

# Marriage & Wellbeing in the Indian Context: An Evaluation

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**Abstract:** The association between marital status and various aspects of physical and psychological well-being is one of the most well-established ones in the field of Psychology (Maastekasa, 1992). It is agreed upon that those who are married are better off than those who are co-habiting or single, and in turn, those who are co-habiting are better off than those who are single in terms of subjective quality of life and physical health (Maastekasa, 1992). Indian data also has shown similar leanings: in a large scale survey done in India, it was found that unmarried women reported higher levels of negative affect in comparison to women who were married at that time or had been married previously, and unmarried men reported higher levels of negative affect in comparison to married men (Agrawal et al., 2011). Does this imply that marriage is always desirable? The following paper sets out to answer this question particularly in the Indian context. Though most of the research that is quoted to support the arguments made is Western, it is due to paucity of relevant research data from India, and it is taken care at every point that the researches that are quoted are embedded in an explanation that is sensitive to the Indian reality.

**Key words:** Marriage, Wellbeing, India

Just as family is a basic fundamental social system that is universal, marriage is a fundamental relationship to be found in almost all societies. In fact, it is so universal and fundamental of all social institutions that its necessity in the civilised world is hardly ever contested, and till the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the voices against marriage were very few and faint. In the last few decades though, resistance to marriage has garnered a lot of visibility: in November 2010 ‘Who needs marriage?’ featured on the cover of TIME magazine, as did ‘I Don’t: The Case Against Marriage’ in Newsweek (2010), ‘Is Marriage Still Worth It?’ in Forbes (2013) and several articles in major media mouthpieces like Daily Mail, Atlantic and AM New York.

In response to the increasingly louder getting voices in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century against marriage in the general public discourse, marriage as a necessity has begun to be debated and even redefined in India. In urban India particularly, love marriages and live-in relationships are taking place more than ever before and thereby some of the older dynamics in a marital relationship that made marriage advantageous or disadvantageous are also changing. The sentiments of the urban, educated Indian youth of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century are similar to the opinions echoed in the book ‘Open Marriage’ in which authors George and Neina Oneill (1984) write: “the meaning in marriage today must be independently forged by a man and a woman who have the freedom to find their own reasons for being and being together. Only by writing their own open contract can couples achieve the flexibility the need to grow.” Yet this is far from being realised on a practical basis in our country due to the stronghold of culture and collectivism and the fact that marriage is functional for the society. Thus due to a clash between traditional blueprints of living and loving, prescribed by marriage as it is in India, and the new ways of thinking brought about by emphasis on individualism and growing emancipation of women, marriage is fraught with controversy in the present times as to how good it actually is for an individual.

With marriage, a relationship gains social acceptance and sanction is provided for sexual activity and co-habitation. That the LGTB community has placed marriage at the heart of its political agenda says something. Furthermore, society also actively provides dividends to get married through its various institutions and policies, be it in banks or insurance companies to name a few. Society, in various ways, also punishes those that choose to stay out of it or get out of it through divorce. Many a times people marry more out of societal or external reasons than out of acting on personal preference. There are thus a number of disadvantages of marriage, more so in the Indian context as will be explored shortly, the number of people choosing to get married notwithstanding.

Marriage can be constricting and shackling due to the cultural baggage that it inevitably carries with itself (Aidala, 1989). It can be seen as subjecting a relationship to various impositions, legal and social. Individual liberty no doubt suffers in such a case, as in addition to the impositions, need for autonomy and personal growth are also thwarted to some extent. To quote Franz Kafka in one of his journal entries “I must be alone a great deal. What I accomplished was only the result of being alone” (1988). For such a man, even when there is mutual love with a woman, marriage can be a difficult choice to make. Another glorious example of such a dilemma is that of Kierkegaard, widely known as the grandfather of existential philosophy, who called off his engagement because of his failure to reconcile the prospect of being a husband with his idea of being a writer first. His fellow existentialist Sartre and his partner Simone de Beauvoir were also famously against marriage.

Another factor that has been seen to make marriage unpopular is that it seems to be synonymous with appropriate gender role performance. According to American historians Mintz & Kellogg (1988), marriage is increasingly being seen as a trap—“circumscribing a woman’s intellectual horizons.” It is not difficult to envisage that finding out who one is and what one wants from life could slip down the priority list after marriage, and more so after childbearing. The modern Indian woman, educated and emancipated, may not thus want to get married till a certain age when she has a sense of achievement and is contended with it. This is reflected in a phenomenal increase, particularly during the last two decades in India in average age of marriage among both men and women. Not just intellectual, social horizons, meaning ties with friends and relatives, also tend to diminish after marriage, particularly for women in the Indian context. The bride is traditionally expected to wholeheartedly accept the bridegroom’s family

as her own and fit in perfectly, and forego her relations with her family of origin. The latter may not be completely true in all cases, particularly in today's age and time with increased ease of access to various means of communication. However, the '*kanyadaan* ideal' amply justifies and eulogises this and daughters being others' property or temporary guests is a well-known dictum in the Indian society. Consequently, after marriage most of the older ties tend to fade away and in cases where the bride is from a lower caste, such ties are even completely severed at times.

What makes this more of a problem is the fact that these impositions just mentioned, somewhere do support traditional hierarchal roles. Feminists have since long voiced their concerns regarding how marriage in many ways supports patriarchy- "the loss of name, having to move in with the husband to his domicile, and the unquestioned legal assumption that in exchange for financial security a wife provides for sexual satisfaction and domestic services" (Millet, 1970). Radical feminists of the 1960s and 1970s were unanimous that marriage was an oppressive institution for women.

Amongst the Hindus, who compose 80.5% of the Indian population, marriage is actually sacrosanct, and not just a contract that is dissoluble. It is in fact believed to be a bond for lives to come. In such a case, plus the fact that regardless of religion, society itself has put so much value on marriage, it is difficult for people to get out of unhappy marriages in our country. Even when people do choose to get out of unhappy marriages, the backlash from society is enough to scare away other people thinking of getting a divorce. In India, divorce is still not a realistic option for most, most particularly women. Sometimes people put up with a difficult and even irretrievably damaged marriage just because of kids, and this is not an infrequent narrative in our country. Empirical evidence however points to the futility of such an exercise. In 'Psychotherapy with children of Divorce', Gardner (1993) says that psychiatric disturbance in children from broken families is less than children in intact but unhappy homes. However, whether this applies as well in India, considering the powerful role community approval plays here can be argued upon. Perhaps the social and financial benefits (the latter for women who are mostly financially dependent on their husbands) are way too important to be disregarded.

The relationship between marriage and violence also is not easy to miss. Wives are often viewed as property, particularly in the Indian context in which the daughter is passed on from father to husband, and has had traditionally no separate identity of her own. Furthermore, what is alarming is the attitude of the youth of India that will be of marriageable age in a decade towards use of physical abuse by a man against his wife. If the Global Report Card on Adolescents 2012, released by the UNICEF is to be any indication, 53% girls and 57% boys in India believe that a husband is justified in hitting his wife. The religious imagery that pervades marriage gives a husband far more power than the wife, say the 'Pati Parmeshwar' archetype, and even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it continues to be manifested in various ways that subjugate women. It is also worth debating the absolute necessity of religious and legal sanction for a relationship, regardless of all these disadvantages just discussed.

However, the picture is not entirely bleak. There are several advantages too that marriage provides to the individual. The exclusive sexual bond that marriage begets makes it a kind of emotional relationship like none other. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it holds true in the Indian context because of the heavy emphasis placed on monogamy and disdain of extra marital affairs. The physical and emotional contentment in the sexual relationship in marriage is fundamentally different from that among those co-habiting or single. This sexual union is also seen as 'permanently' exclusive in the Indian society, thanks to the concept of 'being together for lives to come' among the Hindus, and thereby provides lifelong social insurance.

There is also something about marriage that moves people towards a healthier way of life (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). For instance, married men have better immune systems, be it due to support or nagging by partner to monitor one's health regularly (Cohen, 1997). Marriage seems to change self-destructive patterns. Unmarried men and the divorced as well as widowed, lead riskier lives that endanger their health and even life (Horwitz & White, 1998). Furthermore, Berkman and Breslow (1983) have found that the non-married have higher rates of mortality than the married: 50% higher among women and a startling 250% higher among men. Durkheim (1952), in her protection theory, talks about how being married acts as a buffer against suicidal ideation. The married are only half as likely to commit suicide as the bachelors and one third as likely as the divorced (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

The positive effects are not just in terms of physical health but also mental health. Married people report lower levels of distress and depression, and 40% of the respondents report to be very happy with their lives, compared to about 25% among the single (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Reviewing a vast literature that exists on marriage and out of their own research, Waite and Gallagher (2000) in 'A Case for Marriage' conclude "Sure smoking kills, but so does divorce. Yes, a college education boosts a man's earnings, but so does getting and keeping a wife. Of course children need parental attention, but they do best if they get it from both a father and a mother." In addition to "better material care, correction of inadequate behaviour and fulfilment of sex and security"- the basic needs- there is hence also a host of benefits for children (Weiss, 1969). The research that points to children in unhappy homes being more subject to damage than those in broken homes, actually looks at conflict ridden/violent/severely strained marriages rather than marriages in which the partners just feel no love for each other anymore, thereby wrongly favouring divorce, as Waite and Gallagher (2000) point out in their book.

Furthermore, being married, and hence being secured of the commitment of one's partner- lifelong in the Indian context even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century- is likely to impart greater meaning in life as there's someone to live for. Several other functions are served by marriage that make it desirable: self-affirmation that is on-going and support in stressful times being particularly compelling (Weiss, 1969). In sum, health, wealth, sex, happiness, benefits for one's children and a long life- that's what marriage means to most people mostly because of the promise of permanence it entails (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

The relationship between marriage and well-being, thus, is clearly a complex one and there is no universality in whether marriage is desirable or not in totality. It is and it is not, for a variety of reasons, and the complex tapestry that Indian society is, makes the equation all the more complex.

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