
WEDDING FIRST, LOVE LATER

Arranged Marriage Among the Educated Classes

DURING WEDDING SEASON IN NEW DELHI, IT IS POSSIBLE TO SEE THREE, four, sometimes even five nervous bridegrooms riding through the streets on white horses toward women they barely know but will marry that evening. The little wedding parties are hard to miss: the groom, wearing an elaborate brocaded suit and a headpiece with streamers covering the embarrassment on his face, is escorted on his ride by a phalanx of relatives and a ragtag, improbably named "disco band" playing tinny, off-key marching music. The Hindu priests have deemed it an auspicious night, and it is easy, after stopping in traffic to let a few of these processions pass, to become carried away and imagine the thick Delhi air redolent with hope and fertility. Each procession can take half the evening to reach the site of the wedding, usually a home or, if the family has recently come into money, a big lawn at one of the new luxury hotels. The groom is often several hours late, which greatly annoys the bride's family but is not a catastrophe. The bride, meanwhile, has been closeted with her mother, aunts and

close friends, monosyllabic and nearly immobile under a gaudy red silk sari so extravagantly trimmed with gold that it can weigh fifty pounds. This is just as well, because she is meant to be a passive presence at her own wedding, with her eyes demurely cast down, like a silent maiden from an Indian miniature painting. Her preparations have taken all day and are a ritual in themselves. Flowers have been woven into her hair, small jewels applied over her eyebrows and an intricate lacelike design painted in henna all over her hands and feet. Afterward, she usually says she can remember very little of what happened that day.

One of my pastimes in India was going to weddings. People were always inviting me, thinking that an American woman would enjoy the spectacle. In three and a half years, I think I went to nine as an official guest. Other times I would stumble into a wedding at one of the big hotels, and if I peered in long enough, the parents would usher me in to congratulate the bride and groom. In India, a wedding is a chaotic pageant that can last until six in the morning, and more and more has become a public validation of a family's status and wealth. If a family is rich, it is not unusual to have a thousand guests. Even a working-class family will put on a feast for two hundred, ensuring crippling debt for the next decade. (At a wedding in the alley behind our house, the father of the bride, who made \$800 a year driving for the Vietnamese embassy, paid \$3,200 for the lunch party and dowry.) I went to Hindu weddings, Sikh weddings, and a Muslim wedding. Two of the weddings were given by noble families of the former princely states; at one the groom arrived in a silver horse-drawn chariot and at the other by elephant. At some of them, particularly one in a lush, plant-filled courtyard at midnight during a break in the summer monsoon, I was transfixed by the sweating faces of the bride and groom, who sat cross-legged in front of a sacred fire while the priest chanted Sanskrit prayers and poured sandalwood powder into the flames. There is a sensuousness to Indian weddings absent from the cool churches of the West. Others were gaudy celebrations at Delhi's first-class hotels, part of what Indira Gandhi once derided as "five-star culture," and were distinguished by melting ice sculptures and the video camera recording an event that would keep Delhi's old families fussing for weeks about all the new money in town. There was one thing, though, that marked almost every wedding I attended: the look of dazed terror on the bride's face as she began the rest of her life with a man who was little more than a stranger to her.

In India, an estimated 95 percent of marriages are still arranged,

including the majority of those among the educated middle class. As with so many other statistics in India, no one is certain of the accuracy of this estimate, and in fact many sociologists and much of the general public believe the percentage of arranged marriages to be even higher. When I first came to India, this astonished me. I knew arranged marriage was standard among villagers and the rural poor—in other words, most of the country—but I did not expect that an Indian man who had lived in the United States would come home after years of dating American women to marry someone he had met only three times. I did not expect college women in the big cities to gladly give their parents the task of finding them good husbands. I was more amazed when some would say yes to a prospective groom after a half-hour meeting. “I could decide maybe in a day,” a twenty-year-old New Delhi commercial-arts student told me. Then she thought a minute. “Well, maybe that’s a bit rushed. Maybe in a week.”

Marriage for love exists only among a very small slice of India’s urban elite. Rajiv Gandhi has a love marriage, as do most of those in the younger generation of Delhi’s fashionable circles. Almost all of our friends had love marriages, although I used to suspect that a few had been more arranged than the couple let on. (Often if two people started dating seriously, which could have hurt the reputation of the girl and prevented her from finding a good husband later, the parents quickly moved in and mobilized for a wedding to save themselves from neighborhood gossip.) Outside the big urban centers, attitudes are changing as well. In a 1973 survey of college men and women in the south Indian city of Hyderabad, two sociologists, Prakasa and Nandini Rao, found that “an overwhelming majority of the students wanted more freedom in selecting a future spouse” and concluded that “the forces of modernization are resulting in liberal attitudes toward mate selection among the college students.” But in that same study, more than a third of the students said they did not think it was necessary to know a spouse before marriage.

Arranged marriage is not unique to India and has in fact existed in some form in most societies throughout the world. In the West, only in the last three hundred years has love come to be seen as a part of marriage at all—a development that academics theorize evolved from the concept of courtly love in the Middle Ages and also from the impact of Christianity, which is thought to have deepened the bond between husband and wife by likening it to the relationship between man and God. Much later came industrialization, which increased

social mobility and broke down the extended family, a change that is just beginning in India.

Arranged marriage survives among the Indian middle class partly because a new kind of system has emerged. (The term *middle class*, as it is used in India, refers not to those in the middle economic group but to the people in the top 10 percent, who can afford to buy consumer products and live what the West would consider a semblance of a middle-class life.) A generation ago, a bride and groom rarely spoke to each other before the wedding. In many cases they had never even laid eyes on each other. They had no veto power over their parents’ choice, and if the marriage was miserable, so be it. Even now, for the majority of Indians, marriage still works this way.

But these days middle-class couples are allowed to meet several times before making a decision, and a few can go out once or twice alone. Although most marriages are still arranged among members of the same caste, engagements may last six months and more, and women may reject the choice of their parents. This is considered a substantial breakthrough, and some families insist the result is not an arranged marriage at all. Leila Seth, a socially progressive mother who is one of only ten women among the four hundred High Court judges in India, told me, “Frankly, I don’t think it’s such a bad system.” The prevailing opinion among the middle class is that not only do these marriages work, but they are more successful than those in the West.

In the summer of 1985 I set out to write a story on arranged marriages in the middle class. There had been a number of articles on the subject by Western correspondents, but most had focused on the entertaining pages of matrimonial ads in the Sunday newspapers. They do make for good reading. From *The Hindustan Times*: “Alliance solicited from industrialist/businessman of Delhi for graduate, 21, slim, fair, beautiful daughter of Delhi-based Brahmin industrialists. Write Post Box No. 5729.” From *The Times of India*: “Intelligent, well-read, beautiful, home-loving, English-speaking girl preferably from liberal-minded Christian family for extremely well-placed senior government executive, good-looking, late forties, must be willing to settle in North America, religion and caste no bar.” But I was more interested in discovering if there was something in arranged marriage that really did “work.” These were my early days in India, when I was filled with a newcomer’s enthusiasm and a determination to break away from my Western judgments. In retrospect, I realize there was something else going on. My own parents had been divorced, as had some of my

friends. I think I was searching for some kind of a “secret” to marriage that the Indians had and Americans did not.

Arun and Manju Bharat Ram were recommended to me as the ideal couple, an example, their friends said, of how arranged marriage functions at its best. It turned out they were neither typical nor middle-class: Arun Bharat Ram, a prep-school classmate of Rajiv Gandhi, was heir to one of the largest industrial fortunes in India. Indira Gandhi and fifteen hundred others had come to his wedding. Maybe the “secret” to the success of the marriage was simply money and connections. On the other hand, their families were prime examples of the highly Westernized industrial society in which parents still see marriage, at least for some of their children, as a business alliance. There were also love marriages in Arun’s family, and he himself had dated American women while studying in the United States. In the end, I found no one who better illustrated how Indians could turn what I thought was the relationship between marriage and love upside down.

The Bharat Ram house was an expanse of marble, with modern Indian art and security guards, set behind gates in one of Delhi’s leafier neighborhoods. It was August and insufferably hot, but in the Bharat Ram’s VCR-dominated study, I sank into the leather sofa and froze happily in the blasts of the best air conditioner I ever encountered in India. I sat there once to talk to Manju, then returned, feeling perversely like a marriage counselor, to put the same questions to Arun. He was forty-five, slight, and had a handsome, delicate face; dressed in a sport shirt and slacks, he looked as if he had just spent a pleasant morning on the golf course. He had the social ease and upper-class distance that marked a lot of Rajiv Gandhi’s school chums. Manju was traditional and more accessible. She had a pretty, warm face and wore an expensive silk sari. Her hair was in a long braid down her back.

They first met in 1967, the year Arun had come home to New Delhi after graduate school at the University of Michigan. He was twenty-six and about to start work in the family’s textile business—high time, his mother said, that he found himself a wife. Seeing no movement on the part of her son, she took matters into her own hands and began an all-points search. But Ann Arbor had changed Arun. Although he still felt “truly very Indian,” he also felt “a contradiction, coming back from the West, that I shouldn’t be getting into an arranged marriage.” Finally, he agreed to see a prospective bride, “with no strings attached,” just so his mother would stop pestering him.

That was Manju, a twenty-two-year-old graduate of a home economics college and the product of a conservative middle-class business family that never dreamed their daughter might marry a Bharat Ram—even though traditionally the bride’s family marries above itself on the economic scale. (Sociologists say that marriage with a bride of lower status assures the groom’s family that their new daughter-in-law will be sufficiently dependent on them.) Both Manju and Arun belonged to the prosperous Bania subcaste, which falls within the larger Vaisya, or merchant, caste. In India, arranged marriages both reflect and reinforce the caste system, which remains especially rigid among the rural poor. But unions like that of Arun and Manju prove that caste is still important among at least some sections of the upper class.

A marriage broker hired by Manju’s parents had introduced the two families, but Manju was no less reluctant than Arun was to take the next step. Even though she had always known that her marriage would be arranged, she shuddered when she remembered how a relative had been made to parade before her future in-laws and then quote from Shakespeare. “They discussed her coloring as if she weren’t there,” Manju remembered. “It really was like a girl being sold.”

Arun and Manju’s first meeting was over tea with their parents at a luxury hotel. Manju was so scared that she dropped her cup, but everyone quickly assured her this was a sign of good luck. Arun, meanwhile, still had stiff legs from sitting cross-legged during his sitar lesson that day, but all Manju knew about his limp was that she was about to be married off to a man who might not be “normal.” The only impression she made on Arun was that she was “a pretty girl” and “very quiet.” After the meeting, Arun told his mother, “I’ve done you your favor; now leave me alone.” But his mother persisted, and Arun agreed to see Manju again.

This time they went to dinner together and left the parents behind. “That was when I talked to her for the first time,” Arun remembered, “and I felt she was quite interesting.” Manju decided the same thing. “We had a lot of things in common,” she said. “He was always soft-spoken. He never tried to show off his family and his background. He always made me feel like an individual.”

They saw each other two more times, but with chaperones. At this point, the courtship had gone on long enough and a decision had to be made. Manju had already told her parents she would marry Arun if that was what his family wished—she had no major objections, she

liked him, and that was enough. A few days later, Arun's mother came to the house. "We want her," she said. Immediately the massive wedding preparations got under way.

"Obviously, I wasn't in love with her," Arun told me matter-of-factly about the days after the engagement was announced. "But whenever we met, we were comfortable. According to our tradition, that would lead to love. I was willing to accept that." Manju felt the same. "At the time, I didn't love him," she said, "but it was very exciting for me. Suddenly, I was very important. All of my parents' friends were a little envious about the family I was marrying into." The wedding took place six months later, followed by a honeymoon in southern India, where the two spent their first extended time alone. "We had always had people around us," Manju said. "This was awkward and difficult. One didn't know how much to give." She missed her parents and called them every day.

Afterward, she began a slow adjustment to life within a family that was much more sophisticated than her own. "These people were more aware of things happening around the world," she said. "At times, I felt as if I were stupid. But I learned how to cope with it. My husband helped." When they moved to their own house five years later, there was another adjustment. "It was a frightening experience, living by ourselves," Manju remembered. "There were times when we didn't know what to do with each other." She kept reminding herself that her mother always said a woman has to compromise a lot. "She also used to say, 'If you're unhappy, unless it's really bad, don't tell me.'"

By the time I met them, nearly two decades and three children later, the Bharat Rams had long since adjusted to married life. It is always impossible to know what is really going on in someone else's marriage, of course, but the Bharat Rams said they were happy, and I believed them. "I've never thought of another man since I met him," Manju told me. "And I also know I would not be able to live without him. I don't think I've regretted my marriage, ever." Arun echoed his wife. "It wasn't something that happened overnight," he said. "It grew and became a tremendous bond. It's amazing, but in arranged marriages, people actually make the effort to fall in love with each other."

It was a curious love story. As far as I could tell, they had it all backward. I had been raised on one of the favorite themes of Western literature, that of star-crossed lovers like Romeo and Juliet whose love is a force that exists on its own, a magic that defies the constraints of society. But here the Bharat Rams were telling me that love can be

concocted simply by arranging a marriage between people of common background and interests. In middle-class India, where the family is still more important than any of its individual members, love is believed to flow out of social arrangements and is actually subservient to them. "True love" is possible only after marriage, not before.

Middle-class India defines love as long-term commitment and devotion to family, which can be developed only with much patience and time. In their view, Americans instead define love as passion—which inevitably leads to disappointment in marriage after the glow of those first romantic years wears off. This reasoning always seemed to me a striking example of the Indian belief in their moral superiority over what many of them see as the decadent West, with its dismal record of divorce. Americans just give up, Indians believe, when the marriage hits the rough spots and falls short of an unattainable ideal. Sudhir Kakar, one of India's foremost psychoanalysts, put it this way: "Americans have too great an investment in marriage. The peculiar part is that you think any human institution should satisfy so many different needs. Americans say there should be romance, a mother for the children, intellectual stimulation also. For two people to be all that to each other is a bit much."

Many of the young women I met dismissed "falling in love" as something for teenagers and bad Indian films. A few said they had experienced "puppy love" with a boy at school but assured me they were too grown-up for that now. One of these women was Meeta Sawhney, the twenty-year-old Delhi University economics student who had convinced me that women would be my window into the Indian interior world. As she had explained to me: "When my friends who are in love talk to me, I think they sound silly." She had become engaged that summer to a childhood friend her parents had chosen for her. We had been talking for an hour in her bedroom when I finally asked if she loved him. "That's a very difficult question," she said. "I don't know. This whole concept of love is very alien to us. We're more practical. I don't see stars, I don't hear little bells. But he's a very nice guy, and I think I'm going to enjoy spending my life with him. Is that love?" She shrugged, indicating no worries about her future. "I know this is going to work. I know everything about him. I know his family. On the other hand, if I were in love with this guy, I would be worried because then I'd be going into it blindly."

I thought this was madness, or a good job of brainwashing, but later decided Meeta Sawhney was simply rationalizing what she had been

dealt in her life. What choice did she have? Only women from the most Westernized families have the luxury of falling in love before marriage, and even they had best do it only once. In America, a young woman can move on after her first, intense love affair fizzles, but an Indian woman risks gossip that might ruin her chances of a good husband later. One very Westernized couple I knew had dated quietly for a year and a half. At that point, the man's mother took him aside and told him that since the woman was from a good family, he could no longer risk her reputation by stringing her along. He had one of two choices: either cut off the relationship or make her his wife. He did the honorable thing and married her.

Most teenagers are still not allowed to date, so parents think their children will have no experience on which to make an intelligent decision about a lifelong mate. One of a mother's biggest fears is that her carefully penned-in daughter will make a getaway one day and fall for the first rogue who comes along. I remember the ruckus in one Indian family I knew when their beautiful niece fell for a handsome Mexican exchange student. I was rooting for her, but alas, one of the interloper's old girlfriends turned up and whisked him off to south India, breaking the niece's heart but averting a family crisis. Most girls are more docile and have come to believe what they have been told from childhood: that they will love the husband their parents select. "From the beginning, my mind was set that my parents were going to choose the right person for me," explained Rama Rajakumar, a thirty-four-year-old Brahmin from the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Brahmins are the highest caste in India. I spoke to her in Delhi, where she was visiting on a break from her job as a supervisor at the World Bank in Washington. She had been living in the United States for sixteen years. One evening in 1971, when she was just starting out in Washington as a World Bank typist, she had gone to a friend's house and met a man—a Tamil Brahmin, as it turned out—who was studying at the University of Texas. He seemed like "just another guy" to her. She heard nothing from him until two years later, when he sent a letter to the friend saying he wanted to marry Rama. She was not as thunderstruck as might be imagined. It was important to Rama that she marry a man of her own caste, and it was probably no less important to the groom. Tamil Brahmins are hard to come by in the United States, so it was not extraordinary that an eligible one would be interested in Rama. The friend quickly took on the role of marriage broker and wrote to both sets of parents in India.

First, the horoscopes of the prospective couple were exchanged. "They matched perfectly," Rama told me. The parents exchanged further details on family background and education. Then photos were mailed. A few months later, Rama's parents declared themselves pleased. Rama, who was twenty-two and had not had a date with anyone in the four years she'd lived in America, told them she'd marry the man. "I didn't know him at all," she said. She had not seen him since the meeting two years before, but she was certain that her parents knew best.

The wedding took place in 1973 in India. When I asked Rama if she had worried beforehand that she might not fall in love with the man, she gave me a puzzled look. "No," she said. "I just thought, He is my husband, and I love him. He is going to be everything to me from now on." Apparently he had been. After twelve years of "very happy" marriage, she said, "I still think he's a better husband than anybody I could have asked for."

I remember coming home stunned from interviews like this, mystified by what was going on in the minds of these women. They had seemed so much like me at first. What I did not understand at the time was the powerful sense of fatalism that Indian women have. Strict Hindus believe that their present lives have been predetermined by their karma, the accumulated sum of all good and bad actions from their previous lives. These beliefs are so central to the religion that they influence even the casual Hindu today. Women routinely told me that they had decided to marry a man half an hour after the first meeting because they felt it was "meant" to be. "It's the biggest gamble of one's life," said Ritu Nanda, the thirty-seven-year-old director of one of India's most successful home appliance companies. "So why not just leave it to destiny?" A traditional woman believes that she was married to her husband in her previous life and will remain married to him in the next. The women I interviewed were too sophisticated to endorse that view, but nobody dismissed it as nonsense, either.

This brings me to Meena, whose name I have changed for reasons that will be obvious. She, too, felt that her marriage was predetermined—but I'm getting ahead of the story. I first met her one summer, at the home of a friend. She was twenty-five, pretty and stylish, proud of being a "modern" girl who worked in her father's laboratory supply business. She was from a middle-class family, was ambitious and assertive, and spoke rapid, idiomatic English. She and her parents had been engaged in an active search to find her a husband. "My parents are

going about it in a very scientific way," she said. That meant they were checking the matrimonial ads and alerting relatives and mutual friends to be on the lookout for prospects. "I have already been shown several boys," she told me. (In arranged marriage parlance, men and women are "boys" and "girls." During the introductory family get-togethers, boys and girls are not said to meet but rather are "shown" to each other. This is in fact the most accurate term for the excruciating event.)

None of the boys had been up to Meena's standards, and she had rejected them all. "One of them didn't even have the guts to finish his own pastry," she said. "He had to ask his mother first. So I said, 'Good-bye.'" She had asked the boys who were businessmen detailed questions about their accounts, because "being in business myself, I want to know." She seemed to be in the market for a chief executive officer rather than a husband. I didn't have much hope that she'd find either one.

I was wrong. Seven months later, I got an invitation to her wedding. She had found herself a young doctor, her sister-in-law's brother-in-law, a plump twenty-eight-year-old with a soft, sweet face. She had first met him at her house, where both sets of parents made awkward conversation over tea. Then she and the boy went to her room alone for twenty-five minutes. She found him "very nice to talk to" and was "indifferent" to his looks; he was a big improvement over her previous prospects. "There were one or two cases where the guys physically repulsed me," she said. That evening his parents called and said the boy wanted to see her again, so the two met alone for coffee the next day. After that there was a month of silence. Then one day the boy's mother called Meena's mother, and the two women got down to business. The boy's mother wanted to know if Meena had become engaged to anyone else, and when Meena's mother said no, the boy's mother said the family would like to ask for Meena's hand. Meena's mother said she would check to see if her daughter was still interested and call back.

Meena thought about it for a moment, then said yes. "I was very indifferent, frankly," she explained to me later. "I used to always judge any proposal that came my way on the specific merits." Since the boy had good credentials and she had no major objections to him, she instinctively felt that the marriage would be right. She knew his family was more conservative than hers, but she did not expect that to be a problem. "I was very fatalistic," she said.

The two went on three dates before the wedding—once, shopping, followed by lunch at Pizza King; another time to a movie; and then

to an expensive dinner at the Taj Mahal Hotel. Afterward they sat in the lobby and watched the foreign tourists go by. It was all very glamorous. Meena had been spending her days shopping for saris and linens, helping with the guest list, and discussing the new Maruti car her parents were going to give her as a wedding present as the major part of the dowry her parents had promised her in-laws during the prewedding negotiations. Fortunately, Meena was discovering that she liked the boy "tremendously." The idea of a husband thrilled her. "I was excited about having a man around, living with him, and having all the frills and fancies," she said.

Her wedding started "on time," a mere two hours behind schedule. I arrived only a half hour late, thinking this would be socially correct, and found myself alone with the caterer. This gave me a chance to look around. The wedding was to be held in a large grassy area, open to the sky but enclosed on four sides by circus-style canvas fencing. Inside, rows of metal chairs sat facing a center platform with two red plush-covered thrones for the bride and groom. Waiters were still setting up a buffet of heavy chicken and lamb curries in a tent lit by fluorescent lights. Skinny men were hanging strands of marigolds from the canopy under which the religious ceremony would take place. It all had the feel of a small-town fair. As I watched the preparations, the hot afternoon gave way to a pretty orange sky and then a cool March evening. The grass smelled fresh, and Delhi's traffic rumbled in the background.

Meena finally arrived, looking predictably dazed, and was immediately ushered to a room in a little building near the wedding enclosure. The women of the family surrounded her, offering bits of advice. Her wedding dress was a heavy silk in hot pink, and her nose ring, similar in style to an enormous jeweled hoop earring, hung from one nostril all the way down to her lips. This made talking difficult, although she giggled a lot. I gave her a bouquet of sweet peas and wished her good luck.

At last the groom pulled up on his white horse and things got under way, in a manner of speaking. There is a certain aimlessness to Indian weddings that is confusing at first. Most of the guests ignored the religious ceremony, talking among themselves and wandering around while children chased each other through the grass. A rigid row of aunts had already positioned themselves near the food. None of this was considered impolite. Wedding ceremonies usually drag on for hours and only immediate relatives are expected to endure watching

them without interruption. But I loved much of what I saw. As a priest chanted Sanskrit prayers, Meena and the groom sat under the canopy in front of the sacred fire for several hours, the glow from the flames reflected in their faces. Toward the end, after Meena's father had slipped the priest some rupees to hurry things up, as fathers of Indian brides often do, Meena and the groom rose to circle the fire, the groom leading Meena slowly in a clockwise direction. The couple took seven steps, each one representing a blessing: food, strength, wealth, happiness, progeny, cattle and devotion. After the seventh step, the marriage was irrevocable. The priest sprinkled holy water on the couple, and soon they took their seats on the two thrones as the flashes from the guests' cameras exploded in their faces. Meena said afterward that her mind was a blank.

When it was all over around midnight, she said good-bye to her family and, like most Indian brides, broke down in tears. I had long since left, but I had seen these melodramas before. They are the crucial hysterical conclusion to any Indian wedding. From that night on, the bride is no longer considered a daughter in her parents' home. Instead she will move in with her husband and in-laws and begin a new life among a household of strangers. Indian brides handle these partings with great theatrics, often wailing uncontrollably, which I eventually decided was the only rational response, given what was in store for many of them. The bride's mother and sisters wail along with her, and so does her father, as she is slowly pushed through the crowd and into the car that will take her away. The first time I saw this I didn't even know the family, but I found it so wrenching that I cried too.

Meena spent her wedding night tossing nervously in a bedroom with her mother-in-law and several other women she did not know. In conservative Indian families, this is traditional; the new husband and the men sleep elsewhere. It was not until the next night that Meena was allowed to sleep with her husband, and then was relieved when he didn't want to make love. "That was rather nice of him," she said. "Normally, a boy just pounces on the girl." Both she and her husband were virgins. The marriage was finally consummated the following night, an experience Meena described to me as quick and physically "very painful." Neither husband nor wife talked much about what was occurring between them, although the next morning Meena noticed that her husband seemed glad that "he had got through it—no disaster had happened."

At first I heard from friends that Meena was ecstatic about her new

life. Then I began hearing that she was fighting with her mother-in-law. That seemed routine, so I didn't give it much thought. But then, not quite a year later, I was told she had moved back with her parents and that the marriage was over. I was surprised—not by a marriage that had turned out badly, but by Meena's return home. Ten years ago that would have been impossible for her; her parents could not have endured the scandal and she would have had to stick with a miserable marriage for the rest of her life. So I guess this was change. I went to see Meena a few days after her first wedding anniversary, on a depressing, already hot March afternoon. I sat with her for two hours, in a darkened upstairs flat with a view through the chick blinds of children playing in the dust of a dried-out park. She was thinner and looked badly shaken, and she cried as she told me she would probably get a divorce. It was awful for her. No matter what all the Indian magazines said about the increasing divorce rate among the middle class, the truth was that for women it was still considered shameful. Meena would have trouble marrying again. Her husband would not.

At first the marriage had been "okay," Meena said. At her in-laws' request, she had given up her job and was helping around the house, cleaning and cooking, primarily. She claimed she had no trouble filling her days, even though she could no longer go out and see friends as freely as before. "When you have time on your hands," she said, "you make things in the kitchen that don't need to be made, or eat things you don't need to eat." But she was eager to be a good Indian wife and so was willing to compromise. That especially applied to sex, which had not improved since the first night. Her husband was often impotent, and on the nights when he wasn't she found she still didn't enjoy "the act itself." Her mother-in-law, meanwhile, had been keeping a close watch on the time the newlyweds spent in their room alone.

After the first month, Meena felt her husband was withdrawing from her. Then he stopped talking to her altogether. Two silent months later he finally admitted that he had made a mistake and that his mother had pressured him to marry her. He no longer came to their room, sleeping on the terrace instead. "It was horrible," Meena said. "I was shattered." She decided that he must have "homosexual tendencies" or other "physical problems." Her mother-in-law, she believed, was "filling his ears with lies" about her. Another problem was the Maruti; the car delivery had been held up by the company, yet Meena's mother-in-law was demanding to know where it was. By midsummer Meena had moved back with her parents—"I would have committed

suicide if I hadn't come home"—and was taking daily tranquilizers and sleeping pills prescribed by a psychiatrist. She had seen the doctor only once because he would not treat her unless she and her husband came in as a couple. Then, that fall, her mother-in-law suddenly called to ask her back. By this time, Meena had found a good job in advertising, and her parents, more concerned about their daughter's happiness than what the neighbors might say, told her not to go. But off she went, determined to give it one last try. The reconciliation lasted a week, and after a fight with her in-laws, Meena was back home.

Who knows what the other side of the story was. I didn't have it in me to track down Meena's husband and present him with her charges just as the family was beginning divorce proceedings. Maybe Meena was impossible to live with. Maybe she had been too "modern" and aggressive and had made her husband feel inadequate in bed. I guessed he had been telling the truth when he said he had been pressured into marrying her. He probably was not so awful, although I suspected her mother-in-law was. The point is that Meena's experience, from the bride's point of view, was not at all unusual. Certainly her sexual problems were not.

In theory, during the first phase of an arranged marriage, a bride has tremendous seductive power over her husband. The first few years are meant to be spent in sexual passion, but when things cool off, as expected, then parents believe it is fortunate that they had the foresight to match up two compatible people who can settle down to the everyday business of life. "Love is fine," Usha Seth, a forty-one-year-old New Delhi housewife, told me. "But after the first few years, that's when you realize how important it is that a person is considerate and kind." Parents are also aware of the all-consuming lust that can rage between a young man and woman who have never had sex before. This is sometimes cited as one reason that the bride spends time away from her husband during the first year of marriage, usually in long visits to her family. Mahatma Gandhi says in his autobiography that it was this custom that helped keep him from drowning in sexual obsession during the first year of his arranged marriage, when he and his wife were thirteen. Every few months, his bride's parents would summon her home. "Such calls were very unwelcome in those days," Gandhi wrote, "but they saved us both." (The Gandhi biographer and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, however, sees something more significant in Gandhi's admission of adolescent lust. "How 'passionate' such a boy or man really is becomes a moot question, for we can only know of

the quantitative threat which he feels the need of confessing," Erikson writes. "But one thing is devastatingly certain: nowhere is there any suggestion of joyful intimacy." Erikson argues that Gandhi in fact harbored "some vindictiveness, especially toward woman as the temptress," which in his later years made him attempt, at first with mixed success, a life of celibacy.)

Whatever may be true of Gandhi, the common reality appears to be closer to what Meena experienced. The psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar, in a 1987 lecture delivered at the University of California at Berkeley, spoke of the "widespread sexual misery" among all classes in India. "Even discounting the sexual woes of a vast number of middle- and upper-middle-class women who come for psychotherapy as an unrepresentative example," he said, "there are other, direct indications that sexual misery is equally widespread in the lowest castes." The standard notion in India has always been that very poor and very rich women enjoy sex because they live free of repressive middle-class morality. But Kakar cited interviews with Harijan, or "Untouchable," women in Delhi—members of the lowest of castes—who described sexual intercourse as "painful or distasteful or both," portraying it "as a furtive act in a cramped and crowded room, lasting barely a few minutes and with a marked absence of physical or emotional caressing."

This does not surprise the country's growing band of "sexologists," as sex therapists in India are called. A foreign traveler cannot help but notice the advertisements for aphrodisiacs, sex "cures" and special medicines on billboards across India. "Most Indian men, whether rich, poor or middle-class, use their wives as sleeping pills," Prakash Kothari told me. "They do not know that foreplay and afterplay are important ingredients in the sex act." Kothari, the country's best-known and most publicity-conscious sexologist, a professional who should not be confused with the "doctors" who advertise on billboards, runs a thriving high-priced practice among the middle class of Bombay. He has done some serious research, yet has an unfortunate style that gets in his way. He autographed a copy of an American pornography magazine and gave it to an Indian woman journalist I knew; for me he brought out his collection of seventeenth-century miniature ivory penises and breasts from Rajasthan. Less flamboyant is R. H. Dastur, another Bombay sexologist and author of the best-selling *Sex Power*, a how-to book now in its sixth printing. In interviews that Dastur's researchers conducted with 695 middle-class women from 1983 to 1986 in Bombay, Dastur found that only 10 to 15 percent said they reached orgasm

during intercourse. The rest, Dastur said, “merely submitted to sex and went through it mechanically with the idea that it was their duty in order to have a male child.” Significantly, there is said to be no word in any Indian language specifically for “orgasm.” Non-English-speaking women use words loosely translated as “happiness” or “perfect satisfaction.”

Dastur is an internist who fell into sex therapy as a sideline after his patients began bringing their problems to him. Most were young men consumed by guilt over masturbation or convinced that it would lead to insanity. Other men were unsure about how to perform intercourse. Before marriage, said Dastur, “the large majority of the middle class has had no sexual experience whatsoever.” The most common problem among the married couples Dastur treats is premature ejaculation or impotence, which Dastur says the husband often blames on his wife. In one case, the impotence had lasted for seven years from the day of the wedding. Kothari claimed he knew of cases of impotence that lasted twenty years. Sudhir Kakar goes a big step further in *The Inner World*, his psychoanalytic study of Indian childhood, when he writes of the “ubiquity” of male impotence in India, blaming it on a “vicious circle that spirals inward in the Indian unconscious.” Kakar’s theory is that women are sexually threatening to Indian men, which causes “avoidance behavior” in sexual relations, which then causes frustrated, lonely women to “extend a provocative sexual presence toward their sons.” Certainly, Indian mothers make a huge emotional investment in their sons. Kakar believes this is a human reaction to the distance from her husband that a woman feels in a typical arranged marriage. Her son may well be the first male with whom she has had any sort of deep and satisfying relationship. This ultimately produces adult males, Kakar believes, who are afraid of being overwhelmed or “devoured” by their mothers. Thus, to complete the cycle, they fear the sexuality of mature women. Mama’s boys and the Oedipus complex are of course not unique to India, but the intensity and pervasiveness of the cycle may be.

In India, it is common for boys to sleep with their mothers until they are five years old. In Calcutta, I knew of a woman who still slept with her seventeen-year-old son. A psychoanalyst there told me that was not unusual. In 1961, a study of a community of business families near Delhi found that more than half the men described themselves as being closer to their mothers than to their wives. Another woman I interviewed, a government researcher whose arranged marriage had

split up, told me the relationship might have worked if she had demanded that she and her husband not live with his family. “But it’s too much to ask of a boy,” she said. “If he leaves his family and joins his wife, it’s sort of a crime. He’s known them all his life and he’s only known me for three years.”

Social historians say that procreation and duty were traditionally more important in Indian marriage than sexual satisfaction. Husband and wife have never been regarded as equals. Two thousand years ago, the upper-caste law codifier Manu wrote that a husband, “though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities,” must be “constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife.” Only the lower castes married for sexual pleasure, according to Manu. Khushwant Singh, a historian, journalist and social observer, is only half joking when he says that “all of the violence in this country comes from repressed sexuality.”

These views are hard to reconcile with the extraordinarily rich tradition of love and passion that is India’s heritage. The *Kama-sutra* is probably the most famous poem ever written on the finer points of lovemaking, and the erotic temple sculptures at Khajuraho still startle Westerners. The Indian gods copulate blissfully across the pages of the great epics, and every schoolchild knows the love story of the god Krishna and the beautiful milkmaid Radha. She was no worshipping doormat but rather a proud, passionate woman who cried out to Krishna that “my beautiful loins are a deep cavern to take the thrusts of love.” Those words were written in the twelfth century, in an erotic, lyrical love poem called the *Gitagovinda* that is still performed and sung throughout India.

Today, the legend of Krishna and Radha remains one key to understanding the relationship between marriage and love in India. The *Gitagovinda* made them the most popular couple in the Indian pantheon, coinciding with the Bhakti movement in Hinduism, which emphasized an intense personal devotion to a god, almost like that of a lover and beloved. Today, rural women in particular worship Krishna almost like a movie idol. Anyone who doubts that need only see the frenzy that occurs on his birthday in Brindaban, a village in the north Indian plains where thirty-five hundred years ago he is said to have seduced Radha and a bevy of equally inflamed milkmaids. Every year, tens of thousands of villagers and pilgrims mob the temples for the ritual darshan, or viewing, of the Krishna idol, typically a life-sized plastic doll hidden at the back of the temple behind wooden

doors. One September I watched the steadily rising fervor of the crowd in the sweltering, hour-long buildup before the doors were opened. Drums were beating, and devotional music was slowly building in intensity. Finally, when Krishna was revealed, the women moaned and cried out, throwing money, Indian sweets and strings of jasmine flowers at the idol. The writer Ruth Praver Jhabvala develops this desire beautifully in her short story about a widow, Durga, who was married off at a young age to an impotent old man. He has left her with money but also with the vague sense that "somehow, somewhere, she had been shortchanged." One day an old aunt, Bhuaji, begins to tell Durga the stories from the Krishna legend, and soon Durga's life changes: "Sometimes—when she was alone at night or lay on her bed in the hot, silent afternoons, her thoughts dwelling on Krishna—she felt strange new stirrings within her that were almost like illness, with a tugging in the bowels and a melting in the thighs. And she trembled and wondered whether this was Krishna descending on her, as Bhuaji promised he would."

The point is that the Krishna love story is about an adulterous affair, not marriage. Radha had a husband, whom she returned to. Krishna himself is said to have had 16,108 wives, one of the more amusing statistics I came across in India. But not one of those wives ever measured up to Radha. As for the *Kama-sutra*, it was an encyclopedia of erotic education meant largely for the aristocracy. The Khajuraho temples are more puzzling; no one has ever been sure why they were built, but they appear to have been enjoyed chiefly by the king and his court. For the large majority of Indians, love and passion have never been synonymous with marriage.

In that sense, the "new" Indian arranged marriage is something of a breakthrough after all. The middle class has essentially created an odd hybrid by grafting the Western ideal of romantic love onto the traditions of Hindu society—yet another example, perhaps, of the Indian talent for assimilating the culture of a foreign invader, much as the country absorbed Persian and Moghul art, architecture and language. In the end, the result is something completely and peculiarly Indian, including the notion that it "works." It is of course possible to match up two people of common backgrounds and interests and then watch as they fall in love. What are the American personal ads and dating services, after all?

The Indian idea that you can make two people fall in love, mostly because they think they are going to, at first seemed to me interesting

and in its own way romantic. It was part of the "secret" I was looking for, I suppose—that compromise and perseverance can be as important to a successful marriage as love. Certainly no marriage in the West remains the same as it was on the wedding day. In the end, I came to see that Indians do have important insights into marriage and love. And yet, I saw too many husbands and wives in India who seemed unconnected to each other, as if the invisible thread that you can sense between a happy couple had never existed for them. They had nothing in common but the social class into which they were born. Most of the marriages I knew were not disasters, but many of the couples didn't seem to be friends. There seemed to be an intimacy missing in Indian middle-class married life, partly because few people expect it.

And then there was Meena. "You know," she assured me, after tearfully finishing the story of her wedding and impending divorce, "arranged marriages do work."