

Migration and Changing Nature of Conjugality in India

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Abstract

This article examines how migration reshapes conjugality in India. It explores how rural-urban and inter-state mobility, spatial separation, and digital communication transform spousal relationships. Migration reconfigures gender roles, emotional labor and family control while creating new possibilities for partner choice in marriages especially in Urban India. However, these choices are shaped by class, caste, gender and kinship norms etc. Migration does not simply weaken the marriage or shifts towards modern conjugal forms, instead it generates new types of intimacy, negotiation, a kind of hybrid transformation coexisting with enduring structures of inequality, control and obligation. This article argues that migratory conjugality in India is best understood as a hybrid formation where intimacy, obligation, autonomy and inequality coexist. This study contributes to sociological debates on changing nature of family, mobility and marriage in rapidly transforming societies in Indian context.

Keywords: - Marriage, Migration, Ethnography, Digital Intimacy, Conjugality, gender roles.

Methodology

This article is qualitative in nature. Ethnographic approach is used to collect data. Participants were selected using purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Data were collected through semi structured interviews with migrant couples or one of the spouses who migrated away from his or her family mostly due to their employment. This article maintains the anonymity of the participants for ethical consideration.

Introduction

Migration is the movement of people from their current place to a new place either across a nation or within nation or even within state. Migration has come out to be a defining feature as social change in contemporary India. Migration, be it rural-urban, inter-state or international, mainly happens because of employment in hope of uplifting one's living standard or because of education so that people have more

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exposure and opportunity, and these are to mention few amongst various reasons for migration. These types of mobility or migration have profoundly reshaped family life and marital relationships. One of the most important dimensions of this transformation is its impact on conjugality. Conjugality meaning, the conditions of being married, the mutual affection, economic and sexual relationship between a husband and a wife. Traditionally, embedded within kinship structures, caste norms and patriarchal negotiated across distance, cultural differences and uncertainty produced by migration.

Conjugality refers to the normative expectation and everyday practices that define relationship between two individuals married to each other including emotional dependency, sexual intimacy, domestic cooperation etc. Conjugality has historically been subsumed within marriage as a social institution regulated by family, caste, religion Uberoi, (2006). Marriage in India usually seen less as a private bond between two individuals and more as an alliance between families, where intimacy comes later than responsibilities and maintenance of social order (Patel, 2005).

Anthony Gidden's (1992) concept of Transformation of Intimacy and emergence of 'pure relationship' sustained through emotional satisfaction, communication and reflexivity provides a useful theoretical lens to examine changing conjugal expectations among migrants. Many migrant couples articulate marriage in terms of companionship, mutual understanding and emotional support. However, intimacy is always socially structured by Lynn Jameison (1998) and she further argues that the promise of equal intimacy often disguises persistent gendered inequalities in care, work and emotional labor. An inter-state married couple reveal the above stated tension clearly. The women (39) is working in Bangalore, and her husband (41) is working in Delhi. When talking to her she highlighted that "*hum roz bat karte hain and har din ki struggles share karte hain lekin mujhe hi uske free time ke hisaab se apna time manage karna padta aur mere bachche mere sath hain to mujhpar added responsibility hai*". (We talk every day and share our daily struggles, but I have to manage my time according to his free time, and since my children are with me, I have an added responsibility) Here, women who works and takes care of the children be the one who has to adjust her timing according to her husband's and children's schedule so, she said sometimes it becomes overwhelming for her to manage everything compromising her comfort and peace. This also hints that the fact of gendered roles even in a metro city like Bangalore is still prevalent.

Migration and the Spatial Re-configuration of Marriage

Migration often produces spatial separation between spouses, which results in commuter marriages, long distance marriage and living apart arrangements. Such forms of marriages challenge the normative assumption that continuous co-residence is the foundation of conjugal life. In many cases, one spouse often the husband migrates for work while the other remains in the place of origin to manage household responsibilities. Linda Basch, et al. (1994) conceptualize families as stretched across multiple locations through the circulation of resources, care and emotions. We can see that even within internal migration in India similar dynamics operate. Conjugalities become trans-local, maintained through phone calls, video chats, remittances, periodic visits.

An excerpt of an interview from a woman (25) whose husband (29) is a seasonal migrant worker, which illustrates this situation much better, when asked about how she manages all things including finance in absence of her husband, she said “4-5 mahine me ek bar aate hai, lekin ghar ko bachcho ko sabko dekhna hota hai, mai pass me ek ghar me karti hoon aisa lagta hai mai shadi-shuda hoon bhi ya nahi” (He comes once in 4-5 months, but he has to look after the house, the kids, everyone. It feels like I am doing it in a house nearby, whether I am married or not.”). In this narrative a woman claimed that she feels married and unmarried at the same point of time. She has to work throughout the day in people’s houses with her children because she is all alone with her children, so she is homemaker, caretaker, bread earner, all at the same time without support. This complicates the idea of marriage as a stable and continuous relationship, and it also highlights the emotional ambiguities of migratory conjugality. So, Responsibility is the synonym for marriage what sustains the thread of marriage. Similar arguments given by the study of Bapna (2012) from her study in Delhi, what she calls marriage means *Nibhana*.

Giddens’s (1992) theory of reflexive intimacy spatial separation intensifies the need for communication and emotional negotiation, making intimacy more consciously maintained. However, many participants suggest that increased distance also generates emotional strain, loneliness and gendered burden of adjustments indicating that spatially stretched marriages are marked by both intimacy and vulnerability. Kaur’s (2004) work on marriage migration in North India highlights how conjugality is deeply shaped by spatial displacement and entrenched kinship structures. She shows that women’s migration after marriage often across regions and linguistic boundaries is not merely a change of residence but a reconfiguration of

identity, belonging and marital relations. In such contexts, conjugality is mediated through husband's family with brides expected to adjust to new cultural norms while maintaining ties with their natal homes. Kaur further argues that this form of migration reinforces gendered hierarchies, as women's mobility is controlled and embedded within patriarchal expectations of duty and adaptation. At the same time, it produces new negotiations within marriage, where distance, unfamiliarity, and dependence reshape intimacy and power making conjugality a dynamic process rather than a fixed institution.

Re-negotiation of Roles

Migration significantly reshapes gender relation within marriage. Male dominated labour migration often increases women's responsibilities in managing finances, childcare and interaction with kin. While this may enhance women's decision-making power, it rarely translates into a fundamental challenge to patriarchal norms of our society. Rajan & Zachariah (2020). Female migration for education and employment introduces more visible shifts in conjugality. Working women migrants often expect emotional support and a more equal division of labor. Yet this article argues that women continue to bear the dual burden of paid work and domestic responsibilities despite the change in the status of women both in education and employment.

A respondent (women (34) working in a private bank in Noida and her husband (35) working with MNC in Pune) in an interview revealed "*mai aur mere husband working hain lekin unki responsibility mainly unka office hai but mere lie office ke sath bachche, unka school, breakfast, lunch, dinner, literally everything running this house is my responsibility. There is no choice or equality for me in this marriage*". This narrative of a married migrant women shows that structural gender inequality persists even within modern literate migrant couple. This also highlights that while migration, often seen as a transformative process, does not automatically disrupt entrenched gender hierarchies instead, it can lead to what scholars describe as the 'reconstitution of patriarchy' in new socio-economic contexts.

Hochschild (1983), in *The Managed Heart*, introduces the concept of emotional labor to explain how individuals actively manage and regulate their feelings to align with social expectations. The concept extends deeply into the private sphere of family and marriage, where emotions such as love and care are not merely spontaneous but are consciously performed and maintained. In the context of conjugality, this emotional labour is highly gendered with women expected to sustain

harmony, nurture relationships and absorb emotional tension. In the context of migration, such labour becomes even more complex as women often engage in “long distance emotional management” maintaining intimacy and stability through mediated communication. Thus, his framework reveals how emotions themselves become a form of work, structured by power relations and embedded in broader social and economic processes.

Migration and Mate Selection: Identity matters

Migration expands social networks beyond caste, kinship and region, increasing opportunities for love marriages and inter-caste or inter-state marriages. There is almost no parental control over the daily routine of young migrants, so they exercise greater power in partner selection for marriage, Mody (2008). Individualization is reflected where marriage is framed as a personal choice grounded in emotional compatibility, Beck and Beck (1995). However, participants who were interviewed suggest that family approval remains crucial. One such couple (women, 38, working with MNC in Bangalore and her husband, 41, working with MNC in Pune) described their experience –

“ hum dono Pune me college me mile the, aur 2 sal humne date kia sath rahe fir jab decide kia ki shadi karna hai, apne apne ghar me bataya aur fir unke disagreement aur approval me 1 sal lag gaye, aur bahot logo ko manane ke bad humari shadi hui.” (We both met in college at Pune, and we dated for 2 years and then when we decided to get married, we told our families and then it took 1 year for their disagreement and approval, and after convincing many people, we got married). This excerpt of an interview highlights the hybrid nature of conjugality where individual choice and familial authority coexist. This shows how families continue to play a decisive role in legitimizing the union and guiding post marital expectations. At the same time, couples seek emotional compatibility, intimacy and companionship within marriage, reflecting more individualized aspirations. This coexistence produces a hybrid form of conjugality, where personal desires and collective norms intersect, sometimes completing and at other times contesting each other, making marriage an ongoing site of negotiation rather than a fixed institution. Also, it is evident from the interview of few couples that even it's a love marriage, yet the caste, class, religion etc. matters when they want to make a decision on marriage due to their family pressure. The different markers of identity may be contextualized among few couples. Similar arguments given by Dhal (2021) in his study on migrants.

Intimacy and Digital Mediation

Migration intensifies the emotional dimensions of conjugality. People are tired of physical absence, job insecurity and precarious living conditions which place more strain on their marital relationship, and all these require sustained emotional labour to minimize risk of friction. Digital technologies play an important role in sustaining intimacy. Madianou and Millers (2012) gave the concept of ‘Polymedia’ which means a domain where people have access to multiple affordable platforms like WhatsApp, video call, email etc. and the choice of medium itself becomes socially and emotionally meaningful. This concept of polymedia helps in explaining how migrants choose among multiple communication platforms to manage emotions, conflict and closeness.

The digital intimacy medium chosen by various migrants which enables them to sustain their emotional connection and organize their day-to-day life as much as they could. While digital media creates a sense of closeness, it also intensifies expectation of constant availability. Furthermore, digital platforms facilitate new forms of surveillance and control, blurring the boundaries between care and monitoring. Thus, digital intimacy is ambivalent, and it also produces power inequalities within conjugality. A woman, 38, working in Deloitte in Gurgaon, married to a software engineer, 40, working in Merchant Navy, said during interview- *“ye to 5-6 months ke bad ghar aate hai to 8 cameras lage hain mere ghar me covering from top to bottom of the house. So that unke lie easy ho ghar ko check karna security wise, and video calls ki timing set hai daily, because unko allow nahi hota hai to hum sab unke time ke according apna kaam plan karte hain”*.

Zygmunt Bauman’s (2003) conceptualizes contemporary relationships as fragile, fluid and marked by uncertainty in the context of “Liquid Modernity”. Unlike earlier forms of stable, long-term commitments, modern relationships are increasingly shaped by individualism, mobility and a desire for flexibility, leading to what Bauman describes as ‘Connections’ rather than enduring bonds. Intimacy becomes ambivalent people seek closeness and security yet simultaneously fear dependency and loss of autonomy. This results in relationships that are easily entered into and exist often lacking permanence. In contexts of migration, his idea is particularly relevant as spatial distance, changing life conditions and mediated communication further destabilize conjugality, making marital ties more negotiable, contingent and continuously in need of maintenance. Hence, I would describe it as ‘liquid marriage’

in the age of liquid modernity, where fluid bonds and uncertainty in relations are very much prevalent.

Conclusion

Migration has emerged as a powerful force in reshaping the nature of conjugality in India by reworking intimacy, gender relations, spatial arrangements and family control. Rather than a linear transition from traditional to modern marriage, migration produces diverse and hybrid conjugality. Spatial separation, long distance marriages, and trans-local households challenge the normative idea of co-residential marriage. Stressing on the idea of spouses to actively sustain emotional bonds through communication, this article demonstrates the importance of examining conjugality as a lived and negotiated practice. Such approach is essential for understanding contemporary Indian marriages and for informing policies aimed at supporting migrant families and safeguarding spousal rights. While migration expands opportunities for choice autonomy and companionate intimacy, especially among educated and middle-class couples. It does not erode patriarchal norms altogether. Instead, conjugality is reconfigured where emotional closeness co-exists with gendered expectations of adjustment, care and sacrifice. It calls for greater attention to the consequences of migration in policy particularly with regard to migrant spouse's rights, emotional wellbeing and access to social support. Ultimately, understanding conjugality in an era of mobility is crucial to grasping the changing meanings of marriage, intimacy and family in contemporary India.

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