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DANIEL BEREHULAK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Garima Pant at her wedding to Manas Pant. What started out as a potential arranged marriage turned into the couple's choice.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANIEL BEREHULAK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

the bridal party for Garima Pant and Manas Pant watched dancing at the henna ceremony on Aug. 14 in South Delhi.

Marriage Sites Put Traditions To Test in India

By GARDINER HARRIS

NEW DELHI — For thousands of years, fathers in India have arranged the marriages of their children, and Garima Pant — like an estimated 95 percent of her millennial peers — was intent on following this most Indian of traditions.

Her father found a well-educated man in her caste from a marriage website that features profiles of potential mates and presented his choice to her. And that was when her rebellion began.

"I don't think so," responded Ms. Pant, a 27-year-old special education teacher, after seeing a picture of a man with streaks of color in his hair. So her father picked another profile. "Are you kidding?" And another. "Ugh." And dozens more.

When a profile of a man who intrigued her finally appeared, Ms. Pant broke with tradition yet again, finding the man's cellphone number and secretly texting him.

Her boldness made the match. By the time the fathers discovered that their families were of the same gotra, or subcaste, gen-

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Websites In India Add a Twist To Marriage

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erally making marriage taboo, their children had texted and emailed enough that they were hooked. Months later, the couple exchanged vows with their fathers' grudging blessings. There was one of a growing number of "semi-arranged" marriages in which technology has played matchmaker, helping whittle away at an ancient tradition, but with a particularly Indian twist.

In a society where marriage is largely still a compact between families, most parents, especially fathers, are in charge of the search for a mate, including by scouring the now ubiquitous marriage websites for acceptable candidates. But a growing number, especially in India's cities, now allow their children veto power. Even siblings have begun weighing in; Ms. Pant's younger brother became an early booster of the man she would eventually marry after seeing his profile photo with a black Labrador retriever.

Human rights activists have welcomed the evolution as a significant change in the status of women worldwide and are hoping even poor, rural families begin to allow marriages based on choice.

Each year, they note, roughly eight million mostly teenage brides marry men chosen entirely by their parents, with many meeting their grooms for the first time on their wedding day. Refusals can be met with violence and, sometimes, murder. In one case in November, a 21-year-old New Delhi college student was strangled by her parents for marrying against their wishes.

The shift away from fully arranged marriages is being driven in good part by simple market dynamics among Indians who have long seen marriage as a guarantor of social status and economic security.

For centuries, fathers sought matches among their social connections, often with the help of local matchmakers who carried résumés door to door. But village-based kinship networks are fading as more families move to cities, and highly educated women often cannot find men of equal standing in those circles. Under such strains, families have sought larger networks, increasingly through matchmaking sites.

The websites — India now has more than 1,500 — nationalize the pool of prospective spouses, giving parents thousands more choices while still allowing them to adhere to longstanding restrictions regarding caste and religion. (Candidates who fail to identify their caste get far fewer responses, matchmakers and marriage brokers say.)

The system works, analysts say, because India's young peo-

Suhasini Raj contributed reporting.

ple remain exceptionally open to their parents' input on mates.

"Intergenerational relationships in India aren't hostile. Our teenagers don't have angst. They don't rebel or misbehave with their parents," said Madhu Kishwar, a prominent feminist author and a professor at the Center for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi. "And the reason marriages in India are more stable than those in the West is because families are actively involved."

Still, by allowing the Internet to nudge its way into the marriage equation, parents are increasingly surrendering control. On BharatMatrimony.com, which says it helps nearly 50,000 people in India get married each month, 82 percent of male profiles are posted by the prospective grooms rather than by their parents, up from 60 percent five years ago, said Murugavel Janakiraman, the site's founder and chief executive. Among women, the share of self-postings is at 56 percent, up from 30 percent five years ago.

"Twenty years ago, parents chose the matches," Mr. Janakiraman said of those who have embraced technology in the marriage hunt. "Now parents are largely playing supporting roles, and the brides and grooms are in the driver's seat."

But even as social mores shift, relatively few young Indians, including those who demand more of a say in their marriages, are straying too far from tradition. Dating — or at least openly dating with parents' consent — is still relatively rare. And many of those who choose semi-arranged marriages say that romantic love, the head-spinning Bollywood kind, is not their goal. Compatibility is, as is a sense of control over one's destiny.

"I wouldn't say that I'm head-over-heels madly in love with my husband," said Megha Sehgal, a flight attendant. "But he gives me a lot of comfort, and I see a friend



Manas Pant was all smiles as he arrived with family for wedding festivities at the Ocean Pearl Retreat in South Delhi.

in him."

The percentage of semi-arranged marriages has grown to an estimated quarter of all marriages in India, according to a survey, while just about 5 percent of matches are considered "love marriages," in which couples unite with little parental consent. The survey was conducted by the International Institute for Population Sciences and the Population Council.

Indeed, many families involved in both old and new forms of arranged marriages see falling in love before marriage as threatening. Those with money sometimes hire private investigators to ensure that a prospective spouse does not have any ill intentions or has not already fallen in love then broken off that relationship in favor of an approved match.

"Fifteen years ago, most of my investigations revolved around checking out the family," said Sanjay Singh, a private detective in Delhi. "Now they're mostly concerned with whether the other person is already involved with someone else."

For poor, rural women, the notion of even semi-arranged mar-

riage is still mainly out of reach — a fact that human rights activists say leaves girls especially vulnerable.

"Marriage is the single biggest risk to Indian girls," said Joachim Theis, chief of child protection at Unicef in India, which says that the country has a third of the world's child brides. "They drop out of school; they lose their freedom; they are under the control of their husbands and mothers-in-law; they lose their social network; and they are more likely to die and are 10 times more likely to be victims of sexual violence than unmarried adolescent girls," he said.

Many of the deaths are linked to disputes over dowries demanded by the grooms' families.

Those urbanized Indians shifting to semi-arranged marriages say the change could not have happened nearly as quickly without the growth of matrimonial websites and the proliferation of cellphones, which have given young Indians a way to converse away from the wary ears of their families.

As prospective brides and grooms increasingly take a role in their courtships, the marriage

websites' formulas for suggesting possible mates have had to change, said Gourav Rakshit, chief of operations at Shaadi.com, the largest such site.

"We have seen marked shifts in people using compatibility factors for their searches instead of only the more restrictive parameters of the past," like wealth and caste, Mr. Rakshit said.

In the end, Garima Pant, whose cellphone became a tool of rebellion, mainly got her way. She insisted on meeting her future husband, Manas Pant, alone before making a decision, a once-rare demand that is now routine in semi-arranged marriages.

A date was set for Cafe Turtle in New Delhi's upscale Khan Market, and Ms. Pant agreed to drive Mr. Pant (whose surname was coincidentally the same as hers).

Mistake.

"I was 20 minutes late picking him up, and he hates it when people are late," Ms. Pant said.

Mr. Pant, 28, a marketing professional for technology companies, had a slightly different take: "Actually, she was 25 minutes late," he said. "Then she hit a car." But he was already committed to marrying her, and she was impressed by his reaction.

"He said, 'Well, we're off to a good start,'" she said. "It was a joke, and I thought, 'O.K.' I'm not saying I heard bells or anything, but it was the right thing to say."

After a two-hour date, she dropped him off and drove home, where her father, mother and brother were eagerly waiting in the living room. That night, Mr. Pant texted: "I'm telling my father to go ahead. OK?"

It was the equivalent of a man in the West going down on bended knee. The families would still have to meet, and horoscopes would have to be consulted. But in a monumental change, nothing could happen without Ms. Pant's approval.

She texted back, "Yes."