MARRIAGE AND KINSHIP IN (NORTH) INDIA

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General Anthropology Division

American Anthropological Association
GENERAL ANTHROPOLOGY DIVISION MODULES IN TEACHING ANTHROPOLOGY

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This module is aimed at anthropologists who teach introductory anthropology or cultural anthropology classes. It has two purposes. First, it provides students with an extended ethnographic example of marriage and kinship practices in another culture (India) as part of the overall ethnographic focus in such classes. As part of this purpose, students should be able to learn about the interrelation of cultural practices and values and the adaptiveness of cultural practices to larger socioeconomic contexts. A second purpose is directed at an important overall theme of cultural anthropology, that understanding the "other" is a way into looking more objectively at "ourselves." This purpose works well here because the practice of arranged marriage is very provocative for students, as it goes against the grain of many of their most cherished values and makes them look at themselves. It is particularly provocative and timely because, faced with the high divorce rate in the United States, some rethinking of the values and practices of American marriage seems in order to most of them.

After the focus on marriage, there is a follow up section on kinship directed toward the same ends: the kinship chart comparisons reinforce the message that kinship, though based in biological realities, is an artifact of culture and can be handled in different ways.

The module is broken down into 6 units:

(1) an exercise that engages the student's participation;
(2) a short reading assignment with ethnographic content;
(3) an analysis of ethnographic material through in-class discussion;
(4) an ethnographic film on the culture under consideration (north India);
(5) a discussion of the reading assignment and the film (with or without a brief writing component);
(6) a short reading assignment on the Indian kinship system, followed by an analysis of kinship through either in-class discussion or a written assignment.

The marriage and kinship module can cover from 3-5 class sessions, depending on the amount of time available for the project and the length of the class session. (I have 75 minute periods and run the project over 3-4 sessions.) An approximate time frame is given after the title of each unit. The project can be used with any introductory textbook's chapter on marriage and the family.

The following fleshes out the 6 units in chronological order:

**Unit 1: Engaging Students by Making Up Personal Ads** (1 class period 50-75 min; if you have a longer class, you can include the lecture. Otherwise, the lecture can begin in the next unit or class.)

Ask students to take five minutes or so to write a personal ad for a "partner." They should be similar to those they have seen in newspapers or magazines. Ask one student to record the responses on the blackboard and then ask students to give you and the class one or two of the traits they wrote about in their ad that they desire (or would desire) in a partner. The responses should be listed under "male" and "female" separately. The time for this set of responses depends on class
size, taking about 5-15 minutes. This is a lot of fun for the students and for the instructor as well.

After the lists are on the board, ask the students to analyze the list of qualities in terms of what this suggests about the basis of intimate relationships in the United States, and the ways in which those relationships relate to the larger cultural context. Every class is different, of course, but the qualities that invariably show up, and which seem germane in understanding marriage in the United States generally are (in order of descending frequency):

...physical attractiveness;
...qualities that suggest the importance of companionship;
...qualities of trust, and commitment and responsibility (women more than men cite trust);
...ambition and financial potential (women more than men cite these qualities);
...intelligence;
...matching education or intelligence;
...height and age compatibility.

In the ensuing discussion about what people mean by these qualities, how they think they relate to successful or desired long-term relationships, particularly marriage, and their interpretation of the meaning of the different (or similar) responses of men and women in the class, try to keep the discussion focused on how these lists reflect other aspects of American culture.

Examining Indian Matrimonial Ads

After the discussion about American partners, hand out the sample page of “Matrimonials” from an Indian newspaper in the United States. (These appear as Appendix Materials #1 and can be photocopied as a handout.) Give students a few minutes to look over the ads (for both males looking for wives and females looking for husbands) and then ask them to compare the qualities and dimensions of these ads to the lists made up by their classmates for an American partner. Ask students to write down the main differences and similarities. They usually find the following points:

... in the American ads, individuals are advertising for themselves; in Indian ads, it is senior relatives advertising for junior relatives;
... in the Indian ads, the social status of the family is mentioned; in American ads, this is never mentioned (references to American families are never made);
... in the Indian ads, reference is always made to the profession of the male individual looking for a partner and most often for females as well; this is less frequently mentioned by students in their ads (of course this might be partly related to the fact that they are students and have not yet settled in careers; careers are often mentioned in the actual ads in American newspapers);
... in American ads, in addition to the emphasis on physical qualities, there is a big emphasis on personal qualities, such as having a good sense of humor, or sense of adventure. In Indian ads, physical qualities are prominent, and the mention of personal qualities rare;
... in American ads, mention is often made of “common interests,” in Indian ads, this is rare;
... in American ads, mention is often made of “love,” “romance,” or “fun to be with” as qualities looked for, in Indian ads, this is never mentioned;
... in Indian ads, social status similarities such as “race,” religion, social class, ethnic/linguistic group, caste, are prominent; in American ads as the students create them, this is much less frequently mentioned (this seems to relate to two factors: one the American ideal that the United States is a classless society, everyone is “middle class,” and two, a somewhat opposite underlying concept that takes class, religious, ethnic, and especially “racial” endogamy for granted). In the personal columns of newspapers, in fact, the ads begin with, for example, “DWM” (divorced white male) so that marital status, “race,” and often religion are mentioned and do indicate the importance of some endogamous grouping in the American marriage system.

(Note: “no bars” means caste or marital status is not important. The following words refer to ethnic/caste/religious groups: Gujarati, Brahmin, Naidu, Iyengar, Jain/Aggarwal, Kayastha, Mudaliar, etc.; “issue” means child, i.e., issueless divorcee means a divorcee without children.)

Discussing Marriage in India and the United States

These similarities and differences between India and the United States that students will come up with in the discussion can also be listed on the board by a student or by you, in columns. It is important at this point that you discuss what the differences and similarities suggest about marriage in India and the United States.

The Lecture

Please note that the lecture should be given after the student discussion and is actually a summing up of the discussion where you organize the points made by students and add whatever is missing that will help them get the information they need to analyze the two systems.

Discuss why these differences and similarities exist in the context of what they tell us about marriage in India and the United States. You might want to give a short lecture on the cultural features of marriage in the United States by mentioning these points:

... its focus on individuals rather than on families;
... an emphasis on the conjugal relationship;
... the related importance of companionship;
... the expectation that the couple will be pretty much on its own in life; neolocality at least is an ideal;
... the ideal of romantic love with its associated ideal that the individual’s feelings for the other can overcome any differences in class, religion, or ethnicity;
... the relation of all of these to the relatively fluid stratification system in the United States.

For the cultural features of India, you might want to mention:

... the complex social structure and in particular the features of class, religion, caste, and regional cultures that tend to be endogamous;
... the importance of arranged marriage and how this relates to the view of marriage as a matter
of extended family ties rather than just of importance to the individuals involved;
... generally, there are patriloclal residence rules;
... generally a woman will live in the household of her husband with the expectation that she will
adjust to his family and subordinate her own personality;
... these traits ultimately relate to the important function of marriage and family in India of
providing a network of relationships that are more important in helping individuals
through life, such as in getting a job, than is true in the United States;
... this rigid system of social stratification provides few opportunities to break from the past;
... making sure a daughter marries is a religious as well as a social obligation in India;
... in the ideal Indian life path, the second stage is that of “householder,” where a person has an
obligation to marry, have children, and participate in family life.

Unit 2: Student Assignment: Reading A Short Paper  (Reading time is outside of class.)

Assign a short paper for students to read: “Arranging A Marriage in India” (with its “Further
Reflections”) (Serena Nanda in The Naked Anthropologist, Phil DeVita, ed., Belmont CA:
Wadsworth, 1992). This article acts as a bridge to understanding the relationships between marriage
and other aspects of family and kinship in India. This article appears as Appendix Materials #2 and
can be photocopied and handed out to students.

Unit 3: Discussing the Paper  (1 class period 50-75 min.)

The following questions are useful in discussing the paper during the next class period. The
questions are aimed at eliciting student responses to arranged marriages as a way of examining their
own (unconscious) cultural biases and ethnocentrism. If you have students from a variety of ethnic
backgrounds, there may be several or even many students who come from cultures where marriages
are arranged and this may provide another basis for an interesting discussion in class.

The questions may also serve as a short take-home writing assignment or an essay
examination question. (Some suggested elements of the answer are in parentheses after the
question.)

... what is your own personal response to arranged marriage? Give your reasons. (Note the
anthropologist’s negative reaction to arranged marriage in the early part of the article is
likely to be stated by students, e.g., love comes after marriage, not before; knowing the family
is more important than knowing the marriage partner, marrying someone one has never met
before);
... what is the nature of marriages arranged in India? (Marriage is a concern of families rather
than just individuals; the importance of everyone being married; the fact that the new couple
is likely to live with the boy’s parents);
... from the Indian perspective, what are the advantages of an arranged marriage? (Parents have
experience in life, children don’t; parents know enough to look beyond mere physical
attraction that is not a very sound basis for marriage; young people don’t have to worry about
being popular or whether they will get married; in an arranged marriage there is some
leverage for pressure to see that the marriage stays together);
... what are some of the contexts of social life in India that are important in understanding why arranged marriages are preferred? (There is little dating; divorce is stigmatized; there are few options for single or divorced women; divorce reflects badly on a family's reputation and the subsequent marriages of the divorcée's siblings; caste and class differences are more important in structuring social life in India than in the United States);

... what criteria are important in finding a woman acceptable as a wife? A man as a husband? In what way are the criteria similar and in what way different? What does this suggest about the roles of men and women in families? (Women need to be malleable; having “fair” skin is more important for women than men; the man’s profession is more important than the woman’s; birth order and number of siblings are also of importance);

... what are the central points in the author’s “further reflections?” What does she feel she missed writing in the article that needed further reflection? (More emphasis on marriage from a woman’s perspective; the increasing likelihood that with migration abroad, a girl will be far from her family; the increasing importance of dowry leading to wife abuse and even murder);

... what is the process of fieldwork? How do anthropologists get information about a culture? Why is participation in a culture necessary as well as observation? How do anthropologists find out what they are missing about cultural understandings? (The anthropologist did not understand the friend’s reluctance for certain potential prospects until she asked; people either cannot or do not wish to explain everything to an anthropologist -- they may be very subtle points, or embarrassing, or something they have not had to articulate previously.)

Suggested Further Reading: two articles that you may find useful in discussing the “Further Reflections” section are:


This is an excellent film providing an inside view of the relationship among women in a north Indian, relatively well-off, peasant family. Dadi, the grandmother, is the center of the family and we see her relationships with her daughters-in-law, and hear her speak about her own life in terms of her roles as wife, daughter-in-law, and now, mother-in-law. The women in the film speak about the advantages and disadvantages of the joint family, each from their own perspective and position in the family; social change is also indicated by the event of the marriage of the youngest son, who has moved to the city. The examination of joint family life through the details of everyday work and family interactions makes this an excellent film for classroom use. Before viewing the film, you might give just a brief synopsis and remind the students to particularly note the complex relationships within the extended joint, patrilocial, patrilineal, rural family in India. You may make
and distribute photocopies of the Study Guide that is Appendix Materials #3 before students view
the film.

**Unit 5: Discussion of the Film** (This can take 50 minutes, or in a 75 minute class, can be shortened
to fit the one class period.)

The Study Guide can be used as the basis of class discussion and/or a take home written
assignment or essay examination question. A core point in the discussion is the roles in the Indian
family. The film provides a woman's perspective that is a good corrective to the emphasis of the
male perspective in the article on arranged marriage.

**Unit 6: Kinship System: Short Reading Assignment and Discussion** (This depends on whether
students read the assignment outside of class. If they do, discussion can be 20-50 minutes. The
class can be broken into groups, with one student in each group reporting to the class with their
answers; this will add about 15 minutes. It could be combined with a discussion of the film.)

After some familiarity with the basic concepts of kinship, students should read “Kinship
Classification Systems in Action: A Comparison between North America and North India” (from
This is provided as Appendix Materials #4 and can be photocopied as a handout. After examining
the kinship chart of the American anthropologist in the article, you may wish to have the students
make their own kinship chart as a way of increasing personal participation in the exercise.
Whichever you choose, the major questions for students to write about or discuss are the following:

... list prior to discussion: what are the major bases of kinship in India?, in the United States?
(e.g., collaterality, gender, seniority, etc.)
... how do you explain these differences in terms of the wider contexts of family, marriage, and
other American values?
... kinship systems are ideals. How do the realities of life modify the working out of kinship
ideals? (The answer to this may be based on this kinship article, or on this article, the
previous article, and the film, as well, of course, on the students’ own experiences.)

Further Suggested Reading: fiction and film are often good ways to interest students in a subject.
I have found the following useful in discussing marriage and family life in India:


(2) *Devi* (a film) by Satyajit Ray. (This film is on video and can be found at many video stores; if
you cannot find it, try Movies Unlimited at 3015 Darnell Rd, Philadelphia, PA 19154. For
information, phone 1-800-668-4344. The cost is $19.95 plus $4.50 handling charge.)

You may be interested in visiting the Asian People’s Room at the Museum of Natural
History in New York City. It has a beautiful, if small, exhibit on the Indian joint family and also
on the Chinese family for comparison.
Conclusions

The value of individualism is important in most of the United States. That value is challenged by the Indian system of arranged marriages, making this a provocative exercise for most students. The importance of "family values" as a contemporary social issue almost guarantees significant student participation in discussion. At the same time, the module gives the students an understanding of how things fit -- or don't fit -- together, and also that every system has its benefits and costs to society as a whole and to the individual participants.

APPENDIX MATERIALS

The following materials are in chronological order of use in the module:

(1) Classified Ads in Indian magazines published in the United States.


(3) Study Guide for Dadi's Family.

MARRIAGE — FEMALE

Immigrant sister invites correspondence from educated professionals for fair, pretty M.A. student, 24, 5’11”, North Indian Brahmin family. Contact (414) 351-4842 (Woman in India). Suitable match for a very beautiful, cultured, fair, slim, tall, M.A. Naidu woman, 31, residing in Hyderabad. Suggests U.S. citizens. Case no bar. F 0366, IA.

Pretty, slim, tall, even-tempered, outgoing, and very cosmopolitan woman invites correspondence from tall (5’10” and up), well-settled men in their late thirties and forties. Divorced men with children welcome. No bar. F 0367, IA.

Brother invites correspondence for his Gujrati sister, 26, 5’4”, tall, beautiful, professional, well settled on East Coast. Reply with details and photograph, please. Case no bar. F 0205, IA.

Educated, attractive, accommodating South Indian lady, 30, in need of divorcee, invites continuing correspondence with full details and returnable photograph from educated, well-settled, longtime residents/citizens, around 32-42. F 0255, IA.

Hindu match for pretty lady doctor (internal), 29 years old. Very well placed family. High- trained professionals only need apply. F 0327, IA.

BOX NUMBER ADS

Please follow these steps while replying to IA box number ads that appear without an address:

Seal your reply in an envelope addressed to the box number and put this in another envelope, along with one loose 15” x 1” stamp for each reply and mail it to:

BOX REPLY INDIA ABROAD
331 Park Avenue South
New York, N.Y. 10010

Brother invites correspondence from well-settled U.S. citizen/immigrant medical doctors and other professionals, for his attractive Andhra Brahmin sister, 28, slim, intelligent, medical doctor. Case, language, no bar. Returnable photograph appreciated. F 0345, IA.

Brother invites correspondence for educated, charming, permanent residents, Muslim sister, 35, from educated, well settled Memon men, 28 to 30 years. Write with returnable photograph. F 0102, IA.

Correspondence invited from Hindu doctors, for a suitable match for a lady doctor, 28, settled in practice in New York City. F 0081, IA.

Brother, South Indian Brahmin doctor, 46, professional, seeks alliance for M.B.B.S. sister, 41, presently in the U.S., recently passed ECFMG. Very decent family. Mutual alliance is also welcome. Call (713) 332-1292.

Matriarchal correspondence invited from professional men between 30-38 for a Punjabi lady. Photographs a must. Serious replies only. F 0316, IA.

Matriarchal correspondence invited from Sengupta Yuvaldars for a 22-year-old woman, smart, good-looking, science graduate, residing in India. Please write to F 0246, IA.

Professional, beautiful, divorced lady in early 20s, vegetarian with one issue is looking for a professional, kind man for an early marriage. Photographs are returnable. F 0305, IA.

MARRIAGE — FEMALE

Sister invites matrimonial correspondence from professional North Indian men for a Hindu woman, 38, M.A., slim, tall, beautiful, residing in India. Brothers and sisters well-settled in United States. Call (603) 295-5463 or write: India, 1471 Proud Dr., San Jose, CA. 95132.

Bros, well-settled U.S. citizen, invites correspondence from Iyer girls, here or in India, for sister, 23, M.A., B.B., fair, and homely, presently in India. Early marriage. F 0317, IA.

Sister invites correspondence from Brahmin Tamil liver professional men, here or in India, for tall, fair, charming, and intelligent nurses divorcee, 27. M.A. She is immigrant and well-employed. Reply with details and returnable photograph. F 0319, IA.

Family of attractive, U.S. educated, South Indian Brahmin woman, 24, invites correspondence from smart, well-educated men, 26 or over, with modern outlook. Full particulars with returnable photograph appreciated. F 0220, IA.

Correspondence invited from tall, slender non-smoking doctors for Maharashtrian woman, 37, 5’4”, slim, attractive, warm, M.B.B.S., M.S., married, permanent resident U.S.A., from good family. Please write P.O. Box 34, San Gabriel, CA 91776. F 0316.

Brother seeks matrimonial correspondence from sincere, honest gentlemen around 40, tall, handsome, educated, cultured, refined, well-placed, preferably professionals for his very attractive, extremely sophisticated physician sister, 37. Hindu, divorced with school-going children. Send particulars, returnable photograph, phone number. F 0322, IA.

Correspondence invited from well-settled, mature professionals for attractive Hindu professional woman, 32, 5’4”, fair, slim, divorced, has one lovely child. Write with details. F 0323, IA.

Resident parent invites correspondence with returnable photograph from well-qualified, handsome Gujarati bachelor (25)!, here or in India for extremely beautiful and charming graduate daughter in U.S.A. Reply to F 0324, IA.


Matriarchal correspondence invited from well-established, sincere professionals, prospective professionals, businessmen here or in India for extremely beautiful, tall, fair, sober, convent-educated Christian woman, currently in Bangalore. No bars. Please reply with details and photograph. F 0327, IA.


Sindhi parents invite correspondence from educated men of respectable Hindu family for daughter, 25, smart, good-looking, divorced, convent-educated, college graduate. Has brothers settled in Europe. U.S. Reply F 0331, IA.

Brother, settled in Canada, invites correspondence from educated North Indian men for his sister, 26, 5’, interior decoration diploma, B.A., presently teaching interior decoration in New Delhi. F 0332, IA.
MATRIMONIAL—MALE

Correspondence invited from young attractive women for a 25-year-old, 5’7” gentleman working as manager in New York. Case no bar. Write with photograph or call Mr. and Mrs. A. Aliwaller, (212) 545-4757 at 8 p.m. M 3349, IA.

Successful professional male, 5’10”, good build and reasonably handsome invites matrimonal correspondence from single, divorced, or widowed females under 30, for early marriage. Have high income and green card. Write: P.O. Box 4372, Arlington, Virginia 22204.

Correspondence invited from an immigrant woman for Agarwal bachelor, 24, doing MBA in United States (graduating this year). Reply with returnable photograph. Case no bar. M 3331, IA.

Matrimonial correspondence invited from beautiful, slim, educated women, 25 or under, for North-Indian (UP) immigrants. Vaah. 27”, 5’6”, doing cardiology fellowship. Details with color photo in the first instance, please. Woman’s merits the only consideration. M 3325, IA.

Correspondence invited from well-educated young women by handsome Gujarati bachelor, 31, 5’8”, MBA. Reply is absolute with returnable photograph to M 3318, IA.

Bengali Hindu, retired Ph.D. professor, still teaching part-time, blind from childhood, wishes marriage with Bengali Hindu or American woman. Issueless divorcees/widows eligible. Phone: (212) 465-5790. M 3306.

Well-settled, highly-educated professional (MBA), 29, invites correspondence from well-educated women. No bar. M 3339, IA.

Match for handsome Punjabi professional in India, 30, 5’9”, from respectable family, looking for immigrant or citizen women. No bar. Call (212) 524-3471 or write M 3334, IA.

Very highly educated, successful married-gentleman, 30, N.Y. resident, working in an academic environment, invites matrimony from educated and very-attractive ladies, N.Y. residents for an early marriage. Please write with returnable photograph to M 3342, IA.

Exceptionally beautiful, charming, attractive and well-educated match for a smart, handsome and sincere Sikh engineer-bachelor, 24, holding an executive and managerial position with a very large co. Very high income, very well set up in N.Y. No bar of any kind. Please send returnable photograph and reply to M 3345, IA.

Suitable match for healthy, handsome, man, from Delhi’s cultured Gurjar family, Ph.D. (microbiology), 33, 5’8”, 125 lbs., earning $18,000 in top university. Seeks early marriage. Case no bar. Apply M 3344, IA.

A well-settled uncle invites matrimonial correspondence from resident or citizen Gujarati woman, preferably Patel community, for his 34-year-old business graduate nephew. Write with returnable photograph to 3314 S. Dale Maury, Tampa, Florida 33609 or call (813) 231-6930. M 3392.

Correspondence invited from educated and beautiful women for a handsome North Indian Hindu gentleman, 26, 5’11”, M.D., educated in top class U.S. universities; doing residency; U.S. citizen; balanced east-west style. Full particulars and photo appreciated. Write M 5008, IA.

MATRIMONIAL—MALE

Patial, 5’6”, M.S. computer science, systems analyst, well settled, invites correspondence from U.S. permanent resident Patial women. Reply: 9049 Kirkmont Dr., Hasting, T. 71099, Phone (713) 484-3432.

Correspondence invited from well-educated, good-looking, preferably Punjabi woman to a handsome Punjabi doctor, 26, 5’10”, practicing in Arizona. Write 2950 N. Greenfield Rd., #213, Phoenix, Az. 85016.

Handsome Gujarati, Patial, 28, 5’7”, has own business and other investments in Ohio, invites correspondence from respectable Gujarati Patial family women. Send returnable photograph. Write M 4001, IA.

S. J. Kishan, 31, S. Keshadkar, M.B.A./Engineering $20,000, seeks a tall, well-educated career-oriented, intelligent Sikh woman from N. America or U.K. Sincerity, commitment and a balanced outlook towards Eastern Western cultures is desired. M 3308, IA.

Well-placed, handsome engineer, 31, 5’7”, seeks very beautiful, fair, Punjabi woman of respectable family. Please reply with detail and returnable photograph. M 3309, IA.

Punjabi, Canadien citizen, medical student aged 31, tall, handsome, would like to meet pretty, slim, professional women for matrimonal purposes. Parents well established, living in Canada. Please send details with photographs. M 3310, IA.

Self-made, highly-educated Punjabis, professional, 38, invites correspondence with photograph from slim, beautiful, sophisticated women. No bar. Only woman’s merits considered. M 3311, IA.

Are you warm, sincere and independent? If yes, US-educated (BSEE, MSSEE), widely travelled, N.Y.-settled, well-built bachelor in his thirties, management position, earning in $50’s, would like to hear from you with recent photograph and telephone number. M 3312, IA.