

Matchmaking illustrates the ills of Indian society | Opinion

A recent Netflix show has accurately captured the gendered politics of arranged marriages, with its biases

ANALYSIS Updated: Jul 21, 2020,



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Indian Matchmaking has brought attention to a woe that the onus of sustaining the marriage squarely falls on women. Episode after episode, prospective brides are advised to adjust and compromise and be “flexible”(Screengrab via Netflix)

The rhetoric of modernity, education, and progress is a powerful one that deludes us into thinking that regressive and repressive aspects of match-making are either a thing of the past, the rural, or the uneducated and uninformed. Educated urban-dwellers cringe at the display of casteism and sexism in matters of spouse-selection, often claiming that they do not abide by principles of caste endogamy (marriage within one’s group) and certainly desire to marry “modern educated” women.

Denting this urban self-fashioning is the Netflix series *Indian Matchmaking*, which has held up a mirror to Indian society. It has not ventured deep into the hinterlands of India (like Amazon series *Paatal Lok*) to contextualise Indian’s obsession with “fair skin”, or “tall, slim, trim” as being hallmarks of a good match. Rather, it has shown how casteism

and sexism merge with money, high-status, and modernity in the urban milieus of Mumbai, Delhi, New York, and Chicago.

We are all too familiar with matrimonial newspaper advertisements that routinely describe the preference of a bride who is “fair-skinned”, “convent-educated” and “modern-yet-traditional”. What this series does is bring to prominence the problematic role of the matchmakers who not only promote caste or class homogamous (similar) marriages but, equally disturbingly, use a disciplining gaze on women, and preach to them the merits of adjusting and compromising in order to find a suitable “boy”.

Traditionally, Indian marriages have been facilitated by matchmakers who run a “one woman or man” show, personally suggesting matches, and operate by word of mouth, and prefer to be addressed by a kin name (*mami, masi*).

Crucially, they consider their role as not limited to suggesting matches but of also undertaking a maternalistic (paternalistic) approach by advising prospective brides and grooms to change their attitudes and expectations in order to have a happy married life.

This series depicts all these characteristics quite accurately, and brings out, all too well, how matchmakers readily pronounce moral or character certificates to prospective grooms and brides by describing them as “difficult”, “stubborn”, “negative”, or “good”.

Delay in a woman’s marriage or constant troubles in her matchmaking, for example, are conveniently blamed on her independent or strong-willed character, her wardrobe (in one episode a woman was chastised for having over 30 pair of shoes), or being too career-minded.

Most important, this series has brought attention to an oft-repeated woe that the onus of sustaining the marriage squarely falls on women.

Episode after episode, prospective brides are advised to adjust and compromise, to let go off their dreams of being a career-woman and attachments to their natal family, and instead be “accommodating” and “flexible”. Echoing these sentiments are also prospective mothers-in-law, one of whom firmly states, “The girl has to adjust many things rather than the boy. That is the value we have been brought up with.”

Prospective grooms, on the other hand, are disconcertingly presented as reluctant men, who are to be cajoled and emotionally manipulated (by their mothers, sisters) into even agreeing to meet a prospective bride. When they finally come around, it is evidently on the basis of the woman's physical attraction — a model no less (in one episode), and tall and beautiful (in another episode). No such reluctance, however, is shown on part of the women, who are mainly depicted as eager brides.

This show has generated much debate on social media and has been criticised for promoting problematic standards in matchmaking. Given that my doctoral research was on the matchmaking practices of urban Indians, I can say that this show is not far from reality. We are perhaps uncomfortable and angry because this show has said it as it is, and has done so on a global platform, leaving little scope for pretence. This is, of course, not to say that there are no inter-caste, inter-class marriages, or marriages where women are happy along with having successful careers.

A problematic aspect of this depiction though is that the onus of all-that-is-bad is entirely on so-called arranged marriages and the matchmaker. As a result, other media of matchmaking such as matrimonial websites and dating apps might be championed as progressive.

It is important to remember that technology does not have the power to drastically transform personalities or cultures. It is also shaped by specific cultures.

What otherwise explains the rise of caste-specific matrimonial websites? And while women may have more agency in choosing a match on Bumble or Hinge, what might be the tone of her interactions with the match?

The problems of casteism, sexism, and ageism are not limited to arranged marriages but are entrenched in matchmaking, at large, in India and abroad.

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The views expressed are personal