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with a focus on India**

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# A description of the diversity of kinship and marriage practices in South Asia with a focus on India

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Although not an exhaustive examination, this paper will explore some of the key areas of the diversity of kinship and marriage practices within India. To do so it will look firstly at the formal kinship rules of two well documented communities which are, broadly speaking, representative of practices within their extended regions. From there it will look at the different social functions each of these systems can be argued to serve. Next it will investigate how demographic changes across India are fostering new models of marriage and challenging the formal rules of traditional kinship systems. Continuing the investigation it will look at how the introduction of civil marriage rights is responsible, albeit to a limited extent, for the emergence of yet another model of marriage. Finally, it will observe that despite these key differences, there exist some characteristics which remain in place across India.

Kinship and marriage practices across India are strikingly diverse however they have often been divided into northern and southern models. Whilst a simple North-South demarcation in such an ethnically and culturally heterogeneous region may seem intuitively arbitrary, a number of scholars (See Karve for example) have successfully demonstrated the reality of these differences. Considering the historical attention given to this as a line of difference, it seems a prudent place to start. In the article *Prescription, Preference and Practice: Marriage Practice among the Kondaiyan Kotai*, Good introduces the kinship system among the Kondaiyan Kotai Maravar (K. K. Maravar), of southern India. Good demonstrates, that the K. K. Maravar system is largely isogamous and endogamous. As such there is little stress on lineages, meaning both the bride, and groom's family share largely equal status (Good, 1981, p.118). Another key characteristic of the K. K.

Maravar system and of others within the same region is a preference of cross cousin, and cross uncle-niece marriages (Srinivas, 1983, p.9). These marriage preferences represent the ideal type within the K. K. Maravar but stand in contrast to many others and in particular, those of northern India. Parry and indeed many others too, have conducted detailed studies into the kinship rules of the Rajput clans of Kangra in the United Provinces. Parry posits that this system is characterised by hierarchically ranked patrilineal groups in which the bride's family, are always of lower status than the grooms. Parry further notes that "marriage is explicitly conceptualised as a hypergamous relationship in which those of inferior status give wives to their superiors" (Parry, 1979, p.195). In addition, marriage patterns are exogamous, that is to say, in contrast to the pattern observed among the K. K. Maravar, marriage within entire clans is theoretically forbidden (Ibid, p221). It is worth stating that the differences of formal kinship rules are considerably more nuanced than a simple comparison between two groups of northern and southern India will permit. Indeed, the variance between clans and sub clans within each of these vast regions may be, at times, more marked than the variance between the Rajput's and the K. K. Maravar. However, given the historical attention these groups have received as representative or ideal

types, they serve to illustrate some key aspects of the regions diversity.

Clearly these kinship systems are distinct in their structures, however it is important to also note that these diverse structures have been argued to have different functions within social groups as a whole. As mentioned above the KK Maravar of southern India prefers endogamous marriage within a group and usually to someone already close to the family. Thus it has been argued that this type of system serves the primary function of "knitting families closer together and narrowing the circle of the kin group" (Karve, p.251). This system can be argued to differ in its function from the system of the Rajputs where the prevalence of hypergamy as an organising principle, is considered to preserve the hierarchal structure within the group. Indeed, it has been suggested that it is "largely the existence of the marital alliance which itself establishes the superiority of the bride-takers", over bride givers (Vatuk, 1975, p.159). Despite the fact that very different structures are present in both of these examples, it is clear from the above analysis that marriage is an extremely important organisational principle for defining social relations between groups within a community. As such it can be argued to preserve the hypergamous hierarchal structure of the Rajputs, and the isogamous, relatively equal structure of the K K Maravar.

Another key area which highlights diversity among marriages is the practice of gift giving between two families. Gift giving in its various forms, has become an integral part of the marriage process across India, but as with other customs, these practices have traditionally been looked at in terms of difference between north and south. As discussed above, the northern kinship system can be largely categorized as hypergamous. As a result of this asymmetry between, “wife givers” and “wife takers”, “Dowry” has emerged as the main marriage transaction (Dyson & Moore, 1983, p.44). The reason behind this, suggests Marriott, is the fear that “one’s daughter and sister at marriage become[s] the helpless possession of an alien kinship group . . . [therefore]. . .to secure her good treatment, lavish hospitality must be offered and gifts made to her husband’s family, throughout life (Marriott, 1955, p.112). Though “the custom of giving dowry in the form of cash and household items is widespread” (Grover, 2009, p.8), it is important to distinguish it from the dominant type of transaction in the south. Here, as a result of the greater equality in status between both families, and the isogamous marriage preferences discussed previously, there is less need to offer large sums of money or assets for protection. Instead the practice of “bride price” is more prevalent. Bride price is typically much smaller than dowry, and exists

ostensibly as a means of compensating the bride’s family for the loss of the girl’s labor and services (Srinivas, 1983, p.14). It is important to note that whilst these exist as two historically divergent practices, there has been a shift towards dowry in many areas where bride price has been prevalent. So much so that it has been argued now to be “near universal across India” (Kaur, 2004, p.2596).

Having discussed some differences with formal kinship rules and their functions, as well as some key differences in marriage gift practices, the next part of this paper will focus on more recent developments and transformations which challenge adherence to traditional kinship rules and marriage customs. In the paper, *On Kinship Structure, Female Autonomy, and Demographic Behaviour in India (1983)*, Dyson and Moore present the argument that marriage patterns, through their differing influence on levels of female autonomy, have resulted in significant sex ratio differences between northern and southern India. The extent of these differences has, according to Kaur, resulted in the development of a new migratory pattern of cross-regional marriages (Kaur, 2004, p.2595). Kaur argues that given these demographic differences, “Marriages are increasingly coming to note in which men from UP, Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan are marrying women from West Bengal, Assam, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu”

(Ibid). This pattern is further reinforced in the context of acute poverty, where cross-regional marriage may be considered an opportunity to escape the dowry obligations discussed above. According to Kaur, cross regional marriage can be observed in a number of variant forms. One example outlined is whereby men who for various reasons are unable to attract a marriage proposal, buy a wife from a distant family, too poor to afford dowry. In addition to this, it has been suggested that women from poorer areas, are choosing migration as a marriage strategy, moving to more desirable areas with the aim of securing a better economic future (Kaur, 2004, p.2596). Thus this study represents clear evidence that as the result of demographic and economic pressures, traditional kinship systems are being overruled in favour of “unconventional marriages that are uniting rural, illiterate Indians across boundaries of region, language, religion and even caste”(Ibid, p.2595).

Just as demographic and economic pressures have engendered new forms of marriage practices across India, it can be argued that modernisation, along with the development of extensive urban space, has brought about similar changes. In the article *Love and the Law: Love-Marriage in Delhi* (2002), Mody discusses the introduction of ‘Act III of 1872’. This act extended to all Indians the right to a civil marriage, opening up a potential space where couples could

marry legitimately of their own will, and outside the confines of formal kinship rules. In short, the institution of civil marriages gave individuals the opportunity to choose a ‘love marriage’, over a traditional arranged marriage. Mody demonstrates that love marriages are overwhelmingly considered illegitimate as they contradict social norms. Mody further illustrates a new way in which the illegitimacy of love marriage is reconciled with the traditional order, that is, the ‘love-cum arranged marriage’. Most civil, or love marriages in Delhi are conducted in secrecy with the couple returning home as if nothing had happened. For a period of time thereafter, arranged marriage proposals are snubbed under a number of pretexts whilst the spouse is subtly introduced in the best possible light. During this period great care is taken not to reveal the true nature of their relationship, and over time the child’s preference would be revealed either driving the parents to force an arranged marriage, or to acquiesce to the desires of the child by publicly presenting their preference as their own. Mody notes that in the majority of such cases “the parents eventually decide that they have no other option but to accept the person that the child has ‘selected’” (Mody p.284). It is clear then that in urban Delhi, a new form of marriage has developed as the result of the advent of civil marriages and ultimately, as a means to legitimate an illegitimate act of union.

There is clearly a raft of diversity among kinship systems and marriage customs across India, however it would be one sided not to briefly discuss some of the areas of similarity. The groups discussed above have been exclusively patrilineal in structure. It is worth noting that despite some important exceptions to this rule, such as the matrilineal systems of Kerala, the patrilineal model is dominant throughout India (Karve, 1965, p.291-309). In addition to this, although it is clear that there are differences in types of wedding transaction, i.e. dowry and bride price systems, it has been noted that dowry appears to be becoming the dominant form across India. Furthermore, it is clear that the punishments for contravening customary kinship rules and marriage norms are strict throughout. For example, where the norm of caste endogamy is broken in the North, couples often “have to contend with extreme violence not only from their families, but also from powerful and conservative caste panchayats”(Grover, 2009, p.2). Similarly, in urban areas where the traditional practice of arranged marriage is shunned, couples are often excommunicated. Although this is obviously a more symbolic form of violence, it is clear from both of these examples the extent to which traditional rules are paramount throughout India. Moreover, this demonstrates the extent to which marriage is considered a social contract between two groups, as

opposed to a private contract between two individuals (Mody, 2002, p.247).

In sum, this paper has provided an introduction into some of the key areas of diversity in kinship and marriage practices in India. To do so it has first examined some differences in the formal kinship rules between two well documented communities; the K. K. Maravar and the Rajputs. As discussed, the differences between these two groups account for only a fraction of the diversity of India as a whole, however, they stand representative of a historically observed pattern of difference between northern and southern regions. From there this paper has looked at how these different kinship structures, can be argued to serve difference social functions. Another key dimension of diversity addressed in this paper, is the recent shifts away from traditional marriage patterns of which two have been observed. Firstly, it has been noted that demographic changes and an adverse sex ratio in certain regions, can account for the development of new cross-regional marriage patterns. Secondly, it has examined how the introduction of civil marriage rights has resulted ultimately, though perhaps to a limited extent, in a new model of arranged marriage in urban spaces. Both of these examples divert from traditionally accepted norms and as such, contribute to the diversity of marriage practices in general. Finally, it has demonstrated that whilst there is

clearly significant diversity in kinship systems and marriage customs across India, there are

broadly speaking still some widespread similarities. 🇮🇳

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