Chapter 3.18

Online Matrimonial Sites and the Transformation of Arranged Marriage in India

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ABSTRACT

Online personals have been a remarkably successful in the Western World and have been emulated in other cultural contexts. The introduction of the Internet can have vastly different implications on traditional societies and practices such as arranged marriages in India. This chapter seeks to investigate using an ethnographic approach the role of matrimonial Web sites in the process of arranging marriages in India. It seeks to explore how these Web sites have been appropriated by key stakeholders in arranging marriage and how such appropriation is changing the process and traditions associated with arranged marriage. The key contributions of this study are in that it is an investigation of complex social processes in a societal context different from traditional western research contexts and an exploration of how modern technologies confront societal traditions and long standing ways of doing things. Our investigation suggests that the use of matrimonial Web sites have implications for family disintermediation, cultural convergence, continuous information flows, ease of disengagement, virtual dating and reduced stigma in arranged marriages in India.

INTRODUCTION

Online personals have been a remarkable success story in the United States, attracting as many as 40 million unique visitors at their peak in 2003 (Murine, 2003). At a time when e-commerce ventures...
were being viewed with suspicion by investors
and as the stock market hit new lows subsequent
to its run up in 1999-2000, this was a significant
phenomenon. Online personals typically cater to
singles, providing them an opportunity to find
mates or dates beyond their traditional social
networks of friends, school, work, neighbor-
hood or place of worship. Adapting to a different
societal context, one that is more conservative
and traditional, Web sites that assist in brokering
marriages have emerged in India. In 2006, some
7.5 million users used their services, increasing
from 4 million in 2004 (Lakshman, 2006). As in
the case of online personals in U.S., which have
the potential to affect how we arrange our social
selves, online matrimonial sites can influence
the process of arranging marriages with wider
implications for family structure and relationships.

Marriage is viewed differently in India as com-
pared to the West where it is largely a matter of
individual choice. In India, marriage is viewed not
so much as a union between two individuals as the
beginning of an enduring relationship between two
families. Weddings are usually protracted events
that mark the end of lengthy negotiations between
two extended families including aunts, uncles,
and even cousins once step removed (Seymour,
1999). Referred to as ‘arranged marriage’, they
are rarely based purely on individual preference,
choice or love. Marriage symbolizes and affirms
the collective nature of family and larger kinship
units in which the families are embedded. In
contrast, the western notion of marriage labeled
as ‘love marriage’ is frowned upon by the more
traditional family elders (Dion & Dion, 1996).

Globalization of the economy, urbanization and
the increased influence of western popular culture
from books to movies and television shows, have
brought about changes in the society. ‘From joint
family to nuclear family’ is an oft repeated phrase
that is used to summarize changes in the family
in India during modern times. The decline in the
influence of extended and joint family ties has
resulted in structural holes in family networks,
making it difficult for families to find suitable
life-partners for their children. This led to the
emergence of matchmaking services and classi-
fied advertisements (referred to as matrimonials)
in newspapers. With the advent of the Internet, a
new channel in the form of matrimonial Web sites
has emerged as an alternative way to find partners
for marriageable members of the family. The intro-
duction of technology in the form of matrimonial
Web sites in an otherwise socially-enabled process
provides the setting for a fascinating exploration
of changing social mores and the interaction of
technology and society.

Research on electronic dating, online person-
als, matchmaking and social networks is limited
(Close & Zinkhan, 2003; Fiore & Donath, 2004),
more so in the type of societal context provided
by India. This chapter investigates the impact of
matrimonial Web sites on the process and practices
associated with arranged marriage in India. Spe-
cifically, it seeks to answer the research questions:
(1) how are the affordances provided by matri-
onial Web sites appropriated by stakeholders in
the process of arranging marriage; (2) what is the
impact of such appropriation on the process; and
(3) how does the use of such technologies shape
traditions and norms associated with marriage. The
investigation is informed by the theory of social
construction of technology where the central prem-
ise is that technology as designed provides users
with a range of possibilities which shape usage
and are in turn shaped by users. The intent of the
study is not to propose and validate hypotheses
but to gain a deeper insight into the phenomena
and an understanding of the how technology is
shaping and in turn shaped by users in such com-
p lex social processes. An ethnographic approach
to data collection and analysis is deployed for
this purpose in this investigation. The purpose
of an ethnographic approach is not so much to
show that technology is used but to show how it
is socially appropriated. The key contributions of
this study thus are an investigation of complex
social processes in a societal context different
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