The major influence of globalization seems to be a change in how unmarried men and women want to find a spouse

A SHAPIRMAN, a doctoral candidate at the University of Connecticut, Department of Anthropology, conducted ethnographic research in Bangalore, India, on the dynamics of how young Indians select a spouse in a globally integrated world. Currently in the process of summarizing her findings for her thesis, Shapiiran, a daughter of Indian immigrants who is married to an American of English and German descent, spoke to SUJATA SRINIVASAN on key aspects of her research.

How is globalization affecting the process of spouse selection in India?

According to my research in Bangalore, the major influence seems to be a change in how unmarried men and women want to find a spouse. Love marriages are of greater interest (than arranged marriages).

Globalization is not a new phenomenon for India. The subcontinent has a long history of global trade and of foreign invasion, both of which influenced the indigenous way of life. What’s different about the way in which this round of globalization is affecting the marriage culture?

It’s absolutely true that foreigners and foreign trade has a long history on the subcontinent. This time the difference seems to be the manner of influence. The Indian government passed a number of economic laws that made it possible for foreigners to invest in India and build call centers, tech centers, etc. which have so markedly changed the economic landscape in these geographic areas. The middle-class, because of their skills, has been the main beneficiary. At the same time the media has played a tremendous role in exposing Indians to Western lifestyles, tastes, values, and habits. A peripheral service industry has grown to cater to middle-class Indians who have money to spend, and who find these services and goods are highly attractive; there are Western fast-food restaurants, Western chain stores, dance clubs and bars in Bangalore.

To someone like myself it is unbelievable to see the city transformed in this manner. When it comes to marriage norms the media again plays an important role. Bollywood movies have championed love marriages in the past but thanks to satellite TV the average urban Indian household has easy access to Hollywood movies and American television programs, which elevate love and romance. So this “round” of globalization has a much farther reach than in the past.

Have Multi-national Companies (MNCs), which have made young men and women economically independent, contributed to a change in the way they think about love and marriage?

The interview and survey data suggest that the main driving factor is economic change. People have more money now and more opportunities to spend it. Several MNC employees observed that if the economic context had been similar for their parents then they too would have purchased two-wheelers, cars, clothes, etc. and frequented restaurants. I was also told that working for an MNC is completely different than working for a traditional Indian company. The differences include extensive training, flattened hierarchies, equal-opportunity employment, much better pay and benefits, an emphasis on team-work and management opportunities for women. What this tells me is that, particularly for women, the opportunities are greater before and after marriage. It makes them less worried about any stigma associated with working before marriage, having to quit their jobs after marriage and, very importantly for the middle-class, it legitimizes the concept of a working mother. At the same time the men see both unmarried and married women in the workforce as equals, as managers, as three-dimensional people and can begin to relate to the concept of having a working wife who may want to continue to work after having children.

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The preliminary research I did suggested that people in Bangalore think that there is a major cultural difference developing between workers, particularly younger ones, at MNCs and their parents, as well as between MNC workers and their non-MNC age-mates. Also, I had heard of a few cases where people on this topic of mate choice - and those conversations were equally important in framing my understanding of how people are thinking about mate choice, marriage, and the effects of globalization.

What was your hypothesis and what are your key findings to date? I took a stance against popular opinion. I hypothesized that the major differences with respect to mate choice would not be between MNC employees and everyone else but rather between generations. While I don’t see specific about the results since they haven’t been published yet, I can tell you that the data supports my hypothesis.

For parents wondering if their children are turning into Americans — they definitely are not, even if they appear to dress and talk like them! It’s important to understand that values do not change overnight and that parents rephase my hypothesis.

There are those who acknowledge that an Indian arranged marriage is not regressive, and that their original perceptions were based on stereotypical images. What are your thoughts?

That’s so important to acknowledge. Arranged marriages are often very happy marriages and it is because in India the focus is on compatibility between the families, which usually means compatibility between the individuals getting married. For a long time caste and community were the major indicators of compatibility because those were the people who spoke the same language, ate the same food, worshipped the same deities, celebrated the same holidays by following the same rituals, and on and on.

So you really knew the kind of person you were marrying even if you didn’t know him/her in particular. You knew what your expectations were of you and they knew what your expectations were of them within the context of married life. Arranged marriages still dominate in India.

Mate choice research done in the US and other countries indicate that people prefer spouses who belong to the same socio-economic circle, who have the same level of education, are about the same age, religion and ethnicity. I think it is similar to the goals of arranged marriage but instead of the individuals doing all the hard work of seeking and attracting a mate the parents and other elders bear a lot of the responsibility and burden. Many of the young men and women who I spoke with in Bangalore said they wanted love marriages, but were having a hard time figuring out where to look for that perfect person.

What’s your final word on the subject? It’s wonderful to research a topic that people can engage in and that is so obviously important. More than 90 percent of people are married at some point in their lives and somehow they found a spouse!