

## **Will Matrimonial Websites Transform the Traditional Norms of Indian Marriage?**

**Date :** November 2, 2009

*Parul Bhandari, PhD student,  
Dept. of Sociology, (PPSIS), Univ. of Cambridge*

*A typical Indian-wedding envelope given to the bride and groom by the guests, carrying a certain sum of money as a token of their happiness and blessings for the newly weds*

Indian society has in the past decade witnessed a proliferation of matrimonial websites each of which have 10 to 12 million users registered with them. These websites seemed to be an interesting topic of research as it could help investigate whether the Internet has led to a transformation of marriage practices and processes in India displaying a move from the traditional patterns to more individualistic ones (or the new and 'modern' ones). Keeping in mind its pertinence to the 'changing' and 'transforming' nature of the Indian society this research topic formed my thesis for the MPhil programme completed in June 2009.

The focus of this study was both on the offline and the online. In the offline context the opinions and practices of the registered users and their family were examined to understand the extent of the traditional hold in their marriage preferences and the consequent impact on the consumption of the matrimonial websites, and in the online context, the ways in which matrimonial websites feed into and become embedded in the cultural practices of Indian society was investigated.

As one enters the home page of these websites, the users are presented with various options that qualify the 'search' of their prospective spouses. The primary search option is of religion followed

by region (or language). Once a specific religion is chosen then the option of castes and sub-castes within that religion is also provided to the users. Other attributes such as specific physical, educational and professional qualification are also a few criterion in the search however it is the religious, caste and/or region attributes that form the primary requirements in the search of profiles. While 'searching' for profiles and making one's own profile, the websites do provide the options of 'any religion' and 'caste no bar' however, these are not used very often and this clearly reflects that the registered users are satisfied with the hierarchicisation of the attributes wherein the religious and caste qualifications take the primary spot in search for prospective spouses.

One of the other most important traditional norms associated with Indian marriage is the role of the family in the selection of a spouse. This role, contrary to many assumptions, is very much prevalent even in the internet matrimonial matchmaking and becomes evident as along with the space for display of information on the 'self', ample space is provided by the website for information on the family of the user. Thus, the profile carries information not only about the attributes of the registered user's (religious, physical and others) but also provides an in depth description of his/her family such as number of siblings, their occupation, parents' occupation and most importantly their ideal choice of a spouse for their son/daughter/brother/sister.

It is assumed that the internet facilitates a tilt towards 'love' marriages since more private communication through e-mailing, and chatting can lead to spouse-selection on the grounds of compatibility, the 'connection', intimacy and so on. While this assumption holds true it is important to understand that the screening process involved in the short-listing of profiles is governed by the more traditional norms of Indian marriage that give importance to the religious, caste-based and regional backgrounds of the prospective spouses and the opinion, wants and wishes of the family in the entire process of selection and decision-making. The research suggests that the presumption that the Internet can alter the traditional framework of the Indian marriage system is erroneous and in fact the research empirically concludes that many of the traditional aspects are strongly prevalent and even accentuated by the Internet.