 1943, unpaginated.
[78] 'Zaroorat,' *Ismat*, vol. 61, no. 3, September 1938, p. 269; 'Zaroorat Rishta,' *Ismat*, vol. 61, no. 5, November 1938, p. 440.
[79] Imtiaz Ahmad, 'Introduction,' in *Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims in India*, (ed) by Imtiaz Ahmad (New Delhi: Manohar, 1978), pp. 1-17, p. 9.
[80] Layli Uddin, 'Casteist demons and working-class prophets: subaltern Islam in Bengal, circa 1872–1928,' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2023, pp. 1051-1075, p. 1056.
[81] 'Zaroorat Hai,' *Tehzib-i-Niswan*, vol. 26, no. 16, April 1923, unpaginated.

instance, a *Tribune* advert from 1950 features a Brahmin seeking a bride with correspondence to be made with a *hakim* (Muslim medical practitioner).[82] Such cross-regional communications were facilitated by innovations in print, like the matrimonial column, from which the emergent 'All-India' approach to matchmaking can be discerned. As status criterions demonstrate, the matrimonial method was not illimitably capacious but encouraged intra-caste marriage within an appropriate 'All-India' middle-class.

Professions, Wealth, and Educational Markers

The Salary/Property/Wealth category in the study refers to individual wealth, employment, or familial income (table 3). Aside from status categories, the most valuable acquirable assets for men to *sell* in matrimonials were financial markers, indicated through salaries or professions — those seeking grooms echoed these preferences. Professionals, including professors, businessmen, lawyers, engineers, doctors, commercial and industrial executives, and students, predominantly featured in advertisements alongside landholders and landlords. The most coveted professions — particularly between the 1920s and 1940s with increased employment precarity spurred by the Depression and the Second World War— were 'permanent' government service or 'imperial service' positions.[83] *Sarkari naukari* (government employment) was also appropriate for middle-class *ashraf* and upper-caste groups. It included roles in the Indian Civil Service or revenue collection with salaried work signifying permanent service, immovable property, and financial stability.[84]

[82] *The Tribune*, 17 December 1950, p. 2.
[83] Dietmar Rothermund, *India in the Great Depression, 1929-1939* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1992), p. 34 and p. 268; *The Hindustan Times*, 10 May 1931, p. 15; 'Zaroorat Shaadi,' *Tehzib-i-Niswan*, vol. 29, no. 32, August 1926, unpaginated.
[84] Amanda Lanzillo, *Pious Labor: Islam, Artisanship, and Technology in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2024), p. 141; Engels, *Beyond Purdah*, p. 49; Margrit Pernau, 'Middle Class and Secularization,' in *The Middle Class in India*, Sanjay Joshi (ed), (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 222-239, p. 224.

Within the competitive marketplace of the matrimonial column, a groom's individual wealth was increasingly noted and desired. Advert-placers articulated preferences for grooms that were independent or had 'independent income,' elaborating on earlier references to 'well-settled' matches.[85] Stock phrases such as 'well-to-do' or 'highly-connected' became customary. Seekers were also not shy about requesting or disclosing salaries framed as monthly incomes, net revenue, property values, and pensionable income. In *Tehzib-i-Niswan*'s matrimonials, seekers for both brides and grooms often delineated specific monthly salaries. Stipulating individual earnings, as a measure of worth and strategy for increasing desirability, was partially born out of regional legislative wranglings about familial wealth and joint property ownership articulated by educated professional classes since the 1890s.[86] Contents of matrimonials suggest that earning potentials of men were deployed as bargaining chips for specifying coveted physical attributes. A 1940 advertisement in *Tribune*, for instance, wanted a 'fair, educated and attractive tall girl for Mohammedan Gentleman self supporting income about Rs.600-p.m'.[87] Overall, for men, profession and wealth held greater currency than listing education although foreign graduates were proffered and preferred. Educational markers were self-evident for some professions but, crucially, male financial ability and stability was a vital measurable competency within advertisements. In comparison, education was a clear asset for women: referenced 619 in *Tribune*, 72 in *The Hindu* and 385 in *Hindustan Times*. Across the systematic sample, female education was stipulated 1076 times in contrast to 703 male references.

Female education was more capacious, with matrimonials featuring a wider scale of attainment: ranging from stating a girl was 'educated' to precise indicators such as S.L.L.C (secondary school leavers certificate), matriculated, middle pass, or graduates. The prominent

[85] *The Hindustan Times*, 20 May 1931, p. 15.
[86] Sreenivas, 'Conjugality and Capital,' p. 944.
[87] *The Tribune*, 23 March 1940, p. 15.

use of abbreviated forms may be due to the expense of placing adverts (at cost per word). It is also likely that readers amassed knowledge about explicating female education within the matrimonial schema. Women's education had transformed into a status symbol, possessing aspirational value and signalling modern values in a period in which female educational reform was continually debated. Across Urdu matrimonials, references for varying levels of '*taleem*' (education) regularly appeared, reflecting shifts in female education to meet requirements for western-educated professionals.[88] Alongside this trend, however, some families still adhered to home-schooling customs, particularly amongst poorer middle-class and older *sharifi* families. One *Ismat* matrimonial required a Muslim girl who 'was educated from home' and another in *Hindustan Times* assured that 'all education imparted at home, not in any school'.[89] These two approaches to pedagogy have been explored by Barbara Metcalf and Shenila Khoja-Moolji.[90] The former charted two corresponding strands amongst Muslim reformers in the late nineteenth-century; *ulama* (Islamic scholars) distanced themselves from European influences while some social reformers engaged with European critiques and adapted Western models.[91] Such cleavages in pedagogical views are also well-documented in memoirs and fiction which debated the role of schooling for cultivating 'better wives and mothers'.[92] Amongst Hindus in Maharashtrian society too, there were deep divisions over forms of educational instruction but the prevailing consensus was consistent with other regional positions: women were to be educated to prevent conjugal breakdown between highly-educated husbands and illiterate wives.[93]

[88] 'Zaroorat Hai,' April 1923; 'Zaroorat Shaadi,' January 1943.
[89] 'Shaadi Zaroorat,' *Ismat*, vol. 59, no. 6, December 1937, p. 504; *The Hindustan Times*, 8 August 1936, p. 12.
[90] Shenila Khoja-Moolji, *Forging the Ideal Educated Girl The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), pp. 28-58; Barbara D. Metcalf, 'Reading and Writing about Muslim Women in British India, ' in *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities, and the State in India*, (ed) Zoya Hasan (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1–21, p. 6.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Mumtaz Shah Nawaz, *The Heart Divided* (Lahore: ASR Publications, 1990), p. 370.
[93] Padma Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850-1920 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005)*, p. 81.

A marked difference in the emergence of 'domestic skills' as a separate category can also be observed in matrimonials from the 1920s. 'Domestic skills' were referenced more frequently in the 1940s and 1950s. 'Educated' references in earlier advertisements alluded to culturally-sanctioned household-related education comprising household management, cooking, arithmetic, and reading religious texts and regional languages.[94] Later, as more women attended school and pursued further or higher education, domestic prowess needed to be demarcated on its own terms. This shift was the ongoing consequence of devaluing women's labour amongst lower and middling castes as well as the articulation of supposedly traditional concepts of femininity which hampered women's participation in an increasingly capitalist economy.[95] Out of 20 matrimonial adverts in a February 1950 issue of *Tribune*, 6 specifically requested brides to be 'well-versed in household affairs,' often coded as 'HH'.[96] In *Ismat*, brides needed to be 'experienced in household affairs'.[97] Many matrimonials highlighted that the seeking bride was both educated and skilled in housework, reinforcing female education as a status symbol.

Language proficiency also held high premiums for girls in the marriage market. The ability to reading and write in Urdu, Hindi, and Punjabi featured as valuable attributes and requested assets in the 1920s.[98] A linguistic hierarchy appeared in matrimonials. In *Tribune*, Hindi became a greater selling point than Urdu or Punjabi. From the 1930s, knowing English also began to signify 'modern' matches.[99] A 1937 advertisement for an *ustani* (female home tutor) situated above a matrimonial in *Ismat* suggests English education was also coveted amongst North Indian Muslims.[100] '*Angrazi taleem*' (English education) had been a contentious issue

[94] Judith E. Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India: What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004); Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 106-107 and pp. 216-225.
[95] Engels, *Beyond Purdah*, p. 51; see also Sen, *Women and Labour*.
[96] *The Tribune*, 12 February 1950, p. 2; Ibid., 16 April 1950, p. 2.
[97] 'Shaadi Zaroorat,' *Ismat*, vol. 57, no. 5, November 1936, p. 453.
[98] *The Hindustan Times,* 10 December 1926, p. 15; Ibid., 5 February 1931, p. 15.
[99] Ibid., 1 January 1936, p. 12.
[100] 'Ustani ki Zaroorat,' *Ismat*, vol. 57, no. 5, November 1936, p. 453.

at the beginning of the twentieth century, women wrote about the loss of religious education alongside the necessity of learning English.[101] In 1907, state-led inclusion of rudimentary English in *ashrafi* curriculums for well-to-do women in Bhopal had been a radical innovation.[102] However, English education and even higher education in the marriage market came to be seen as a vital asset.[103] Generally, a modicum of education, whether schooling, domestic skills, or language proficiency, became a desirable trait across matrimonials.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, women's professions were rarely requested due to their perceived limited earning potential. Middle-class familial expectations often dictated that brides would not work after marriage beyond volunteer or social work. Although women's professions were listed and requested disproportionately less than those of men, they were not completely absent. Doctors, teachers, and headmistresses were numerously referenced. From the 1940s and early 1950s, women graduates and 'medicos' also emerged as selling points (with male doctors requesting 'lady doctors').[104]

Age, Child Marriage, and Widow Remarriage

Ages of seekers or desired matches was one of the indices most likely to be included in matrimonials, second only to status indicators. Age was conveyed using precise quantifiers or contextual measures such as 'young,' 'middle-aged,' or 'grown-up'. Measuring and recording 'age' as a legal, cultural, or biological entity has been vociferously debated by historical actors and historians alike.[105] Ishita Pande has shown how, although colonial law-making took

[101] M. Ali Baig, 'Larkhiyah ki Taleem' (The Education of Girls), *Ismat,* vol. 12, no. 6, June 1914, pp. 12-13; Khaksar Abida Al-Ghafoor, 'Angrezi Taleem ki Zaroorat' (The Need for English Education), *Ismat*, vol. 12, no. 6, June 1914, pp. 60-62.
[102] Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, *Muslim Women, Reform and Princely Patronage: Nawab Sultan Jahan Begam of Bhopal* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 84.
[103] Maryam Khanum, 'Haqooqi Niswan Aur Pardah' (Rights of Women and Purdah), *Ismat*, vol. 54, no. 5, May 1935, pp. 335-337.
[104] *The Hindustan Times*, 23 September 1950, p. 2.
[105] Mary E. John, 'Some Historiographical Challenges in Approaching Child Marriage,' *in Love, Labour and Law: Early and Child Marriage in India*, Samita Sen and Anindita Ghosh (eds.), (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2020), pp. 1-28, p.4 & p. 24.

defining and recording age with chronological precision for granted, age weas often approximated.[106] In matrimonials, female age requests generally ranged from 15 to 20 but male ages were much more variable. The youngest precise age mentioned for a girl was 13 years of age (with girls being statistically younger in *Hindustan Times*). Debates around child marriage and the age of consent, which first appeared in the context of conversion, evince why these age listings for girls were common.[107]

The high-profile case of Rukhmabai culminated in one of the major social legislative enactments of the nineteenth century, the Age of Consent Bill of 1891. This Bill raised the age of consent for girls from 10 to 12. Child-bride Rukhmabai, born into an educated Shudra family, had been married to Dadaji Bhikaji (aged 20) when she was 11 years old but the marriage had not been consummated as Rukhmabai reached puberty in her mother's home.[108] In 1884, Bhikaji, having not claimed marital rights for 15 years, filed for the restitution of conjugal rights at the Bombay High Court. Rukhmabai was initially acquitted as she had not consented as a child. But, upon Bhikaji's appeal, the judge succumbed to widespread pushback — including virulent opposition from upper-caste groups who endorsed early marriage as a central endogamous tenet — and ordered her to reside with her husband.[109] Under the doctrine of restitution of conjugal rights, a colonial transplant from English ecclesiastical law, sympathy generally lay with husbands and was instrumentalised to safeguard male control.[110] In July 1889, another case highlighted the violence of child marriage: 35-year-old Hari Maiti was

---

[106] Ishita Pande, *Sex, Law, and the Politics of Age: Child Marriage in India, 1891-1937* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p .93.
[107] For more on conversion, see: Samita Sen, 'Introduction,' in *Love, Labour and Law: Early and Child Marriage in India*, Samita Sen and Anindita Ghosh (eds.), (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2020), pp. xi-xxxvi., p. xix; For more on the use of colonial legislative apparatus by Indian social reformers, see: Denault, '"A Babel of Law,"' p. 150; John, 'Some Historiographical Challenges,' p. 20.
[108] Ibid., pp. 17-18.

[109] Padma Anagol, 'Age of Consent and Child Marriage in India,' in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*, 2016, pp. 1-5, p.2.
[110] Sen, 'Offences against Marriage,' p. 90 and p.94; Kanika Sharma, Laura Lammasniemi, and Tanika Sarkar, 'Dadaji Bhikaji v Rukhmabai (1886) ILR 10 Bom 301: rewriting consent and conjugal relations in colonial India,' *Indian Law Review*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2021, pp. 265–287, p. 271.

accused of murdering his 11-year-old wife Phulmani Dasi who suffered horrific sexual injuries as a result of pre-pubertal rape and haemorrhaged to death.[111] This case further foregrounded issues around the health and mortality of child brides. Both cases unleashed powerful regional and transnational debates about early marriage, ill health, and conjugal disequilibrium.[112] In the Tamil region, society and prepuberty marriage was largely confined to Brahmins and the child marriage question generated more controversy there partly because of ongoing tensions about the place of Brahmins in Tamil society.[113]

After further deliberation into the twentieth century, the Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) or Sarda Act was passed in 1929, fixing the age of marriage for girls at 14 and boys at 18. This enactment may explain why 13 was the youngest age observed for girls in matrimonials. Families could claim that they were looking for suitors for daughters turning 14. During the winter of 1929 and 1930, Bengal experienced a wave of child marriages with parents taking their last chances to arrange pre-puberty marriages for daughters.[114] Families could also subvert the CMRA in advertisements by employing 'marriageable age' — a coded term exclusively referring to females. It signalled a girl's physical development and reproductive capacity as well as domestic training. Over time, the phrase 'marriageable age' diminished as specifying exact ages became popular; reflecting shifts in modern age quantification and the appropriation of precise terminology as part of a clearer sales pitch in matrimonials.[115] Yet, determining and proving age remained an issue; an article published in the periodical *Nur*

[111] Pande, *Sex, Law, and the Politics of Age*, p. 31.
[112] Ishita Pande, *Medicine, Race, and Liberalism in British Bengal: Symptoms of empire* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p.160; Antoinette Burton, 'From Child Bride to 'Hindoo Lady': Rukhmabai and the Debate on Sexual Respectability in Imperial Britain,' *The American Historical Review*, vol. 103, no. 4, 1998, pp. 1119–1146.
[113] C. J. Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan, *Tamil Brahmans: The Making of a Middle-Class Caste* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 123); Sreenivas, *Wives, Widows, and Concubines*, p. 76.
[114] Engels, *Beyond Purdah*, p. 45.
[115] Pande, *Sex, Law, and the Politics of Age*, p. 93.

Jahan (Lahore) pointed out that the law was unenforceable without the universal registration of births.[116]

Age remained a highly gendered, unequal variable in the marriage market, with one advertisement describing a 'highly cultured graduate' as a 'spinster' at the age of 35.[117] This disparity placed even greater pressure on families to continue to fix the marriages of daughters early, particularly amongst castes that valued hypergamy (especially Kulin Brahmins). Upper-caste families would be anxious to marry daughters early precisely to foreclose the impact of limited choices. Some legislators had even pushed for an amendment to exempt Brahmins from the CMRA because of these pressures.[118] Early marriage had also been practiced to protect against forcible abduction in regions like Punjab.[119] At the same time, child marriage was gradually abandoned by upper-caste middle-class groups but continued be popular amongst poorer, low-caste Muslims and Hindus because parents were unable or unwilling to 'undertake maintenance of daughters for longer periods'.[120] CMRA breaches, therefore, were difficult to prove and deliberate deflations of age occurred in cases of unmarried girls approaching puberty whose parents sought to avoid social censure.[121] Requesting photographs in matrimonials often helped ascertain age fabrications before in-person meetings were sought.

Marital ages and widow remarriage were also connected issues in the marriage market. Laws for widow remarriage had been proposed in the 1830s but the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act was not passed until 1856. This was due to brahminical orthodoxy converging with British judicial opinion.[122] Upper-caste opponents worried that such a law would confuse upper-caste

[116] Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, p. 154.
[117] *The Hindustan Times*, 16 September 1950, p. 2.
[118] Sreenivas, *Wives, Widows, and Concubines*, 77)
[119] Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, p. lxxxix.
[120] Sen, *Women and Labour*, pp. 86-87.
[121] Pande, *Sex, Law, and the Politics of Age*, p. 116.
[122] Sen, 'Offences against Marriage,' p. 87.

Hindus with inferior castes and tribes amongst whom remarriage was common.[123] Colonial courts readily accepted that marriage for Hindu women was a monogamous life-long sacrament.[124] Low castes also started to restrict widow remarriage as a means of upper-caste emulation.[125] Another element of the Remarriage Act which limited the prospect of remarriage was section 2, the forfeiture of the deceased husband's estate upon remarriage, that was applied to all Hindu widows.[126] Lucy Carroll observed that the application of forfeiture by the High Courts of Bengal, Bombay and Madras to all Hindu widows, despite differences in customary law, was part of the broader 'Brahminisation of the low castes and the Hinduization of tribals'.[127] These impediments as well as upper-caste emulation meant that widow remarriage remained a social taboo well into the twentieth century. Early marriage also partly fell out favour amongst privileged upper-caste groups to mitigate or, as Deboshruti Roychowdhury puts it, avoid the 'risk' of widow remarriage.[128]

Though widow remarriage is generally considered to be the least effective colonial-era social reform, matrimonials columns did become a forum for providing matches for widows. Shudha Mazumdar touches upon the opportunities afforded by the matrimonial in her memoir: a young child widow, whose parents 'bravely sent out an advertisement' in a popular daily, garnered a response from a college student in Calcutta.[129] She remonstrates the social oppositions the man faced, including threats of disinheritance, stating that 'in spite of the Widow Remarriage Act and the fact that many reputable men sponsored the cause, the

[123] John, 'Some Historiographical Challenges,' p. 12.
[124] Sen, 'Offences against Marriage,' p. 90.
[125] Engels, *Beyond Purdah,* p. 64; Chakravarty and Chakravarty, *Wives and Widows*, p. 224.
[126] Lucy Carroll, 'Law Custom and Statutory Social Reform: Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856,' in *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader*, Sarkar Sumit and Tanika Sarkar (eds.), (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007), pp. 113-144, p. 81.
[127] Ibid., p. 89.
[128] Deboshruti Roychowdhury, *Gender and Caste Hierarchy in Colonial Bengal: Inter-Caste Interventions of Ideal Womanhood* (Kolkata: STREE, 2014), p. 173.
[129] Mazumdar, *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, p. 216.

remarriage of widows was not looked upon with favour'.[130] Like the respondent from Calcutta, widows, second husbands, and supporters often faced violent intimidation, abduction, social ostracism, and disinheritance.[131] Ostracization often extended to remarried widows' female relatives too.[132]

No advertisements requesting matches for widowed Muslim women appeared in the sample. Widow remarriage was rare amongst *sharif* upper and middle classes, despite its scriptural permissibility and attempts by Muslim social reformers to allay cultural strictures like Altaf Husain Hali's poem *Munājāt-e Bewa* (A Widow's Prayer), appearing in 1884, and novels like Nazir Ahmad's *Ajamā* (The Widows) (1891) and Muhammad Ahsan's *Jam-i-Zahr* (The Cup of Poison) (1909).[133] Yet, advertisements seeking matches for widows did appear more frequently in newspapers. It was a popular forum for reformist organisations advertising multiple matches at once and preferring same caste matches like the Vidhva Vivah Sahaik Sabha (Widow Marriage Assistance Sabha) and the Arya Samaj.[134] Notably, matches for widows, from both willing seekers and respondents, were for 'virgin widows'. This was not wholly unexpected as controlling the sexuality of child widows had been a central concern of the Hindu intelligentsia — in mid-nineteenth-century debates, reformer Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar had been most perfervid about recovering their reproductive capacity.[135] During the 1920s, newspapers like *Amrita Bazar Patrika* also encouraged widow remarriage and gainful employment as a way of combating alleged conversions or abductions of Hindu women by Muslim men.[136] By indicating a willingness to marry 'virgin widows,' many male seekers

[130] Ibid, pp. 216-217.
[131] *Tanika Sarkar, Rebels, Wives, Saints: designing selves and nations in colonial times* (London: Seagull Books, 2009), p. 123.
[132] Engels, *Beyond Purdah*, p. 63.
[133] Naim, A *Most Noble Life,* pp. 74-76 and p. 82; Muhammad Ahsan, *Jam-i-Zahr* (Lucknow: Newal Kishore Press (1909) .
[134] *The Hindu*, 2 April 1925, p. 1; *The Tribune*, 28 July 1940 p. 11.
[135] Sen, 'Introduction,' p. xvi; Chakravarty and Chakravarty, *Wives and Widows*, p. 233.
[136] Ibid., p. 219 and p. 221.

would not only open up a selection pool of younger matches but also foreclose undesirable marital outcomes and signal their positionality vis-à-vis reform efforts.[137]

Terms like 'virgin' and 'bachelor' were employed in gender-specific ways in matrimonials — 'bachelor' denoted an unmarried or young male whereas 'virgin' was exclusively reserved for women to convey that a bride was single, unattached, or a virgin widow. Comparably, multiple advertisements in *Tehzib-i-Niswan* requested '*do shiza*' (a virgin) matches whilst '*jawan*', meaning young or youthful, was used to describe male seekers.[138] This terminology was part of the construction of a new form of an older conservative patriarchy that implicitly expected men to be experienced whilst explicitly binding respectability and honour to female bodies and behaviours. The marked difference from traditional patriarchy here is the expectation of monogamous conjugality, if not sexual fidelity, from men.[139] As Sarala Devi of the Tagore family, notes in her diary, although polygamy for Hindu males was legal, educated persons only took another wife in exceptional circumstances such as an 'existing wife fail[ing] to produce a son'.[140] Compassionate companiable marriage, thus, was a feature of modern marriage and brides were expected to conform to behaviours that sustained the conjugal couple.[141]

Reassurances of monogamous conjugality began to feature in matrimonials in the interwar period. In this context, age also became an issue that needed to be explained for older men seeking brides, often widowers or those looking for subsequent wives. Those seeking second marriages stated several reasons for doing so including the first wife's consent, her inability to

[137] Widows could also be seen as economic assets through their earning potential or property rights: Ibid., pp. 113-114.
[138] 'Zaroorat Shaadi,' August 1926; 'Zaroorat Shaadi,' January 1943.
[139] Monogamy was discussed within polygamy debates: Kaliana Swami, 'Educated Women and Polygamy,' *Roshni: All India Women's Conference Journal* (Bombay), vol. 1, no. 9, October 1946, pp. 22-26; Asiya Alam, *Women, Islam and Familial Intimacy in Colonial South Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 189–238.
[140] Malavika Karlekar, *The Many Worlds of Sarala Devi: A Diary and The Tagores and Sartorial Style: A Photo Essay*, (trans.) Sukhendu Ray (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. 196.
[141] Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India*, p. 59; Alam, *Women, Islam and Familial Intimacy*, p. 128 and p. 139.

conceive, or separation.[142] Widowers indicated whether children had been born out of first marriages using 'no issue', indicating the percolation of British legal language into Indian marital lexicon.[143] Old(er) men often clarified concerns about health conditions, virility, and potential impotence as families began to express requirements for healthy, strong widowers.[144]

Assessing Health and Beauty

By the 1930s, as mentioned above, exchanging photographs had become standard procedure in many cities. Shudha Mazumdar recalls asking for photographs to assess and investigate truth-claims: 'No longer did I run to see alleged beauties' but requested 'candidates… send photographs first'.[145] Photographs were a crucial verification stage used to assess health and beauty within a marriage marketplace plagued with concerns over physical and reproductive health. Some diseases like smallpox left physical marks on the skin and denoted ill health including sight loss, but could also mark out survivors as immune (having no legible marks was just as suspect).[146] Another visibly symptomizing disease was tuberculosis with markers of rosy lips, pale complexions, and thin figures.[147] In twentieth-century India, though fairer skin was idealised, waxen-like or white translucent complexions were not. Paler complexions, associated with unsanitary and unhealthy environments, marked the body as ill and potentially reproductively defective.[148] Ill-health affected colouring so that glowing lighter skin, in comparison to a drawn, darkened appearance, became associated with good health. References to healthy appearances in matrimonials relied on readers' experiential knowledge who could

[142] *The Bombay Chronicle*, 23 August 1940, p. 2; *The Hindustan Times*, 26 November 1926, p. 15.
[143] Ibid.,1 October 1926, p. 11
[144] Ibid., 26 September 1936, p. 12; *The Tribune*, 16 June 1940, p. 15; Ibid., 21 September 1940, p. 11.
[145] Mazumdar, *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, p. 192.
[146] David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (London: University of California Press, 1993), p. 116; Alison Bashford, *Imperial Hygiene: A Critical History of Colonialism, Nationalism and Public Health* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 35.
[147] Carolyn A. Day, *Consumptive Chic: A History of Beauty, Fashion, and Disease* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p. 2.
[148] Mobeen Hussain, 'Hakims on Health and Hygiene: Advising Women and Optimising Reproductive Capacity in Urdu Instructional Literature, c.1880s–1940s,' *Social History of Medicine*, 2025, pp. 1-25, pp. 8-10.

tease out subtler references to colour.[149] This was not limited to women alone. As part of her defence in refusing to cohabit with Bhikaji, Rukhmabai had cited his employment instability and poor health — Bhikaji was at the intermediary stage of tuberculosis.[150] Healthier matches generally suggested a particular kind of lifestyle and availability of resources (food, medicine, and disposable incomes). Many matrimonials, therefore, requested photographs alongside brief biographies with the tactic requirement that health histories should also be disclosed.[151]

Between 1915 and 1950, matrimonial columns reveal a divergence in the aesthetic specifications of, and for, men and women: healthy grooms and beautiful women were the most valuable. A corpus of aesthetic and physical markers emerged in matrimonial columns. In this statistical study, physical attributes accounted for a substantial portion of the total desired criteria for brides and grooms.[152] Physical attributes were mentioned almost three times more for women (at 1425) than for men (506 times). Although men's health was referenced considerably more than their appearances, women's health and beauty consistently superseded that of men (except for men's health in *Tribune*). Aesthetic markers based on bodily physique also emerged — women were required to be 'slim,' 'tall,' 'smart,' and 'well-built'. In comparison, men were predominantly described, rather than sought, as 'slim,' 'tall,' and 'well-built'. In Urdu advertisements, matrimonials described or asked for proposals from *khoobsurat* (beautiful) girls and the *soorat* (appearance) of both men and women was often referenced.[153]

A discerning viewer could use photographs to determine skin shade before confirming with in-person meetings. Studio lightening helped to illuminate fairer complexions in photographs,

[149] *The Tribune*, 3 March 1920, p. 3; *The Tribune*, 4 April 1920, p. 6.
[150] Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India*, p. 189.
[151] *The Bombay Chronicle*, 19 June 1940, p. 2.
[152] For more on commodification and colourism, see Mobeen Hussain, *Performing Fairness: Skin-lightening, Race, and Beauty in Colonial India c.1900-1950*, forthcoming.
[153] 'Shaadi Zaroorat,' *Ismat*, vol. 57, no. 5, November 1936, pp. 452-453; 'Zaroorat Shaadi,' August 1926.

but excessive light absorption could also pose problem for darker skins.[154] The systemisation of skin shade in matrimonials also signalled the specific commodification of the female body. Fair skin was a highly prized attribute in matrimonials, expressed through overt references as well as a coded lexicon. Indices of colour and complexion included fair, good, white, and wheatish. Across the newspapers and periodicals, there was a huge gender disparity between the number of times women's skin colour was listed as a preference and selling point compared to men. The proportionally high number of colour specifications in *The Hindu* was not unexpected in the context of South India.[155] Perceptions about the darker skin shades of South Indians, against their North Indian counterparts, were sustained by ethnographic colour assumptions and visual and textual caricatures and stereotypes.[156] Fairer skin, carrying cross-regional privilege, emboldened specific types of regional marital preferences in advertisements, increasing in frequency in the 1940s and 1950s. For instance, a South Indian Brahmin widower desired 'a fair virgin widow'.[157] These cross-regional skin colour preferences have lingered, spreading to poorer groups in contemporary India. Reena Kukreja's study of Hindus and Meo Muslims in Rajasthan, Bihar, Odisha, and West Bengal shows that colourism in cross-country marriage operates through sustaining casteist assumptions about darker skin tone as an identifier of low-caste status.[158]

Fair complexion as an asset for men, though considerably less frequent, also began to appear in matrimonial columns.[159] Skin colour did feature into marriage negotiations before the advent of matrimonial advertisements — many memoirs of women include (often passing) references

[154] Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 92-93.
[155] *The Hindu* only published 3255 matrimonials on average over four years in comparison to 14,070 (*Hindustan Times*) and 29,232 (*Tribune*).
[156] Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar the Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 239-242.
[157] *The Hindustan Times*, 25 November 1950, p. 2.
[158] Reena Kukreja, 'Colorism as Marriage Capital: Cross-Region Marriage Migration in India and Dark-Skinned Migrant Brides,' *Gender & Society*, vol. 35, no.1, 2021), pp. 85-109, p. 86 and p. 88.
[159] *The Hindu*, 14 October 1920, p. 6; *The Hindustan Times*, 14 February 1950, p. 2.

to how skin colour affected marriage prospects. However, references to fairness permeated across the marriage market with the textual development and consolidation of the matrimonial and its standardised lexicon. Mazumdar's bridal search for her brother-in-law reveals how physical attractiveness was often synonymous with fairer or lighter skin colour as well as how skin colour was measured against other attributes and competencies. She remarks that one 'advertised maiden' had beautiful manners, was clever, 'had clear-cut features and a good figure, but alas was dark!'[160] Mazumdar favoured this candidate as 'possessing breeding' but decided that her brother-in-law would 'naturally prefer a fairer bride'.[161] The girl's skin colour, perceived as an undesirable physical trait, was the deciding factor despite other valuable assets. The commodification sanctioned by photographs and physical requirements did not go uncriticised. Rochona Majumdar notes that writer Debendra Chandra Basu Mullick had lambasted Bengali matrimonials for treating men and women as objects to be bought because partners were now selected 'after thoroughly scanning through a string of girls' photographs'.[162] Nonetheless, by the late 1940s, fairness was consistently referenced as a desirable, value-laden attribute in the matrimonial schema.[163]

Shifting Requirements and Measuring 'Progressiveness'

Matrimonials also became incubators for a multitude of gendered behaviours which would later be assessed in interviews. Mazumdar remembers rejecting one prospective match due to her manners: 'when she rose to salute us, she stood a couple of inches above- a disqualification for a younger sister-in-law'.[164] Gendered behaviours and ideals of domesticity were framed as accomplishments — 'accomplished' became a popular term in matrimonials from the interwar

[160] Mazumdar, *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, pp. 195-196.
[161] Ibid., p. 196.
[162] Majumdar, *Marriage and Modernity*, p. 49.
[163] The capital of marrying 'light' operated in various colonial, settler-colonial, and postcolonial contexts: Henrice Altink, '"Marrying Light": Skin Colour, Gender and Marriage in Jamaica, c. 1918-1980,' *The History of the Family*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2019, pp. 608–628.
[164] Mazumdar, *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, p. 190.

period. Other gendered terms included cultured, modest, well-behaved, and even submissive. These phrases were listed 886 times compared to 118 references for grooms who were described using terms like ambitious, moral character, and good habits. More importantly, men were required to have good, high, or bright prospects. Some matrimonials included lengthy lists of gendered behaviours alongside desired physical appearance: one advertisement stated that a prospective bride should be 'educated, good-looking, appealing, beautiful, mannered and cultured, fair complexion, slim and delicate but healthy, of respectable family'.[165]

Matrimonial columns were discursive sites in which concerns about the consequences of social reforms on marital and familial structures were articulated. Some advert-placers sought 'not Westernised,' and 'home-loving' women.[166] Anxieties around female visibility in public spaces percolated into matrimonials, provoking attempts to mould a specific modern and cultured sensibility: women were to be educated but simple, modern but modest, able to socialise outside their circle, but cultured and *not* Westernised. In Bengal, Majumdar identifies this new ideal of womanhood as intimately tied to a refashioned urban Hindu middle-class aesthetic.[167] Such aesthetics of idealised womanhood translated, in numerous ways, across the urban middle-classes. These gendered, unequal requirements, increasingly proscriptive in mid-twentieth-century matrimonials, were another way in which a particular kind of female body was being constructed within Indian civic projects.

Many advertisements from the late 1930s also self-presented modes of 'progressiveness,' suggesting emergent modern subjects based on male choice. Mazumdar commented on how youths were 'choosing their own brides, at least having a look at the girls' before decisions were made.[168] Self-selection or individual input held transformative capacity for the demands

[165] *The Tribune*, 2 December 1940, p. 9.
[166] Ibid., 2 October 1940, p. 11; *The Hindustan Times*, 13 December 1936, p. 12; Ibid., 14 October 1950, p. 2.
[167] Majumdar, *Marriage and Modernity*, p. 43.
[168] Mazumdar, *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, p. 186.

men could make in advertisements, some of which conformed to conflicting ideas about modernity and progress. Five key strategies were deployed to express 'modern' values and desires: English or foreign-returned descriptors; 'progressive' indicators; social capability signifiers; individualised traits and hobbies; and relocation choices. From the mid-twentieth century, associations with foreign education, domicile, and travel began to hold a greater premium in matrimonials with grooms often citing future prospects abroad.[169] Even a decade or so earlier, such markers had worked in reverse: Mazumdar recounts that her brother was rejected by a landowner because orthodox Brahmin pandits raised objections against her father and brother having crossed the '*kala pani*' (black water) to Europe.[170] Such an empirical shift from impediment to asset reflects an urbanising society in flux, coming to terms with multiple modernity routes. One route to performing this urban modernity was achieved through appropriating an acquired loaded and coded lexicon that described seeking grooms and their preferred brides as reformed, cosmopolitan, liberal, advanced, and highly modern.[171] These trends suggest that matrimonials became 'totems of status aspiration' for middle-classes across India.[172]

Western-educated grooms also began to expect spouses to socialise in certain public spaces which filtered into indicating social capability signifies — some advertisements wanted a 'society girl' or a lady 'fit to move in the highest society'. Families anticipated and responded to this trend by exhibiting female social prowess in interacting with Indian and English society.[173] Alongside the cultivation of new womanhood(s) and ideals of marriageability, mid-twentieth-century matrimonials also gesture to some instances of female choice and mobility through references to relocation and professions. One 1931 advertisement in *Hindustan Times*

[169] *The Tribune*, 5 May 1940, p. 15; *The Hindustan Times*, 27 April 1936, p. 18; Ibid., 2 December 1950, p. 2.
[170] Mazumdar, *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, p. 119.
[171] *The Hindu*, 25 February 1930, p. 2; *The Tribune*, 9 June 1940, p.14; Ibid., 18 July 1940, p.11.
[172] Majumdar, *Marriage and Modernity*, p. 41.
[173] *The Tribune*, 27 August 1930, p. 6.

delineates that an educated, modern bride 'should be allowed to proceed with her husband to England for further education' whereas another from *Tribune* in 1940 asks for 'an accomplished match willing to go to Kenya'.[174] Inclusions of 'should be allowed to proceed' and 'willing to go' suggest emergent notions of individualised choice — women and their families could at least articulate their preference for staying within communal and familial networks even if this was not the deciding factor in marital negotiations. Advertisements that indicated a family's 'liberal' and 'progressive social views' whilst considering 'virgin widows' and 'no dowry' matches also appeared to confirm greater choice.[175] However, such matrimonials often consolidated earlier parochial views of spousal selection in the sheer specificity of their requirements.

Ramifications of Partition

As one of the largest voluntary and forced migrations in human history with around 14.5 million people migrating within four years, the 1947 partition of Punjab and Bengal also impacted matchmaking.[176] In matrimonials from 1950, anxieties about matches in Punjab can be observed and newspaper advertising was a viable option for finding matches amongst Punjabis whose intraregional relationships had been disrupted due to relocation and partition violence. *Hindustan Times* includes matrimonials from West Punjab refugee families and those indicating that 'Punjabi refugee Brahmin girls' would be considered.[177] Both *Hindustan Times* and *Tribune* featured more advertisements actively seeking or showing willingness to consider matches from refugee families, specifically refugee girls. Appeals to national duty in the 'rehabilitation through marriage' policy, which was pursued by the government as a solution

[174] *The Hindustan Times*, 18 May 1931, p. 15; *The Tribune*, 3 March 1940, p. 15.
[175] *The Hindu*, 18 February 1930, p. 1.
[176] Prashant Bharadwaj, Asim Khwaja, and Atif Mian, 'The Big March: Migratory Flows after the Partition of India,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 43, no. 35, 2008, pp. 39–49, p. 39.
[177] *The Hindustan Times*, 12 November 1950, p. 2; Ibid., 22 July 1950, p.2.

to gender-based sexual violence, could explain the presence and preference for such matches.[178] Securing refugee brides without familial support networks also meant that it would be easier to assert control and extract labour from brides in the conjugal home. One advertisement specifically preferred a 'displaced, deserted and stranded girl in unfortunate circumstances'.[179] Descriptions such as 'displaced,' 'poor,' or 'refugee' appeared alongside reassurances about the good health or healthy-looking appearances of refugee girls seeking matches. Visible health markers, as signifiers of reproductive capacity, thus, remained important.

Pakistani matches also occasionally appeared in columns suggesting the malleability of cross-border matchmaking between India and Pakistan in the immediate post-Independence period before the imposition of stricter border regimes.[180] Some scholarship has explored the fates and mobilities of women in cross-border marriages across South Asia, however further research on mid-twentieth-century cross-border matchmaking has yet to be undertaken.[181]

Overall, across matrimonial columns between 1915 and 1950, marital negotiations involved articulating and competing for assets and competencies. The consolidation of the standardised matrimonial format was simultaneously informed by and impacted how marriage payments were brokered.

The 'Industrial Activity' of Marriage: Capital Accumulation and Debating Dowries

John Nesfield, a contemporary of Risley, had described the competitive elements of marriage as 'necessary to industrial activity' in his study of castes and tribes in the North-

[178] Rimple Mehta, 'How women negotiated gendered relief and rehabilitation in post-partition West Bengal,' *The 1947 Partition of British India: Forced Migration and Its Reverberation*, (eds) Jennifer Leaning and Shubhangi Bhadada (New Delhi: Sage, 2022), pp. 73-99, pp. 86-89.
[179] *The Tribune*, 7 October 1950, p. 2.
[180] Ibid., 20 March 1950, p. 2.
[181] Sahana Ghosh, 'Relative Intimacies: Belonging and Difference in Transnational Families,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 52, no. 15, 2017, pp. 45-52.

Western Provinces and Oudh.[182] Though his broader interpretations of industry conform to racialised hierarchies of civilisational progress, his pertinent reading of the 'industry' of marriage gestures to the enumerative labour of matchmaking through payments for marriage. This section maps the shifts in forms of monetary marriage exchange in South Asia. By reading the process of making matches through social reproduction and social exchange theory, we can trace how capital accumulation and endogamy were coded in new ways within the standardised lexicon of the matrimonial. Social exchange theory explicates how relationships are evaluated as a form of economic analysis through exchanges of rewards, costs, and material goods.[183] The reproductive labour of the marriage market sustained a 'drive for accumulation'.[184] Across India, economic accumulation had been sustained by matchmakers (barbers and *ghataks*) who assisted with settling marriage payments.[185] Utilising *ghataks* as intermediaries had allowed for families to make demands without being present.[186] The printed, depersonalised matrimonial advertisement functioned as a new container for specific kinds of demands to be made. This section ends by outlining how capital was signalled, assessed, and accrued through financial markers within matrimonials.

There are multiple systems of monetary marriage exchange across South Asia. Exchanges include *mahr* (monetary gifts paid to Muslim brides by the groom's family according to Islamic cultural and scriptural norms) and payments to girls' families termed 'bride-price'.[187] By the late nineteenth century, however, bride-groom price as 'dowry', in which a negotiated payment is made by the bride's family to the groom's family, became popular as an emulated upper-

[182] Nesfield, *Brief view of the caste system of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, p. 103.
[183] For more on social exchange theory in marriage, see: Ramasubramanian and Jain, 'Gender Stereotypes and Normative Heterosexuality,' p. 257.
[184] Tithi Bhattacharya, 'Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction,' in *Theory Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, (ed) Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017), pp. 1-20, p. 2.
[185] Nesfield, *Brief view of the caste system of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, p. 42; Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, p. 496.
[186] Engels, *Beyond Purdah*, p. 46.
[187] Other marriage exchanges include gifts of money called *dej* and *pallo*: R.E. Ethnoven, *The tribes and castes of Bombay, 1922 Vol 2* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1990), p. 191.

caste practice. Most historians agree that 'dowry' symbolised an unequal power dynamic between two negotiating families in the late colonial period.[188] Understanding the shifts and critiques of these forms of payment is crucial to assessing how dowry was operationalised in matrimonials. According to Risley, upper-caste hypergamy was the reason for the replacement of bride-price for dowry.[189] Anti-caste reformer B.R. Ambedkar had read unmarried high-caste 'surplus women' in a hypergamic system as a persistent threat to the 'social imposition and perpetuation of endogamy'.[190] Within this 'surplus' framework, the widow also posed a threat. The taboo of widow remarriage persisted because families were unwilling or unable to pay subsequent dowries; their re-entry into the marriage market would make 'the competition… of finding husbands' more difficult.[191]

There had been a degree of tolerance towards the customs of poor and low castes even when they had conflicted with laws framed by the values of dominant Muslims and Hindus.[192] In some cases, colonial administrators recognised the misrepresentation of bride-price, acknowledging that it maintained security and kinship reciprocity rather than a 'traffic in woman'.[193] Likewise, in some rural agrarian economies in Bengal and Haryana the bride-price system recognised women's economic contribution to the conjugal family.[194] In observances of Muslim betrothals, ethnographers indicated the sheer variation of wedding rituals, disclosing some confusion over divergences in payments; terms like dowry, dower, and bride-price were all referenced.[195] One the whole, though, dowry was framed as a high-caste practice in colonial

[188] Majumdar, *Marriage and Modernity*, p. 54; Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities*, p. 80.
[189] Risley, *Tribes and Castes in Bengal*, p. lxxvii.
[190] Mitra, '"Surplus Woman,"' p. 16.
[191] Risley, *Tribes and Castes in Bengal*, p. lxxviii.
[192] Sen, 'Offences against marriage,' p. 85.
[193] Anthony Gilchrist McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis* (London: Luzac & Co Limited, 1949), p. 102.
[194] Sen, *Women and Labour*, p. 87; Prem Chowdhry, 'Customs in a Peasant Economy: Women in Colonial Haryana,' in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, Kumkum Sangari, and Sudesh Vaid (eds) (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 302-336, p. 310.
[195] Ibbetson, *A glossary of the tribes and castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province*, p. 803, pp. 816-816 and p. 835.

readings which cited bride-price and *mahr*, often conflated with one another, as savage traditions to evidence narratives of stadial progress.[196] Indian reformers also consigned bride-price as the shameful practice of selling girls to promote dowry marriages as honourable.[197] In Punjab, Malhotra notes the roots of this shift from bride-price to dowry from the second half of the nineteenth century.[198] Though marriage of *pun* (without bride-price) was desirable, 'high-castes' *birdaris*, who had grouped themselves as a broader middle-class, married their daughters in *pun* accompanied with large dowries.[199] Both *mahr* and bride-price, therefore, existed simultaneously with dowry but the latter had permeated other systems across India by the turn of the century: after 1900, 42 out of 51 census-registered castes were paying dowries.[200]

Alongside caste emulation, dowry marriage became widespread from the First World War due to the economic challenges of the period. In the 1920s, despite an increase in overall incomes in places like Bombay and Punjab, reports suggest that private debts as a result of loans taken for birth, betrothal, marriage, and death ceremonies plagued around 72% of Indians.[201] The competition for employment, as Sen notes, was connected to the competition for grooms whereby deteriorating economic conditions made it difficult for families to find grooms and pay dowries.[202] Though bride-price had been cast as an dishonourable practice, perceiving girls as 'valuable chattel' or valuable property continued to dictate the unequal dimensions of betrothals in favour of the groom and his family.[203]

---

[196] Samia Khatun, *Australianama: The South Asian Odyssey in Australia* (London: Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2018), pp. 142-144.
[197] Accepting bridewealth was compared to *bardafaroshi* (women trading): Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities*, pp. 66-67.
[198] Ibid., p. 48.
[199] Ibid., p. 62 and p. 201.
[200] Engels, *Beyond Purdah*, p. 50.
[201] *Report on India Burma and Ceylon complied on the basis of Messrs. Lehn and Fink's Questionnaire,* Bombay: Indian June 1931, J. Walter Thompson Company, (Durham: David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University), Reel 225, p. 13.
[202] Sen, *Women and Labour*, p. 86 and p. 88.
[203] Ibbetson, *A glossary of the tribes and castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province*, p. 790.

Debating Dowries

Despite becoming the dominant form of monetary marriage exchange, dowry's popularity as a vehicle for amassing capital from brides' families did not go uncontested. Liberal and reformist journals had started to print critiques in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, specifically opposing egregious demands. In 1914, the story of Snehalata Mukhophadyay was oft-repeated in and beyond Bengal, and, subsequently, across historical scholarship.[204] Snehalata, from a poor Brahmin family in north Calcutta, committed suicide because her parents could not afford the excessive dowry requested. In her memoir, Mazumdar describes another case of a personal acquaintance, Suri, who was the eldest of five daughters. She was an 'eligible in every respect' but had no dowry and suffered 'tongues wagg[ing] about her family keeping her unwed. Eventually her father mortgaged their home, the ensuing financial constraints caused domestic tensions leading Suri to soak her sari in kerosene and 'set herself on fire'.[205] Snehalata's and Suri's tragic deaths were two of many reported dowry-related suicides. Not all commentary was sympathetic — Snehalata was variously cast as immoral and a 'new woman'.[206] However, much printed literature beseeched the public to learn from the violent sacrifices of Snehalata and other dowry suicides.[207]

Many female-authored articles in the interwar period also condemned dowry expectations. Notably, they were responding to an uptick in conservative opinion. Some used Snehalata's death to condemn dowry as a modern commercialised innovation in order to advocate for earlier marriages.[208] Whereas others used her death to reframe girls as a 'burden', advocating

[204] Majumdar, *Marriage and Modernity*, pp. 54-55 and p. 73.
[205] Mazumdar, *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, p. 130.
[206] Majumdar, *Marriage and Modernity*, pp. 83-84.
[207] Rochona Majumdar, 'Snehalata's death: Dowry and women's agency in colonial Bengal,' *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2004, pp. 433-464, pp. 434-435; Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), pp. 138-139.
[208] Ibid., p. 138.

for inheritance rights for women.[209] Social worker and teacher Charushila Mitra (1882-1979) and teacher and reformer Kamini Roy (1864-1933) both foregrounded the extractive function of dowry in Bengali women's periodicals. Writing in *Bamabodhini Patrika*, Mitra called for 'an immediate end to undesirable customs' such as child marriage and dowry because they jeopardized the nation whilst Roy argued that eradicating dowry was the last to be tackled in the triad linking child marriage, joint family, and dowry in *Bangalakshmi*.[210] Both argue that the sacrament of marriage had 'become a commodity acquired through monetary exchange' likening the buying and selling of grooms to a 'slave market'. [211] Mitra's analysis got to the heart of the financial hardships faced by girls' families: 'everyone has to bear the burden of a daughter's marriage, but all seem to forget this while extracting huge amounts with proper interest as dowry from the bride's family'.[212]

Reformist pieces also castigated how dowry arbitrations centred around obtaining prized attributes and circumventing negatively perceived traits in the early-twentieth-century *market* of marriage. In Tamil women's magazine *Pen Kalvi* (Female Education), examined by Sreenivas, one cartoon from 1914 depicts dowry demands on the turbans of diploma-wielding grooms and captioned: 'Look here! Our Sons have earned F.A. and B.A. degrees… If you give us the money written on their turbans, we will have our sons marry your daughters'.[213] Though Snehalata is not specifically mentioned in the cartoon, it depicts girls committing suicide via different methods. A key strategy for reformist writers was to centre the role of education in changing views on dowries, precisely because both female and male education were covetable

[209] Engels, *Beyond Purdah*, p. 51.
[210] Charushila Mitra, 'Amader Samaj,' *Bamabodhini Patrika*, May 1914, Part 3, no. 609, pp.20-23, tr. Sohini Sengupta, *Shaping the Discourse: Women's Writings in Bengali Periodicals, 1865-1947*, (eds) Ipsita Chanda and Jayeeta Bagchi (Kolkata: STREE, 2014), pp. 32-35, p. 33; Kamini Roy, 'Barpan,' *Bangalakshmi* (Calcutta), April-May 1926, tr. Prakriti Mitra, *Shaping the Discourse: Women's Writings in Bengali Periodicals, 1865-1947*, pp. 65-68, p. 66.
[211] Ibid., p.65; Mitra, 'Amader Samaj,' p. 33.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Sreenivas, *Wives, Widows, and Concubines*, p. 102.

assets on the marital marketplace. In 'Amader Samaj,' Mitra asked was 'the sole aim of a son's education and his university degree to make him a better commodity in the marriage market?'[214] Similarly, Roy stated that 'nowadays, the amount of dowry varies according to the educational qualifications of the groom. A graduate would demand higher dowry than a matriculate,' imploring young men to 'eradicate such customs'.[215] Both cite prospective grooms' education level as positively correlating with requested dowry amounts, suggesting how the relational value of education had been commodified in dowry negotiations (often against the physical appearance and skin colour of brides).

Others were more critical of gendered hierarchies within monetary marriage exchanges. Mazumdar discusses how choice and merit should be the deciding factors of both marital decisions and dowry amounts. She recalls her grandmother breaking off a good match for a female family member because the bridegroom's party had demanded a dowry. Her family insisted that the girl will be wed on her 'own merits' taking the 'gifts we choose' with her.[216] Gifts were ceremonially exchanged by both families amongst kayasthas.[217] Her grandmother also remonstrated that 'never have we taken or given money in marriages. These people must be chamars' taking offence at 'outrageous tactics to exhort money'.[218] Designating dowry demands as a low-caste practice, rather than solely bride-price, reflects reformist opinion on the financial implications of dowry extortion. In fact, like Mazumdar's grandmother, some commentary specifically tapped into casteist aspersions to show how brides and their families suffered from the exploitative nature of culturally-sanctioned gift-giving. In one monthly, Sarajubala Basu lamented on the life of the daughter-in-law who is abused by her in-laws: 'You, daughter of a low-caste person! Daughter of a chamar! Does my B.A. pass son deserve

[214] Mitra, 'Amader Samaj,' p. 33.
[215] Roy, 'Barpan,' p. 67.
[216] Mazumdar, *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, p. 129.
[217] Crooke, *The tribes and castes of the North-western Provinces and Oudh*, p. 197.
[218] Mazumdar, *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, pp. 129-130.

such low-grade gifts?'[219] Mazumdar's family's condemnation of the dowry system may reconcile with the prevailing opinions of the period but also speaks to the instable nature of monetary marriage exchange whereby only well-off families were able to eschew unreasonable demands.

Simultaneously, however, the implication that a girl should be taken on her 'own merits' evinces how valuable traits, as quantifiable assets, could offset dowry demands. The discourse of 'merits' as capital fed into the broader language of the marriage market, specifically around female education in the mid-twentieth century. In a 1942 article entitled 'Give Your Daughter a "Mental Dowry"' in *The Illustrated Weekly of India,* the anonymous author compares a dowry of educational assets to a banking account, asking wouldn't a 'mental savings bank account' be more useful to a girl? Coopting the language of material dowry, the author advises parents to build an educational 'reservoir' for daughters which would 'increase of its own accord'. Aligning education with the transactional terminology of the commercialised marriage market, the writer signals the growing currency of female, as opposed to male, education as worthwhile in preparation for a 'new world that is to come'— a post-war and even a postcolonial world.[220]

Dowry-signalling and Gift-giving

Dowry demands and amounts commonly featured in matrimonials from the 1920s, re-emerging in distinct ways as the format became popular. Critiques of excessive dowries — which had been exacerbated by the commodification of the marriage market — exposed the greed that underpinned many matchmaking endeavours but also produced other trends. Cross-regionally, advertisements from the 1930s and 1940s explicitly sought 'suitable non-greedy

[219] Sarajubala Basu, 'Badhujiban,' *Manasi o Marmabani*, Nov-Dec 1924, no. 4, pp. 395-298, tr. Mukulika Dattagupta, *Shaping the Discourse: Women's Writings in Bengali Periodicals, 1865-1947*, pp. 207-211, p. 208.
[220] M.M., 'Give Your Daughter a "Mental Dowry,"' *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (Bombay), 25 Jan 1942, p. 41.

matches' and refused 'dowry hunters' and 'dowry-seekers,' suggesting a middle-class cognisance of the nascent distaste of monetary-based matchmaking.[221] Many advertisements, particularly in *Tribune*, preferred Arya Samajist matches who purported to eschewed dowries.[222] However, as Mazumdar's grandmother's casteist gripe (above) shows, dowry, as a means of accruing capital, remained tightly bound to performing and articulating class and caste. Seeking families asserted dowries as non-requirements — articulated as 'immaterial' or 'no bridegroom price' — whilst concurrently highlighting the financial capabilities of suitors.[223] The notable exception were matrimonials placed in the Calcutta-based *Amrita Bazar Patrika* which continued to list decent dowries or overtly request dowries without spelling out exact amounts in order to maintain bargaining power.[224] These demands were consistent with *Amrita Bazar Patrika's* broader position on dowry. In the wake of Snehalata's death in 1914, an editorial in the newspaper had expressed concern that taking anti-dowry vows may lead Hindu boys to disobey their parents and girls to choosing their own husbands.[225] Though the matrimonials in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* appear to be the exception, it reminds us of specific regional dynamics whereby, as Sumit Sarkar puts it, 'age, gender, and caste hierarchies were all felt to be under threat'.[226]

In other newspapers across urban India, dowry disavowals were often accompanied by new forms of what I call 'dowry-signalling'. 'Dowry-signalling' refers to the ways in which advert-placers requested payments for marriage through the exchange of other capital, gifts, and material goods without explicating 'dowry'. As noted above, stating incomes as well as the financial capabilities of brides' families and grooms' individual and familial wealth tacitly

[221] *The Hindustan Times*, 17th May 1936, p. 12; Ibid., 30 September 1950, p. 2; *The Tribune*, 23 March 1940, p. 15.
[222] Ibid., 19 May 1940, p. 14.
[223] Ibid., 23 March 1940, p. 15; *The Hindu*, 10 April 1920, p. 4.
[224] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 13 March 1940, p. 2; Majumdar, 'Looking for Brides and Grooms,' p. 930.
[225] Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, p. 138.
[226] Ibid.

signalled the kinds of matches that should apply. Photography, as a popular visualising technology of the middle-class, again played a constitutive role in commodifying matchmaking. By the late 1870s, wedding photographs of the conjugal couple were popular. From the 1930s, it became fashionable to feature wedding photographs of newly-weds and society weddings in newspapers. In *The Illustrated Weekly of India* alone, whole pages were dedicated to making public marriage announcements under headings such as 'Weddings and Personalities' and 'Wedding Bells'.[227] These dedicated pages would delineate the professional backgrounds of Indian and English couples. Whilst acting as records of who 'constituted' family,[228] exhibiting wedding photographs illustrated wealth and dowry-signalled for future matches. As Caty Doty writes of mid-nineteenth century New York society, wedding announcements in society pages were used to 'publicly signal where their money was going and what their priorities were'.[229] As a globalising phenomenon, public declarations of marriages, thus, sustained cross-regional class and caste status by signalling conjugal capital flows.

Families pursued alternative dowry routes in matrimonials by employing coded vocabularies. *Hindustan Times* featured matrimonials that requested dowries in the form of financial support that would support male ambition — one advert solicited responses from 'only those willing to bear the expenses of his foreign studies or to arrange to settle him in life'.[230] Others assured financial incentives such as providing prospective sons-in-law with employment and funnelling economic resources towards training grooms.[231] Numerous advertisements also declared that the groom was to go abroad for higher education, implicitly

[227] 'Weddings and Personalities,' *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, 9 January 1944, p.19; 'Wedding Bells,' T*he Illustrated Weekly of India*,19 May 1946, p.24.
[228] Malavika Karlekar, *Visual Histories : Photography in the Popular Imagination* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 27.
[229] Cate Doty, 'A Brief History of the New York Times Wedding Announcements,' *Literary Hub* (May 2021) https://lithub.com/a-brief-history-of-the-new-york-times-wedding-announcements/ [accessed October 2021].
[230] *The Hindustan Times*, 15 January 1936, p. 10.
[231] Ibid., 27 April 1936, p. 18.

signalling an expectation of sponsorship from the prospective bride's family.[232] Occasionally, groom-seeking matrimonials would also advertise female economic independence.[233] For many Muslim matches, dowries continued to coalesce with *mahr* and the wealth of both parties were routinely included in matrimonials.

Dowry-signalling was also incorporated into cultural gifting. Gift-giving as a rite that legitimises and recognises a marriage is an important, almost universal practice.[234] Amongst Hindus, *stridhan*, a form of property under women's control, often came in the form of jewellery. Jewellery is a customary source of female wealth across many South Asian cultures. References to cash, jewels, and familial wealth were used as methods of dowry-signalling, most strikingly in the post-Independence period.[235] These gift-giving rituals were not new but re-inscribed older practices.[236] *Daaj* and *Khat* (Punjabi) or *jahez* (Urdu) forms of dowry, as well as the trousseaux, initiated a life-long flow of gifts from the bride-giving family to the receiving one, involving marriage payments as well as household furniture, jewels, clothes, kitchen utensils, and cattle.[237] In Maharashtra, the custom of *hunda* (dowry) and an expectation of gifts from the bride's family remained an unquestioned practice.[238]

Numerous states had attempted to curb excessive dowry demands by enacting legislation including the Bihar Dowry Restraint Act 1950, Andhra Pradesh Dowry Act 1958, and Jammu and Kashmir Dowry Prohibition Act 1960. After Independence, debates around dowry, alongside women's rights to property and divorce, took place within deliberations on the Hindu

[232] Majumdar, 'Looking for Brides and Grooms,' p. 930.
[233] *The Tribune*, 25 August 1940, p. 11; Ibid., 30 April 1950 p. 2.
[234] Louise Purbrick, "No Frills: Wedding Presents and the Meaning of Marriage, 1945–2003," in *Marriage Rites and Rights*, Perveez Mody, Rebecca Probert & Joanna Miles (eds.), (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), pp. 77-98, p. 78 and p. 95.
[235] *The Hindu*, 5 February 1950, p. 2; *The Tribune*, 15 January 1950, p. 2.
[236] P. S. Jaswal and Nishtha Jaswal, 'Anti-dowry legislation in India: an appraisal,' *Journal of the Indian Law Institute*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1988, pp. 78–87, p. 78.
[237] Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities*, p. 53; *A glossary of the tribes and castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province*, p. 801; Engels, *Beyond Purdah*, p. 55.
[238] Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India*, p. 93.

Code Bills.[239] However, a nationwide Dowry Prohibition Act (DPA) criminalising dowry demands was not codified into Indian law until 1961.[240] So how do we account for nascent dowry-signalling before dowry criminalisation and beyond the impact of reformist critiques and piecemeal state legislative efforts? The answer may lie in the commoditisation of marriage itself. Rather than dowries falling out of fashion, dowry was reframed as enumerable assets and subsumed into a self-conscience language of dowry-signalling that appealed to, often nominal, indicators of progressiveness and modernity. In doing so, enumeration mirrored other commercialisation trends such as specifically delineating aesthetic preferences, accomplished behaviours, and educational markers.

Crucially, as politician Pandurangi Kodanda Rao noted, the Dowry Prohibition Act only dealt with 'consequences and not the cause,' arguing that it did not 'help to find husbands without it'.[241] Rao also asserted that dowry as a voluntary gift was acceptable but its exaction was 'anti-social'.[242] Section 3(2) of the DPA delineated penalties for giving and taking dowry but permitted customary gifts to be received by both parties at the time of the marriage.[243] Here was the sticky point in legislating against dowry and subsequent dowry-signalling. Distinguishing voluntary or customary gifts from dowry demands and expectations was a nebulous endeavour, impacting how the enaction of DPA could contribute to the persistence of unequal monetary marriage exchange.

Gift-giving was also sustained into the late twentieth century despite the DPA and related enactments. In 1983, a new offence was added the Indian Penal Code of 1860 as the Criminal

[239] 'In the Light,' *Roshni*, vol. 4, no. 4, April 1949, pp. 2-4, pp. 2-3.
[240] 'The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961,' *India Code: Digital Repository of Laws*, https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/5556/1/dowry_prohibition.pdf [accessed 12 December 2021].
[241] P. Kodanda Rao, 'Dowry,' Speeches and Writings by Others: Serial no: 17, Date Unknown [1961 or 1962], *Rameshwari Nehru Private Paper Collections* (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library), pp. 1-3, p. 1 and p. 3.
[242] Ibid, p. 1.
[243] 'The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961'.

Law (Second Amendment) Act (CLA) which criminalised wilful cruel conduct of husbands and their families towards wives. The Section 498A definition of cruelty as 'harassment' included coercion and unlawful demands for 'any property or valuable security or is on account of failure by her or any person related to her to meet such demand'.[244] This came to be referred to as the dowry law and cases were filed under the CLA, over the DPA, because it was easier to prosecute for dowry-related crimes than against domestic violence or to seek divorce.[245] This was followed by a DPA amendment in 1984 which widened monetary marriage payments to include anything given 'in connection with the marriage' but still left room for presents given in a non-excessive and 'customary manner'.[246] Despite subsequent amendments to the DPA, dowry demands were still difficult to verify. This was partly because, as Robin Wyatt and Nazia Masood note, it did not account for how *stridhan* traditions coalesced with modern-day marriage transactions.[247]

Deficiencies in legislating against payments for marriage mirrored many of the contradictions that defined the colonial legal-juridical regulation of marriage. In the nineteenth century, colonial state actors had struggled with rigidly defining and circumscribing meanings of marriage, customary rights, and related legislation.[248] After Independence, the Indian state struggled with defining monetary marriage payments and legislating against what was considered dowry. Specifically, within the DPA and CLA, it was difficult to define exactly what constituted a customary or voluntary gift and if it was given willing at any time. As Wyatt

[244] 'Section 498A- Criminal Law (Second Amendment) Act' *India Code: Digital Repository of Laws,* https://www.indiacode.nic.in/show-data?actid=AC_CEN_5_23_00037_186045_1523266765688&orderno=562 [accessed 8 January 2025].
[245] Robin Wyatt with Nazia Masood, *Broken Mirrors: The 'Dowry Problem' in India* (New Delhi: Sage, 2010), p. 3 and p. 20.
[246] 'The Dowry Prohibition (Amendment) Act, 1984,' *India Code: Digital Repository of Laws*, https://www.indiacode.nic.in/repealedfileopen?rfilename=A1984-63.pdf [accessed 8 January 2025].
[247] Wyatt, *Broken Mirrors*, p. 20 and p. 24.
[248] Sen, 'Offences against marriage,' p. 84 and p.106.

and Masood's study of dowry in contemporary India shows, the role of 'gifts' often came to be seen as covertly demanded dowry at the point of marital breakdown.[249]

In the 1980s, the expectations of life-long giving and subsequent violence during the course of marriage posited a linguistic shift in public discourse from 'dowry suicides' to 'dowry deaths'.[250] The Dowry Prohibition Amendment Act of 1986, honing legislation further, included a section that banned advertisements of dowry.[251] However, with economic liberalisation and intensifying neoliberal reforms, acceptable dowries in the form of luxury goods and jewellery continue to appear in contemporary matrimonials whilst dowry as capital accumulation has become a poverty-alleviation strategy amongst poorer and marginalised groups.[252] The life-long aspect of gift-giving as a means of accruing capital, thus, was entrenched by modern matrimonial culture in late colonial India and continues to reinforce gender inequalities within marriages across South Asia and its diasporas comprising forms of domestic violence and even femicide.[253]

Conclusion: Requesting the Ideal

Through a comparative study of matrimonial columns, this article has historicised their use as a modern match-finding medium across an urbanising all-India middle-class. Emerging before the turn of the twentieth century, advertisements became popular from the 1920s rather than the 1950s as many anthropological studies have posited. Matrimonials in newspapers and periodicals unlocked the potential for matches to be made across wider

[249] Wyatt, *Broken Mirrors*, p. 25.
[250] Ibid., p. 19; Engel, *Beyond Purdah*, p. 55.
[251] 'The Dowry Prohibition (Amendment) Act, 1986,' *India Code: Digital Repository of Laws*, https://www.indiacode.nic.in/repealedfileopen?rfilename=A1986-43.pdf [8 January 2025].
[252] Ramasubramanian and Jain, 'Gender Stereotypes and Normative Heterosexuality,' p. 255; Kukreja, 'Colorism as Marriage Capital,' pp. 93-94.
[253] Manvir Singh, 'Letter from India How dowries are fuelling a femicide epidemic,' *The New Yorker* (June 2023) https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/06/19/how-dowries-are-fuelling-a-femicide-epidemic [accessed 20 June 2023].

demographics, beyond localised community networks, but also led to a prescriptive process of ascribing precise vocabularies. Returning to the lengthy matrimonial presented as a 'good opportunity' the article started with, the loquacious groom requested prescriptive preferences while expressing ostensibly progressive values. Despite requesting a 'broad outlook', he dictated multiple requirements and accomplishments, bound by caste, region, and physical attributes in an advertisement that came to 70 words (the longest observed). Herein lay the inherent contradiction of many matrimonials. Matrimonial columns widened the spousal net but emboldened the *market* of marriage by commodifying multiple markers that sustained one another in an anonymised, depersonalised textual format.

Families implemented a variety of composition and communication strategies to delineate desired matches. Some requirements remained important but were reconfigured to suit urban modernities across the twentieth century including caste, religion, and coveted professions like government service. Cross-regional oscillations of preferential assets and valuable markers did appear, variously responding to colonial lawmaking endeavours (like the CRMA) and public discourse and reform (on widow remarriage and education). Preferences for fair skin featured more frequently in *The Hindu* (Madras), younger girls were preferred in *Hindustan Times* (Delhi), and concerns for healthy bodies featured heavily in Punjab (*Tribune*). Whilst extending the scope of matchmaking, the commercialised language and standardised codes of matrimonials perpetuated rather eliminated caste and class hierarchies and gender inequalities — from shorter stock phrases and general markers to detailing precise preferences.

An analysis of general attributes, competencies, and physical traits also revealed the emergence of ideal womanhood in the search for brides in a commercialised marriage market. Attributes of education, gendered accomplishments, and beauty markers were quantifiable assets and markers of desirability. Mazumdar's matchmaking experiences and the proliferation of advertisements across India reveal how explicit aesthetic requests and gendered shade

hierarchies first became systemised in the late colonial period. Mazumdar assessed the photographs, physical appearances, and behaviours of potential brides to find a match with 'brains and beauty plus pedigree' choosing a 'well-bred' 'modest' girl with a fair complexion and 'a passable provincial education'.[254] From the 1920s, beautiful, tall, and fairer brides with some education and familial status were the idealised standard. A recent Netflix sensation *Indian Matchmaking* (first airing in 2020) attests to how the marriage market continues to operate within strict caste-class-colour confines.[255] In the show, matchmaker Sima Taparia guides clients in India, the United States, and the United Kingdom in the arranged marriage process as individuals or their families list preferences that appear on screen in a biodata-like fashion — a continuation of the colonial-era matrimonial schema. The desired ideal, oft-repeated by Taparia, is remarkable similar to colonial-era matrimonials; women should be flexible and 'slim, trim, and educated'.[256] Likewise, caste was not overtly specified but articulated by stating full names and the coded use of requesting matches from 'good families'.

The participation of families in a status-laden marriage market also depended on the navigation of modern technologies (notably photography) and colonial readings of marriage customs. Marriage negotiations and resultant marriage payments were expressed in novel ways. Dominant shifts from bride-price to dowry were emulated across castes so that valuable attributes and assets were offset against undesirable spousal traits in the accumulation of capital. Requesting specific remunerations or other forms of capital, despite concurrent social reformist attempts at curbing unreasonable dowry demands, became inveterate within the commodification of marriage through dowry-signalling. Concerns over the 'dowry hunter' led to creative approaches to dowry-signalling in the twentieth-century matrimonial. Alternative strategies of dowry-signalling, specifically reconstituted customs of gift-giving, emerged in an

[254] Mazumdar, *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, p. 186 and p. 197.
[255] Smriti Mundhra pr., *Indian Matchmaking*, (Netflix, 2020-Present).
[256] Episode One title of *Indian Matchmaking*.

innovative marriage market that continually (re)negotiated the terms of sale. The fissures in postcolonial legislative attempts at curbing dowry, notably iterations of the Dowry Prohibition Act, also contributed to rather than hindered these negotiations, sustaining monetary marriage exchanges as forms of capital accumulation.

The anonymised textual schema of the matrimonial engendered the commercialisation of the marital marketplace, couched in idealised notions of femininity, masculinity, fairness, and status, for an all-India middle-class. This matrimonial culture continued into the latter part of the twentieth century and has percolated across South Asian diaspora populations with the rise of global social media and matchmaking applications.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Leigh Denault and Professor Samita Sen who provided insightful comments on an earlier version of this article.