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Indiascapes. Images and Words from Globalised India

Edited by
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Brides and Grooms Wanted for: Matrimonial Websites in India

¹ A general overview of I. E. can be found in Tom McArthur, *Oxford Guide to World English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). For the particularities of I. E., see G. Subba Rao, *Indian Words in English* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954); Braj Kachru, *The Alchemy of English* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1986); Braj Kachru, *The Indianization of English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Probal Dasgupta, *The Otherness of English. India's Aunties Tongue Syndrome* (New Delhi: Sage, 1993); N. Krishnaswami and Archana S. Burde, *The Politics of Indians' English Linguistic Colonialism and the Expanding English Empire* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

² Anthony Burgess in Robert McCrum, William Cran and Robert MacNeil, *The Story of English*, (London: Faber and Faber and BBC Books, 1986), 322.

³ Jean D'Souza, "Contextualizing Range and Depth in Indian English", *World Englishes* 20.2 (2001), 150.

English in/and India

Indian English (I. E.) is the result of a linguistic adaptation for communicative needs in a multi-lingual/multi-cultural context.¹ In the Indian value system English words are conceptualized in a different way, they acquire new meanings and express culture-bound connotations, while the use of English continues to raise questions regarding identity-making and modes of social promotion. It varies widely according to social class and educational level; ranging from the more grammatically-standard English spoken by upper-class Indians, especially those with greater exposure to the West through books, electronic media, television and cinema or travel, to the so-called 'Kitchen English' or 'Babu English' spoken by the lower classes. Ethnicity and the socio-religious positioning of the speakers are other factors to be taken into account. This is evident in popular textual typologies like, for example, matrimonial ads which present a revealing picture of India's constantly shifting social and cultural scene.

Today, the media and above all the Internet, whose popularity has expanded enormously over the last few decades, following the boom in the country's electronics and computing industries, present particularly interesting fields for the study of inter- or trans-cultural language practices. In Indian websites the reader can find linguistic interferences, atypical word-divisions, coinages and English words that are no longer in use. They offer an example of the evolution of Indian English, "a new language made of Indian and English colloquialisms, jargons and popular references, not pure English, but ... gloriously impure".² English "has been Indianized by being borrowed, transcreated, recreated, stretched, extended, contorted perhaps. It has been used and 'abused' but these abuses are not serious ones and the uses are often joyous".³ Among the examples of this hybridization, matrimonial websites deserve special attention. The analysis of matrimonial ads on the Internet reveals the continuous evolution of I. E. and offers a new perspective on the handling and reshaping of English as a way to rebuild a new concept of linguistic and cultural identity.

Matrimonial Ads in India

Advertising for a partner is an old phenomenon in the Indian context derived from centuries of arranged marriages, but nowadays new technologies, especially matrimonial portals and websites, make it possible

to simplify the elaborate search for the ideal partner and offer a new perspective on this ancient social norm. If matrimonial columns in newspapers have already been present since the 19th century,⁴ today the internet offers an easy and powerful way to contact potential partners in a larger number and in a shorter period of time. The analysis of this kind of advertisement allows a reflection on important social changes in the institution of marriage because the language used reveals how matrimonials function as cultural artefacts mirroring values and culture-bound interpretations of the Indian context. Advertising at one and the same time romantic desires and practical needs, these texts demonstrate the powerful interplay between culture and language and the necessity to use terms with culture-bound connotations.

First of all, an analysis of matrimonial ads emphasises the differences implicit in gendered discourses, as roles and expectations are clearly different in men and women's ads in India. The presentation of the "advertised bride/groom" is quite different; the would-be bride is always referred to as a "girl", a "daughter", a "sister" or a "niece", while the bridegroom is a "man", a "graduate" or a "professional". On the one hand, the bride is categorised through a family designation; on the other, professional title and role in society speak for the groom. This differentiation makes it clear how through the "naming process" the writer of the ad selects specific terms in order to present the son/daughter's qualities for his/her target audience creating an appealing e-profile.⁵ Lexical choice, together with syntagmatic placing proves to be extremely important in the search for a suitable spouse, an enterprise considered as part of the parents' responsibility and duty. If matrimony is thought to be a life ritual needing experience in order to build it up, the 'advertisers' must build the candidate's presentation with great care. Because the writer has a particular target reader in mind, in order to carry on the negotiation s/he utilises what can be defined as the 'language of matrimony' and many of the texts show recurrent elements of negotiative pre-marital discourses according to a specific lexicon-semantics.

In India, creating an e-profile is a serious business and the seriousness of the tone of numerous ads reveals how this electronic medium is considered as a new way to achieve a precise goal: the union of two families. Generally speaking, the pre-electronic criteria continue to apply: the parents and relatives who are the decision makers of the love match still 'introduce' the bride/groom and look for a partner with a precise profile. However, social changes over the last few decades surface in between the lines and if today a marriage is a contract ruled by social choices as in the past, an "alliance" between two families, the way to find the ideal partner is changing slightly.⁶ Since marriage is pivotal in the fabric of the Indian society, an elaborate search for the right bride or

⁴ For a discussion of the rise of matrimonial advertisements in Indian newspapers and magazines between 1870s and 1940s see Rochona Majumdar, "Looking for Brides and Grooms: Ghataks, Matrimonials and the Marriage Market in Colonial Calcutta, circa 1875-1940", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63.4 (2004), 911-935.

⁵ For an analysis of the naming process in the press see Danuta Reah, *The Language of Newspapers* (London: Routledge, 1998) and Roger Fowler, *Language in the News. Discourse and Ideology in the Press* (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁶ Francesca Vigo, "A Rite of Passage: Alliances as Communicative Events in Indian Society", in Carmela Nocera, Gemma Persico and Rosario Portale, eds., *Rites of Passage: Rational/National, Natural/Supernatural, Local/Global*, Atti del XX Convegno AIA (Soveria Mannelli, CZ.: Rubbettino, 2003), 321-333.

groom – according to social class, caste, profession, education and religion – has to be carried out. However, if in the past the matrimonial ad was seen as a way to construct an alliance between two families belonging to the same community and caste, today the new technological medium discloses some elements of individual choice.

The Internet offers much wider space for future brides and grooms to give far more details about themselves and in a more informal way: they can specify the city they live in, their profession or religion and even insert their picture in the ad. Accessing the site and searching under specific domains make it possible to find people who share some of the elements that are considered important for the future of the marriage. While it should be acknowledged that not everyone has access to these sites and that people advertising in these portals are mostly highly educated and live in urban areas, a glance at the different categories already gives an idea of the many different social and cultural issues at stake in India today.

The data of the present study come from various matrimonial websites from which the ads were randomly selected over a two month period. The analysis focuses mainly on lexical features and outlines the denotative/connotative meanings of I. E. and culture-bound terms as examples of the effective confluence of language and culture. The meaning potential of any word tells us something about contemporary Indian culture in between tradition and Western influences. Recurrent keywords remind the reader of Indian values and norms but they are accompanied by data which demonstrate how fast Indian culture is changing in the globalised world. Moreover, since the corpus of analysis is a specific textual typology we are able to recognize a precise lexicon and style that we can define as a rhetoric of matrimonial ads. Already at a first glance a restrictiveness related to specific categories such as caste, religion or the location of the “advertised” is clearly recognizable as a way to help the screening process of the suitable partner and refuse unsuitable proposals.

The structure of these texts with its underlying conventions is central in the creation of the e-profile: first of all, in matrimonial ads sentences are short and sometimes ungrammatical; secondly, Indian English features such as the use of the progressive form of verbs, an anomalous use of prepositions, tag question construction, change in word order, word reduplication for emphasis and compounds with English terms and elements from South Asian languages can easily be traced.⁷

Matrimonial Portals and E-Profiles

If Indians believe marriages are made in heaven, for many of them the Internet matrimonial portals are a ‘door’ they can open in order to find a

⁷ See Gunnel Melchers and Philip Shaw, *World Englishes. An Introduction* (London: Arnold, 2003).

perfect match. There are many matrimonial portals in India; the most popular is *Shaadi.com* which offers a clear division between “profession search” (matches for a particular profession), “Astro-soulmate search” (matching horoscopes which has always been considered a positive prerequisite for marriage negotiation), “community search” (divided into Bengali, Gujarati, Tamil, Hindi, etc.) and “city search” (specifying the location of the bride/groom). One of the first websites to be created was *BharatMatrimony.com* which is still considered a credible service of alliances, a portal to be trusted. This site is a more traditional one, similar to ads in newspaper columns. The connection with Indian values and traditions is clear from the very beginning because the term *Bharat* is the pre-colonial name for India and echoes the role of kings in ancient times. Other matrimonial portals which have been included in the research are *Shubhlagan.in* where a bigger space is dedicated to wedding traditions and customs, offering a sort of guide to the ways in which a traditional Indian wedding ceremony can be conducted; *LifepartnerIndia* full of links to matrimonial success stories and with a strong focus on community differences; *Jeevansathi.com* presented as the portal for “an intelligent matching” and divided into categories such as education, profession and income considered an important issue for the perfect match. Other websites are more similar to Western “lonely hearts” columns: *H1Bmarriages.com* which presents a wedding glossary explaining Indian terms to non-native speakers acknowledging the presence of non-Indian seekers, *Findyourlove.Indianmatrimony.com*, *newmatrimonial.com* and *Indiabestmatch.com* with shorter profiles and a more colloquial style.

In Indian matrimonial websites profiles are usually posted by parents or relatives and offer a detailed description of the family background presenting the potential bride/groom as part of a definite and joint family group. The family's social and economic status is relevant and even the category of “ancestral origin” can be included in order to specify the possible ideal candidate, a partner with a similar ethnical, social and economic environment. The ads are mostly made by upper middle class parents and siblings looking for matches that take into account issues still thought to be important for a good match such as caste, religion, income or education even when sentences like “no caste bars” are included. They clarify the supposed characteristics of the addressee and are based on cultural interpretations of the texts, structured in order to establish the credibility of the advertised bride/groom to be.

The cultural and religious constraints of the Hindu marriage system are more widely reflected in the ads of *Bharatmatrimony* than in other portals. Caste concerns of a hierarchical society segmented into several castes are to be found here; the ads run under headings such as Brahmin (the highest Hindu caste) or Kayastha (a merchant subcaste), or under professional

rubrics (engineers, doctors, accountants). Looking at these ads it seems that caste mobility is still a myth in the Indian context. The Indian words included denote culture-bound terms like caste/subcaste or astrological details referring to Vedic astrology; a recurrent term, for example, is “manglik” or “Mangal Dosha”: an astrological condition that occurs if Mars is in the 1st, 4th, 7th, 8th, or 12th house of the \o “Vedic astrology” Vedic astrology lunar chart. This condition is believed by some to be devastating for marriage, causing discomfort and tension in the relationship, leading to separation and divorce; in some cases, it is believed to cause the untimely death of one of the spouses. This is attributed to the fiery nature of the planet. However, if two mangliks marry, the negative effects are believed to cancel each other out.

Other terms frequently used are for example “broad-minded”, meaning the capacity to embrace Western modern values while retaining the core values of Indian culture, or “clean-shaven” which refers to a non-traditional Sikh who cuts his hair. Other adjectives refer to physical features such as “good looking” or “tall” and indicate a local cultural ideal of beauty. The use of these expressions adds a colourful style to Indian matrimonial ads which differ greatly from “lonely hearts” or “personals” items in the Western press and websites.⁸

⁸ An interesting volume on Western personal ads is Ester Gwinnell, *Online Seductions. Falling in Love with Strangers on the Internet* (New York: Kadansha, 1998). For a comparative analysis of Western and Indian ads see Anita Pandey, “Culture, Gender and Identity in Cross-Cultural Personals and Matrimonials”, *World Englishes* 23.3 (2004), 403–427.

⁹

<www.hindimatremony.com>, 18 October 2008.

My daughter is a traditional girl with modern and practical thoughts. She is very patient and can adapt herself in any situation. She is excellent in communication and mannerism as per modern life. She is a convent educated girl and competent enough to anchor her career. She is a science[chemistry(H)] and GNIIT graduate. She has 3years faculty experience in teaching. These days she preparing for P.O banking as well as for M.B.A.⁹

The ad balances between tradition and innovation; the girl is portrayed as educated and modern implying that she will be able to adjust to a traditional family who wishes her to be a housewife or to a more broad-minded one which will let her have economic independence as a young working woman. She is “convent educated”, a term which comes from colonial times and implies a certain command of English and educational level. These are common features of matrimonial ads, together with references to skin colour which is still a hierarchical factor in Indian society. Many terms refer in fact to complexion like “very fair”, “fair” meaning not markedly dark-skinned, “wheatish” which refers to a golden colour of skin, or “dark” rarely used because the term is considered derogatory. The bride’s temperament, personality, occupation, hobbies and long term goals are

always listed. She is usually “gentle”, “soft spoken”, “caring”, “simple”, “obedient” and she can manage home and workplace, being capable of handling household duties while being devoted to her husband’s family. Many profiles are of highly educated young women, professionals with a role in society; brought up according to Indian family values, they are ready to put their future husband and children at the first place in their life:

She is sweet, simple, loving, affectionate, religious, spiritual and family oriented besides being modern and smart. She is a good combination of modern outlook and traditional values. Smart and semi modern, keeping in mind always her traditions and family respect. We are a family with a progressive outlook.¹⁰

The focus is often on depicting a pleasing personality and presenting a moderate, religious girl (even when she is a mature woman the presentation never refers to age but to the fact that she has never been married). The importance of being “homely” is still a characteristic that a bride must possess to appeal to more potential grooms. Patience, a good temperament and the awareness of being part of a larger family unit are at the centre of the ad. The balance of traditions and progressive thinking within the family implies an upper- or middle-class way of life divided between ancient social norms and contemporary shifting values. In many ads the parents identify themselves as middle class and giving importance to religious values, combined however with progressive thinking. The family’s characteristics are followed by the description of the girl:

[S]weet nature, helpful, kind, hearted confident, co-operative, religious, understanding self respective, jolly nature intelligibility & sincerity. She is soft spoken, fair, beautiful and down to earth girl. She is well educated, very caring, polite and honest person and comes from a very respected and cultured family. She is a vegetarian and well versed in domestic work. She respects moral values and traditions and also a very strong believer in God and its powers. She has done her masters in Physics and has also done B.Ed. She has been teaching Physics to both College and higher secondary students since last 6 years. She takes her work very seriously and is ready to work or be a complete housewife if required and it depends on the situation. She is looking for a suitable alliance, which is very understanding, caring and responsible and believes in family values and in the institution of marriage. He should respect her and her feelings and most importantly should be a decision maker.¹¹

The girl is presented as ready to adapt to any circumstance and to respect her husband’s wishes. The ad clearly suggests the groom’s family should possess the same values. The family as a social unit is taken as the basis of the possible match and marriage is seen as a serious enterprise to be carried on for life, a “suitable alliance”. The last sentence refers directly to the ideal partner who should respect her ideas. The section which specifies

¹⁰

<www.bharatmatrimony.com>,
1 November 2008.

¹¹ Idem, 6 November 2008.

the expectations from the desired partner is a common and important element. Here the family of the bride-to-be usually depicts the ideal husband as “well-established”, “well settled”, “professionally qualified”, combining educational, professional and economic qualifications. Men are required to be anything from “teetotalers” to “broad minded”, “confident”, “decision-maker” and “responsible”. They should preferably have a secure job and be independent. Some ads, like the following, are structured in order to give more details about the search. Here the bride’s family feels the necessity to add a “few humble requests” in order to select the future groom:

Please show/accept interest only when the guy in question has gone through this profile thoroughly. Profiles without Pictures and Dowry seekers please excuse. Profiles with casual approach and those who tend to delay things and meanwhile do profiles shopping/hopping. Please excuse us too. Profiles with a serious and genuine interest should only accept/approach, it is our humble request once again. If you find this profile matching your interests and requirements then we would like to go ahead with a telephonic/email communication and then if all goes well then would like to meet personally and decide for a simple early marriage. We have made our requests and have mentioned our requirements very clearly so as to save each others time and respect each others feelings and sentiments.¹²

¹² Idem, 10 November
2008.

The style of the ad clearly reflects the ‘Indianization’ of English and some features of Indian English reveal the syntactical and grammatical ‘anomalies’ which make it unique: the use of the third person reference for example, denotes deference, an important value in the Indian relationship system. The structure of the text exposes other aspects of Indian culture to view; the repetition of terms such as “humble request” and the use of the verb “to excuse” together with the sentence “save each others time and respect each others feelings and sentiments” combines the practical desire to choose among ‘selected’ candidates and the importance given to respect for elders and in social relationships. Language unveils the Indian notion of education and appropriate behavioural attitude through specific polite forms of expression. The last sentence too stresses the importance given to serious behaviour in this matter and the wish not to waste time if the candidate is not interested or compatible. Moreover, the reference to dowry reflects an unwritten social norm still present in India where girls’ parents are expected to offer substantial amounts of money for a good match. This norm is part of a family ethics where the duty of every member of the family is to support the others and uphold family honour.¹³

¹³ See Rajagopal Ryali,
“Matrimonials: A Variation
of Arranged Marriages”,
*International Journal of
Hindu Studies* 2.1 (1998),
107-115.

Matrimonial ads on the Internet show some of the changes that have occurred in the practice of arranged marriages; first of all “the agent wishing to marry has considerable autonomy over the actual marriage decision. In other words, while the family and friends look for appropriate marriage prospects, it is the agent who decides when to say yes. This agent receives

marriage proposals as a result of the investigative activities undertaken by others".¹⁴ This attitude is disclosed by the use of terms such as "bride self-guardian" or statements like "correspond directly with the bride" possible in a more democratic medium like the Internet where women feel free to speak for themselves and look for their possible husbands. The Internet can thus be seen as a new discursive space where the voice of the marginalised and silenced can be heard and where access to a virtual world with implications in the real one becomes an effective way for women to speak for themselves.¹⁵ The qualities of some prospective brides underline some of the changes that have taken place in Indian society, as when highly qualified working women take for granted they will go on with their career after marriage and ask for men "willing to share domestic work and other chores" or assert they are looking for "a sincere and honest person who can value his partner on equal terms and make her laugh, ... give space and can discuss things out."¹⁶

The ideal of equality between partners and mutual understanding is at the centre of these ads. Where the first person is used, it tends to portray a new way of thinking about social conventions and relationships between men and women, as in the following example:

Hi, I am a simple, down to earth, happy going, caring and understanding girl with good moral values. Always like to keep smiling and deal every problem of life as an opportunity to learn from them. I am a person who respect the feelings of others. Pursuing PGDBA in HR, Working as a Analyst in MNC in Gurgaon. Looking for: he should be smart, caring and good from heart with positive attitude towards life. Mutual understanding between partners leads to a joyful life, that's what i feel. I would like to marry a boy who can respect me & whom i can see with respect all my life. preferably staying with family and working in delhi/ncr. One thing more, i am just looking for a person or a family who don't believe in matching kundlis and for whom caste is no bar.pls. contact only if u don't believe in these things and values person for who is she as a person and not value for what her caste and religion is, best of luck for your search.¹⁷

The more colloquial, informal style typical of the Internet itself reflects the writer's idea about marriage and her disdain for hierarchical divisions, social norms or beliefs. An even more anti-traditional ad is the following one where the writer demolishes the Indian approach to marriage and proposes a new way of thinking where religion becomes spirituality:

[B]elieve in miracles, in magic and in a higher purpose of life ... I started off my adult life with a certain set of beliefs and dos and donts and as I walked in to the real world, I realized that few of those beliefs and rules work and can be applied, when life is actually to be LIVED.

So the result is that today I believe marriage is a comfortable and understanding companionship of two souls, love is precious and so are all the relationships

¹⁴ Amitrajeet Batabayal, "A Dynamic and Stochastic Analysis of Decision Making in Arranged Marriages", *Applied Economics Letters* 6 (1999), 440.

¹⁵ Ananda Mitra, "Voices of the Marginalized on the Internet: Examples from a Website for Women of South Asia", *Journal of Communication* 54.3 (2004), 492-510.

¹⁶ <www.shaadi.com>, 10 November 2008.

¹⁷

<www.Indiabestmatch.com>, 6 November 2008.

¹⁸ Ibid.

that led us to it ... companionship and friendship is as important as an “ideal marriage”. If you yourself have been watching your life closely, you would have seen the truth in this. So in other words, I am a seeker, I am seeking God, I am seeking someone to share my life, my thoughts, my ups and downs, my hopes, oops, our hopes.¹⁸

Here the personal is more important than the public; all details are about the writer’s personality and attitude to life. Everyday language is used to create a completely different register which mirrors the changed content of this textual typology. But other social changes have also become visible in matrimonials, like for example, divorce. Nowadays the idea of remarriage has become more acceptable in India and the traditional stigma attached to divorce has been at least partially erased. The I. E. term “divorcee” however, differs from “divorced” (which seems to have a derogatory connotation). It is usually accompanied by the adjective “innocent”, which reveals the wish to attenuate the negative implication of the word and implies, as the person is not responsible for the end of the previous marriage, that s/he must be excluded from blame and trusted for a future relationship. Gendered discourses are visible also in these examples, where in the fewer cases of divorced men ads are written in first person and do not justify the end of the marriage. Quite a few ads present widows, mainly women, who have daughters and sons and wish to have a second opportunity in private life and find a caring man who will take care of them and their children. Usually they look for a widower, or a divorced or separated person, revealing the idea that a second marriage for both partners is considered as more appropriate.

Some matrimonials refer to non resident Indians (NRI) living abroad, mainly in the U.S. and England, and looking for a bride at home by recurring to the traditional method of finding the soul mate through ads. The establishment of overseas communities in England and the United States have influenced the notion of suitable bride or groom and have brought some changes as regards Indian society. This is once again shown in the lexicon: a term used for example to present men or women who have lived abroad is “foreign-returned”, where the adjective refers to a person who has recently returned from a Western country and is possibly influenced by other contexts and cultures.

While the majority of brides’ ads in these websites are written in the third person from the point of view of a sibling or parent (usually the father) many grooms’ ads are written in the first person and posted by the future husband himself in both more and less traditional portals. Grooms’ ads deal more with the individual than the family, give more details on personality and character together with a description of what is wanted from the future bride. The following example goes hand in hand with brides’ ads written in the first person revealing a similar attitude:

I am looking for an educated, loving, caring & understanding life partner. Very much against all sorts of dowry, we wish to share the marriage expenses. Not bothered about Religion, Region, Cast, Creed, Sect, Marital Status, Looks, Skin Color of the person whom I wish to have as my life partner but prefer to have a girl with beautiful mind & heart and should be loving, caring & understanding. I too have a desire to love, care, pamper to the most & like to take her all through / walk of my life. Though I am very liberal but spiritual, religious minded & God fearing person who admire, respect elders as well as the customs & manners of the society.¹⁹

In men's ads too, traditions are united to a more modern conception of society where seekers look for women who can share the responsibility of family life. Some of the ads declare a detachment from traditional social norms and emphasise the importance of the bride's personality, disclosing a new perspective on love relationships:

I'd like to have my life partner to be bold, broad minded, liberal, loving, caring, understanding. For me, I am not at all bothered about the Religion, Region, Cast, Creed, Sect, Marital Status, Financial Status, Outer looks, Skin colour but prefer to have a girl with a beautiful mind & heart, I mean not outer beauty but inner beauty. My earnest wish is to love, care, pamper my wife a lot where I want to see that she is always happy / smile at her face. Prefer a girl who is ready to travel along with me since I do travel quite a lot on Medical assignments. It is my desire that my wife should be with me at all times if possible.²⁰

19

<www.LifepartnerIndia.com>,
6 November 2008.

20 Ibid.

Conclusion

The comparison of Indian matrimonial websites has revealed some relevant changes in society as regards the practice of arranged marriage. The textual and discursive strategies of matrimonial ads are the result of the rich cultural hybridity of the Indian context. Ads are articulated in a persuasive fashion in order that the writer may appear trustworthy and authentic. They follow standardised textual typologies characterised by specific norms and conventions. Syntagmatic positioning, together with a precise lexical choice, shows how matrimonial ads function as cultural artefacts mirroring values and interpretations of the Indian context. The culture-bound terms in Indian matrimonials are part of I. E. vocabulary, some are calques with a different meaning potential, some are words in Indian languages which reveal the intermingling of English and other idioms in Indian life and culture. The analysis of recurrent keywords and attributes demonstrates not only that Indian culture and values are changing in a globalised and westernised world but also that these texts are still marked by gender difference. However, it is interesting to see how, as new and different elements emerge in the different portals, the perspective is shifting, opening new scenarios in Indian married life.