# The Shifting Landscape of Marriage

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## Abstract

The institution of marriage has undergone significant transformations in recent years, driven by shifting societal values, changing demographics, and evolving individual expectations. As a result, the traditional notion of marriage as a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman is no longer the only dominant form of union. The rise of same-sex marriage, increasing rates of divorce and remarriage, and growing acceptance of non-traditional family structures have all contributed to a redefinition of what marriage means in contemporary society. Furthermore, the decline of traditional gender roles and the increasing economic independence of women have led to a shift away from marriage as a solely economic arrangement, and towards a more emotional and personal understanding of partnership. As the landscape of marriage continues to evolve, it is essential to examine the complex and multifaceted nature of this institution, and to consider the ways in which it is adapting to the changing needs and values of individuals and society as a whole.

### The Changing Landscape of Marriage: Youth and Expectations

In the accounts of Bina Paul, Madhuri, and Reena Rai, we see a marked shift in generational attitudes toward marriage. The younger generation is portrayed as more assertive, with higher expectations for equality and compromise in relationships.

Bina Paul's account speaks to this shift, particularly when she mentions the refusal of the young cousin to marry someone who earns less than her. Here, the idea of compromise is positioned as something one must accept in marriage, but the cousin's refusal challenges the traditional notion of compromise as something that is automatically expected. In this case, compromise becomes a condition of the relationship rather than a given. The young cousin's reluctance reflects a desire for autonomy in choosing a partner based on personal preferences rather than fulfilling the traditional economic and social expectations of marriage. This is a shift away from the sacrifice and resignation that older generations seem to view as inherent to the institution of marriage.

Madhuri's speech also touches on gendered expectations in the marriage market. The emphasis on the boy's bank account as a primary criterion for marriage reflects the economic negotiation inherent in many marriages, especially in traditional societies. Here, the asymmetry between male and female incomes is acknowledged, but it is also celebrated as a point of enjoyment or even power. This reflects how economic security is an important factor in determining marriage dynamics, and how women may assert power in their marriage decisions by seeking financial security from their partners.

Ratna Mathur's account, which presents a more liberal stance on marriage, provides an interesting contrast. She mentions that marriage is not necessarily that important, but emphasizes the importance of mutual understanding and respect in the relationship. Her view encapsulates a desire for emotional compatibility over traditional institutional obligations. Yet, her reluctance to outright dismiss the institution of marriage signals that while some younger individuals may be questioning traditional norms, the broader social expectation still ties emotional and sexual fulfillment to the institution of marriage.

### Generational Tensions: The Marriage Ideal vs. Changing Reality

The accounts of Raj Kirariya and Reena Rai reflect how traditional values—particularly around compromise and responsibility in marriage—are still prevalent in older generations. Raj Kirariya's commentary suggests that love marriages may not adequately capture the essence of marriage, as they focus more on sensory experiences (attraction, chemistry) rather than the pragmatics of cohabitation. For him, satsang and the no-dowry ideal represent ways in which younger generations can still honor traditional values while asserting autonomy. However, his emphasis on compromise as an inherent part of marriage reveals the tension between evolving generational ideals and deeply ingrained social structures.

Reena Rai reiterates that compromise is essential in marriage, particularly for women. She emphasizes the need for women to accept the demands of the institution, underlining the continued expectation that women must adapt to the asymmetries inherent in marital relationships. The idea that a girl must come to terms with compromise highlights the persistence of gendered expectations in marriage, even as younger women might challenge these norms in more subtle or overt ways.

The excerpt you provided delves deeper into the gendered dynamics of marriage, particularly the expectation of compromise (samjhauta), and how it is woven into both individual experiences and societal structures. Several themes emerge from the voices of both wives and husbands, reflecting contrasting but often intersecting perspectives on the nature of marriage, its labor, and its social significance.

**Gendered Asymmetry and the Role of Compromise**

The idea of compromise emerges consistently as an essential part of marriage, especially for women. Reena Rai's earlier assertion that "a girl must come to terms with compromise" is reaffirmed by Asha Nathan, who emphasizes that marriage is inherently a responsibility that requires sustained effort. Asha's statement, "The pair gets along until the end," points to the enduring nature of marital bonds, suggesting that endurance (nibhaana) is not only a duty but a foundational aspect of marriage. She speaks of the material support given to her at her wedding (from needle and thread to everything else) as symbols of continuity and responsibility—elements that are not just personal, but socially binding.

In Asha's account, the dowry objects she mentions have a dual role: they serve not just as gifts to the bride but also as material evidence of the social ties being reproduced through marriage. The idiom of nibhaana is interwoven with social expectations of maintaining the marriage and contributing to a larger social fabric. In this context, compromise is seen not just as a personal adaptation, but as a socially codified practice, reinforcing the patriarchal expectations that women shoulder a disproportionate amount of responsibility within the marital and familial structure.

**Marital Relations: Comfort vs. Obligation**

In Harish Upadhyaya's account, the changing nature of marriage is scrutinized. He laments that modern marriages have become reduced to relationships of comfort and convenience, driven by individual self-interest rather than the broader social obligations that marriage once fulfilled. According to Harish, marriage is no longer seen as a lifelong commitment (nibhaana) but rather as a transactional arrangement that can be dissolved when it no longer serves the individual's needs. This reflects a critique of modernity, where the idea of personal satisfaction has supplanted traditional notions of duty and sacrifice.

Harish stresses the importance of having the "right way of thinking" (soch) in marriage, which echoes the deeply ingrained cultural belief that marriage is a sacred institution demanding not just endurance but a mindset of duty and sacrifice. He positions marriage as a cultural anchor, and those who fail to honor it as a social contract are seen as undermining its very purpose. His lament suggests that compromise (samjhauta) is not just about managing personal differences but about adhering to traditional values that define the institution.

**Family Expectations and Gendered Responsibility**

In Santosh Kumar's account, we see the continuity of patriarchal values even in the face of marital rupture. Santosh expresses deep regret about his daughter-in-law's departure, but his lament is not about the failure of marriage itself but about the failed matchmaking. The key issue, however, is not about the institution of marriage but about the financial and social investments that come with it. He notes that the parents of the daughter-in-law encouraged her to leave, further highlighting the intergenerational conflict and different expectations between parents and children regarding marital responsibilities.

Santosh underscores the idea that marriage, for him, is about "nibhaana for life". In this sense, nibhaana is framed as non-negotiable—marriage is a commitment that cannot be easily undone or altered by individual desire or external pressures. This creates a stark contrast to the more

modern views expressed by younger generations, where divorce or separation is sometimes seen as an option when convenience or compatibility is no longer present. Santosh's account reveals the gendered nature of family responsibility—his sense of duty towards preserving the marital union is framed within a broader social responsibility, but one that places the burden of maintaining the family largely on the daughter-in-law, who is seen as the primary agent for the continuity of the family unit.

## Interpreting Nibhaana in a Changing Social Context

The recurring emphasis on compromise (samjhauta) and nibhaana positions these values as integral to the survival of marriage. In older generations, this concept encapsulates the ideal of duty, where personal desires are subordinated to the greater good of familial and social cohesion. However, there is a growing tension with modern attitudes toward marriage as a contract, where individuals are expected to find not just social respectability but personal satisfaction within the marital bond.

In this context, nibhaana does not merely refer to the endurance of hardship or sacrifice but also reflects the deeply ingrained cultural norms that insist on the maintenance of marital ties despite personal challenges. It is a notion that demands resignation, but also implicitly requires gendered labor—women are expected to bear the weight of maintaining the marriage, while men, though not exempt from their responsibilities, are less likely to be held accountable for sustaining domestic harmony in the same way.

In the face of such demands, women's agency is often framed not in terms of resistance but in terms of adaptation. They are expected to compromise in ways that preserve both the marital bond and family structure, while men's agency is often seen in terms of financial provision and decision-making. However, there are signs of resistance, especially among the younger generation, where the gendered asymmetry in marriage is more openly contested, and marriage is being reimagined as a relationship based on mutual respect, personal choice, and emotional compatibility, rather than just socioeconomic necessity and tradition.

## Marriage as a Site of Adjustment and Compromise

A recurrent theme in these accounts is the importance of adjustment and compromise in marriage, not just as an emotional negotiation, but as a practical necessity. For example, Nirmala's reflection on how she and her partner managed finances—spending carefully when they had money and conserving when they didn't—illustrates how compromise becomes a way of navigating material scarcity in marriage. This highlights how marital life is inherently tied to pragmatic decision-making, often shaped by economic circumstances, but also a broader cultural expectation of mutual understanding. Nirmala's assertion that "marriage is necessary" also reflects the deeply entrenched notion that marriage is not only an emotional or personal bond but a social contract with collective and familial responsibilities.

The young Rajput son, Jitender, on the other hand, articulates a more contemporary hesitation about the realities of compromise and responsibility, expressing his unpreparedness for the compromises that marriage entails. His statement, "I am not ready for compromise right now," suggests an awareness of the inevitable demands of marriage, yet an unwillingness to embrace them immediately. His reluctance to embrace the future obligations of marriage underscores the tension between traditional expectations (embodied in the concept of nibhaana) and the desires of a younger generation seeking personal autonomy or perhaps a different kind of relational engagement. This speaks to the generational gap in expectations around marriage, where the younger generation may see marriage as an option, or even a burden, while older generations see it as an unavoidable duty.

## Gendered Expectations and the Role of Women

Several statements reinforce the gendered roles that marriage imposes, particularly on women. Manoj Singh Patial, a middle-aged Rajput husband, describes nibhaana as the core of marriage, which involves settling a girl in her place—implying that marriage is about establishing the woman's role in relation to the man's life and family. The phrase "a nest has to be found for her" further underscores the notion of women as anchors, whose primary function within the

marriage is to settle and manage domestic life. While this may seem somewhat traditional, it reflects how marriage is framed as the women's domain—responsible for both maintaining familial relations and ensuring emotional stability.

Vani Sharma underscores the role of nibhaana in maintaining not just familial relations, but also stability. Her account, where she recalls balancing her responsibilities towards three families—her own, and two sisters-in-law—speaks to the immense emotional and labor demands placed on women in marital life. Her statement that "nibhaana and stability are important values" signals that the performance of nibhaana ensures both marital continuity and social respectability, particularly in societies where marriage is integral to a woman's identity and social standing. Suman Sharma, too, reflects on the constant labor of marriage, recognizing that once you are in it, there is no exit—it demands perpetual work, both emotionally and physically.

## Review of Literature

**Singh and Gupta's (2023)** The Changing Landscape of Matrimonial Practices Worldwide," examines the impact of globalization on matrimonial practices across the globe. The authors argue that globalization has led to increased mobility, cultural exchange, and the blurring of traditional boundaries, resulting in a significant shift in the way marriages are conceptualized, arranged, and practiced. Singh and Gupta contend that the intersection of globalization and marriage has given rise to new forms of matrimony, such as transnational marriages, intercultural marriages, and online marriages, which are redefining traditional notions of marriage, family, and identity. The study highlights how globalization has also led to increased commodification of marriage, with the rise of online dating platforms, matchmaking services, and wedding tourism. Overall, Singh and Gupta's research provides a nuanced exploration of the complex and multifaceted relationship between globalization and marriage, shedding light on the ways in which global forces are reshaping the institution of marriage and its associated practices.

**Johnson and Barnes' (2023)** Redefining Commitment in the Digital Age," explores the intersection of marriage, love, and technology in the contemporary era. The authors argue that the widespread adoption of digital technologies has transformed the way people form, maintain, and navigate romantic relationships, including marriage. Johnson and Barnes contend that technology has redefined traditional notions of commitment, intimacy, and communication in marriage, with couples increasingly relying on digital tools to manage their relationships. The study highlights how social media, online dating platforms, and digital communication apps have created new opportunities for connection and intimacy, but also new challenges and complexities, such as the blurring of boundaries between public and private spaces. Ultimately, Johnson and Barnes' research suggests that the digital age has prompted a reevaluation of what it means to be committed in marriage, and that couples are navigating these changes in complex and multifaceted ways.

**Hughes and Green's (2023)** The Role of Social Movements in Shaping Modern Marital Norms," examines the dynamic relationship between social change, social movements, and modern marital norms. The authors argue that marriage has long been a reflection of broader social and cultural values, and that social movements have played a significant role in shaping modern marital norms. Hughes and Green contend that social movements, such as the feminist, LGBTQ+, and civil rights movements, have challenged traditional notions of marriage and family, pushing for greater inclusivity, equality, and diversity. The study highlights how these social movements have influenced changes in marital laws, policies, and practices, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage, the rise of non-traditional family forms, and the increasing recognition of diverse forms of intimate relationships. Ultimately, Hughes and Green's research demonstrates that marriage is not a static institution, but rather a dynamic and evolving reflection of broader social and cultural changes.

**Brown and Harris' (2024)** Individualism, Interdependence, and New Forms of Commitment," delves into the evolving nature of marriage, exploring the intersection of individualism,

interdependence, and new forms of commitment. The authors contend that modern marriage is characterized by a complex interplay between individualistic and interdependent tendencies. While some scholars argue that marriage has become more individualized, with spouses prioritizing personal autonomy and 487ulfilment, others suggest that interdependence remains a core aspect of marital relationships [1]. Brown and Harris' study aims to reconcile these perspectives, highlighting the ways in which modern couples navigate the tension between individualism and interdependence.

**Lee and Williams' (2024)** From Perpetuity to Personal Choice," examines the transformation of marriage in the context of post-industrial societal shifts. The authors argue that the traditional understanding of marriage as a lifelong commitment is being redefined in favor of a more individualized and flexible approach. Lee and Williams contend that the decline of traditional industries and the rise of the service economy have led to increased emphasis on personal autonomy, self-expression, and flexibility in all aspects of life, including marriage. Lee and Williams also explore the implications of this shift, including the rise of non-traditional family forms, increased divorce rates, and the growing importance of personal choice and agency in marital decision-making. Ultimately, the authors suggest that the post-industrial world requires a revised understanding of marriage, one that acknowledges the complexities and nuances of modern relationships and prioritizes individual autonomy, flexibility, and personal growth.

**People and Place: An Ethnographic Overview**

One of the most striking features of the slum is the way discarded items are repurposed as valuable resources. What is considered trash or garbage in middle-class neighborhoods—such as plastic oil cans, rubber tires, polythene sheets, cardboard boxes, and wooden fruit crates—becomes a vital material resource for the slum's inhabitants. These seemingly worthless objects are not only reused, but they also shape the very geography of the slum. They are transformed into functional tools for survival, like containers for storing water or building materials for constructing homes. The process of acquiring and utilizing these discarded items is not merely about frugality or environmental sustainability. It reflects a deeper engagement with the material world, involving labor, creativity, and moral investment. Residents of the slum are not passive recipients of waste but active agents who imbue these objects with new meaning and purpose. Through this act of repurposing, they assert their agency in the face of economic and material scarcity. The process of scavenging and repurposing also implies a kind of moral economy, where value is not determined by the object's original purpose but by the labor and imagination invested in its transformation. This creative reuse, alongside the tangled web of wires and cables that run through the slum, forms a unique material and social landscape that speaks to the resilience and resourcefulness of the residents.



**The Nalla flowing to the right of the Basti habitations**

The organization of the basti is intricately linked to its surrounding urban fabric, where its geographical boundaries are often blurred and its borders seem to melt into the neighboring spaces. Situated between the Gas Agency to the north and Priyadarshini market to the south, the basti occupies a strategic and often contested location in the city. To its east lies the nalla, a long, winding drain that serves as both a natural boundary and a repository for human waste, while Sector Q marks its western limit. These boundaries, though technically identifiable, are fluid, especially when considering how the basti's expansion overlaps with the adjacent Priyadarshini market. The market itself functions almost as an extension of the basti, where its hustle and bustle infuse the slum with a constant flow of goods and people. The basti's front entry is often marked by a cacophony of sounds and sights, interwoven with the activity of

shops and the presence of two prominent places of worship—a Balmiki mandir and a masjid—which add a layer of religious and cultural significance to the neighborhood.

**The Demolition of the Meat Market: Loss and Livelihoods**

A significant moment in the changing socio-economic landscape of Priyadarshini Market, particularly for the Muslim community that has long relied on the meat and poultry trade. The demolition of the market, which had been operating for over three decades, signaled a dramatic shift, coinciding with the culmination of the fieldwork period. While demolitions had occurred intermittently in the past, the meat vendors had always managed to survive through a mix of bribes and by going underground temporarily before reopening their shops. However, the events of July 2008, following a bird strike incident at Indira Gandhi International Airport, led to a coordinated crackdown on the area. The airport authorities, along with the municipal corporation, identified the Priyadarshini Market's nalla (sewage canal) as one of seven hotspots where unchecked dumping of animal waste attracted birds, posing a risk to air travel. As part of the response, the municipality, in collaboration with Delhi International Airport Private Ltd (DIAL), decided to demolish the 60-70 meat and poultry shops at Priyadarshini Market. This marked a turning point for the community's primary means of livelihood. The market's closure, however, was just one facet of the larger crackdown on the community. In March 2010, a police raid resulted in the arrest of several young men from the Muslim Basti for the illegal slaughter of cows, further complicating the community's legal and social standing. News reports revealed that nearly three tonnes of chopped meat had been seized, along with weapons such as choppers and knives used for slaughtering the animals. The arrests were framed within the context of religious sentiment, with the deputy commissioner of police emphasizing the illegal nature of the activities. A case was filed against the men under the Indian Penal Code, which included charges for hurting religious sentiments, as well as under the Delhi Agricultural Cattle Preservation Act of 1994, a law prohibiting the slaughter of cows. The right-wing led municipality, echoing nationalist sentiments, pushed for the invocation of the National Security Act (NSA) against the offenders, a move that reflects the rising tensions around issues of communal identity and the policing of practices associated with the Muslim community. This episode encapsulates the intersection of economic survival, legal frameworks, and political pressures, where the Muslim community's occupational identity is criminalized, leading to further marginalization. It also underscores the entanglement of local issues—such as sanitation and economic survival—with broader national security and religious concerns, all of which contribute to the dismantling of the community's traditional livelihoods.

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**Marriage And Time: Toward An Ethnography of Nibhaana**

**Marriage as an Economic Necessity**

Some of the statements, particularly from younger men like Vimal Kothari, who sees marriage as necessary to share life's responsibilities, reveal the economic rationale behind marriage. Vimal suggests that "you need a wife to cook for you", highlighting the traditional division of labor where marriage is not only a romantic or emotional union, but also a practical one, rooted

in fulfilling domestic duties. This reflects how sexual difference and gender roles are often implicitly baked into the marital contract, with women expected to bear the brunt of domestic labor.

Sita Devi's critique of the ritual time of gauna challenges the prescribed sequence of marriage customs, pointing to how the temporal framework of marriage can sometimes be abandoned or bypassed in favor of practical realities. This reflects a broader theme where marriage is subject to the realities of daily life rather than just the abstract ideals of tradition.

**Marriage as Responsibility and Duty**

In many of the accounts, marriage is described as a responsibility. Bishambar Shrivash calls it the "greatest responsibility", while Laxmi Murti and Bulbul Raghav highlight the importance of keeping the family happy and together. These statements point to the expectation that marriage is not just an emotional bond but a role one must play—one that involves the emotional and physical labor of sustaining the family unit.

In this sense, nibhaana takes on a formalized quality, seen as the duty to uphold the institution of marriage, even when personal satisfaction or emotional connection is not at the forefront. The idea of responsibility reinforces the concept that marriage is not just about personal feelings or desires but about maintaining the social order, ensuring that children are cared for, and that the family structure remains intact.

**Marriage, Life and The Work of Nibhaana: Narratives from the Muslim Basti**

Mehro's narrative is deeply shaped by a sense of cultural and social superiority, as she differentiates herself and her community from the Meerutwale (fisher-folk). She emphasizes the cleanliness and discipline in her own community, contrasting it with what she perceives as the chaotic and disorderly behavior of the fisher-folk. This is evident in her descriptions of family dynamics, such as the disrespect between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and the absence of clear familial roles. According to Mehro, such behaviors—like eating in front of the elders or engaging in violent disputes—are unacceptable in her community. Mehro's criticism is not just about lifestyle choices but also about respectability and honor in family structures. She underscores her community's commitment to social order and honor by contrasting their practices, such as the meal etiquette where the mother-in-law eats first, with those she attributes to the fisher-folk. The cultural values she describes seem to prioritize modesty, respect, and obedience, particularly within the realm of family interactions.

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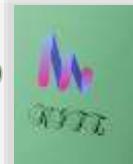
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