

Romance in Kathmandu  
The Decision to Marry for Love in the Hindu Kingdom of Nepal  
*Extended Abstract*

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The decision making processes of foreign cultures are difficult to conceptualize and should not be made overly simply. It is certainly simplistic to assume that a single patriarch makes all the decisions in a South Asian household. Even if one individual has the final word on marriage arrangements, the degree to which they makes these decisions alone is variable. For centuries marriages arranged by parents have been the only kind of acceptable marriage in Nepal. However, new research indicates that the proportion of “love marriages” is increasing. What accounts for these recent changes in marriage practices? What are the social costs and benefits of marrying for love? And given the opportunity do young people have different criteria than their parents when selecting a spouse?

My inquiry into the subject of marriage led me to identify two causal mechanisms in the decision making process. Firstly, each person has specific *motivations* for recommending or agreeing to a certain match. And secondly, each person has a certain amount of *weight* or influence in the final decision. We would observe no changes in marriage patterns if variations in these two variables remained constant across South Asian populations. Arranged marriages will predominate over other forms of marriage as long as most children defer to their parents decision, and most parents do not change their reasons for arranging marriages as they do.

So what has changed? Why do Laura Ahearn<sup>1</sup> and others observe changes in South Asian marriage practices? Has something influenced the actors to change their motivations for preferring a certain type of marriage over another? Has something changed that has given

younger people more weight in the final decision? My model of the decision making process helps us to evaluate the potential causes of changes in marriage patterns by measuring the effects of a specific variable on either weight or motivations. Economic, political and social forces can be evaluated in relation to how they impact both the weight and the motivations of individuals in South Asian families.

Forces that impact both weight and motivation in the same direction will have the greatest impact on marriage patterns. Conversely, a single variable may simultaneously have an impact on weight and motivations, but in opposite directions. For example, a movie with a romantic theme may convince a father that a woman has the capability to choose a man wisely, and the movie results in an increase in the weight of the man's daughter's preference when he arranges her marriage. The same movie may also prove to the father that life in the city is frivolous and dangerous, so he may decide to make sure she marries a man who intends to remain in the village. Consequently, we may detect an increase in her decision making power, but the change in her father's motivations negates the possibility of change in arranged marriage patterns. The traditional culture remains essentially intact, despite the influence of exposure to alternative tropes.

My argument is that weights matter even if individuals have the same motivations. One might assume that a parent will agree to a woman's choice of husband if that choice fits their idea of a suitable match. However, there is evidence to the contrary. Srimati Basu's<sup>2</sup> informant Ritu argues against such an assumption, claiming that her brother's objection to her marriage had little to do with his religious preference, and was an issue of power. The story of Shanti Mishra<sup>3</sup> supports a similar position. If she had approached her father and asserted her preference in marriage herself, her father would have been displeased. Instead her friend, a princess, uses her authority to arrange the marriage, weighting in as a surrogate elder sister, and Mishra remains

silent. The mother of Ahearn's informant, Sarita, goes so far as to approve of her daughter's decision to elope, but tells the researcher that she will assume no responsibility for her daughter's decision. Though exercising her legal right to marry for love, Sarita suffers the consequences of her actions by living without the security afforded to those who have arranged marriages. The cultural constraints on Nepali women also can be observed in Ahearn's bimodal results on the proportions of arranged, joint, and love marriages, demonstrating that women who voice a preference are not tolerated in the same way that sons are.

In beginning to answer the question, "What are the potential causes of changes in marriage patterns?" I suggest using this model of decision making processes in South Asian households. By analyzing data from the Demographic and Health Survey I show how this model is useful in evaluating the impact of various influences on a population. In order to understand how groups make decisions, I suggest that we evaluate the weight that individuals have in household decisions separately from the motivations that prompt a person to form a certain preference.

The exact relationship between weight and motivation is complex. Motivations may change and different matches may result. One may be tempted to assume that an increase in young people's weight in decision making will only have an impact if there is a change in motivation. But gender constructions complicate this picture. If young people and parents make similar choices, a young woman may be reluctant to risk having a love marriage unless someone very special happens to come along.

The young women I interviewed and observed in Kathmandu in 1997 were not representative of the female population of Nepal. Unlike most young Nepali women they lived and studied in a city. Their relatively high wealth and status indicated that their opportunities in life and marriage differed from the majority. I plan to present their stories in a way that

highlights their unique position in Nepali society. Digital technology offers new ways of juxtapositioning women's individual voices with empirical generalizations about their culture. Models and data analysis set the context for understanding women's lives and the ways they are constrained by social facts.<sup>4</sup> Narrative accounts of my research will be published digitally alongside quantitative data, sidestepping the constraints of linear storytelling and the tendency to represent inductive research as deductive. Ideally the user will approach the subject of nuptiality in Nepal as I did, ignorant, but ready to learn. My theory is that information about courtship in Nepal will provoke users to reconsider their assumptions about marriage in their own culture, irregardless of their final judgement on the practice of arranged marriage. Interactive features will create a forum for further discussion and study. Hopefully this project will never be finished.

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<sup>1</sup> Ahearn, Laura M. Invitations to Love: Literacy, Love Letters, & Social Change in Nepal. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001.)

<sup>2</sup> Basu, Srimati. She Comes to Take Her Rights: Indian Women, Property, and Propriety. (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1999.)

<sup>3</sup> Mishra, Shanti. Voice of Truth: The Challenges and Struggles of a Nepalese Woman. (Delhi, India: Book Faith India, 1994.)

<sup>4</sup> Durkheim, Emile. "What is a Social Fact?" The Rules of Sociological Method. (Toronto: The Free Press, 1982.)