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Research Article

Swipe Right for Tradition: Decoding Gender Constructs in Modern Indian Matrimony through Media Representations

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Abstract
This paper examines the portrayal of arranged marriages in India as depicted in mainstream media with a special focus on Netflix's *Indian Matchmaking*. It utilises an intersectional feminism framework to explore themes of colourism, casteism, and gender discrimination within the context of Indian matrimony. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative content analysis of specific episodes and character interactions within the documentary-style format of *Indian Matchmaking*. By analysing these depictions, the paper aims to uncover how mainstream media reflects and perpetuates societal norms and discriminatory practices inherent in the Indian matrimonial tradition. Through detailed examination, the findings highlight the ways in which the Netflix series perpetuates entrenched patriarchal structures and regressive value systems, illustrating the complexities of identity negotiation within the marriage market. The analysis demonstrates that while the series provides a platform for cross-cultural exploration, it simultaneously reinforces harmful ideologies and existing power dynamics. The paper concludes by discussing the broader implications of media representation for social discourses on gender equality and social justice, emphasising the dual potential of popular culture to both perpetuate and subvert dominant narratives.

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Introduction: Arranging Marriages

In the cultural landscape of India, arranged marriage stands as a venerable institution, woven intricately with tradition, familial expectations, and societal norms. In arranged marriages, which is the most prevalent form of matrimonial practices in India, the responsibility of finding a suitable spouse is primarily entrusted to the family, particularly the parents, extended relatives, and sometimes professional matchmakers. Unlike love marriages, where individuals typically choose their partners based on romantic feelings and personal compatibility, arranged marriages involve familial involvement in the matchmaking process.

Arranged marriages are deeply rooted in cultural traditions and societal norms prevalent in Indian society. Factors such as caste, religion, and regional customs play a significant role in partner selection. Economic considerations, such as financial stability and compatibility of lifestyle, may also play a role in partner selection. Once a potential match is identified, families exchange biodata or profiles containing details about the prospective bride or groom, including their age, educational background, occupation, family status, and personal preferences. These profiles serve as a basis for evaluating compatibility and suitability. Families may also consider factors such as caste, religion, horoscope compatibility, and regional customs when assessing potential matches. Yet, beneath the veneer of familial harmony and matrimonial bliss lies a labyrinth of biases and prejudices, entrenched within the very fabric of modern Indian matrimony.

This paper embarks on a critical inquiry into the underbelly of arranged marriages, dissecting the insidious presence of colourism, casteism, and misogyny that permeate the matrimonial landscape. Through the lens of Netflix's documentary series, *Indian Matchmaking*, it unravels the complexities of matrimony, power, and prejudice in contemporary Indian society. While the series presents a plethora of themes and narratives, this analysis specifically focuses on the intricate interplay between the institution of arranged marriages and prevalent societal biases such as colourism, casteism, and misogyny.

Theoretical Framework

This research paper employs a multidimensional theoretical framework to critically examine the institution of arranged marriages in India, particularly as depicted in Netflix's documentary series, *Indian Matchmaking*. At its core, the analysis is grounded in intersectional feminist theory, which serves to illuminate the power dynamics and gender inequalities inherent within societal structures. By applying this theoretical lens, the study investigates how patriarchal norms and expectations influence the experiences and agency of individuals, especially women, throughout the matchmaking process. It aims to uncover how these norms perpetuate unequal power relations and constrain individual autonomy within the context of marital arrangements governed by familial and societal pressures. Intersectionality forms another critical component of the framework, enabling an exploration of how intersecting axes of identity—such as gender, caste, and colourism—shape and inform individuals' experiences within arranged marriages. This approach acknowledges that individuals occupy multiple social positions simultaneously and that these positions intersect to produce unique experiences of privilege and oppression. By examining these intersections, the research seeks to unravel the complex ways in which caste-based discrimination, colourism, and gender inequalities manifest and interact within the matrimonial practices depicted in the series.

Additionally, the theoretical framework draws upon insights from postcolonial theory to contextualise the enduring influence of colonial legacies on contemporary Indian society. This perspective helps illuminate how historical power dynamics, exacerbated by colonialism, continue to structure social hierarchies and inform cultural practices such as the matchmaking criteria emphasised in *Indian Matchmaking*. By analysing these influences, the study aims to deepen understanding of how colonialism shaped notions of caste hierarchy and cultural norms, which are reflected in the preferences and biases portrayed in the series.

Media and cultural studies perspectives further enrich the framework by examining how *Indian Matchmaking* as a reality television series constructs and disseminates representations of arranged marriages to a global audience. This analytical lens considers the role of media in both reflecting and shaping cultural attitudes and perceptions about Indian matrimonial practices. By scrutinising the production, reception, and impact of the series, the research elucidates how media representations contribute to broader discourses on gender, caste, and marriage, influencing societal norms and individual perceptions worldwide. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the research endeavours to provide a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of arranged marriages in India as portrayed *in Indian Matchmaking*. It aims to uncover the complexities of power relations, prejudice, and identity negotiation within the institution of arranged marriages, offering insights into broader social implications and cultural discourses surrounding gender, caste, and colourism in contemporary Indian society.

Indian Matchmaking: Exploring Arranged Marriages Through the Lens of Reality Television

In the twenty-first century world of modern dating that is replete with swiping apps and constantly evolving dating terminologies such as breadcrumbing, benching, etc., Netflix's *Indian Matchmaking* throws a spotlight on the age-old tradition of arranged marriages, albeit with a modern twist. Created by American-Indian filmmaker Smriti Mundhra, Netflix's *Indian Matchmaking* is a reality TV series. It premiered on Netflix in July 2020 and has been renewed for three seasons, with the latest one released in April 2023. The show features Sima Taparia, a seasoned matchmaker from Mumbai, who caters to a clientele of successful Indian professionals seeking spouses – both domestically and across the diaspora. *Indian Matchmaking* propelled the concept of arranged marriages into the living rooms of Netflix viewers, sparking widespread discussion and interest across English-speaking audiences worldwide. The show offered non-South Asian audiences a unique insight into the initial stages of arranged marriages within Indian families, both in India and abroad, focusing specifically on the role of the matchmaker.

The series primarily focuses on individuals from the upper echelons of Indian society residing in India and the United States, and the third season also focuses on clients from the United Kingdom. The central figure is Sima Taparia, a matchmaker who introduces herself to her clients as "Sima from Mumbai," which also becomes the catchphrase of the series. Taparia's own journey into adulthood began with her marriage at the age of 19 in 1983, and she openly expressed her preference for arranged marriages over love marriages. She places significant emphasis on the "biodatas" of potential candidates, considering them as comprehensive documents providing essential information, as she states in episode 1, "Everything we come to know by the biodata." Taparia holds a distinctive perspective on marriage, blending

superstition with traditionality and advocating for the involvement of families in matchmaking. She considers horoscope matching akin to an insurance policy for marriage, thereby tapping into the Orientalist image of India as a land of mysteries and snake charmers. The show endeavours to portray arranged marriages in a positive light and highlight their success rates. Several episodes feature vignettes of couples who have been together for many years, underscoring the longevity and stability of arranged marriages.

It is worth noting that Netflix launched *Indian Matchmaking* during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, a time when global lockdowns and social distancing measures severely restricted social interactions. As people reevaluated dating norms and intimacy in light of these circumstances, Netflix, being a major global content provider, captured the attention of a socially isolated audience. Despite *Indian Matchmaking* being less conventional and perhaps more cringe-inducing compared to dating programs produced in the West, they still offered audiences an opportunity to indulge in voyeuristic pleasure amid a lack of interpersonal connections. The cultural specificity of such shows brings to the forefront issues related to career, family dynamics, and the complexities of modern lifestyles, all while incorporating traditional practices (Raghav, 2021). This resonates particularly well with younger audiences from diasporic communities who are accustomed to consuming content from local media platforms. The impact of diversifying content is increasingly evident in the expansion of Netflix's subscription base.

The series introduces participants based on their personality traits and follows their individual journeys as they are matched with potential partners by Taparia. The characters introduced in the first season who have recurring appearances in later seasons include Aparna Shewakramani, an attorney from Houston; Nadia Christina Jagessar, an event planner from New Jersey; Vyasar Ganesan, a college counsellor from Austin; Pradhyuman Maloo, a jeweller from Mumbai; Akshay Jakhete a businessman from Mumbai; and Ankita Bansal, a business owner from Delhi. Each participant comes from an upper-middle-class background and holds a white-collar job. The narrative of each episode centres around 'the date,' which involves not only the client but also their family and the potential match. The 'likeability factor' is determined by the participant's family and sometimes extended family members. In this manner, *Indian Matchmaking* endeavours to cater to Western audiences and offers an Indian counterpart to successful reality TV dating shows like *Love is Blind* (Netflix, 2020 – present) and *The Singles Project* (Bravo, 2014). What sets *Indian Matchmaking* apart is its utilisation of transnational production networks and its distinction as the first docuseries featuring an Indian cast based in the U.S., U.K. and cosmopolitan Indian cities, aimed at a global audience. *Indian Matchmaking* also distinguishes itself from other dating reality TV shows produced in the global North by incorporating a mix of both English and Indian languages. This bilingual approach underscores Netflix's strategic effort to produce content that transcends cultural and linguistic barriers, catering to a diverse global audience.

Arranging Matrimonies and De-constructing Culture

Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie draws attention to the constructed nature of culture and the embedded misogyny, which can be addressed through collective efforts. "Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture" (Adichie 2014, p. 15). Culture, which is a social construct, usually discriminates against women. This statement could

be justified through the example of *kanyadaan* or the practice of giving away of bride in Hindu marriages. The act of giving away of the bride is construed as a solemn responsibility entrusted to the bride's father, symbolising his consent and blessing for the nuptial union. This cultural aspect of Hindu marriages that conceptualises women as chattel is often romanticised and elevated into an emotional affair through elaborate ceremonies and traditions. *Indian Matchmaking* offers viewers an unfiltered glimpse into the intricacies of postcolonial India where age-old traditions and customs persist alongside deeply entrenched values rooted in misogyny, colourism, and socio-economic marginalisation. Within this cultural landscape, the institution of arranged marriages acts as a microcosm for the examination of systemic discriminations that continue to prevail.

One of the prominent themes explored in the series is the double standard evident in the preferential treatment towards men within the context of arranged marriages. Despite purported progress in gender equality, *Indian Matchmaking* reveals persistent disparities in the expectations placed upon men and women. The male clients of Taparia are often afforded greater agency and autonomy in the matchmaking process, while women are subjected to stricter scrutiny and societal pressures to conform to traditional gender roles. For instance, in her very first encounter with Aparna, who is an attorney based in Houston, Taparia casually remarks, "if the females are lawyers in India, people are scared," implying that it is tough to find a suitable match for an independent woman. Likewise, another client of Taparia is a woman called Rupam, who is divorcée and has a child from her previous marriage, to whom Taparia offers her *well-intended* advice, "Divorce carries stigma, especially with a kid…You will get less options and you will have to compromise." This discrepancy underscores the enduring influence of patriarchal norms and societal expectations, perpetuating unequal power dynamics within marital relationships.

Indian Matchmaking, ironically, sheds light on how patriarchy operates as an additional layer within these discriminatory practices by perpetuating gender stereotypes and patriarchal ideologies. The show normalises patriarchal expectations that dictate gender roles and behaviours, reinforcing traditional power dynamics within relationships and households. Women, both in reality and as portrayed in the show, are often subjected to stricter standards and expectations, perpetuating a cycle of gender-based discrimination and oppression. Furthermore, the depiction of upper-class and caste families in the show provides insight into the entrenched discriminatory and hierarchical social structure that persists in Indian society. While constitutional reforms have sought to abolish caste-based discrimination, *Indian Matchmaking* highlights how socioeconomic status and caste affiliations continue to influence matchmaking preferences and social interactions. The emphasis on pedigree, wealth, and social standing reinforces existing inequalities and perpetuates societal divisions.

Initially rooted in Hindu tradition, the caste system in India predates British colonialism, yet colonial rule exacerbated existing divisions and utilised caste hierarchies to consolidate power and control over the subcontinent. British colonialism capitalised on the caste system to perpetuate disempowerment and marginalisation among communities across India. The ramifications of colonial rule have permeated into everyday life, shaping social interactions, communication patterns, and societal structures (Chadha, 2018). *Indian Matchmaking* provides a lens, albeit one that is uncritical, through which these enduring effects of colonialism are evident in contemporary Indian society. Throughout the series, viewers witness subtle yet pervasive manifestations of discrimination based on caste, colour, and gender. These biases are ingrained in societal norms and preferences, influencing the criteria used in the

matchmaking process facilitated by Taparia. From the seemingly innocuous desire for a partner from a similar background to more overt beauty standards favouring fair skin, attractiveness, and slimness, the show reflects the entrenched inequalities and prejudices that persist in Indian society.

In her interactions with clients, particularly women, Taparia often enquires about their willingness to adapt and compromise for a successful relationship. Indian marriages, as depicted in the show, extend beyond the couple, becoming integrated within larger family structures. Compatibility is assessed based on the potential for these households to coexist harmoniously post-marriage. Women are frequently portrayed as being caught in a power struggle with the groom and his family and are often forced to make sacrifices to ensure marital stability. It results in a marriage dynamic where women bear the brunt of compromise, sacrificing their personal and professional freedoms to maintain the relationship. This perpetuates a cycle of inequality and subjugation, where women's agency and autonomy are sacrificed in the name of familial duty and societal expectations (Venkatraman, 2020). It is also worth noting that all of Taparia's female clients are professionally successful independent women, who hail from privileged backgrounds. However, despite their achievements and social standing, they are still subjected to discriminatory treatment within the paradigm of arranged marriages. This raises questions about the extent of humiliation and discrimination that ordinary Indian women, who may not have the same level of privilege and success, have to endure in similar situations.

Throughout *Indian Matchmaking*, viewers are confronted with instances where biases based on skin colour, caste background, and physical appearance play a significant role in the matchmaking process and marital preferences. However, these issues are often portrayed in a frivolous manner, with little depth or critical examination. Instead of challenging these prejudices, the show tends to gloss over them, presenting them as normalised aspects of Indian society without interrogating their underlying implications. This lack of critical interrogation is particularly concerning given the profound impact these biases can have on individuals, especially women from South Asia, who are subjected to the demeaning process of being scrutinised and evaluated based on societal standards of beauty and social status. By failing to provide a nuanced exploration of these issues, *Indian Matchmaking* risks perpetuating harmful stereotypes and reinforcing existing inequalities. Moreover, the show's failure to question these prejudices does a disservice to the stories of women who may have experienced trauma or abuse as a result of the arranged marriage process. By presenting these issues without adequate context or critique, the show overlooks the systemic injustices many women face within this cultural context.

Contextualising the 3 Cs: Colourism, Casteism and Compromise

The paper is centred around an exploration of three primary themes that emerge prominently throughout *Indian Matchmaking*: colourism, casteism, and compromise. The interplay of these three themes within the framework of arranged marriage preferences and practices provides valuable context for understanding *Indian Matchmaking*. However, the show's portrayal of these social norms lacks depth and nuance, particularly in its presentation to a global audience. Additionally, the paper acknowledges the importance of examining ageism and the prejudice against divorced women within the context of arranged marriages portrayed in the series. Ageism manifests in societal expectations regarding the ideal age for marriage, while divorced

women face stigmatisation and discrimination that can impact their prospects for remarriage and social acceptance, as becomes evident in the case of Rupam.

Colourism, a term credited to Pulitzer Prize winner author and activist Alice Walker, is defined as the "prejudicial or preferential treatment of individuals of the same race based solely on their skin colour" (Norwood, 2015). While distinct from racism, colourism exhibits a close relationship with it, in fact, it could also be defined as a more insidious form of racism. Colourism does not necessarily exclude people of colour from consideration and opportunities but rather exhibits a preference for those with lighter skin tones over those with darker skin tones. Moreover, it often carries gendered implications, with women disproportionately affected due to societal standards of beauty. This unique relationship with notions of beauty contributes to its impact being more pronounced among women, although it can affect men as well. Characters featured on *Indian Matchmaking*, sadly even women are guilty of perpetuating colourism, as every client of Taparia considers light-skin as a non-negotiable criterion for their prospective partners.

Hutton defines caste as "a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community" (Hutton 1963, 47). The Indian caste system is often characterised as a closed system of social stratification, wherein an individual's social status is predetermined by the caste they are born into. This system imposes restrictions on interactions and behaviours between individuals belonging to different social strata (Sekhon 2000). Within the context of arranged marriages depicted in *Indian Matchmaking*, considerations of caste background often play a significant role in partner selection, reflecting deep-seated societal biases and prejudices.

The concept of compromise, within the context of arranged marriages depicted in *Indian Matchmaking*, is viewed through the lens of an oppressive patriarchal system that imposes restrictive and often misogynistic standards on women. In this paradigm, compromise entails making significant sacrifices that disproportionately affect women, ultimately reinforcing gender inequalities and perpetuating harmful stereotypes (Wilson, 2013). Examples of compromise highlighted in the show include women being expected to relinquish their careers or professional aspirations to prioritise their spouses' and families' needs and desires. This expectation reflects the deeply ingrained belief that a woman's primary role is within the domestic sphere, subordinating her own ambitions to fulfil traditional gender roles. Compromise may also involve sacrificing one's freedom and autonomy to conform to societal expectations of an ideal wife. Moreover, women may be compelled to modify their behaviour and personality traits to align with patriarchal ideals of femininity and desirability. This could entail suppressing aspects of their identity perceived as undesirable or unconventional to appear more appealing to prospective partners.

Shades of Discrimination: Impact of Colourism in Arranged Marriages

Mayura Iyer (2015), in her blog on colourism in India, judiciously observes,

> The glorification of fair skin is pervasive throughout Indian society and goes far beyond implications of beauty—it is associated with greater intelligence, greater status and

> greater privilege. It manifests itself in colourism, the systemic devaluation of persons with dark skin.

India's fixation on light skin has permeated even the realm of popular culture, notably Bollywood, which is the pinnacle of India's entertainment industry. Given that Bollywood serves as a "popular escape mechanism for millions of Indians, who immerse themselves in the fantasy and drama of the movies" (Shevde, 2008, p. 4), it is unsurprising that fair-skinned actors and actresses often dominate the leading roles. Popular culture reflects existing societal norms and biases, so the perception of beauty and its standards are "intrinsically tied to the society one lives in" (Neikirk 2009, p. 39).

The preference for light skin in the context of arranged marriages is prominently observable in Indian matrimonial advertisements, which have historically been disseminated through traditional mediums such as newspapers but have increasingly shifted to digital spaces in contemporary times (Chattopadhyay, 2019). All matrimonial advertisements, whether conveyed through print or digital media, consistently emphasize the skin colour of the prospective bride. Dey (2016) mentions in his study that the skin complexion of the bride holds greater significance in marriage than the groom's. According to him, "As many as 85 per cent of adverts put up by the would-be-groom or his family members did not specify the man's skin colour but very specifically demanded (57 per cent) the bride to be fair" (Dey, 2016, p. 8391). In their study conducted in 2012, Mishra, Monippally, and Jayakar examined online matrimonial profiles within the Indian Muslim community, assessing factors such as income, age, and educational qualification. Their findings revealed that in the context of physical descriptions, "Not a single female profile mentioned 'dark' as the complexion type. Such representations likely reflect the overwhelming preference for fair complexion in the Indian subcontinent…Not a single male or female profile chose 'dark' as the expected complexion of the prospective spouse. Only three female profiles and one male profile chose 'wheatish' as the expected complexion of the spouse" (45).

In *Indian Matchmaking*, Taparia often sits down with her clients to discuss their criteria for a prospective partner. It is notable that a majority of them, both men and women, include 'fair' as an essential requirement. This mirrors the light-skin bias often seen in Indian matrimonial advertisements and further underscores the prevalence of colourism within arranged marriages. Taparia, in many ways, embodies the elitist and exclusionary sentiment embedded within these advertisements. Her role in *Indian Matchmaking*, therefore, serves as a reflection of the broader societal norms and biases surrounding colourism prevalent within Indian arranged marriages. The portrayal of colourism in *Indian Matchmaking* has sparked rightful condemnation from some viewers, as the show appears to glorify this discriminatory ideology. However, amidst this controversy, each episode of the series sheds light on a harsh reality: many South Asians continue to adhere to these problematic beliefs in contemporary society. A poignant example of this is seen in the sixth episode of the first season of the show, where Taparia examines the biodata of a potential client. Despite listing impressive professional achievements, Taparia dismisses the client's suitability by remarking that she is not photogenic, a euphemism for not fitting into the Indian beauty standards. Later in the episode, we meet the client Ankita, a dark-skinned woman who finds herself hindered in the pursuit of a potential spouse due to her appearance not aligning with traditional Indian beauty standards. This episode encapsulates the pervasive nature of colourism within South Asian communities, where individuals are judged and discriminated against based on their skin tone.

Unpacking Caste Dynamics in Indian Matrimony

Isabel Wilkerson, in her 2020 book *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*, articulately conceptualises caste as a cultural construct, "A caste system is an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups" (30). In modern India, caste continues to be a deeply ingrained social structure that permeates various aspects of life, including the institution of marriage. Within this system, a segment of the population known as the Untouchables, or Dalits, occupies the lowest rung and faces systematic discrimination based on their birth status. This discrimination ranges from overt acts of violence to more subtle forms of marginalisation and exclusion in everyday life, extending beyond the borders of India to diaspora communities worldwide.

The influence of caste dynamics is starkly evident in *Indian Matchmaking*. From the very outset of the series, Taparia outlines the criteria that guide the matchmaking process in India, as she categorically states, "In India, we have to see the caste, we have to see the height, we have to see the age." This statement serves as a stark reminder of the deeply entrenched nature of caste-based discrimination within Indian society. Despite efforts to downplay or ignore caste issues, they persist as an underlying theme and are laced throughout the series with coded language. Whether it is discussions about family background, regional affiliations, or traditional values, caste considerations often underpin the matchmaking process. The feigned ignorance or reluctance to openly address caste issues reflects the broader societal reluctance to confront this deep-seated form of discrimination. It is noteworthy to observe the euphemisms employed by Taparia's clients when they want to avoid explicit reference to caste, opting instead for phrases like "similarly situated" or "similar cultural backgrounds" (Ghosh, 2022). While these phrases may appear innocuous to those not familiar with the nuances of Indian culture, they often conceal underlying pressures to maintain caste-based endogamy. While on the surface, it may seem that individuals seek partners with whom they share cultural connections, there is a subtle expectation to marry within the same community and social strata.

In terms of implicit caste-based discrimination within arranged marriages, Taparia's client Nadia Christina Jagessar is a particularly important case in point. During a conversation about her Indian-Guyanese ancestry, Nadia reveals that she often feels she doesn't meet the expectations of being "Indian enough" for some individuals of Indian descent. Despite this, she still prefers Indian men due to her stronger cultural connection with them. When Taparia presents potential matches to Nadia's family, they inquire if the prospective groom knows about their family heritage. Sima promptly responds that "caste" is not an issue for any of the candidates. Nadia's Indo-Guyanese background holds particular significance here, as many individuals of Indian origin from various African countries or the Caribbean are descendants of indentured labourers brought by the British for cheap plantation labour. This historical context also carries caste implications, sometimes leading to a sense of superiority among other members of the Indian diaspora who may have migrated to different countries by choice. Taparia's comment about Nadia being a "good girl, but the match is difficult" likely insinuates these complex dynamics.

Upper caste families, which historically hold dominant positions in Indian society, perpetuate and reinforce caste-based divisions through the institution of arranged marriages, where considerations such as family background, regional origins, and cultural values often align along caste lines. One significant aspect of caste superiority is the unapologetic display

of elitism within upper-caste families (Manda, 2020). The services provided by matchmakers like Taparia cater primarily to affluent and privileged clients who belong to upper-caste backgrounds. This elitism reinforces existing social hierarchies and divisions, as access to such premium matchmaking services often remains exclusive to those with economic and social capital. Despite attempts by Taparia to justify caste-based connotations in her matchmaking process by emphasising compatibility in values and culture, the underlying reality is one of entrenched caste-based discrimination and exclusion. Thus, the normalisation of caste within arranged marriages serves to uphold and perpetuate exclusionary practices that continue to marginalise certain communities while maintaining the social and economic dominance of upper caste groups.

Gendered Expectations and Compromise

Compromise is defined through the lens of an unforgiving patriarchal system that confines women overwhelmingly to misogynistic standards. In many South Asian communities, women are socialised to prioritise the needs and desires of men, often at the expense of their own well-being and identity (Ibraheem, 2020). This expectation of compromise is especially pronounced in arranged marriages, where the terms and conditions are predetermined, leaving little room for negotiation. Preeti, the mother of one of Taparia's clients Akshay, exemplifies this mindset when she insists that the bride for her son must be "flexible" (Episode 5). However, this flexibility is not about equitable sharing of responsibilities between husband and wife; rather, it requires women to suppress parts of themselves that do not conform to the values and expectations of their new family. This skewed gender dynamics perpetuate toxic marriages in Indian culture, where women are conditioned from a young age to be obedient and unobtrusive, thereby reinforcing traditional gender roles and societal norms. This pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and maintain harmony within the family can result in the suppression of women's voices and aspirations. Furthermore, the emphasis on women's flexibility and adaptability in arranged marriages can create power imbalances within the relationship, leaving women vulnerable to exploitation and mistreatment. Instances of marital abuse, including emotional manipulation and physical violence, can occur when women are unable to meet the unrealistic expectations placed upon them (Chawla, 2007).

Taparia's approach to matchmaking, particularly in her contrasting interactions with men and women, highlights the entrenched misogyny within the arranged marriage system. Many of Taparia's female clients are accomplished professionals with active social lives, yet they are consistently told to compromise and adjust their expectations. Aparna, one of Taparia's clients, exemplifies this double standard. Despite her professional success, she is immediately judged for her age and perceived shortcomings, such as her inability to cook. Throughout the show, she is portrayed as stubborn, mentally unstable, and rude simply because she is unwilling to compromise on her preferences. Aparna's case sheds light on the challenges faced by modern women within the arranged marriage framework. While some of her criteria may be questioned, she is a woman who values her career and refuses to settle for less than what she believes she deserves. However, Taparia's reaction to Aparna's assertiveness reflects a societal bias against women who prioritise their own aspirations and independence (Ghosh, 2022).

Indian Matchmaking's portrayal of these problematic gender dynamics is concerning, particularly given its broad audience reach. By uncritically depicting the pressures faced by

women within arranged marriages, the show risks perpetuating harmful stereotypes and reinforcing gender-based inequalities. This underscores the importance of contextualising these biases with historical and social commentary to provide a more nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in the arranged marriage system.

Conclusion: Lack of Accountability in Representation

Indian Matchmaking, while showcasing the brighter side of arranged marriages, fails to address the prevalent prejudices, violence, and discrimination that many women experience within this institution. As media consumers, it becomes crucial to analyse the societal issues highlighted by the show and, more importantly, to recognise the aspects of discrimination and implicit exclusion that are conveniently brushed aside by the narrative. Though *Indian Matchmaking* markets itself as a window into the rich cultural landscape of India, it falls short in educating its global audience about the underlying context behind its insensitive portrayal of many problematic moments (Pendharkar, 2020). Therefore, understanding the historical and sociological background of colourism, casteism, and compromise becomes imperative. It perpetuates the notion of determining one's worth based on superficial traits outlined in a biodata. While the creators defend the show for portraying the matchmaking system realistically, its failure to acknowledge the broader context is negligent and potentially harmful. By disregarding the sociocultural backdrop, *Indian Matchmaking* misses an opportunity to address and challenge deeply ingrained prejudices, ultimately perpetuating harmful stereotypes and practices.

Representation is undoubtedly important, particularly when it comes to showcasing the diverse experiences of Indians and other non-White communities on screen. However, the solution to addressing these issues goes beyond merely investing in a frivolous treatment of socio-cultural issues that adversely impact the lives of thousands of individuals for future seasons of shows like *Indian Matchmaking*, which holds the potential to authentically tell the stories of marginalised people. The fundamental issue lies in accountability. If the creators and showrunners genuinely want to foster introspection and meaningful conversations, as they often claim, they must confront the on-screen prejudices, systemic discrimination, and exclusion inherent within the institution of arranged marriage rather than presenting a Bollywood-inspired rosy picture of arranged marriage. Simply depicting a wider range of experiences without acknowledging or challenging the underlying biases and inequalities perpetuates harmful stereotypes and does little to effect positive change. It is imperative that content creators take responsibility for the narratives they portray and actively work to dismantle harmful norms and practices. By holding themselves accountable and committing to more nuanced and inclusive storytelling, they can play a significant role in challenging societal attitudes and fostering greater understanding and empathy among audiences.

The current approach taken by Netflix in commercialising and capitalising on a show like *Indian Matchmaking*, which essentially upholds colourist ideology, caste supremacy, and misogyny, has troubling implications. By normalising these forms of discrimination and obscuring their violent reality, the show perpetuates harmful stereotypes and reinforces systemic inequalities. For South Asians familiar with these realities, the show's portrayal of such information may not come as a surprise. However, for audiences less acquainted with these issues, *Indian Matchmaking* caters to an orientalist gaze, fetishising Indian culture and

portraying it as backward and oppressive in comparison to the supposedly morally superior and socially advanced West.

The portrayal of the institution of arranged marriage in *Indian Matchmaking* lacks the necessary depth and context to accurately capture its complexities. Arranged marriage, far from being a light-hearted affair, is often laden with oppression and trauma, especially for women. By glossing over these realities and presenting them in a comedic or entertaining manner, the show fails to acknowledge the profound impact of arranged marriage on individuals and communities. The criteria for compatibility *in Indian Matchmaking* are rooted in stagnant social institutions that perpetuate social oppression and marginalisation, particularly affecting women. The show's portrayal overlooks the inherent power dynamics and systemic inequalities present within arranged marriages, reducing women's experiences to mere entertainment. This trivialisation of women's trauma is not only insensitive but also reinforces harmful stereotypes and perpetuates the normalisation of oppressive practices (Venkatraman, 2020). The power of popular culture lies not only in reflecting our reality but also in reshaping it. In the digital age, we are uniquely positioned as both producers and consumers of media. Therefore, we have the opportunity to critique oppressive systems and pave the way for more authentic storytelling practices. It is not enough to merely acknowledge the existence of oppression; it becomes imperative to work actively to dismantle it.

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