At the Crossroads of Marriage: Experiences of Young Urban Middle-Class Women Negotiating Family and Sexuality Within Heterosexual Intimate Relationships in North India

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the experiences of women in heterosexual intimate relationships. It aims to understand how women negotiate social structures of family, marriage choice, and community through intimate relationships. Young women are challenging gendered power relations, traditional family structures, and marriage norms in their everyday lives. By this, women challenge the old structures of patriarchy, caste system, and control of their sexuality. A qualitative research design using in-depth interviews with 12 working women in the age group of 25–30 years who were in intimate relationships was conducted. The study was based in Delhi and done over two months in 2019. Women were selected through snowball sampling. Narrative analysis has been used to evaluate women's experiences in intimate relationships. The narratives show the struggles and negotiations that women do for love and how these struggles are becoming a way of challenging various structures like patriarchy, caste, class, and religion. Women choose their life partners or arrange for their love marriage. Still, the choice of the partner and the idea of marriage are influenced by the broader patriarchal, caste, and class structures. The women in this study have been able to move beyond the traditional norm of arranged marriage but have still not taken the leap of choice free of the broader institutions of

caste, class, and family. The paper concludes by emphasising that although women choose their heterosexual partners for marriage, their choices are still influenced by their caste, class, and patriarchal structures.

KEYWORDS
intimate relationship, family, marriage, negotiation, power, love, choice, freedom, intimacy

Introduction

I am a young unmarried woman brought up in Delhi in an urban middle-class family. While growing up, I saw the long-term companionship of heterosexual partners only within marriage families have arranged. The middle class in India is governed by class, religion, social status, and caste endogamy, which necessitates finding suitable partners within one's community and socio-economic background. I was socialised to believe there is an appropriate age at which women must get married as the reproductive clock is ticking like a bomb.

Much later, I understood how this biological reasoning has a lot to do with controlling women's sexuality. The image constructed of the husband is of an authority figure who is meant to replace the patriarchal father for a young woman. Since childhood, we (urban middle-class women) have subtly had various restrictions to control our mobility and sexuality. For example, I was not allowed to do things like go out late at night or wear certain kinds of clothes that were considered revealing and attracted male attention. I was told I could do it if my future husband allowed me to because I would have other symbols of marriage, like a ring or a chain, giving the message to other men of being committed. Therefore, growing up, I always felt I needed a partner who thought like me and would let me do as I wanted. Alas, that was not easy when the partner was going to be chosen by my parents and would have a similar mindset and social constructs to them, subtly controlling me and following the same patriarchal institutions.

When I was twenty-four years old, I met a man in college who I liked, with similar goals in life, and who respected me for who I was and supported my ambitions. The first battle was won; I found a companion who would let me live as I wanted, but the catch was that we were from different castes, ethnicity, and religion, which did not seem to matter at the onset of the relationship. Still, they become factors that need to be considered when we are forced to think of marriage. Marriage was an eventuality that could not be ignored, and an intimate relationship without a legitimate name could not be socially acceptable for very long in our country. Now, we wanted to have a future together, and marriage seemed the only socially acceptable way of doing that; hence, we had to consider it an eventuality.

These discussions and considerations made me take on this study to understand marriage from the perspective of young middle-class women choosing their partners

within the broader patriarchal structures. The questions I have addressed in the paper are: How do young middle-class professional women negotiate marriage within urban contexts relationships? What are the various ways women negotiating with their partners, family, and society at large? How does the transition from personal relationships to marriage take place? Why do women have to struggle for this transition?

Urban middle-class young women's intimate lives concerning marriage become pertinent to understanding the changing traditional sexuality norms. This paper brings forth the dialogue of women with patriarchal institutions like that of family, heterosexual intimate relations, and gendered power relationships. It looks at the individual struggles of women's assertion of their choice of partner and marriage within the broader structures of family, sexuality, caste, and patriarchy.

The study is socially constructed to examine how women's experiences of intimacy, family relations, and marriage are gendered. It aims to understand how educated, working, and young middle-class women negotiate marriage in everyday life within their intimate relationships.

Arranged Marriage and the Importance of Social Status

Historically, it has been seen that in the structure in which women have been subordinated, they have held the reproductive power. One way to control their "power" was to treat it as dangerous, an "innate" quality of women who needed to be tamed. The façade created was a threat from the "uncontrolled sexuality" of women. Hence, the ideology of fidelity and chastity has been promoted throughout history, making women aspire to these ideals (Chakravarti, 1993).

Women should prioritise marriage and motherhood over their professional development ambitions (Saraswathi, 1999). This institution transcends all other achievements of her life; marriage is mainly seen as the ultimate achievement of a woman's life. Therefore, intimate relationships are still negotiated according to social norms. In this paper, we analyse how they negotiate, resist, and reproduce these structures during the transition of their intimate relationships toward marriage.

The pattern of marriage and romantic relationships is changing over time but it is important to see if there is any consequent change in the resulting social structures. These structures are the root of gender relations. Hence, we need to recognise the shifts in the forms of gender, caste, ethnicity, class, and so on. They, in turn, influence the development and well-being of women (Sassler & Lichter, 2020).

Role of Family in Finding Marriage Partners for Young Adults

In India, choosing a partner is predominantly made by family and the broader kin group. The practice of arranged marriage is still the most prevalent form of marriage. However, urban India is seeing a new trend of arranged marriages, where the woman's choice is given some consideration (Progress of the World's Women 2019–2020, n.d.).

Within the urban middle-class society of North India, love marriage is not a norm but rather an exception. These urban middle-class women are disrupting the

traditional social order and kinship relations. Often, they lead to a rift between young adults and their parents and may even lead to violence (Mody, 2008). Previous research shows (Kakar, 2006) that family and broader social approval play an important role in women's relationship choices. An individual's identity is formed by their role in their families (Kakar, 2006).

Breaches in caste linkages are supposed to bring down the status of the family and that of the clan and extended caste group. This is one of the primary reasons for enforcing strict sexual and caste codes. Central to the regulations is the control of female sexuality, and conferring her sexuality in marriage is imperative for the patriarchal forces to maintain power, hierarchy, and caste purity. It has been seen that any infringement of kinships and caste faces violence. The control of the sexuality of the woman is linked to the control of her reproductive and productive labour, its power is crucial for patriarchal power and authority (Chowdhry, 1997).

Education and Financial Independence as Factors Leading to Love Marriage

Love marriage or marriage of choice needs to be seen within the changing socio-economic processes. The changing structures are influenced by the global and local systems, which are reflected in the culture and beliefs of that society. Women are pushing the traditional boundaries, with an increasing push towards love marriage. Love marriage is seen as the next step of an intimate relationship. Hence, we are looking at the transition to marriage from an intimate relationship and the interface of caste and family rules and norms within this space (Allendorf, 2013).

The traditional form of marriage in India—arranged marriage—restricts personal choice where individual ambitions are suppressed. There is pressure to conform to the gendered division of labour, which regulates individual freedom. However, this picture is changing to an extent and can be noted in marital dynamics among educated, urban, and English-speaking classes of people. Palit's (2014) study on intimacy among Indian couples in educated, urban areas said that their social content and women's education and employment influence a couple's relationship.

Most women are reclaiming marriage. It does not represent just the traditional aspect of gendered marriage. The women are forming their understanding of this institution. Women are not just negotiating their intimate relationships but negotiating marriage structures. For these young women, it becomes important to choose their partner and future, which is also acceptable to their parents. The family has been central as a source of security and comfort and a place of nurturance. Hence, there is a certain desperation to maintain this relationship, despite the oppressive structures of the family.

Over time, the power dynamics are changing due to increased economic opportunities, leading to complex relationships between caste members and the members within caste groups. The younger members are questioning caste and kinship ideologies by breaching traditional sexual norms. Individual violations are taking place, and the restrictions seem more relaxed. However, the consideration of class and status is still prominent, allowing caste flexibility (Chowdhry, 1997).

Middle-Class Women's Sexuality and Gender

The middle-class urban communities are the largest consumer base in the newly emerging markets. With the onset of the internet era, the traditional ways of finding partners have shifted to online platforms such as jeevansathi.com and bharatmatrimoni.com. These have become the newer mediums of finding potential marriage partners based on caste, class, ethnicity, religion, etc. Though the ways of finding a potential heterosexual partner are adapting to the new times, the sexuality, caste, class, and embodiment norms remain intact in the mainstream marriage discourse.

Within this interplay of modernity, capitalism, and traditional patriarchy, young middle-class women must choose partners and marriage. There is the image of a sexually liberated, independent, professional working young woman who is seen as a consumer. This image is paradoxical with the embodiment of cultural traditions, sexuality, and desirability.

The middle-class women's narratives have previously been seen within the discourse of modernity versus tradition, saying that the norms of sexuality and gender are becoming obscured. At the same time, more than 95% of marriages within the Indian context conform to the traditional arranged marriage. Within this discourse, love marriages have been seen as a way of modernity, where love and mutual respect are essential to the relationship. In the arranged marriage setup, aspects like social class, caste, and occupation of the potential partners are significant considerations for families (Puri, 1999).

The women and men grow up living with the practice of segregation, the underlying ideology being that women are perceived as both dangerous and in danger. Their sexuality is uncontrollable, hence seen as dangerous, and if their sexuality is not controlled, it can threaten the social order. They are also in danger because if their sexuality is violated, it can bring shame and dishonour to the woman and her family. The former is seen to govern the adult woman's sexuality (Abraham, 2002). The practice of social segregation plays out in women's daily lives growing up, which in turn affects the development of intimate relations.

Chakravarti (1993) looked at the relationship between caste and gender, focusing on the subordination of the upper caste women. She said that the need for sexual control of these women is to maintain patrilineal descent and caste purity, an institution particular to Hindu society. To maintain the three, it becomes essential to organise female sexuality strictly.

Method

The paper is based on an empirical study that used a qualitative research design for conducting the research and analysis. In-depth interviews have been conducted for data collection based on identified themes from a literature review: intimacy, love, power, power in intimate relationships, everyday experiences in intimacy, family,

marriage, choice, freedom, agency, individuality, and so on. Narrative analysis has been used to analyse women's interactions.

The population for the research was unmarried urban middle-class women in Delhi who identified themselves as in a heterosexual intimate relationship. The women interviewed all worked in the development sector and completed their post-graduation in social sciences. The women at the time of the research were all working in Delhi. The women were in the age group of 25–30 years. These women belonged to various states: Assam, Maharashtra, Punjab, Bihar, and Delhi. The partners of most of the women were also from similar socio-economic and religious backgrounds. All the women identified themselves as upper caste or middle class; caste and class have been used interchangeably by the women throughout the research. Though the women belonged to different cultural backgrounds, they were all middle-class educated urban women and economically independent.

The data collection was conducted in Delhi from January 2019 to March 2019.

Sample Population

The women participants were advantaged educationally. They have all completed up to their master's degree and earned above 6 lakh rupees per annum.

The women who identified themselves as being in a heterosexual intimate relationship were approached to participate in the research. The women in the study have been in intimate relationships for more than two years, with few having been in them for more than five years and two being in them for more than ten years.

Data Collection

Convenient sampling and snowball sampling methods were used to find participants. A participant information sheet was made and shared with friends and colleagues to share with their known contacts. Consent was taken verbally by telephone conversation or text message, and the women participants decided on a convenient date, time, and place for the interview.

The location of the interviews differed based on the day, time, and comfort of the women. However, most were conducted in coffee houses and the homes of the women. The total number of women interviewed for the research was 12, with multiple in-depth interviews conducted.

Method for Data Collection

In-depth interviews were conducted with the women based on the themes identified through secondary research, personal experiences, and a pilot study. These identified themes only acted as a guide for the interview, as newer themes emerged during the interview process.

The in-depth interviews were conducted using a conversational method. The process also involved sharing personal experiences by the researcher.

Coding, Transcribing, and Analysis of Women's Narratives

The interviews with the women were audio recorded by the researcher after taking verbal consent from the participants. The interviews were conducted in a combination of English and Hindi.

The first level of coding involved identifying common ideas and concepts throughout the women's narratives and shared pictures. These themes and concepts were identified within the backdrop of women's everyday intimate experiences. A few concepts that were identified at this stage of coding included the marriage negotiation, marriage decision conflict, obligation to get married, marriage as a way of social approval, power, sexual relationships, assertion, choice, freedom, love, and individual trope within the relationships, caste, tradition vs. modernity, family approval, social structures, and traditional gender roles. The second level of coding led to the development of broader themes of the paper. The concepts were under more general themes of marriage, power, family, sexuality, patriarchy, and caste. These themes and their interrelations formed the basis of the paper's discussion and argument of how they affect women's intimate relationships.

Ethical Concerns

The audio recording was done for all the interviews after obtaining permission from the participants. They were deleted after transcribing the tapes. The names or any other identifying information of the women were not used. Codes were assigned to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the women. The transcribed interview was shared with the women for their feedback and to allow dialogue and make the women active participants in the research.

The study was conducted using the ethical guidelines provided by the internal ethics committee of Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. The Internal Ethics Committee approved the study as part of the research course of the college.

Limitations of the Study

The number of participants was limited and particular to only these unique experiences of women. The women interviewed were all middle-class women residing in Delhi and working in the development sector. The findings cannot be generalised to a larger group of women and can only be understood by women in this context. Furthermore, only women were interviewed for the research; the perspective of the men partners was not part of it. It is one more reason that the findings cannot be generalised.

Discussion and Results

The women who were part of the study were middle-class unmarried young women educated and working in metropolitan Delhi. The urban space provides women with a certain kind of anonymity and freedom. Financial independence has given these women a space for making their own choices in their lives, particularly about their intimate and marriage partners. Invariably these women seek partners from a similar social class and lifestyle, thus aspiring for common life goals.

The narrative of the young middle-class women builds into the discourse of marriage as a way of companionship. The women's narratives show that they view marriage as a space for mutual respect and egalitarianism. All the women indicated that they wanted to marry their partners in the future, showing the pervasiveness of marriage as a social expectation (Puri, 1999). The analysis of middle-class women's narratives addresses the dominant marriage discourse of control of women's bodies and sexuality. At the same time, it engages with ways in which women negotiate these norms and structures within their intimate everyday lives.

The narratives emphasise that it is important for them to know their partners before marriage and have an emotional connection with them. They see themselves in a position where they can easily express themselves and their needs to their partners. For them, the intimate relationship as a space for speaking their minds becomes important, and they want the same in their marriage.

Underlying these expressions of respect and equality is the assumption that the partner is from a similar social class. Hence, the desired gender equality is due to having similar socio-economic backgrounds.

I have traced how the idea of marriage is introduced within the intimate relationship and why women question these notions, what are women's challenging perceptions of women about marriage, and why the idea of marriage is used to introduce the relationship to parents. There is also a discussion about patriarchy, caste and class and how they add to the complexity of intimate relations. It is mostly within these boundaries that women negotiate their intimate everyday lives. The patriarchal and caste structures govern their decisions as the women internalise them, yet they are questioned differently. The researcher discusses the back and forth between social structures that women do in their lives and decision-making regarding intimate relationships.

As Thapan (2009) observed, women are "prepared" in various ways for marriage, which the narratives of the women in this current paper reflect. The narratives show women's conflict in relation to family commitment and the decisions they make for themselves.

Family Pressure to Marry

The factors influencing the marriage decision are family, individual, dating experience, and so on. The narrative below talks of how the traditional idea of marriage and intimate relationships interact. The structures of control, like family and community, that adhere to the institution of marriage play out. The parents feel that their daughter has reached the age of marriage and their conversations start revolving around it.

According to the women, the parents ask about the presence of a potential partner or if they were to look for a partner for them. The age of marriage is a socially defined idea determined through the control of women's sexuality. This narrative shows the parents are open to the idea of a woman finding her partner. It indicates a dialogue between the traditional arranged marriage by parents and the woman regarding her freedom to make her own choices and yet have the support of the family.

> They [parents] had said that I had reached marriageable age and that if I had someone, then I should tell them, or they would start looking. And if there is someone, they will not have a problem; it will be better as it will save them time. (Ankita, personal communication, January 2019)

Like the above narrative, the parents' concern is to find a life partner for the woman. The young couple had not thought about marriage and were concentrating on their careers.

In the narrative below, the marriage decision is not only in the hands of the partners but also influenced by the family, creating the pressure to find a partner and get married even though the woman and her partner have not decided on marriage yet. The parents are informed about the relationship when it reaches a stage where it can take the form of marriage. The woman has been in the relationship for more than eight years and only informs them when she is pressured to marry.

> Actually, at that time, my partner and I had not decided; we wanted more time to settle down and for more time in our relationship. After this they [parents] were after me. They started pestering me, and I also told them that there was someone in my life, after that, they became a little quiet; they wouldn't have to look for anyone. (Ankita, personal communication, January 2019)

The distinction between love and arranged marriage for these middle-class young women is a little blurred. In most cases, the intimate relationship that starts from mutual attraction must seek parental approval for marriage. The parental love, care, and concern then become forms of controlling young women within their own homes.

Marriage or Independence?

"Love marriage" is seen as a deviance from the mainstream "arranged marriage". Love marriage is discouraged among the young to maintain the hegemony of arranged marriage, caste, and religious and family practices. At times, love marriage faces various negative responses from family and community. Hence, women choosing their partner push the traditional boundaries of sexuality and control.

The narrative below shows the woman reflecting on the idea of marriage with her intimate partner. Conflict arises on the issue of getting married and when to get married. Through the narrative, the woman uses her agentic expression by saying that she does not want to get married, problematising the concept of marriage in her own experience of intimacy. "I was not sure about marriage. I do not want to get married, and he was like he wants to get married" (Sneha, personal communication, January 2019).

Within the dominant gender discourse, marriage is seen as a life achievement, a mark of celebration and status (Sassler & Lichter, 2020). In the above narrative, Sneha asserts her agency by saying that she has her own priority (career) and feels marriage will hinder her goals. During the interview, she reflects on her choice vis-à-vis her partner and wants to think about marriage later. She feels marriage will jeopardise her independence and career goals.

From the narrative below, marriage is an area of conflict for Sneha and her partner, including whether to marry and at what stage of their relationship. Conflict arises because her partner wants to marry due to social expectations and pressure from his family. Sneha must negotiate within these predefined social structures of marriage. In this case, Sneha uses the job as a reason to delay marriage, but the internalisation of the norm is strong; therefore, she does not outright reject the idea of marriage.

For these reasons, I see the conflict as positive, caused by the woman asserting her choice over the social pressures and norms. It is essential to acknowledge the space Sneha has provided for her career growth, though it has an expiry date in this case. There is an understanding of marriage at a later stage, but the man decides the timing of the marriage, and the woman negotiates to delay the marriage as she prioritises her career over marriage.

Notably, the question of marriage arises only once the male partner is settled or has a stable income. This highlights the man's traditional breadwinner role and sees him as the prime earning member of the new household. Marriage seems to be a compulsory eventuality of the relationship; hence, this is how the broader social structures play out in women's lives.

> Yes, we do fight, especially right now due to marriage issues […] I said that I had to complete one year in my job, it could only be after that. So, we decided for next year beginning and this way I was able to achieve my goal. (Sneha, personal communication, January 2019)

The women selecting a life partner represents a certain level of assertion of their sexuality, giving them reproductive and productive labour based on their choice. It signifies an authority loss on the part of the senior male member. This loss becomes a consideration by the senior male member to oppose or be discontented with such a move. An assertion by the woman in this form affects the family hierarchy and disrupts the power equation in the family (Chowdhry, 1997). Women mostly do not share the existence of their intimate relationships until they must, which is in the context of marriage. From Payal's narrative, it can be seen that the family makes decisions regarding marriage, and the extended family members also consider it their prerogative to influence and direct the marriage of younger family members.

Women have been socialised in a way where they see their parents in an authoritative position. Hence, in this narrative, the woman does not directly tell her parents that she has chosen her partner; instead, she matter-of-factly breaks the news. Her mother's initial silence and her father's complete silence signify a gap in the traditional family hierarchy and create an imbalance in the power structure.

> One day we were having a discussion at the table where my mother said that she was telling my aunt that I would have told them if there was someone and then I was like, yes there is [...] and she was like "what?" and I was like, yes there is. First, she kept quiet, and my father pretended that he did not hear anything. So, my mom kept asking who he was. (Payal, personal communication, February 2019)

Natasha is referring to age as a criterion for marriage, highlighting that marrying at a young age is a social construct and restricts the sexuality of individuals. Her narrative talks about the family pressure to get married at a particular age. At the initial stage of the relationship, Natasha could negotiate the social control of marital age. At the same time, she knew that she could only stall marriage till a certain age. The broader structures of patriarchy determine the course of the relationship through family pressure, stereotypes related to marriage and so on. Natasha is constantly negotiating with and within these structures. For her, the ability to delay the marriage as much as possible can be equated with her ability to push the set boundaries of the patriarchal structures.

> So, he is four years older than me, and he has crossed the 30 mark, and there was pressure from his side of the family. When we started seeing each other, he was in his late twenties, and I was in my early twenties, and I told him then there was no chance of getting married that early. (Natasha, personal communication, February 2019)

The women can be seen to struggle with the traditional marriage system based on family, community, and culture. On the other hand, the women have freedom, choice, and autonomy. When the relationship reaches the marriage stage, the women are seen negotiating to arrange their love marriage. The traditional idea of marriage is still dominant for women, influencing their decisions in intimate relationships.

In Natasha's narrative, she wants approval of the relationship from her parents before she takes the relationship to the next stage. Natasha says that if her parents disagreed, there would be no point. Her statement implies that she would discontinue the relationship if her parents did not consent. The traditional patriarchal norms are embedded in her thoughts, actions, and language.

> So, I did not confirm to my partner; I did not want him to feel that I was trying to stall it, but I told him that I wanted my parents to agree and then I would say yes to him. I wanted clarity and not be like [...] that my family refused. It could be that the family refuses, then there would be no point. (Natasha, personal communication, February 2019)

The woman must negotiate not only with her own family but also with a new family she must call her own. We get a glimpse of this negotiation within the context of women's wedding plans with both sets of families.

Misha's narrative shows an inherent conflict between the traditional and individualistic ideas of a wedding. The narrative describes the desire of the man's family for a big affair with many family members and friends present. This scenario is juxtaposed with the couple's desire for a small ceremony with people they care about. Here, a big affair signifies the wedding as a way of displaying the family's social prestige and wealth to the larger community. The small affair

is about discreetly celebrating the occasion with loved ones—not a public affair. This narrative is representative of the diversion between the traditional belief system and the more individualist modern interpretation of the wedding ceremony. "They wanted a big affair, and we wanted like a small affair, something like a court marriage and a reception after that" (Misha, personal communication, February 2019).

Control Over the Sexuality of Young Middle-Class Women

The below narrative represents sexuality as a taboo and how various structures of the social system control it. Even though the woman desires physical intimacy, she does not engage in it because of the mental structures that society has created. She is an embodiment of them. The systems are so deeply embedded that they are "naturally" followed by the individuals as members of that society. The maintenance of control over the sexuality of the woman is achieved through various social agents in the below narrative: the neighbours and parents.

This narrative talks about the physical intimacy in the relationship and the influence of social factors. The couple monitors its sexuality to avoid being judged by people, such as neighbours, and thus the idea of not talking and keeping sexuality under wraps. Engaging in sexual intercourse is acceptable when the partners have been married (i.e., "licence"). She feels that marriage provides privacy and social acceptance for what she desires. She feels that doing it without marriage is not okay because it goes against social norms.

Sneha, therefore, sees marriage as an institution and appropriate space for engaging in sexual intercourse. The institution of marriage controls the sexuality of women to maintain caste purity by restricting their sexual engagement to one partner or the concept of monogamy so that the man's lineage is "pure." The social significance of chastity and the threat of digressing from sexuality norms ensure heterosexual sexuality within marriage (Puri, 1999). "It is better to do it [sexual intimacy] after marriage. We will have a licence. We will not have to be worried about where we want to do it" (Sneha, personal communication, January 2019).

The "management" of female sexuality is usually not done by her only but also by various other cultural institutions (Chakravarti, 1993). The gender differences and the double standards in young women's narratives towards sex and premarital sex resonate with the cultural and social constructions that subordinate and control a woman's sexuality. It is both the heterosexual partners who together work towards the construction and maintenance of patriarchal ideology represented by the concept of virginity, which is central to the idea of marriage (Abraham, 2002).

Payal's narrative below exemplifies the above point about women's dilemma around premarital sex. The women are socialised such that it becomes an integral part of them not to engage in sex before marriage due to the social and cultural norms and taboos. In their intimate relationship, they face a situation where they want to engage in sexual intercourse. It is then that the idea of tradition conflicts with the demand for an intimate relationship. Hence, the woman engages in sexual intercourse knowing that she will marry the same person, giving a sense of taking

action within the prescribed norms of the society. "I had thought in my head that I did not want to have intercourse till we were absolutely certain and decided about the timeline as to when we want to get married but I got over the mental block" (Payal, personal communication, February 2019).

Natasha's narrative shows that the norms and sanctions are so deeply embedded that the women follow the unwritten rules. In this case, the control of the structures is deep-rooted to the extent that she does not talk about needs or desires. Instead, she feels sexually obligated to her partner because they are in an intimate relationship. "My orientation is not very clear [...] Like sex is taboo and I was never very open about it [...] So he tries to help me learn and explore, he will forward me articles to read and all" (Natasha, personal communication, February 2019).

In the Brahmanical patriarchy, the upper caste women are considered gateways to keeping the caste "pure." There is a constant control of the woman's sexuality and reproduction. In this narrative, the woman unconsciously abides by the self-regulatory code, a consequence of the norm of endogamous marriage (Chakravarti, 1993).

In the narrative below, the intersection of gender and caste manifests in how the woman perceives her relationship and her constant reference to caste. It shows how caste endogamy is maintained where the woman has internalised the social norm and control. The woman seeks a partner from the same caste and expects her parents to approve of him with minimal conflict. Hence, the woman exercises her choice in a partner, but at the same time, traditional structures bind her because acceptance by parents and society is imperative to continue the relationship. The woman exercises the power of choosing her life partner, but the social systems determine the person she chooses. She may like multiple people, but her criterion is caste endogamy. Hence, the overarching social divisions continue to play a dominant role in a woman's life.

> Their concern was if he belonged to the same caste. It just happened; I did not think much. So, I belong to the Brahmin community and he also belongs to the Brahmin community. But there are categories within that also, that was not same. So, my father was like you did not get a Brahmin which is same as us and I told him that, he was expecting too much. (Natasha, personal communication, February 2019)

Any rupture in the caste links can bring down the status of the immediate family and the clan group. This is one of the reasons for the strict enforcement of sexual and caste codes. These codes centre around the control of women's sexuality, and the transfer of this sexuality in marriage is integral to patriarchy, caste purity, power, and hierarchy. The principles of gender and caste are still a guiding force for marriage and choice (Chowdhry, 1997).

The narrative exemplifies how caste and gender govern a woman's life. She is conscious that caste is present but feels it has to be done to avoid conflict with her parents, thereby continuing with the traps of caste, class, and gender. The parents, in a

way, show their dissatisfaction with the daughter's partner by saying that she could have found someone "better" or more appropriate. The woman has subordinated herself to the family structure so much that she interprets her father's authority as that of love. "It did not matter much, but at the back of my mind I knew that if the caste were not same then there would be a lot of tension" (Natasha, personal communication, February 2019).

Conclusion

From the research, it can be concluded that the broader social structures of gender, caste, and class have a significant influence on the decision-making of women regarding their intimate relationships, relationships, partners, and marriage. Women negotiate within these broader social structures by asserting themselves in relation to the intimate relationship. The idea of marriage still holds great importance in most women's lives, but they do not blindly follow the social norms of marriage. Instead, they assert, resist, and reproduce the structures in various ways.

The broader structures of society, including marriage, caste, and class, play out differently in women's intimate relationships. Women have internalised many structures and manage their relationships according to those structures. Through the struggles and negotiations, women are trying to challenge the broader patriarchal power structures in their everyday lives. The fact that women are questioning these almost invisible structures and are conscious of them is a step closer to a gender-equal society. We are not there yet, but we are moving in the right direction.

The everyday conditions of women's lives signify not just their habits but a space for articulating change and resistance. Gender, class, and caste become a part of life through which women negotiate and strategise to ensure their place and position in society. The articulation of their lived experiences of womanhood, intimacy, identity, and how women resist and comply with structures. The decisions, choices, and identities are constructed through these struggles in their everyday lives.

These struggles may not lead to transformation, they may only maintain their position in the structures, but at the same time, it is important to recognise these attempts at resistance. It symbolises young women's awareness of their situations and ways of dealing with them differently. Women are constantly negotiating, manipulating, and strategising situations and interactions in everyday life.

In the paper, I looked at women's experiences negotiating gender relations and norms to achieve an intimate egalitarian relationship. There is a long way ahead of us to disentangle ourselves from the patriarchy, caste, and class deeply embedded in our lives and relations. For women to be in more equal relationships in their everyday lives, their struggles must be recognised and supported at the level of individual agency within the private sphere of young women's lives.

Intimacy, mutual respect, and companionship are ideals that women use as a standard for achieving a gender-egalitarian relationship and marriage. While women are not ceasing to be affected by the inequality, they are also not letting themselves be subordinated by them completely. The ideals of gender equity within the relationship help them negotiate a relationship entrenched in patriarchal inequalities.

Young middle-class women are choosing their partners, delaying marriage, putting their career goals ahead of marital goals, engaging in sexual intimacy before marriage and imagining a more egalitarian married future. They are pushing the boundaries of the traditional patriarchal context through everyday interactions with family and intimate partners. Yet, though these pushes may be in the right direction, they are not making the leap to question or completely resist the sexuality, caste and class norms.

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