

## Strong Disagreement

I do not agree with Madhu Kishwar's views on *Love and Marriage* (Manushi 80) because they serve to perpetuate the widely held belief among Indians that so-called "love marriages" are a recipe for disaster and that if a woman wants to stay married she should opt for an arranged marriage.

Before I critique Madhu's article, I would like to share my own experience of love and marriage. I too have a "love marriage". In my case, my mother has refused to accept my husband as he is neither Sikh nor is he Indian. The stress of not having family support is indeed burdensome as Madhu so rightly pointed out. In fact, our marriage would not have lasted had it not been for the fact that my husband and I not only share the same interests, values and aspirations but that he and I are each other's best friends.

Sure I miss Indian festivals and the feeling of community that was so prevalent throughout my childhood. But the alternative — of an arranged marriage — seems so daunting to me that I can't even imagine it happening to me. The women I have known who have had arranged marriages seem to be constantly role-playing — the "good" wife, mother, daughter-in-law etc. They never seem to be themselves and are forever seeking their husband's and in-laws' approval. I have never been a good actress and I am positive that if I had had an arranged marriage, I'd be divorced by now.

My quarrel with arranged marriages is not so much the fact that the people involved do not love each other in the romantic sense of the word but rather the fact that arranged marriages are a violation of a human being's right to self-determination and are a device used to perpetuate the oppression of women in patriarchal family hierarchies. I do not believe that the joint family is necessarily

## DISCUSSION

# Love & Marriage

Since the article *Love and Marriage* (Manushi 80) has generated a lot of controversy, we are publishing the responses to it in a special *Discussion* column rather than in the usual *Letters* column so as to give adequate space to the criticism levelled at this piece.

oppressive. In fact, the joint family ensures that the weakest members of the family — children and the aged — are cared for in a supportive, intimate environment. Children in such an environment grow up in less isolation than children in nuclear families. It is also true that women in such families derive enormous emotional support from each other, if not from the men. Arranged marriages and by extension, the joint family, can in fact be a source of immense comfort to women. Since the rules of marriage are clearly defined, there is little space for conflict as each partner knows exactly what is expected of him/her. This explains to some extent, why arranged marriages appear to be more "successful" than love marriages.

However, women do pay a price for being part of this system, that is the lack of say in how she wants to run her home and family. Men pay this price too, as Madhu's former student Vinay Kumar describes in his article on marriage and dowry (No. 80). Despite his repeated insistence that his parents should not accept dowry, his parents went ahead and did so, thereby depriving Vinay of the dignity that comes with following one's convictions.

Madhu's analysis of why love marriages break up, that is, the lack of

emotional, psychological and financial support from parents is absolutely correct. But instead of blaming the parents for abandoning their children, she advises the children not to marry the partner of their choice lest they incur their parent's wrath. This is like saying that a battered woman should not speak up against her husband lest he leave her.

In all the cases she cited, it appeared that the parents were as much to blame for the collapse of the marriage as were the couple involved. For instance, why did Sunita lose the right to financial support from her parents merely because she married a man of her choice? If her parents truly loved her, they would have continued to provide emotional and financial support to her as they do for their other daughters. And if her situation got deplorable, they might even help her obtain a divorce. After all, if she had been a thief or liar, they would have forgiven her and even helped her mend her ways. But because marriages in India are rarely for the benefit of the couple involved and are there to augment the two families' status and standing in the community, Sunita could not be forgiven so easily. What she now gets from her parents is labelled "charity". In all the cases, the love of the parents for their

children was conditional. "Marry who I choose for you or I will never speak to you again" seems the message the parents are giving their children. This kind of emotional blackmail is rampant in India and has led millions of people into unfulfilling marriages.

Madhu's assertion that "love marriages are assumed to be superior because they are supposedly based on romance, understanding and mutual love" is also false. "Love marriages" are superior because they are based on individual choice. It's as simple as that. Of course, people can *choose* to have an arranged marriage just as they can choose to be vegetarians. But they are choosing a system of thought rather than an individual.

If, as she believes, arranged marriages are superior to love marriages, then why is it that in Delhi alone 1000 women are killed every year by husbands and in-laws who brought the woman into their home via an arranged marriage? Where is the support of her natal family in these cases? Perhaps the greatest benefit of a "love marriage" or self-arranged marriage, as Madhu calls it, is that one can choose to terminate it if it gets truly bad because there is no pressure from family to stay in a marriage that could eventually lead to death.

In her article, Madhu says that in arranged marriages husbands are kept in check by families and hence are less likely to stray. I wonder if she can back this up with statistics which show that men who have arranged marriages are less adulterous than men who have love marriages. My guess is that they are more likely to be adulterous with women who can provide them with fleeting sexual excitement which is probably lacking in their romanceless marriages. I suspect that the reason why western men appear to be more adulterous than Indian men is that in the West,



adultery often becomes a public affair — when women discover their husband's infidelity, they are likely to divorce him and, therefore, make a public issue of it rather than grin and bear it as her Indian counterpart is likely to do.

It is true that western women spend an enormous amount of time, energy and money trying to attract potential husbands. (But so do Indian women. *Mehndi, kaajal* and gold jewellery for every part of the anatomy are Indian beauty aids, are they not?) However, as anyone can tell you, a marriage based purely on looks will soon fade and it is perhaps for this reason that these marriages fail. Their marriages are not "love marriages" but carefully-calculated marriages of convenience. Hence, they are bound to fail. (Curiously, the phrase "love marriage" only exists in the Indian context as if it were an antonym of arranged marriage. It is not.)

Which brings me to the question of what a true love marriage is all about. To me, a love marriage is more than sexual attraction. It is a union based on trust and respect which allows each partner to be more expressive, creative and productive. Each partner considers the other as his/her dearest and most cherished friend.

In the present world order where women's relationships with men are

based on fear and inequality, it is hard to envisage this kind of partnership between men and women regardless of whether they are in arranged or love marriages. Only when men and women are equal can friendship thrive between them. I am not a defeatist but I have to say that until that time comes, we have no choice but to enter into arranged marriages or pseudo-love marriages where the attraction for each other wanes as soon as the honeymoon is over.

In such a scenario is it perhaps more advantageous to have an arranged marriage with a person who is socially and economically at par with your family. (Why enter a love marriage only to discover that it was not love at all and be poor and miserable to boot?) But like I said before, these advantages come at a price: the knowledge that the man you share your bed with every night is little more than a meal ticket and a security blanket and that you as an adult woman have no say in deciding whether or not you want to bear his children.

If having security is the most important thing in life, why did millions of women around the world begin questioning their lives at the risk of losing all the symbols of security that male-dominated societies provided for them?

**Rasna Warah, Nairobi, Kenya**

### **Trap of East Vs West**

Madhu Kishwar's article on *Love and Marriage* in **Manushi** 80 disturbed me somewhat, although I generally find her very good on legal and political issues. It seems to me that she is falling into a trap—the East versus the West, traditional versus modern, individual versus society/community. It is exactly this sort of easy dichotomy that leads to N. Ireland, Bosnia, Kashmir and soon. More disturbing to me is that

you present women as inevitable victims.

My parents had a lovable marriage which was not arranged but could have easily been so. My maternal grandmother chose my father, rather poor, but from a better family (a family of Confucian scholars and not businessmen), to tutor my mother in English: he 19 years of age and she 16. Marriage is never easy; it takes two to tango. By the way, I have never married.

**Hsio-Yen Shih, Hong Kong**

### **Bengali in French Accent**

Let me say at the outset that I agree with some of the major points you make in your article *Love and Marriage*, namely, that the model of the mating game which is the standard form of arranging marriages in contemporary Europe, US etcetera involves a whole lot of desperation, deception and power inequalities for women in many cases, that it is possible (though rare) to have family-arranged marriages without dowry and with egalitarian ceremonies, that women do benefit a lot from support given by their natal families and family support is usually withdrawn in the case of self-arranged marriages.

However, in the way that you lay out the problematic in your essay, your argument appears, to put it as politely as possible, distinctly out of focus. It feels to me like someone speaking Bengali with a French accent, where all the proper words are there all right but because the emphasis is in the wrong places, it feels and sounds wrong!! You mention in your conclusion that a woman's fate in marriage is determined by her own independent means of survival, though of course the husband's disposition and the attitudes of both families play a large role: now that would be a good focal point to approach the issue in terms

of a woman's options and choices, instead of the boring old oppositions of arranged/love marriage, east/west, divorce/compromise, love/barbarism etc. that never make women's best interests a crucial criterion.

This being Manushi, I don't doubt for an instant that you are unaware of the violence and harassment women suffer in the home, whether from husbands or in-laws, in nuclear or extended families, self or parent-arranged marriages, India or the US. While it is true that families are far more detached in self-arranged marriages and may refuse to take part in negotiations, it is equally true that even now women are encouraged by their own families to bear abuse in their homes and to divorce only in extreme cases.

Doubtless, the unwillingness of most families to give daughters property rights and share in the parental home plays not a small part in this. We cannot ignore the fact that a daughter-in-law living in an extended family is likely to be the most powerless, the most alien and hence the least loved as an outsider in a parent-child-sibling unit, the person given least independence, freedom et cetera, as compared to a woman who has the chance to set up her own home. May be the young women surveyed go for that option because of scarce financial and housing resources, but they certainly lose a lot in terms of developing personhood and responsibility: when I compare my parents and their contemporaries who set up their own homes and made their own decisions and stood by their choices though they still were connected to their families with married friends now who live with husbands' families and show a clear discomfort and alienation with this home-which-is-not-quite-

theirs, I cannot rejoice with this latter group at their financial gains or lesser housework or child-like adult life.

In any case, as you point out so fleetingly, we would do well to approach the question of women's options not in terms of how their marriages are arranged but in terms of their independent economic options, such as an equitable labour market, access to well-paying jobs, a share in family assets and a half-share of husband's earnings following divorce (on the basis of community property which the woman has helped add to with her labour), and also by examining if she spends disproportionate labour on domestic work and childcare, and this would take care of questions of violence and isolation in ways that actually empower the woman rather than debating the non-issue of how a marriage is put together. When I hear of a friend or relative getting married, I worry not so much about how the match is being put together as about whether she has the financial and emotional means to take care of herself and whether the families involved show love and respect for her as a person rather than blind adherence to tradition.

As For Vinay Kumar's letter, I find myself immensely irritated by the editorial decision that led to Vinay's letter being published, especially because Madhu frames it as a letter that is finally a man's view of this subject on Manushi. Used to be that Manushi articles evoked grief and resolve and inspiration. If you wanted to publish a man's views on dowry and his stand against them surely you could have found someone who emotionally touched and who could have inspired us. I am sure that among Manushi's subscribers, admirers and well-wishers there are quite a few men of this kind who have actually taken strong moral decisions.

My heart fails to bleed for a micro-second for this man who whines romantically about being anti-dowry and pro-woman, who obviously has the education but not the drive to get an independent job which would loosen family control on him, nor the strength of mind to face his family directly with courage. Oh poor baby, trapped in his social privilege, forced to take a lot of dowry when he wanted only a little money so his wife could pay for her food (and work in their house for free), forced to have his wife slave for him entirely when he wanted only a 'reasonable' amount of service!

I would welcome accounts in **Manushi** from men who have really struggled, about what they have won or lost in the process. Otherwise, just publish something about Vidyasagar's life for instance, let's not have any more adding-insult-to-injury accounts from privileged dowry-takers.

**Srimati Basu, Carbondale, USA**

### **Importance of Marriage**

It is a common fact that, as you have analysed, the so called love marriages or self arranged marriages are breaking down. So also, it is a fact that parent-arranged marriages are no more long lasting. Whatever methodology you apply the general picture we get is that we have cases of failure as well as success in both the types of marriages. In which category the success or failure rate is more is not the question.

The point is questioning the institution of marriage, since it is seen as a means of oppression and thus the need for alternatives of marriage. Kalpana Viswanathan emphasises on recognising the different forms of living if we are not very happy with the institution of marriage in its present form. Staying single is certainly not the solution if we accept

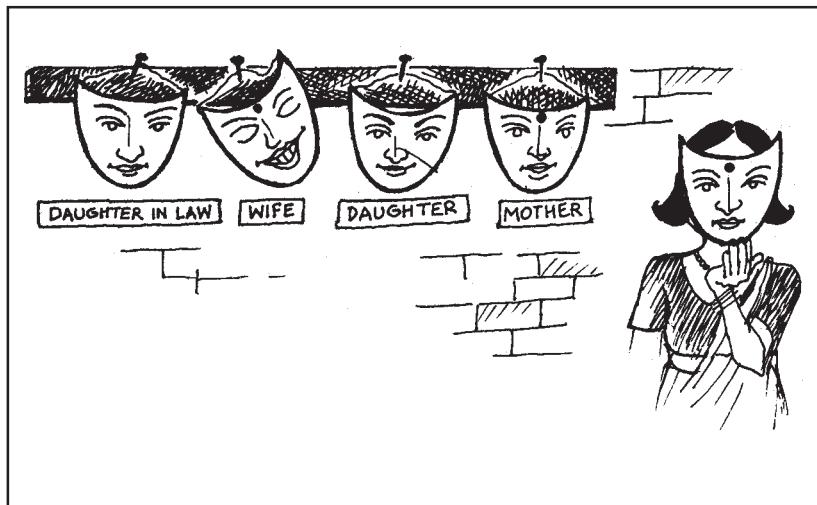
procreation as an individual and social necessity. If somebody does not want to go for procreation then also the need to fulfil your sexual needs remains. How do we go about this? Free sex, some might answer. Are we ready for this? If we are talking about single parenthood then also one has to enter into some kind of partnership or other with the counterpart. What kind of partnership will it be?

Idea of living together. Many people think this as an alternative to marriage. You can have the family life without having the bondage of a family. Happy you stay —

religions we cannot ignore the social discipline part of it.

In fact all rules and regulations are framed to regulate the behaviour of people in a given society and the basis for this is that all human beings do not behave in a responsible manner all the time. Individuals tend to behave in a way that benefit themselves and tend to forget the social responsibilities. Hence there is the need for a social monitoring system which always aims at individual growth and social progress.

If we see historically, all social systems are constantly in a process of change and so does the system of



unhappy you leave. Sounds good. But have we analysed the implications it will have on children and on the partners when one of them breaks the contract in the absence of any legal and social binding. Is everybody mature/responsible enough to go for this partnership?....

Marriage, as an institution has been evolved to impose discipline on the sexual behaviour of human beings and to create a mechanism for the healthy growth and sustenance of human race. Even if we ignore the values attached to the institution of family and marriage by different

marriage and family. We cannot say that the present family system is a perfect one. There are tensions and conflicts in the family - whether of love marriage or arranged marriage.

We no more believe that marriages are made in heaven and thus sacrosanct. But we cannot ignore the importance of marriage as a social institution and the social responsibilities attached to it. Till now we have not come up with any alternative to marriage which will give better life to both women and men and to the society.

**Pramodini Pradhan,  
Bhubneswar, Orissa**

## Response

I am really surprised at the misunderstanding my article seems to have caused. I am by no means advocating that family arranged marriages are “superior” to self arranged marriages but merely trying to point out that the superiority claimed by the votaries of the so-called love marriage system is not evident when one looks at the quality of relationship in self arranged marriages. It is wrong to assume that simply because the two people supposedly “chose” each other, they will have a better, more egalitarian marriage.

As I mentioned in my article, to me the outcome of marriage is more important than the mode of selecting one’s partner. If women continue to get beaten and abused by their self chosen husbands then there is reason to believe they are not choosing sensibly. In my own social circle I find too many disastrous self-arranged marriages to put them on a higher pedestal compared to family-arranged marriages. Moreover, if “choice” is to be the all important factor in defining these things then let us not look down upon those who “choose” to have family arranged marriages. However, the assumption is that those who go in for family arranged marriages are backward, not fully conscious of their rights.

I am not arguing that in the interest of stability people must go in for family arranged marriages. In fact, if a family arranged marriage is forced on an unwilling person, I would be dead against it and would extend all help to such a person to enable her or him to resist parental tyranny, as Manushi has done many a time over these years.

The basic point I want to make is that whether a marriage is self or family arranged, family support is crucial for its well-being. Therefore, my advise to anyone who wants to go in for self-arranged marriage would be that even if they are encountering family hostility and opposition, they should work hard to win over their family rather than rush into marriage in defiance. The time spent to win over

parents will also be some kind of an endurance test for the relationship.

Even at the risk of being “anecdotal”, let me share with you an example of a self-arranged marriage, where the couple were patient and won over the parents despite heavy odds. My friend, Saroj (not her real name) fell in love with a Muslim fellow student while she was studying at the University. She herself came from a Punjabi Hindu family which had settled in Delhi following the partition. As with most Hindu refugee families who have been victims of the partition, Saroj’s family also had its usual share of anti-Muslim sentiment. In addition, her father had been an erstwhile RSS member. For a family with RSS background the decision of Saroj to marry a Muslim came as a big jolt. In addition, Ahmed came from a relatively poor family while Saroj’s father is a fairly prosperous business man. The inter-class and inter-religious dimensions made them extremely upset. Moreover, when the RSS friends of Saroj’s father got to know of the crisis brewing in their family, they began to put a great deal of pressure and even issued threats to the family to prevent Saroj from marrying Ahmed.

However, Saroj stuck to her guns and assured her family that she would not go ahead with her marriage till they agreed but also made it clear that she would never agree to marry a man they imposed on her. It may sound *filmi* but slowly the family did come around and not only celebrated the marriage publicly but also helped the couple set up house.

Given the prejudice against a Hindu woman marrying a Muslim, Saroj and Ahmed were finding it extremely hard to even rent a house. Saroj’s family helped them buy a flat of their own. Their support helped neutralize the hostility of the society at large to an inter-religious marriage of this sort. On the other hand, I know several cases where young people have rushed in for temple marriages or simply eloped, when the parents were only advocating caution rather than opposing the

marriage outright. That has left permanent scars and made it very difficult for a relationship of trust to grow subsequently.

My experience is that when young people are seen as behaving with a sense of responsibility while choosing their marriage partners, their parents react with less hostility. This is not to suggest that all parents can be made to come around. Some are indeed tyrannical and would rather kill their daughter than let her choose her life partner. Manushi has many a time come to the aid of some such women, legally and emotionally. But one need not dismiss all parental opposition as proof of their tyranny. It could well be that the decision being taken is indeed irresponsible and the choice itself is foolish.

If we want, as Rasna says, that parents should unconditionally support every decision, right or wrong, of their children, children too have to be willing to reciprocate by taking their parents’ reservations and wishes into account. Or else, one has to have the emotional and financial strength to take full responsibility for one’s life. Unfortunately, very few women or even men have the strength to do that. Most begin to crack up when family support is withdrawn.

At the heart of this controversy is the question: Is marriage merely to be considered an alliance between two individuals and no one else’s business as is believed to be in the West and among westernized Indians? Or whether marriage is to be considered an alliance and bonding between two families or kinship groups through the process of bringing two individuals together as is the dominant view in India and many non-western societies? I for one believe that if we wish to avoid living in highly atomised societies where family ties are fragile and loose, we have to provide a legitimate space for the family’s involvement while actively resisting parents or family elders who become tyrants and bullies and deny young people the right to choose their marriage partners.

**Madhu Kishwar**