

Marriage in modern India: “The middle-class ideal of an Indian marriage has not changed”

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Dr Henrike Donner explains how notions of marriage and family life are evolving among the Indian middle class. This interview is the first instalment of a three-part series on changing marriage norms among middle-class Indians.

According to the National Council for Applied Economic Research, India’s middle class will have burgeoned to include [53.3 million households](#) – or 267 million people – by 2015-16. Within a decade, by 2025-26, the number of middle-class households in India is predicted to double to 113.8 million households, or 547 million individuals. No doubt, the rapid growth of the middle class will challenge traditional notions of kinship, family values, gender roles, and reproduction. This series draws on recent research published by LSE faculty and fellows to examine how marriage norms among middle-class Indians are evolving with India’s liberalisation policies.



The series kicks off with an interview with Dr Henrike Donner, author of “[Domestic Goddesses: Maternity, Globalisation and Middle-Class Identity in Contemporary India](#)”. Since 1995, Donner has conducted fieldwork in Kolkata (Calcutta), focusing on the transformation of marriage and conjugal ideals, food consumption, and the impact of privatised healthcare and education on middle-class lifestyles. She is interested in the role women play in middle-class constructions of identity and the way in which their everyday practices – as well as institutions like marriage and the family – reproduce class boundaries. Here she discusses the growth of the Indian middle class, changing expectations of marriage, and modes of social differentiation among middle-class Indians.

Q. Given the rapid expansion of the Indian middle-class, can we still talk about this category as a coherent whole?

A. It is always good to ask what we’re talking about when we talk about the Indian middle class. Economists and the Indian government use income, education levels, and the ability to consume particular goods as metrics by which to identify the middle class. Still, there is a huge degree of diversity and variety across the class and not everyone can consume the same things. Coming from the anthropological side, what I find interesting is not whether members of the middle class consume the same things, but that they desire the same things. The fact is, middle-class Indians may not have identical ethnic, religious, or caste backgrounds, but their voting patterns are similar and their relationship with the state and society is similar, and these become a strong unifying force, so as a political project

and a cultural scene the middle class is a relevant force and needs to be studied.

Q. Is there a disconnect between broader economic and political narratives about the Indian middle class and your research findings, which focus on the private domain?

A. There are two broad streams of discussion about the Indian middle class: there's the economic angle, which is related to India's global image, but also geared to push particular kinds of policies to cater to the middle class, for example, urban restructuring or educational reform. The notion of the middle class is also associated with consumer culture and behaviour—we talk about the middle class when we're talking about new consumer practices.

My interest and long-term association has been with families and localities (at the neighbourhood level) so I have a different picture than what surveys and research on consumption present. An emphasis on new patterns of consumption, socialising, or youth cultures presents subjects in an individualistic mode. But when you talk to the same person in their family surroundings, a very different picture emerges, and that picture complicates understandings of being middle-class in India today. Suddenly, you sense moral tensions between being an individual and being part of a family; between traditional outlooks on gender roles and the desire to be part of a hip, modern youth culture; and practices and moralities promoted in the media and local discourse, for example where arranged marriages and love marriages are presented as opposed to each other.

Q. How is the growth of the middle class impacting perceptions of marriage and family life?

A. Discourses on marriage and the family are a huge part of modern South Asian middle-class identity; in fact, there's a sense of exceptionalism, the idea that Indians are focused on family relations while Westerners are not. Being appropriately middle-class is therefore often presented in terms of 'traditional' values and gender roles.

Of course, these ideals do not necessarily reflect the actual practices. Whilst the extended joint family is upheld as an ideal, nuclearisation is increasingly taking place, especially in places like Bangalore where middle-class employees migrate for work. These new opportunities in the Indian economy are grabbed by many, but at the same time they create a sense of insecurity, especially among those who were traditionally middle-class and benefited from government opportunities: on the one hand, these people now want to avail of different opportunities and provide the best for their families, but on the other hand, they are reluctant to give up the security that comes with such jobs (in the form of pensions and other perks). As a result, you get more people thinking very carefully about kin relations, how to arrange marriages, where and with whom to live in order to accommodate change.

There's such a diversity in how marriages work in India that you cannot say that there is one kind of Indian marriage and then pinpoint how it is evolving at the moment. What endures, however, is the middle-class ideal of marriage—that has not changed. Apart from the fact that love marriages are on the rise, same-sex relations have been decriminalised, and legislation exists to dissolve marriages, there is still the strong idea that marriages should be arranged, heterosexual, and lifelong unions. Anything that defies this norm has to be justified and is measured against this ideal, which serves to cement parental authority and a strong hold of affines over a couple's future.

Q. Has economic liberalisation changed opinions about hypergamy (colloquially known as 'marrying up')?

A. New opportunities force us to rethink about what marrying 'up' and marrying 'down' mean. Among most middle-class communities, classic hypergamy between status groups has been replaced with marrying up in economic terms. But even those kinds of class-related identities are being redefined; for example, differences in cultural and educational status are increasingly glossed over as economic standing can compensate for a lack thereof. That said families are crucially aware of differences in status, and those who marry 'up' are frequently reminded of their family's shortcomings. In a rapidly changing world, marriage becomes one of the main institutions to ensure the reproduction of class, which explains why arranged marriages are still very much the norm.

Q. In "Domestic Goddesses" you describe how middle-class Indian women still subscribe to the idea that motherhood is destiny. How are economic liberalisation and the growth of the middle class impacting the

experience of motherhood?

A. Middle-class women use parenting as one of the many practices to differentiate themselves from the poor and the upper class. Staying at home or elective Caesarean sections, both choices which have come under pressure in the West, constitute a much coveted privilege here and contribute to middle-class status.

What you increasingly see is that everybody who can afford to engages in the most expensive strategies to maintain and secure privileges, especially when it comes to healthcare and education. Women as mothers do mediate the tensions implied in such competitive fields and motherhood is one of the main fields where distinctive middle-class ideologies and practices contribute to class formation.

Q. The Indian middle class is widely critiqued for being apolitical and isolated. How accurate is this view?

A. The view that the middle class is disengaging from politics only holds if politics are narrowly defined as party and electoral politics, and even then the question has to be differentiated regionally; after all, the change of government in West Bengal was actively supported by the middle class. On the whole, the general idea of a common political project and support for the Indian state focused this around an ethics of redistribution has alienated middle-class citizens, who engage more in issue-based politics critiquing the status quo by mobilising around ideals of middle-class citizenship. The sites for this engagement, and some of it has a lot of support as the case of Hazare has shown, have shifted from a politics of the street towards a politics of already exclusive groups, for example, around housing associations, consumer forums, or web activism. All of this is urban-based to the exclusion of the rural poor, but also less affluent urban communities.

Middle-class women are becoming more vocal and visible in public, and this has led to moral debates around their behaviour in public space. It appears that this is fine as long as they raise their voices from within appropriate middle-class spaces – the home, the college, the mall. But female political engagement should not not involve claims to the street. As such, the new identity of women as proper middle-class consumers extends older constructions of women as homemakers and, in fact, limits their political agency. At the moment, this is the prevalent political space left. And the question is not how do you organise around consumer identities, but will this lead to any empowerment ?

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