Romantic Desires and Partner Selection

A Study of Young, Unmarried, Heterosexual Couples in Delhi

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Abstract— **This article examines how young, unmarried, heterosexual adults in Delhi select romantic partners while seeking monogamous, long-term relationships. Drawing on a mixed-methods study of heterosexual young adults in Delhi, the article combines ethnographic fieldwork with survey data to uncover how partner preferences reflect deeper class, caste, and gender expectations. While participants often rejected arranged marriage and claimed caste was unimportant, their partner preferences were coded in language signaling shared values, fluency in English, similar class backgrounds, and cultural compatibility. Most expressed a desire for monogamy and family approval, revealing that autonomy in dating coexists with the pursuit of social legitimacy. Emotional labor was unequally gendered, with women expected to maintain romantic rituals, while men often emphasized presence and support. Although romantic choice appears individualized, it remains tethered to larger social scripts of respectability, aspiration, and self-presentation. By analyzing how participants describe the "ideal partner," this article shows that romance is not a space of full freedom, but a performance of modernity shaped by structural constraints. Partner selection becomes a cultural negotiation—where freedom of choice is claimed, but only within the bounds of acceptability.** *(Abstract)*

***Index Terms*—Partner selection, romance, desire, heterosexual couples, Delhi, matchmaking.** *(key words)*

I. INTRODUCTION

Romance and dating in India are often seen as occupying a liminal space, especially in a context where young adults are discouraged from engaging in romantic or sexual relationships before marriage. These practices are seen as directly challenging the traditional, patriarchal systems of family-arranged marriages, which are largely within one's community. Nevertheless, research over the past two decades has indicated a shift in these cultural norms, as more young adults are choosing to engage in pre-marital relationships and have indicated a preference for "choice" or "self-arranged" marriages. Yet, as scholars in Sociology, have noted, there is a desire for "love-cum-arranged" marriages (Uberoi 1999) where they choose their own partners, but marry after gaining familial approval. This phenomenon can be seen in response to the circulation of globalized imaginaries of romance following liberalization, globalization and privatization in the 1990s. The following two decades have seen, along with several economic and sociocultural changes, a change in the trend of dating practices. In more recent years, this has been accelerated with the advent of dating applications, which, through their advertising and marketing, imply that dating should be based on individual choice rather than traditional familial notions of caste- and class- based marriages (Dattani 2024). Although there is plenty of sociological research on spouse-selection and marriage, there is a paucity of literature on the romantic or dating practices of young, heterosexual, middle-class adults in India. This article attempts to capture some of the dynamics of these changes to see how desires of romantic love and the choices of partner selection are made by young adults in India.

The article draws on a dataset of self-reported survey responses from young adults in Delhi to identify how romance is practiced and talked about. It asks: how do people choose who to date?

Ideas of romance are shaped by the narratives of romance that circulate. Literature on romance in Indian Sociology is severely limited, as most scholars have hitherto focused primarily on marriage. The closest that we have come to romance is through studies on "choice" marriages and elopement (Mody, 2002). Similarly, Abraham's (2004) work on the relationships among low-income youth in Mumbai categorises their relationships into typologies: *bhai-behen*, true love and timepass. Such works provide insights into how young women negotiate intimate relationships in a context where patriarchal notions of honour serve to control their sexuality and mobility.

Scholars have highlighted the connections between liberalization and globalization in the 1990s and the construction of romantic love as an aspiration to modernity, English speaking, gift-giving, and celebrations of Valentine's Day (e.g., Ahearn, 2001). Given this, along with the increased mobility of women with newer job opportunities and educational facilities, the fears of romantic transgressions multiplied. International scholars such as Illouz (1997) also highlight how the fears of young couples having sex were amplified in the United States as romance and courtship moved to the sphere of public consumption.

Work on globalization and love indicates a dissemination of commercial symbols of romance (Illouz 1997), which is important in this context for understanding romance as a ritualistic cultural form wherein public meanings of the sphere of consumption are translated into subjective lived experiences. For example, various discourses such as 'love at first sight' or 'companionate love' are used as frameworks to make love intelligible by her participants (Langford 2001). Similarly, in India, with globalization, romance became tied to consumption as greeting cards and Valentine's Day celebrations presented a homogenous romantic ideal (Brosius 2013). However, while mediatized images might use uniform representations of romantic love as passionate, the embodiment of romance itself is varied. For example, in Illouz's study, the participants considered stories of love at first sight extremely romantic, but they viewed them as unrealistic in 'real' life. This gap between the ideal and real becomes crucial in romance, where fantasy and desires are punctuated with sociocultural norms and practices. For example, Twamley's (2013) work on young Gujarati couples shows that they consider love at first sight to be lustful, thus rejecting this ideal of romantic, passionate love.

While cultural frameworks for love in India are well-researched within cinema studies (Dwyer 2000; Dwyer and Pinney 2002; Uberoi 1998; Uberoi 2002), there is a lack of literature on the practice of romance. Sociological studies in India have focused on marriage and changing kinship structures and norms rather than romantic love. Literature on elopement is interesting, because while the analysis focuses on marriage, the narratives of participants often reflect ideals of romantic love and courtship. For example, Ahearn's (2001) work in Nepal focuses on the changing kinship structures with the rise of elopements post female literacy programs in the village. However, the narratives quoted by her indicate ideals of love that are linked to the development discourse and modernity. For instance, most of her participants equate romantic love to 'friendship' that leads to success and growth in personal life. Similarly, Walsh (2004) presents an account of how romantic love was transformed in colonial India with ideas of colonial modernity. She shows how literacy and love were intertwined in the making of a colonial modern self. For example, English-educated men read stories such as Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and desired ideals of companionate and passionate love wherein the lover becomes everything from friend to goddess. Such a visualization of love was in stark contrast to the family *dharma*, wherein marriage/love was to be managed within a network of kinship ties. However, this yearning for a specific kind of romance reflected a construction of self within a range of sociocultural and economic practices that included working in Western jobs, living in nuclear families, colonial forms of dressing, and so on. She analyses popular Bengali manuals to assert that they molded companionate love to be congruent with family. Therefore, while women were expected to be educated to match the intellect of their husbands, the practice of arranged marriage remained intact, and love simply involved adapting to the husband's needs after marriage. This was in contrast to Western ideals of romantic love, where love and courtship ideally preceded marriage.

Therefore, literacy and education have had a significant impact on the courtship practices in India. Fears regarding women's mobility and increased cross-sex interactions in schools and colleges have been well documented (see Abraham 2004; Anandhi et al.). Abraham (2004) and Bhandari (2017) demonstrate how away-from-home spaces function as spaces of romantic liaisons, especially for women in India. Abraham (2004) identifies three typologies of relationships among low-income youth in Mumbai: *bhai-behen*, true love, and timepass. In her study, schools became spaces where various cross-sex interactions could take place. However, participants, especially in timepass or casual relationships (Abraham 2004; Bhandari 2017), often disavow physical intimacy. In serious, long-term relationships, physical intimacy is first deferred to confirm emotional involvement in the relationship and then justified on the grounds of demonstrating trust towards the male partner. These works give an insight into how young women negotiate intimate relationships in a context where patriarchal ideas of honor are strong. However, despite this body of work, there is a gap in understanding how young people choose partners and navigate romance in metropolitan cities like Delhi.

II. METHOD AND PARTICIPANTS

This study is based on a mixed-methods survey conducted among young, urban Indians to understand how they perceive, practice, and navigate romantic relationships in contemporary settings. The survey reported in this article is part of an ethnographic study conducted in three field sites in Delhi between 2018 and 2020: a mall in South Delhi, a park in North-East Delhi and a park in Central Delhi. Other methods of data collection included multi-sited ethnography and participant observation in a women's hostel in Delhi.

A survey questionnaire was distributed using snowball sampling to collect responses from unmarried and heterosexual young adults. The survey was distributed online and garnered over 40 complete responses. Participants ranged in age from their early 20s to mid-30s and were primarily based in Delhi and NCR. All of them belonged to middle-class, English-speaking backgrounds. The survey combined quantitative and qualitative question formats to capture both attitudes and personal narratives. These included Likert-scale questions (ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) assessed respondents' views on expectations around emotional labour, attitudes towards gift giving, dating in the city and so on. Further, other questions were based on selecting multiple options to invite participants to reflect on more nuanced dimensions of their romantic expectations and experiences, including: Most and least desired traits in a romantic partner, definitions of romance, views on family approval and relationship legitimacy and descriptions of ideal dating scenarios and gift preferences. This combination of scaled and narrative responses enabled a layered analysis—capturing not just what participants believe, but how they articulate, justify, and live those beliefs.

III. FINDINGS

Preference for choice-marriage

More than 65% of my respondents suggested that they did not think that arranged marriage would be a good choice for them. They also did not want to look for a partner on matrimonial websites through the system of arranged matchmaking. Most of them marked neutral to the question of whether love was more important to them than familial relationships. This indicates an ambivalence. At the same time, about 50% of the respondents of the survey claimed that their family would approve of the person they would choose to marry.

"One-love-for live" discourse

A majority of the participants desired monogamous, long-term relationships. Most of them, especially women, emphasized the desire for having "one-love-for-life". Even in my field, women suggested that they wanted to have romantic relationships, but desired commitment and monogamy that would lead to marriage. I saw this pattern in my field as well, where participants voiced a nostalgia for 'traditional times' where 'true love' existed. What I found most significant about this discourse, however, was its citation as a 'return to tradition'. This sentiment reflected the desire for long-lasting true love that was not governed by lust, rather, it emphasized a 'cool old-school love' ought to be back in fashion. The integration of traditional values, such a love-letter writing and the desire for only one companion, is reinscribed within larger socioeconomic and political structures that deem 'modernity' as a threat to traditional values. The immediate gratification of romantic desires in this context is devalued and considered not just uncool but also immoral.

Participants navigated a careful balance between wanting to be seen and needing to remain invisible. Women, especially those living in conservative households, talked about maintaining two versions of themselves: one for home, and one for their romantic life. Some reported having to curate their digital presence to avoid suspicion. They said that they don't post pictures of themselves on social media as they can be "caught" by relatives". Peer groups too influenced disclosure. Being in a committed relationship carried social currency, but promiscuity or multiple breakups were often judged, especially for women. Respectability wasn't only about being private—it was also about appearing stable, monogamous, and future-oriented.

Emotional labour and gender

Women respondents more frequently articulated expectations around emotional labor: from remembering anniversaries to showing up for small gestures. Men, while supportive of romantic celebration, tended to de-emphasize ritual or material aspects. This reflects the emotional asymmetry in romantic relationships observed by Langford (2001), where women are often positioned as caretakers of emotional tone. Many women expected their partners to exert visible effort in celebrating special occasions, while gift-giving was seen as important but not necessarily expensive. —creativity and emotional significance mattered more than price. When asked about gift-giving and Valentine's Day, responses revealed ambivalence. Participants distanced themselves from overt commercialism, preferring "thoughtful," "personalized" gifts over "expensive" ones. As Illouz (1997) argues, the commodification of love has introduced contradictory desires: to express uniqueness through standard rituals. Respondents navigated this tension by rejecting clichés while still engaging in symbolic acts of affection. Celebrating love was not dismissed entirely—but the form it took mattered. For many, handmade gifts or shared time held more meaning than flowers or jewelry. These preferences signal a desire for "authenticity" amid the mass-market romance economy.

"Suitable" Partners

Caste was cited as the "least important" trait in a partner by 50% of the participants, and none of them selected caste as a trait when choosing "most important" trait. In contrast to caste, traits such as loyalty and intelligence were the most valued traits. However, despite this, there was a preference for "suitable partners" who were "equals". Equality here was mainly defined as someone who is emotionally attuned, stable, and ambitious.

Although none of my participants alluded to caste and class as markers of a "suitable partner", these preferences were encoded. They were embedded in a language of "personal preference" and "choice", but indicated class-and-caste based categorizations. These findings resonate with Bhandari's (2020) study on matchmaking and spouse selection practices amongst the middle-class. For most men and women, especially those from upper-middle classes, education was cited as a non-negotiable. Further, many participants alluded to desiring partners who had good English-speaking skills and could hold a conversation in English. Other indicators of class preferences included preferring people from certain professions, such as Doctors and Engineers.

While most of my participants directly suggested that caste was not important or did not exist in urban India, phrases like "same values," "from a good family," or "modern yet rooted" were recurring. In many cases, the idea of a romantic match rested on shared cultural capital: a mutual understanding of etiquette, aspirations, and lifestyle elements often determined by caste-class location.

While most participants were middle class, their spatial mobility varied. Those living in hostels, rented accommodations, or joint families described limited access to private space. As a workaround, they turned to commercial spaces like cafes, cinemas, and shopping malls. For upper-middle class participants with more flexible lifestyles, mobility was broader and less surveilled, affording more experimental relationship styles. Yet this freedom was still filtered through class privilege. Some participants from smaller towns described shifting their romantic practices once they moved to metropolitan cities: from secrecy and coded texting to open dating and public displays. These differences highlight how class shapes access to privacy and discretion.

Material desires

The significance of physical appearance and material desires such as being with someone rich or someone who gives expensive gifts is often downplayed significantly by both men and women. Illouz (1997) writes about the construction of romance as the opposite of capitalism, which is a popular perception that my participants hold true. In several episodes of the dating reality show, MTV Splitsvilla, participants have to arrange their 'desires' in life into a hierarchical pyramid. In almost all, 'money' is positioned last, even when 'career' is usually placed in the top-3 spots. Family is overwhelmingly at the first place, followed by friendship/love. In one such episode, the partners had to guess each other's choice and when the man placed 'money' higher on the list, the woman took offence, leading to an argument. This is very interesting as career is viewed as passionate – again constructed as the opposite of work to meet basic needs or money.

Women are careful not to appear as 'gold-diggers' and men do not want to be labelled 'superficial' or 'Casanovas'. Read this conversation with Neha below:

N: I have this ideal Mills and Boon's kind of romance where the guy is tall, dark, handsome and rich and is very caring, very lovely. He takes you out and gives you big gifts. But this remains a very…. In a way, when you evolve this becomes a silly idea… it remains though… but you get practical. You realise that ya, sometimes these things are nice you know, the material aspect.

M: Did your partners fit the bill?

N: So, one of them was handsome and rich, the first one also was handsome, like handsome by school standards [laughs], he was rich and would throw parties for my birthday and all that. But I couldn't find the value systems fitting anywhere. And as I grew up, I realised that money is also a matter in my hands. As a child, I grew up to think that the guy would provide.

M: So now what do you think practically?

N: Well. I still want someone rich; I want to have a nice lifestyle. So, I'll give you an example. Like Vicky Kaushal, he's extremely talented and doing well in life. He is TDH [tall, dark, handsome], charming. Yet, he is not arrogant. He has very grounded values. He seems like a normal middle-class boy with normal values. So, M&B is like the foreign idea, this is the Indian one. Indian guy—extremely rich, yet humble, kind. It is a difficult mix to find in this world.

Asking participants about their romantic ideals provided an entry point into understanding the significance of money. Neha found a balance while talking about her 'Indian ideal' – a balance between the Mills and Boons fantasy and the cultural context. She also made sure to assert that beauty was not the only criteria but that it should go together with the value system. Many women thus confessed that it would not hurt if their partner had been 'better looking'. Priyanka said,

I have to say [my boyfriend] is quite average. Sometimes I wish he looked better. I had all these desires for a chocolate boy – someone really cute looking. But I realized that good looking boys are not good natured sometimes. Also, I am not that beautiful so why will they like me?

Sagar's account also follows a similar track:

I am not good looking so how I can ask for someone who is the most beautiful woman in the world. It's all relative, part of natural selection. I would obviously love to be with someone very beautiful, but eventually I do not know if that relationship would last – because everyone would want her, no? [laughs]. I think inside beauty should matter more.

His conflicting narrative resonates with several men and women who believe that couples' appearances should be complimentary. This is phrased using Darwinian terms such as 'natural selection' where primal attraction can only take place between two equals. Another significant aspect he highlights are the insecurities of being with some 'beyond your league'. Reshma corroborates this:

I was with this really handsome boy, and I felt so insecure all the time because women would give us these looks. I knew they were thinking that I did not deserve him… I know this because I also judge people like – oh isko itni sundar biwi kaise mil gayi? [how did he manage to 'get' such a beautiful wife?]. Eventually I felt so insecure that I decided to end things. Please don't think I'm shallow, it was just too much for me.

Sameer, an aspiring businessman said,

I know I am handsome, and I do want my girl to be beautiful so that I can show her off. I want her to dress in a classy manner, take her out to fancy places. I want to start a business eventually and this is the criteria for my partner. I cannot take a woman who is ugly and not well-dressed to my business parties, it would be an embarrassment.

The insecurities of 'not being enough' and the insecurity of 'being embarrassed of your partner' come through clearly in this narrative. Further, romanticized ideals of beauty and class – especially through cinema and advertising are discussed. For example, Neha desired a partner like Vicky Kaushal – whom she views as handsome, rich and someone who is intelligent and perhaps caring. Sameer is explicit about how certain lifestyle' choices and the performance of 'class' shape romantic coupling. Subsequently, there is a belief that couples' appearance should be complimentary. Ironically, 'inner beauty' is remembered as an after-thought and the overall assertion by most participants continues to be that that value-systems matter more than money or physical appearance.

IV. Conclusion

This study finds that the selection of a romantic partner among young, urban Indians is not merely a matter of personal taste or compatibility, but a deeply social act encoded with classed and caste-based anxieties. While participants express an overt commitment to monogamy, emotional openness, and modern companionship, their partner preferences reveal the persistence of traditional hierarchies cloaked in the language of "choice."

The preference for someone "like-minded," "from a good family," or who "speaks good English" reveals how caste and class still structure intimate possibility — not through explicit mention but through culturally legible proxies. Partner selection thus becomes a negotiation between individual desire and collective acceptability, a site where romantic freedom is exercised but never fully untethered from social obligation.

Family approval remains central to legitimizing choice, even when love precedes formal engagement. Participants seek the security of acceptance while trying to preserve the authenticity of their romantic narrative. In this sense, the ideal partner is not simply someone to love but someone one can present — to parents, peers, and social media — without shame or fear.

Romance here becomes a form of social sorting — where class performance, cultural fluency, and emotional labor are weighed not only for love, but for their capacity to translate into future respectability. These findings challenge simplistic dichotomies of tradition versus modernity, showing instead how the two are being stitched together in real time — in metro rides, on dating apps, over homemade gifts, and in whispered reassurances that "we'll make this work."

In choosing partners, these young adults are also choosing how far they can stretch the bounds of the acceptable — and where they must compromise.

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