

Introduction

In my next life, I hope I am not born a woman and if I am, I will not get married.

—Sarla, 48

Shādī bakwās hai [marriage is rubbish]. No one should get married . . . but marriage is *zarūrī* [compulsory] . . . since I got married, I have never felt *kī sahī hai* [that it is correct/right] . . . *par nibhānā partā hai* [but it is a relationship you have to keep].

—Jaya, 45

Both Jaya and Sarla had moved to Barampur village,¹ in the north India state of Uttar Pradesh, following marriage. Sarla had moved from a nearby district, while for Jaya, this move had entailed traveling over 1200 kilometers from her native state of West Bengal, crossing multiple boundaries—of region, state, language and caste—to become a wife in what I term a “cross-regional marriage,” in contrast to a “regional marriage.” Since the early 2000s, cross-regional marriages have become the subject of much media speculation in India and internationally (e.g., Agal 2006; DHNS 2019; Huggler 2009; Masoodi 2014; Siwach 2010; Bajwa 2019; Bedi 2003; Raghavan 2015). These reports condemned the “buying” and “trafficking” of “poor” women from the southern, eastern, and non-eastern states of the country to men in India’s bride-deficit northern and northwestern states—Gujarat, Haryana, Rajasthan, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh. The reports provided descriptions of “hundreds of thousands of women and girls forced into sexual and domestic slavery” (del Estal 2018), being “sold like cows and goats” and “treated as commodities” that could be “recycled and resold” (Gooch & Jolley 2016).

What also appeared were reports of NGOs involved in the “rescue and rehabilitation” of “trafficked” women “coerced into marriage.”² In the midst of this, the issue also became the subject of academic work that described these as “across-region,” “bride-import,” “cross-border,” “cross-region,” and “long-distance” marriages (Ahlawat 2009, 2016; Blanchet 2008; Chaudhry & Mohan 2011; Ibrahim 2018; Kaur 2004, 2010a, 2012; Kukreja 2018a, 2018b; Kukreja & Kumar 2013; Mishra 2016; Mukherjee 2013). These studies note the bringing of brides not only from other regions but also across the border from Bangladesh and Nepal.

This research stemmed from an interest in interrogating the moral panic around the status of “trafficked” women who became brides in geographically distant and culturally distinct rural communities. Unlike existing studies on the topic, however, it not only makes cross-regional marriage the subject of analysis but incorporates a focus on regional marriage as well. This book is, thus, about the post-marital experiences of women, like both Sarla and Jaya, who *migrate for marriage* to this rural context. The central argument of the book is that in everyday contexts, many of the difficulties that cross-regional brides face are in fact shared by women married regionally. By distinguishing where distance and regional origins make a difference, I will aim to address the undue attention to supposedly “problematic” or “foreign” wives, who are brought from far away. I begin with a discussion of some of the key issues that have emerged in the literature on cross-regional marriages in India.

Cross-regional marriages have been described as a “new” phenomenon (Kukreja & Kumar 2013, p. 5), “hitherto undocumented,” “unusual,” or “unconventional” (Kaur 2004, pp. 2595–2596), even though several studies suggest that such marriages have a long history in the northern region.³ Writing on Punjab in 1925, Malcolm Darling, for instance, described “a regular traffic of women . . . imported from the hills of Kangra, the plains of the Ganges and the deserts of Bikaner” ([1928] 1977, pp. 49–50). More recent ethnographic studies also describe cases of the “buying of wives” in the 1970s and 1980s in villages of north India (Jeffery & Jeffery 1996, pp. 75–77; Raheja 1988, p. 236; Sharma 1980, p. 141). Studies suggest that while such marriages have existed historically, they are no longer exceptional (Chaudhry & Mohan 2011), with men of almost every caste bringing cross-regional brides (Kaur 2004) and the influx of brides into the north Indian states increasing over the years (Mishra 2016).⁴ Ravinder Kaur contends that long-distance, cross-region marriage is becoming “a socially, if not numerically, significant category of marriage migration in India” (2012, p. 79).

In the academic writing, three significant issues have highlighted how cross-regional marriages represent a “new” and undocumented type of marriage pattern. First, these marriages have been explained as resulting from compulsions in both bride-sending and bride-receiving regions. In the former, the inability to provide a dowry for daughters due to poverty has been identified as the primary explanation. Other factors identified include being “socially over age by local standards” (Mishra 2016, p. 223), failed previous marriage, “girl not attractive,” family violence, or lack of interest on the part of fathers in arranging a marriage (Blanchet 2008, p. 172; Kaur 2012, p. 80). Scholars have also explained long-distance marriage migration in terms of a desire to move from poorer to more desirable regions (Kaur 2004, 2010a): what William Lavelly (1991), in the Chinese context, describes as “spatial hypergamy.” In the bride-receiving regions, bride shortages due to masculine sex ratios combined with other forms of “disadvantage”: unemployment, landlessness or marginal landownership, hard labor occupations, physical disability, lack of education, “older” age or prior marital status (these may be secondary marriages for men), and “flawed” reputation (Blanchet 2008; Chaudhry & Mohan 2011; Chowdhry 2005; Kaur 2004; Mishra 2016) have been understood as the primary explanation for men seeking brides from other states.

Masculine sex ratios had been identified as a long-term trend in India by the 1960s and ’70s (CSWI 1974). There is a large body of literature that has discussed not only pronounced son-preference (Agarwal & Unisa 2007; Arnold et al. 1998; Bhat & Sharma 2006; Das Gupta 1987; ICRW 2014; Miller 1997) but also “daughter aversion”—the growing unwantedness of daughters and the idea that they can be “dispensed with” (John et al. 2009, p. 18)—as explanations. The northwestern region of India—Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, parts of Uttar Pradesh, as well as the capital city of Delhi—has highly imbalanced sex ratios, while the southern and eastern states (barring a few pockets) have comparatively better sex ratios (Kaur 2020). Pronounced son-preference has been a longstanding component of the “northern demographic regime” (Dyson & Moore 1983) related to patrilineal systems of descent, inheritance, and patterns of post-marital residence and dowry (Das Gupta 1987; John et al. 2009; Miller 1981, 1997). Son preferences is linked to such behaviors as bias in intra-household distribution of food and nutritive elements and poor medical care during illness of girl children (Agnihotri 2001, 2003; Bhat & Sharma 2006), what Barbara Miller (1997) describes as “sex selective child care.”

Until the 1980s, masculine child sex ratios reflected differential care of girls and boys that led to higher rates of infant and child mortality among girls. Since the mid-1980s, new technologies (first amniocentesis and later ultrasound) became widely available in India. Initially developed to aid the detection of fetal abnormalities, they came to be increasingly used to determine the sex of the fetus and were then followed by sex-selective abortion (Jeffery 2014). Pre-natal sex determination and selection has continued unabated (George 2002; Patel 2007) despite legislation that made pre-natal sex determination illegal. In 1994, the Government of India formulated the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, which came into force in 1996 and has been amended twice since—in 1996 and then in 2003.

Furthermore, northern India has witnessed a fertility decline that has been accompanied by couples' increasing efforts to affect the gender balance of their children (Guilmoto 2008; Guilmoto and Attané 2007) contributing to the persisting gender imbalance.⁵ Family planning policies such as the “two-child norm” have also contributed to reinforcing the rationale for sex selection and the devaluation of daughters (Kaur 2020). A consequence of the sex ratio imbalance has been a “mismatch in the marriageable population,” what demographers describe as a “marriage squeeze” (Guilmoto 2012; Kaur 2016), that is already unfolding in the northern states, with cross-regional marriages being one response to it. This parallels other Asian contexts (China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan) where demographic and social changes have rendered some men similarly “disadvantaged” and “unmarriageable” within local contexts, resulting in bride import (Bossen 2007; Davin 2008; Fan & Huang 1998; Freeman 2005; Kim 2010; Lee 2012; Lu 2008; Min & Eades 1995).

A second key issue that emerged in the literature on cross-regional marriage is that such marriages “deviate” from north Indian marriage norms: parentally arranged, endogamous (within the caste and religious group), following norms of *gotrā* (clan/lineage) and territorial or village exogamy (outside the clan, village, and neighboring villages) with a limited marriage distance between a woman's place of birth and marriage (outside the village, but usually within the district or in a neighbouring district). Patri-virilocalty is the predominant pattern of post-marital residence, with dowry being the accepted and honorable form of marriage payment. These norms give a particular color to marriage as a continuing “strategy” for social reproduction (Bourdieu 1976, 1977). Marriage is thus regulated and breaches are not tolerated. Indeed, they are often punished with violence termed “honour”

crimes or killings (Chakravarti 2005; Chowdhry 2007; Mody 2008). I use the term “regional marriage” to describe all marriages that conform to the aforementioned norms.⁶

By contrast, cross-regional marriages cross regional and even international boundaries and so entail very long-distance migration for marriage, being inter-caste and sometimes inter-religious. Studies argue that such marriages are “accepted” in a context where breaches in caste and marriage norms are otherwise not tolerated (Chowdhry 2005; Kaur 2004; Mishra 2016). These marriages are not self-arranged “love” marriages in defiance of parental authority and caste and community norms. In most cases, they are initiated by the grooms and “accepted” by their families and their caste and village communities despite being inter-caste or inter-religious. Janaki Abraham describes this coexistence of “honour” killings and cross-regional marriages in the north as an “endogamy paradox” (2014, p. 57). Further, these are dowryless marriages: the groom meets the marriage expenses, and the “go-between” who mediates the arrangement often receives a payment. This has resulted in the categorization of cross-regional marriages as “bride-buying” and “trafficking” (Blanchet 2008; Chaudhry & Mohan 2011; Kaur 2004). The writing on cross-border marriages, especially the so called “mail-order brides,” has also noted a similar tendency to label all women in such marriages as “commodities” and “trafficked” women (Constable 2005, 2009; Nakamatsu 2003).⁷

The third issue highlighted in the scholarly writing is that the spouses in cross-regional marriages belong to different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and the incoming bride faces a difficult process of adjustment. A question that has generated much interest relates to the incorporation of cross-regional brides, of uncertain origins, in the receiving communities. As with the journalistic accounts, some academic work has supported a “victim” narrative focusing on the “harsh lives and the low status” of such brides (Blanchet 2008, p. 177). Prem Chowdhry writes, “Not more than bonded labor they are subjected to extensive exploitation of all kinds” (2005, p. 5195). Likewise, Reena Kukreja argues that there exists “caste discrimination, ethnoracist prejudice, forcible cultural assimilation, and religious othering on a daily basis” (2018b, p. 383; see also 2018a and Kukreja & Kumar 2013). Other studies have attempted to counter this “victim” narrative. Paro Mishra (2016), for instance, argues that such marriages have become the norm in Haryana. Ravinder Kaur maintains, “Not all marriages are a failure and not all brides are unhappy after the initial adjustment. . . . It would be an incomplete representation of the truth to argue that compan-

ionate conjugality fails to develop in all such marriages” (2012, pp. 83, 85). Furthermore, some of these studies explore the post-marital experiences of cross-regional brides, at times drawing parallels and contrasts with “local brides” but making only cross-regional marriages the subject of analysis.

The existing academic studies on cross-regional marriage, thus, provide conflicting depictions, either supporting accounts of widespread discrimination and victimization of brides in receiving communities, or arguing that discrimination is exceptional and brides are accepted in tradition-bound rural communities. My research tells a more complicated story about women’s location within patrilineal, patri-virilocal marriage. It aims to highlight variations in women’s lived experiences shaped not only by their regional origins, but also by their stage in the life-course and their embeddedness in relations of caste, religion, class, and gender. This book adopts a comparative approach. It not only assumes cross-regional marriages as problematic but it problematizes “normal” or regional marriages as well. I situate the book in recent debates about “the trouble with marriage” in India (Basu 2015; Basu and Ramberg 2015) and similar discussions on the (also) troublesome nature of couple relationships in the West (Jamieson 1998, 1999, 2011). The book will integrate and engage with these two forms of critique to provide an empirically informed approach to the gendering of intimacy in a Global South arranged marriage context.

The Trouble with Marriage Is Marriage

Srimati Basu writes that marriage is “at the core of gender trouble” (2015, p. 216). The troubled institution of heterosexual marriage has long been the subject of critique for Western feminists who have addressed women’s economic dependency and violence within marriage (Barrett & McIntosh 1982; Delphy & Leonard 1992; Dobash & Dobash 1980; Pateman 1988). In more recent sociological writing in the West, much of the discussion on couple relationships has followed Anthony Giddens’s (1992) claims that processes of social change characteristic of late modernity have resulted in the weakening of traditional social structures such as the family. No longer bound by tradition or external constraints, individuals thus have greater choice and agency to develop and maintain relationships for their “own sake.” He argues that what distinguishes present-day relationships from past decades is the emergence of “the pure relationship” and “confluent love” in which equality results from “mutual self-disclosure” (p. 6). He postulates

that a “transformation of intimacy” is underway (p. 3) and states that a pure relationship

refers to a situation where a social relation is entered for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay in it. . . . Marriage—for many, but by no means all groups in the population—has veered increasingly towards the form of a pure relationship. (p. 58)

Giddens argues that romantic love has for long affected women’s aspirations more than men’s. He distinguishes “confluent love” from romantic love, arguing that the latter has been replaced by the former: “confluent love is active, contingent love, and therefore jars with the ‘fore-ever,’ ‘one-and-only’ qualities of the romantic love complex” (p. 61). While romantic love is “imbalanced in gender terms,” “confluent love presumes equality.” He writes, “Love here only develops to the degree to which intimacy does, to the degree to which each partner is prepared to reveal concerns and needs to the other” (p. 62). For him, intimacy leads to democracy (p. 188). At the same time, he sees problems with heterosexual relationships, as they are intrinsically imbalanced. He contends that “men’s anger against women” in some substantial part is a reaction against women’s claims for equality in their relationships that drives the pure relationship (p. 149).

The idea that couple relationships have become more equal has been widely debated (Jamieson 1998, 1999). Based on a review of empirical studies on marriage and couple relationships in Euro-American contexts, Lynn Jamieson points to “persistent inequalities” (1998, p. 138). She draws attention to the asymmetrical compromises that women make, at times muting discontent and even rationalizing inequality, whether around the household division of work, parenting, sex, or their partner’s emotional absence or lack of participation in the relationship, in order to sustain marriage (see more recently Carter 2012; Twamley & Faircloth 2015). Jamieson considers the “pure relationship” to be a “near impossibility” for domestic partnerships that are embroiled in material and financial concerns over and above the relationship (1999, p. 490). Furthermore, she argues that while for Giddens, mutual self-disclosure is the key to the “pure relationship,” empirical evidence suggests that it is neither the sole nor necessarily the ascendant type of intimacy between couples (p. 485). Giddens offers an approving view of women’s claims for gender equality

in personal relationships but does little to engage with the body of earlier feminist work that has long addressed these issues.

In the Indian context, too, some scholars have engaged with Giddens's thesis. Jonathan Parry writes approvingly of a nascent trend toward companionate marriage. He sees companionate marriage differently from Giddens, for whom it is "a kind of attenuation of the pure relationship" (Parry 2001, p. 788). Like Giddens, he argues that there has been a "new ideological stress on the couple" yet differs from him with regard to his claims around the possibilities for "de-coupling" (p. 816). He supports Giddens's argument that intimacy leads to equality. Caroline Osella (2012) critiques both Giddens and Parry and expresses dismay that academics are so deeply "embedded within their own modernist liberal expectations of a pure love" that they evaluate so negatively "sacrifice, compromise, the little touch of pragmatic adjustment and realism, the love enmeshed in the everyday messiness of domestic duties and hidden bargainings" (2012, p. 242). Other scholars have explored questions of equality in discussions of companionate marriage that has emerged as an ideal in some Indian settings (Gilbertson 2014; Reddy 2006; Twamley 2012) and that has been described by Jennifer S. Hirsch and Holly Wardlow as representing a "global shift in marital ideals" (2006, p. 2). These scholars explore the primacy given to emotional intimacy, desire, and love not only in the making of marriage but also in the ways in which companionate ideals frame marriage itself as an affective project. In keeping with the findings from other contexts, they conclude that despite the shifts in marital expectations, couple relationships remain inegalitarian.

Another stand of scholarship points to the normalizing and marginalizing function of marriage. Over two decades ago, John Borneman wrote on anthropology's failure to subject marriage to a "rigorous critique." He stressed the need to understand marriage as a "privilege" that operates through "exclusionary means . . . a series of foreclosures and abjections, through the creation of an 'outside'" (1996, p. 216). Marriage, thus, "circumscribes the realm of the legitimate" (Biswas 2011, p. 425) and thereby marginalizes those "who fall outside its parameters or never enter it"—the unmarried, celibate, the divorced, the homosexual, and the widowed (Palriwala & Kaur 2014, p. 5). Since Borneman's contention, the writing on India has included several queer critiques of marriage. Rekha Pappu, for instance, points to the failure of the Indian feminist movement to create alternatives to marriage. She argues that the efforts have mostly focused on democratizing the institution rather than abolishing it (2011, p. 376).

Ashley Tellis (2014) finds the disciplines of sociology and anthropology in India responsible for “leaving the foundations of institutions like marriage and family unquestioned” (p. 345). He describes marriage as “the most burdensome model on same-sex loving people in India,” yet he contends that marriage continued to constitute the imaginary of his queer informants (p. 344). He asserts that what we need is the creation of spaces “outside marriage within which same-sex subjects can breathe and imagine their lives the way they want” (p. 346). Likewise, Nithin Manayath (2015) expresses his dissatisfaction with LGBT activists’ demands around sexual citizenship that have been framed within a global “rights” discourse with many calling for the legal right of same-sex couples to marry.⁸ This, he argues, is detached from the desires and lived reality of certain erotic/intimate bondings. He asks, should non-heterosexual intimacies only be imaginable within the frame of marriage to gain legitimacy?

A key issue that emerges in this literature is how in India, marriage becomes the focal institution through which intimacy is policed by the state. The legal framework not only privileges marriage and monogamous married women within it, but it also sets “the boundaries of deviance” denying the benefits of marriage—rights, entitlements, and social legitimacy—to those “outside” it (PLD 2010, p. 41; Basu 2015).⁹ Srimati Basu and Lucinda Ramberg (2015) argue that there is thus a need to “trouble” the normalizing conception of marriage (monogamous, patrilineal, and heterosexual). They assert that while the pursuit of marriage as a means for same-sex relationships to gain legitimacy before the state and to procure rights may ameliorate the position of married same-sex couples, it threatens to further marginalize those persons (single) or relationships (friends, siblings, lovers but not domestic partners) who cannot or do not wish to access their rights as citizens through marriage. They ask, “Is it possible to reclaim marriage in the pursuit of recognition for non-normative forms of love, intimacy and sexual practice?” (pp. 6, 10).

What these Western and Indian studies imply is that marriage is an inherently inegalitarian and exclusionary institution. In this book, I build on these critiques of marriage through an exploration of the post-marital lived experiences of women in a rural north Indian context where compulsory heterosexual marriage is the norm. I detail the factors that make for women’s continued dependence on marriage to show how all women (whether regional or cross-regional) “are made vulnerable by marriage itself” (Okin 1989, cited in Basu 2015, p. 16).

Moving for Marriage

As Lucy Williams observes, exogamy is considered to be the most common global marriage pattern, so cross-border marriage of brides can be seen as an example of the long tradition of women leaving their natal homes to join their husband's family (2010, p. 55). There is now a very large body of literature on cross-border marriage migration (see Bélanger & Flynn 2018; Brettell 2017; and Williams 2010 for a review). The existing literature encompasses, first, studies that describe transnational "within community marriages," such as those between spouses from a South Asian country and the South Asian diaspora (Charsley 2008; Qureshi 2016; Qureshi & Rogaly 2018; Abraham 2008; Mand 2008); second, marriages between spouses belonging to different Asian countries—Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines and Pakistan (see Ishi 2016; Freeman 2005; Lu 2008; Nakamatsu 2003; Suzuki 2005; Yeoh et al. 2014); third, marriages of women from Global South countries with men in the Global North (Constable 2005; Del Rosario 2008; Lauser 2008; Pananakhonsab 2016). There is also a relatively smaller but growing literature on marriages within national borders, notably cross-regional marriages in India and inter-provincial marriages in China that also involve long distances between the bride's natal and marital homes (Davin 2008; Fan & Huang 1998; Fan & Li 2002; Gilmartin & Tan 2002; Liu et al. 2014; Min & Eades 1995). This literature outlines multiple factors and diverse motivations to explain marriage across borders, seeing the increase in cross-border marriages as largely tied to processes of globalization.

In much of Asia, however, marriage migration has long existed where certain kinship rules of post-marital residence (patri-virilocal) and exogamy (not just outside a kin group such as a clan or patrilineage but also territorial exogamy) have involved territorial dislocation, at times over a considerable distance, for young women. The institution of *marriage itself* has thus entailed women's migration (Palriwala & Uberoi 2008, pp. 24, 28). In India, for instance, 46 percent of the total migrants cited marriage as their reason for migration, and of this, 97.4 percent were women (Krishnan 2019). This migration for marriage is more than simply a shift in place of residence and has significant implications for women's rights and status within marriage. Rajni Palriwala and Patricia Uberoi argue that the gendered implications become sharper when the rule of patri-virilocal residence combines with kinship rules of patrilineal descent, inheritance, and succession, as is the case in much of South Asia (Palriwala & Uberoi 2008, p. 29; Palriwala 1994). The move following marriage, thus, implies

the transfer of labor, rights, and maintenance from the natal to the marital home. Residence, then, as Leela Dube notes, “is a material as well as an ideological expression of principles of kinship” (1997, p. 93).

Palriwala and Uberoi outline three implications of these kinship rules for women’s autonomy and bargaining power within marriage. The first relates to women’s inheritance rights as daughters, especially with respect to immovable property (e.g., agricultural land). Even when granted by the state (as in India), patri-virilocal marriage means that a married daughter moves away on marriage. This makes it difficult for women to establish claims to property, often resulting in them forgoing their rights. Second, an in-marrying woman’s say within her marital family is weakened by her unfamiliarity with the local customs and family traditions of her husband’s family. Further, she is treated with suspicion in the home to which she has migrated and her rights, especially to property, are curtailed. A married woman’s primary rights to support are as a wife, yet she has few rights to and limited ability to lay claims to matrimonial property. Third, the security or vulnerability of women post-marriage and the constraints or possibilities of their agency are related to their ability to access support, particularly natal kin support, and proximity is crucial (Palriwala & Uberoi 2008, pp. 29–30). Indeed, this third issue has been the subject of several early studies that contrasted the kinship systems of north and south India to explore the implications of different forms of marriage alliance for gender relations. It was argued that in north India, rules of village exogamy and the prohibition on marriage with near kin, along with the preference for distant marriages with strangers, alienate women from their natal kin and limit their autonomy. By contrast, in south India, the preference for close kin marriages results in the marriage of daughters to families not too far from their natal homes, placing them in a relatively more favourable position (Dyson & Moore 1983; Karve 1994; Trautmann 1981).

In this book, I consider the implications of geographic distance by extending this north–south contrast to explore the contrast between the regional and cross-regional bride, with the marriage distance for the latter being multiplied manifold compared to the also exogamously marrying regional bride. Further, by drawing on the discussions in the wider literature on marriage migration, I trace commonalities in the experiences of cross-regional brides and women in cross-border (international) marriages, as both traverse large distances, often marrying in contexts that are culturally alien to them. At the same time, while highlighting the specificity of the experiences of cross-regional brides, I will show that all women, whether they move

for marriage across a village border, district border, or state border, are as a consequence uprooted from their homes and families. I aim to shed light on how this territorial dislocation is experienced to argue that to differing degrees, marriage migration places all women in vulnerable positions.

Intimacy

Holly Wardlow and Jennifer S. Hirsch argue that to study gendered relationships it is necessary to attend both to the socially, politically, and economically structured inequalities within which couples negotiate and to the possibilities for tenderness, pleasure, and cooperation that exist in spite of these inequalities (2006, p. 3). In this book, I set such an agenda in motion by studying marriage not only as a relationship “fused with trouble and strife” (Basu 2015, p. 3) but also as one where there is space for intimacy to develop and exist within relations of inequality.

Love is not “new” to South Asia, as discussed by Francesca Orsini (2006), who traces the historical trajectory of discourses of love. She discusses several literary repertoires—the devotional song, folk stories about famous lovers, and Indian film—that have shaped imaginations of love in the South Asian context. Orsini sums up: “The spaces for love in Indian society still lie mostly in the literary or filmic imagination. In the interstices of ordinary life, when no one is looking or in the interval between the dreams and expectations about the future spouse and the epiphany of reality at the wedding” (p. 37). Yet love has received insufficient attention in the writing on conjugal relationships. This in part may have to do with the assumption that love is unique to Western modernity (Khandelwal 2009). In the Indian context, studies note how discussions of love have centered on “love” marriages and elopements that transgress marital norms (Mody 2008). Writing primarily on urban contexts, some others explore how love and desire play out in pre-marital courtship practices that may or may not culminate in marriage (Bhandari 2017; Chakraborty 2012; Donner 2016; Fuller & Narasimhan 2008; Nisbett 2006; Twamley 2014). From these studies, we learn about pre-marital, romantic love. Yet, as Wardlow and Hirsch point out, conjugal love is not the same as romantic love and is often difficult to sustain once a couple is married. They explain, “For one, parents, siblings and other kin may dispute the centrality of the marital bond, insisting on the equal or greater value of their own economic and emotional claims making love both a practice through which kin ties are constructed and at times are in tension with those same ties” (2006, p. 3), as is the case in India.

Anthropological studies have, thus, long drawn attention to conjugal practices that are kept “hidden” (Das 1976; Trawick 1990). Married couples are expected to avoid the slightest familiarity or displays of affection in the presence of others, as intimacy between spouses is viewed as threatening the unity of the joint family. Ann G. Gold notes that a woman’s affinal kin may stand in the way of conjugal bliss, yet they never totally stifle it. True love between couples is, thus, predicated on “private intimacy” (2006, p. 321). Gold focuses on women’s songs in rural Rajasthan to provide insights on women’s desires for conjugal intimacy. Through songs, women create an alternative world to one where family life is centered on the patrilineal extended household and a man’s ties to his own kin are expected to be prioritized over the conjugal bond. In some songs, women abuse their husbands and praise lovers, while others allude to sexual pleasure with husbands. She notes a disjuncture between song and practice: “Those who spoke of sex at all portrayed it as something accomplished as rapidly as possible during that rare moment of privacy that couples in a joint-family household must await” (Raheja & Gold 1994, p. 40).

Unlike in the West, where the couple relationship is at the center of personal life (Jamieson 1998), in India what we find is the centering of the institution of marriage but not of the conjugal relationship. This is perhaps what led Jacqui Gabb and Janet Fink to conclude that for South Asians, the couple may be a meaningless unit of analysis for understanding intimacy. Writing about an Indian couple in Britain, they argue that the presumption of intimacy and the intimate dyadic couple is called into question and represents the wrong starting point for analysis, as the couple relationship is steeped in cultural expectations of intergenerational extended family care (2015, pp. 92–93). Should a focus on the couple then be abandoned? The South Asian couple no doubt is embedded in wider kinship relationships, yet I argue that there is a need to bring it into focus, for we know little about the texture of conjugal relationships or the nature of the “private intimacy” that scholars have written about. This may in part have to do with the difficulties in researching love and intimacy in a cultural context where it is neither celebrated nor vocalized. In her work on a Tamil family, for instance, Margaret Trawick (1990, p. 93) writes,

In the ordinary course of affairs, people did not often talk about love. They talked about what was to be cooked for dinner, or what one of the children had done that day. . . . Occasional indirect references were made to love. Even more occasionally, words for love and words of love were used. Yet acts of love,

including acts done in words, were as common, and as wrapped in cultural significations, as eating. . . . Discovering the meaning of love to this family was rendered difficult by the fact that for them, love was by nature and by right hidden.

Given the urban location and caste-class trajectories of her informants, Shalini Grover (2011) describes a different experience in her work on marriage among working-class women in a neighborhood in Delhi: “In the low-income neighbourhood I studied, marriage is by no means a private matter . . . most people in my field conversed about marriage and love with surprising ease and frankness.” She adds, “While there were few barriers in conversing about marriage, it was still a challenging subject to capture analytically. In a setting where people are candid about their relationships, deciphering emotions is still not an easy task” (p. 17).

In the Indian context, where so much of the writing has focused on love in the making of marriage, Grover’s work has been extremely significant in shifting the focus onto the “post-wedding phase” (p. 6). By examining how marital relationships are lived and experienced between spouses and among sets of kin, her ethnographic study provides valuable insights into “the dynamics of conjugality” (p. 2). My work contributes to this focus on women’s lived experiences of marriage. While for Grover, questions of conjugal stability and asymmetry have been central, I not only interrogate how inequalities shape conjugality but also set out to explore the intimate and affective dimensions of conjugal relationships. As Rajni Palriwala and Ravinder Kaur note, “Though the negativities of contemporary marriage for women have been a focus in earlier work, there has been little work on conjugality itself, on the dimensions of emotion, support and care which the fact of marriage is taken to frame” (2014, p. 7).

Perveen Mody notes that intimacy is a “latecomer” to anthropology. She asks, “why bother with intimacy, if other analytics (for instance, “kinship,” “relatedness,” “love”) can do the same work using different categories.” The answer to this, she argues, lies in “the way in which intimacy describes the quality of relationships” (2019, p. 258). It is precisely for this reason that I employ the analytic of intimacy in this book taking inspiration from Lynn Jamieson’s (1998, 2011) influential work in sociology. For Jamieson, “intimacy refers to the quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality” and intimate relationships are “a type of personal relationships that are subjectively experienced and may also be socially recognised as close” (2011, p. 1). Jamieson develops the concept

of “practices of intimacy” and demonstrates its value for the analysis of personal relationships across cultures. She defines practices of intimacy as “practices which enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness” (p. 1). She broadens the definition of intimacy by seeing intimacy as a multi-dimensional concept.¹⁰ She argues (2011, p. 3),

Intimacy is not solely or perhaps even primarily practiced through self-disclosure . . . but that it relates to a wider repertoire of practices. The component practices—giving to, sharing with, spending time with, knowing, practically caring for, feeling attachment to, expressing affection for—are not exclusively about intimacy. That is, each practice tends to produce intimacy but is not a sufficient condition.

In this book, I will draw on Jamieson’s conceptualizations of intimacy, intimate relationships, practices of intimacy, and dimensions of intimacy. I will pay heed to Jamieson’s (2011) call to move away from “Euro-North-American ethnocentrism” and explore how intimacy is understood across cultures. This book substantiates two of Jamieson’s arguments: first, practices of intimacy are present in all cultures, even where they may not be culturally celebrated and relationships are emotionally constrained; second, gender inequalities can exist alongside intimacy.

Relationality

Lynn Jamieson et al. point out that “grasping the meaning and significance of any specific personal relationship requires an understanding of the whole constellation of personal ties within which people are embedded” (2006, p. 1). An understanding of conjugality, thus, demands an inquiry into the multiple relations within which it is embedded. In the writing on India, there have long existed discussions of the relational person. In some early anthropological accounts, such as those of McKim Marriott (1976), the Indian person was described as a “dividual” in contrast to the Western person—the “individual.” In his formulation, the latter were defined as bounded and self-contained and Indian persons as open and unbound, constituted through their transactions with other persons (through sex, living together, feeding, etc.), places, and things. Sarah Lamb (1997) nuanced the understanding of relational personhood by attending to both gender and life-course, aspects

ignored in earlier anthropological accounts. She demonstrated ethnographically how in India, where persons are constituted through networks of “substantial emotional ties,” women’s experiences differed significantly from men’s in the ways in which their ties were created but also “unmade” over the life-course. Lamb takes issue with the dichotomized view that associated the East with the “relational” person and the West with “individuals” (see also Dumont 1970). She asserted, “there is no simple or single model of selfhood in either the contemporary Western or contemporary Indian cultural system” (p. 297).¹¹

Within Western sociology, relationality has a long history, but there has been a renewed interest in the concept among scholars of the family, intimacy, and personal life (Duncan 2015; Holmes 2014; Jamieson 1998; Smart 2007). There are three ideas in this sociological writing on relationality that are particularly relevant for my work. First, people are not isolated; rather, they are inherently connected to others—networks of kin and friends. Second, individuals make important life choices with significant others in mind. I will draw on Ian Burkitt’s (2016) and Simon Duncan’s (2015) discussions of “relational agency,” which sees agency as not individual but rather interdependent and realized through “joint actions” and in relation to “other individuals and collective agents.” Third, relationality is an important concept because it transcends the limitations of kinship, however redefined. Carol Smart writes, “The word itself clearly acknowledges that people *relate* to others who are not necessarily kin by ‘blood’ or marriage, thus allowing for considerable flexibility in approach” (2007, p. 48). She points to the importance of conceiving not of kinship but of “personal life” as a more inclusive term: “A term now increasingly applied to include not only families as conventionally conceived, but also newer family forms and relationships, reconfigured kinship networks, and friendships” (p. 27). In the writing on India too, some studies (e.g., on friendship) are reflecting this shift away from analyzing relationships within the frame of kinship (Desai 2010; Dyson 2010; Froerer 2010).

Sasha Roseneil and Shelley Budgeon assert that while sociology has expanded the scope of the term “family,” it continues to marginalize the study of love, intimacy, care, and sociality beyond the family (2004, p. 137). They call for “decentering the family” and the (heterosexual) couple with a view to recognizing the “the extra-familial” relationships of significance in individuals’ lives. Focusing on the relational lives of adults living without a partner in Britain, they argue that there is a strong emphasis on friendship and a “deliberate de-emphasizing of the importance of the couple

relationship” or a “clear prioritizing of friendship over and above sexual partnerships” (pp. 146, 150).

In this book, I will build on the aforementioned arguments developed within sociology and anthropology to address how women’s relationships with their husbands, natal kin, children, and other (kin and non-kin) women are lived out and transformed over time. As detailed above, my ethnographic argument is that in the Indian context, the couple should not be treated as meaningless for understanding intimacy (or “decentered”), but in fact needs foregrounding to aid our understanding of its inner dynamics. At the same time, I make a case for also exploring women’s relational lives beyond the couple. I will demonstrate that women’s relationships with their children, natal kin, and affinal women and female friends, like the conjugal relationship, may be conflict-ridden, but they also serve as vital structures of support and care. Indeed, I see these other intimate relationships in women’s lives as *enabling* conjugality, by providing an important outlet for the tensions and strife of the conjugal relationship.

A Return to the Rural

Over the last two decades, there has been a remarkable expansion in writing on marriage and intimate relationships in India, with numerous studies covering new ground and enriching the existing body of work. Studies have analyzed lived experiences not only within marriage, but also “outside” it, thus documenting experiences of widowhood and remarriage, marital breakdown, same-sex relationships, alternative living arrangements, and singlehood (see the volumes by Basu & Ramberg 2015; Kaur & Palriwala 2014; and Sen et al. 2011). What appears to be a glaring gap in this literature, however, is studies on marriage in rural India.

In the mid-1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, several ethnographic studies provided insights on rural married women’s lives (Jeffery et al. 1989; Jeffery & Jeffery 1996; Kolenda 1984; Minturn 1993; Narayan 1986; Raheja & Gold 1994; Palriwala 1991; Sharma 1980; Wadley 1994, 1995). In the recent writing, however, there has been little interest in researching marriage in rural contexts, despite this being the setting in which the demographic majority of Indian women actually live. Recent academic work on marriage and intimate relationships has been drawn toward the “new”—the middle class, the internet, urban spaces (slums, neighbourhoods, cybercafés) or state institutions (such as courts) (Bhandari 2017; Chakraborty 2012; Donner

2016; Grover 2011; Kaur & Dhanda 2014; Mody 2008; Nisbett 2006; Twamley 2012). As with studies on Western contexts, the focus has been on how modernity, economic processes and democratic shifts are impacting familial relationships (De Neve 2016; Osella 2012; Palriwala & Kaur 2014). Greater agency in entering and leaving relationships and a shift toward a desire for a “companionate marriage” has been noted among middle-class and diasporic Indians. Comparisons are made with earlier ethnographies of rural India that take for granted the situation in rural contexts today rather than carrying out new fieldwork. By contrast, this study returns to rural India and reassesses the situation today while adopting similar analytics: modernity, globalization, and economic transformations. It presents a picture of an India—although located at a distance of only 60 kilometers from India’s capital city—where the contours of change have been different. I ask: how is marriage, as process and practice, changing or being reiterated in contemporary times in rural north India?

The Setting: Barampur

This book draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over an eleven-month period from September 2012 to August 2013 in a village in Baghpat district of the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (Map 1). With a population of 199.58 million, Uttar Pradesh (UP) is India’s most populous state, accounting for 16.5 percent of the country’s population (Census of India 2011b). UP lags behind other Indian states on almost all development parameters and large disparities are visible between different regions in the state (Mamgain 2019; Srivastava & Ranjan 2016). Western UP is distinct from the rest of the state because it is comparatively more prosperous, as is evident in its higher levels of industrialization, and by its concentration on sugar cane and wheat agriculture (Jeffrey 2010, p. 42). Its agrarian structure and infrastructure made western UP the “springboard of the green revolution in UP” (Srivastava & Ranjan 2016, p. 35).

Located in the western part of the state, Baghpat was created in 1997. Until then it was a *tehsil* (administrative division) of Meerut district. Baghpat is one of the 75 districts of UP. Its western boundary is the bank of the Yamuna river. The total area of the district is 1321 km². It is divided into three *tehsils* (Baraut, Baghpat, and Khekra). According to the 2011 Census, the total population of the district is about 1.3 million, with 78.9 percent of the population being rural. UP is one of the Indian states with a significant

Muslim population (19.23 percent) and a large proportion of Scheduled Castes (SCs) (20.5 percent).¹² Muslims constitute 27.98 percent and SCs 11.4 percent of the population of Baghpat district. For 97.3 percent, Hindi is their first language.

Uttar Pradesh is part of the “northern demographic regime” (Dyson and Moore 1983) that is characterized by higher levels of fertility compared to the southern states, even though fertility has been declining rapidly in the state since the 1990s. The total fertility rate (TFR) in UP declined from 4.36 in 2001 to 3.59 in 2011; the TFR figures for Baghpat district were 3.9 and 3.5 in 2001 and 2011 respectively. The TFRs for UP and Baghpat are still higher than those for India as a whole, which were 3.16 and 2.66 in 2001 and 2011 respectively (Guilmoto & Rajan 2013). UP also has some of the most masculine sex ratios in the country. “Normal” sex ratios (number of females per thousand males) without gender bias are around 950 or so. According to the 2011 Census, India has an overall sex ratio of 940. The sex ratio for Baghpat district is 861, which is lower than the state average of 912, which is also skewed. The sex ratio in the



Map I.1. Field site: Baghpat District, UP.

0–6 age group for Baghpat is 841, again lower than that for the state as a whole, which is 902. The sex ratio for rural Baghpat is 856 and for rural UP as a whole is 918. Baghpat has a literacy rate of 72 percent, which is higher than the average for UP but lower than that for the country as a whole (Census of India 2011a). The female literacy rate lags far behind the male literacy rate for the district as a whole (82.4 percent for males and 60 percent for females) as well as for rural Baghpat (male and female literacy rates are 82.7 percent and 58.9 percent respectively).

Barampur village is located on the State Highway that connects Delhi to Saharanpur district. The village is regarded as one of the largest villages of UP. It comprises over 1500 households and has a population of almost 10,000, with an overall sex ratio of 824. The sex ratio in the 0–6 age group is 849. The Scheduled Caste population of the village is 958 (9.7 percent of the total population), of which 496 are males and 462 females with a sex ratio of 931. Nearly 66 percent of the population is literate: 73.7 percent of males and 55.5 percent of females (Census of India 2011b).

Barampur has 22 caste groups: 17 Hindu and 5 Muslim (Appendix 1). Jats are the dominant caste of Barampur. They are dominant both numerically and in terms of land ownership. Jats are a middle-ranking caste and in March 2014 they were included in the central list of Other Backward Classes (OBCs).¹³ Significant numbers of Jats have accessed higher education and the percentage of Jats employed in government and private sector jobs is much higher compared to other castes (Sahay 2015). Chamar and Valmiki are the two Dalit castes of the village and are included in the category of Scheduled Castes. Chamars are numerically the second largest caste of Barampur and the largest Dalit caste in UP (Kumar 2016). Telis and Lohars are the two numerically dominant Muslim castes of Barampur. Most Lohar households are economically better off than other Muslim caste households in the village. The majority of SCs and Muslims in UP, however, are poor and tend to work in informal sector jobs (Jeffrey 2010).

The nearest town, an expanding commercial center, is four kilometers away. Barampur has no independent commercial significance. Till about the 1980s, it was famous for metal agricultural implements, with its traditional blacksmiths working out on the main street. The street is now a common market with Muslim caste households clustered around. The village is divided into three *pattis* (a belt of dwellings) with the Chamar *mohallā* (neighborhood) adjoining the irrigation canal (one of the many that criss-cross the region drawing from the upper Ganga canal system). Over time, other caste households developed all around, with some Chamar and Valmiki families