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# Indian women in marriage: When the sacred marriage thread<sup>1</sup> becomes a noose

Maheshvari Naidu

## abstract

Violence against women is a worldwide problem that transcends all boundaries – cultural, geographic, religious, social and economic. However, it is maintained that there are also added particular cultural ‘dynamics’ or constraints inherent in specific cultural groups. This focus attempts to sketch out the features of a category of Indian women who are assumed as being compelled by particular systemic cultural constraints or familial pressures to ‘play the dutiful wife’ at the expense of enduring sustained emotional and physical trauma. While there is extensive, even sensational reporting of violence within Indian families and against Indian wives in (predominantly Indian) tabloids, there is conversely less scholarly attention on this category of women and the dynamics and conflicts within Indian households. This piece focuses a narrow scrutiny on the Indian wife within abusive marriages. It looks at what is referred to as ‘culturally systemic’ violence and a certain commonality of marital discord and abuse experienced by Indian wives who live in extended families, and pays attention to the presence of the mother-in-law within the living arrangement.

## keywords

Indian, marriage, familial relations, abuse, extended household

## Introduction

The cultural framework erected around marriage in the Indian religio-cultural context is that of a sacred union between the two partners, as well as a kind of social merger between the wider networks of the two families. Marriage within religio-cultural groups in Indian communities, even within diasporic spaces such as contemporary South African Indian society, is constructed as a religious act and the marriage contract is a ceremonial event performed in a liturgical as well as a ritual context, as a contractual union. Thus, marriage in the Indian traditions is considered a sacred institution and a religious union between spouses, as well as being understood as including the wider network of family members.

The liturgical and ceremonial dimension of marriage draws the gaze to the construction of marriage in religious terms. Yet this is hardly a point of sustained concern for the average South African Indian wife. Aside from Indian women in various neo-religious Hindu and Muslim movements,<sup>2</sup> with strong images of ‘ideal wife’ and ‘ideal husband’, religious ‘duty as wife’ and so on, my own experience with the married Indian women (in age groups younger than 47 years) showed that the women had no emphasised sense of their roles as *wife* in any religious sense. However, far more discernible was their awareness of the sociological and cultural dimension of marriage that brought in its wake a rather extended kinship network.

Notwithstanding the inclination of many young couples to lean towards nuclear family



Hindu wedding, South Africa, early 1970s. Photo courtesy of Maheshvari Naidu.

spaces, one or both of the spouses in many such nuclear households continue to maintain strong emotional and sometimes financial ties with their respective parents. Many of these nucleated households boast successful and emotionally rewarding attachment ties with their wider kinship network of family members. There are, however (especially in lower-income families) married couples that continue to share space with the husbands' family through necessity. Although there are of course many instances of reciprocal fulfilling emotional support across such extended family households, there are also many households where such extended domestic living arrangements place added pressures on the daughter-in-law. One such domestic stress, this study maintains, is in the form of the mother-in-law.

While there has been early (and by now severely outdated) anthropological literature on Indian families and households (see Kuper, 1960) and later work (see Meer, 1972; Freund, 1991; Jithoo, 1991; Singh & Harisunker, 2010) on Indian women in households, none of these focus on the experiences of abused Indian

wives. The Singh and Harisunker (2010) study looked at marriage as a kind of anchorage within Indian society. However, while marriage in the South African Indian context, cross-generationally, *has* functioned as a kind of an 'anchor' or 'fastener', cementing one to the Indian and Hindu religio-cultural traditions, it would be myopic not to see that there are a significant number of Indian marriages that are experienced not so much as *anchoring*, as much as *entrapping*.

This focus probes through interviews with participants the experiences of some Indian women in abusive violent marriages and with abusive partners. It asks to what extent the culturally spawned framework of extended households of in-law relations (specifically the mother-in-law) obligates these women into maintaining silence regarding the trauma and abuse experienced within their households.

### Situating the study

Fortunately wife abuse has been exposed, through the efforts of feminist researchers as

well as feminist activists, from being a private, largely invisible experience to being viewed as a social problem, and violence against women is increasingly being read within a registry of public health concern. Emotional, sexual and physical violence by an intimate male partner is one of the most common forms that violence against women takes (Ellsberg *et al.*, 2001).

When I first read the study by Go *et al.* (2003) I was attracted to the project that set out to explore the “pathways by which gender norms influenced marital violence” (p. 393) in economically depressed communities. The ethnographic space that the research group focused on was the South Indian city of Chennai, and they worked specifically with particularly vulnerable groups of South Indian Tamil-speaking women in low-income families. What was intriguing about the Go *et al.* study was the use of what can be referred to as a multi-layered conceptual framework. This allowed a multi-level scrutiny of the individual, relational, community and societal determinants of marital violence in this setting. Such a conceptual framework allows an understanding that marital violence exhibits a social pathology that is tiered with immediate and proximate family stresses and determinants, as well as larger and more distal societal determinants, which in turn impact on the kind of interventionist strategies needed.

Whilst the Go *et al.* (2003) study was conceptualised along multiple individual, relational and societal layers, this focus piece chose to extract data at the level of *relational*, although cognisant that this exists within the larger webbed matrix of community and societal level determinants. It is of course meaningless not to acknowledge that marital conflicts are usually also intensified by the presence of much wider and larger societal and community stressors such as poverty and unemployment and so on. However, this study looked at a specific, recurrent ‘theme’ that presents itself in abusive marriages in the South African Indian communities – the relationship of the abused wife to her mother-in-law.

This familial relationship was seen to complicate and triangulate the husband-wife dyad in many Indian households. While certainly not the case for the more economically mobile, and the households of professional and working Indian women in the Durban suburbs studied, for many contemporary households

of women from lower economic groups, it is the male-dominated hierarchies that held the decision-making power in all spheres.

## Methodology

This was a relatively discrete regional study, confined for opportunistic reasons to the areas perceived as being predominantly Indian in Durban in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. A purposive sampled group of 28 women (working and non-working) and from low-income families in the areas of Chatsworth, Phoenix and Reservoir Hills were identified. ‘Low-income family’ was defined qualitatively rather than statistically by certain indicators as put forward by urban theorists (see Alvinah, 2000; Poulsen & Silverman, 2005) as families who show one or more tendencies of not owning assets such as the property they inhabit, being unbanked and having little or no access to banking and credit facilities, and having either no or a poor credit profile.

The final sample of participants numbered 28; an initial larger purposive sample of 46 women was filtered from a survey-type questionnaire administered to 120 women that sought answers to more general and somewhat more innocuous set of questions regarding participation in religious observances and the role of religion and culture in Indian households. General questions regarding the number of breadwinners in the household, and whether the home was owned or rented, prefaced the initial questionnaire. The larger group of 46 potential participants was culled from particular answers that the women volunteered about the manner in which they perceived and experienced their own role in the household and family structure. However, from these 46, 10 women declined to participate further – quite understandably given the sensitive nature of the study – while a further 8 were found to not fit the narrowly conceived profile needed for the study (in other words they were women either not in abusive marriages, or whose mothers-in-law were not a proximate part of their lives).

Selected participants in the final sample group were aged between 25 and 47 years and were interviewed over a period of 7 months with unstructured interview schedules when alone at home or at convenient meeting spaces close to their homes which they chose



Close family at a Hindu wedding, South Africa, early 1970s. Photo courtesy of Maheshvari Naidu.

themselves. The interviews, which were informal and unstructured, lasted approximately an hour to an hour and half, and the meetings with at least 15 women were multiple encounters and allowed for fostering greater rapport and a deeper level of insight into what they were choosing to share.

In addition, two trained crisis interventionists were interviewed, one who was a longstanding volunteer at the well-known Advice Desk for the Abused based in Reservoir Hills, and another now retired volunteer who asked that her affiliation to her particular crisis centre be kept confidential. These took the form of lengthy, casually posed, in-depth discussions and utilised the method of 'conversation as interviews' favoured by anthropologists for the level of ease and rapport it allows between researcher and participant. The interventionists were emailed details regarding the nature of the study and given five key areas around which discussion was to be initiated. The questions here probed their experiences with working with women in Indian communities. While both these interventionists had dealt with women from all racial groupings as well as with men who had consulted them, they were chosen specifically because they also had experience working with Indian women in abusive marriages.

In deference to the women and ethical considerations, names used for the participants are fictitious.

## The study

The study takes its cue from the observation of Johnson and Ferraro (2000), who point out that partner violence (in this case by the husband), cannot be understood without acknowledging important distinctions among the various types of violence, the motives of perpetrators, the social locations of both partners and, most importantly for this study, *the cultural contexts in which violence occurs*.

Many writers also show that multiple material and cultural conditions foreground events of domestic spousal violence, reminding us that women who depend on their husbands for practical support also depend on them as sources of self-esteem and emotional support and go through a process of role modification that allowed them to 'change' to accommodate the behaviour of the abusive husband. Certainly this is what both the crisis interventionists were also emphatic about.

Thus, without being blithely dismissive or condescending of vital macro-forces of gender politics, the piece wishes to bring into our gaze the intrapersonal forces that may well feed into spousal violence, in the figure of the Indian mother-in-law. It is not the intention to vilify the often parodied and as often *villained* figure of the mother-in-law in Indian societies, but rather to hold a lens up to this particular and persistent cultural figure (in Indian communities), who in many instances shares proximate physical and/or emotional space with the married couple.

This, for me is an example of the intersection of social structure and culture.

This kind of conceptualisation is in a sense *ecological*, in other words related to the surrounding constraints and pressures in the immediate and wider environment, and I am borrowing here from the terminology and work of Johnson and Ferraro (2000). This is so because marital behaviour patterns are comprehended as a reflection of the environmental and societal context within which they are embedded, and represent the entangled social network of other individuals who constitute the immediate social environment within which marital activities and interaction are embedded.

The narratives of the women interviewed prompted me to suggest that the one cultural consistent figure, as featured in their shared experiences, was that of the 'mother-in-law'. In the context of the women interviewed, the couples were not to be conceived as two-person dyadic units but rather in domestic three-person triadic units (even when the extended family comprised other members, such as the father-in-law and sister-in-law, etc.). Many of the women's narratives seemed to indicate the figure of the mother-in-law as one of the more "consistent markers" (Naved & Persson, 2005: 290) for triggering marital conflict or discord in the relationship. The study also suggests that a 'thick' feminist analysis has to be applied that attempts to understand the role that (other) women play in perpetuating gender inequalities and hierarchies between men and women.

If, historically, women have been constructed and associated with 'body' and 'nature' (see Bordo, 2004; Butler, 1990; Mies & Shiva, 1993) and men with 'mind' and 'culture', it is maintained that in some instances women also participate in the perpetuation of asymmetrical gender relations. This focus shows that this was certainly the case with the women interviewed, who claimed that it was this 'other' woman in the house who proved to be embedded in their marital lives and part of the marital discord.

### The mother-in-law

Since the emergence of interest in the subject of domestic violence in the literature, the trend has been towards identification of social factors associated with this phenomenon. Emphasis has been placed on the role of the socialisation

process in *victimising* the woman and *licensing* the man (culturally and otherwise) to use violence as a tactic for maintaining his status in the marriage. This sense of 'licensing' was evident in the general tenor of much of what the women chose to reveal. Many of the women shared that they felt that there were many occasions that they felt "as if the mother-in-law thought it okay if the wife got a knock or two". Nancy and Sarah, otherwise seemingly strong women who claimed to be powerless against both their husbands and mothers-in-law, claimed that it was difficult to understand that another female could take such relish in their pain.

Lila (not her real name) confided that her husband was "very close to his mother", whom she felt "acted like the lady of the house". The house in question was a modest two bedroomed flat in a large complex of flats in Phoenix, in which lived Lila, her husband and her mother-in-law. Lila felt that some of the "long talks her husband and mum had together" had to do with Lila and how they felt she was "behaving". Recently returning to work as a salesperson in a department store, Lila was convinced that her mother-in-law urged her husband to be heavy-handed with her on the pretext that she [Lila] was "being overly friendly with other males" at the bus stop or at the corner tea-room. It later emerged that by "heavy-handed", Lila meant both what she experienced as snide comments and, in extreme cases "slaps" and "shoving".

Lila also confided that "yes", her husband "did drink", rather "heavily at times", but was convinced that he was prodded on by the mother in attempting to punish her for perceived transgressions. She whispered through clenched teeth that "even when he was sober" and inclined to be "nice" to her, her mother-in-law would "say something to set off" the husband. Lila, like Mandy, shared that they felt compelled to stay and play out the role of wife. When asked why this was the case, both women, like many others interviewed, referred to a certain level of financial and emotional dependence on the husband. They claimed that the mum-in-law was all too aware of this dependence, and "rubbed this in" and attempted to obligate their silences and compliance through guilt.

This narrative may well sound like a case of pathologising the mother-in-law or a familial game of 'blame the mother-in-law'. Yet Lila's story was shared by Miriam, Sally and several



*The moment of the tying of the sacred marriage thread. Photo courtesy of Maheshvari Naidu.*

of the other women in the sample community, where strong family ties as well as economic dependence necessitated sharing living space with members of the husband's family.

There were also occasions when, upon invitation from some of the participants, I was able to visit in the evenings when husband and mother-in-law as well as other co-habiting members of the family were present. I was able to visit<sup>3</sup> about six homes in the Reservoir Hills and Chatsworth areas, at the request of the women on the pretext that they were offering me paid tuition in either crochet (at which I am genuinely hopeless), or Indian cooking (not exactly my *forté* either). The thinking was that these were plausible pretexts, and the added income<sup>4</sup> and my presence would be welcomed by the household members. The initial two or three weekly visits saw the husband and mother-in-law on exemplary behaviour in keeping with how one would behave in the presence of strangers. Subsequent visits saw a relaxing of their guarded behaviour; there were occasions when I was able to observe behaviour, verbal

and otherwise, that bore out much of what the women were telling me.

There were also occasions to 'chat' privately with the mother-in-law or husband, when the participant would leave the room on the pretext of checking on her children. These conversations also revealed that there were genuine issues around masculinity and control with the husbands, and issues around what many mothers saw as 'prior claim' or proprietary rights over their sons. It was also obvious that many of the husbands had recourse to alcohol, and were sometimes visibly drunk. It was observed that on more than one occasion, rather than discipline the drunken son, the mother would set about 'fussing' over him.

Strong extended family ties are an important feature of both Indian and black African families. According to Jackson and Berg-Cross (1988), studies of upwardly mobile black American families indicated that these families received from and gave to their kin emotional, cultural and financial support. Jackson and Berg (1988) claim that after marriage, in-laws become a link on the extended family chain, and claim that

in-laws were among those relatives identified as 'significant others'. They assert, however, and one feels – all of two decades later – that not much has changed in scholarly trends and that exploration of specific in-law relationships within the black family has been a neglected area of research.

In the South Asian context (see Myung-Hye, 1996) young couples commonly live with the husband's family, an arrangement widely believed to be the source of conflict and violence against the bride. Certainly, what my sample group were sharing would appear to echo this. However, accepting the veracity of their narratives (and observing some of what they told me) does not allow us to conclude that *all* such shared living arrangements lead to household conflict. There are many extended Indian family households where the mother-in-law is seen by the wife as a vital resource in terms of emotional and other kinds of support she can offer to her and the grandchildren.

**It becomes crucial to realise that this is not simply a case of male violence against women, when (other) women themselves feature in the 'social pathology'**

My interviews with the crisis interventionists bore out this point, that they had encountered many instances where women came to them with accounts of abuse that were either directly or indirectly (via the son) perpetrated on them by the mother-in-law. However, the crisis interventionist at the Advice Desk, who kindly took me through many of her experiences working with Indian abused women, also pointed out that in her experience there were also concerned mothers-in-law, who have over the years brought their sons for an intervention out of genuine concern for the welfare of the wife.

Visaria (1999, cited in Naved & Persson, 2005: 290) also found that in India a smaller proportion of women in extended families (53%) reported abuse compared with the proportion of women in nuclear families (73%). The point to be made, and as the research shows, is that the presence of in-laws in the household is not so straightforward; it may give rise to some

conflict, but at the same time it may also prevent violence.

Family structure is thus potentially an important factor associated with violence. It therefore seems important to identify factors which are related to the quality of in-law relationships in families. The argument is also that 'culture' moderates the effect of structure (see Atkinson *et al.*, 2005: 1137).

## Conclusion

Kurz (1989: 489) writes that two major social science perspectives on wife abuse emerged in the 1980s: a family violence perspective and a feminist perspective. Johnson and Ferraro (2000) explain that theoretically the focus in the family violence perspective has been "largely on commonalities among the various forms of family violence, such as the frequency of violence, the role of stress, and public adherence to norms accepting the use of some violence within the family context". In contrast, research from the feminist perspective allows a narrower and more fine-grained focus on the issue of wife beating, and focuses on factors specific to violence and abuse perpetrated against women by their male partners.

Feminist analyses rely on data collected from the women themselves (Johnson, 1995: 283/284). Such a feminist analysis allows us to see that while there are a host of wider, distal determinants of wife abuse within Indian and the wider households across various racial and cultural households, there are also more proximal determinants within specific cultural traditions, such as South Asian (in our case, Indian) which lean towards extended family configurations and shared living spaces.

Preferences, beliefs and norms, which anthropologists refer to as learned behaviours or, put loosely, 'culture', are partly transmitted through generations and acquired by learning and other forms of social interactions, and are what we understand as 'cultural transmission'. This arguably plays an important role in determination of many fundamental traits. Cultural transmission is the result of purposeful socialisation decisions inside the family (direct vertical socialisation), as well as of indirect socialisation processes like social imitation and learning (or oblique and horizontal socialisation) (Bisin & Verdier, 2005: 2).



In my observations within the Indian households visited, there were instances of such direct vertical socialisation from mother to son, regarding how it was felt that the 'good Indian wife' ought to behave. Although not a formal part of the study, there were several occasions where I had an opportunity to speak with some of the mothers-in-law.<sup>5</sup> While the informants here were too few to draw any plausible patterns or even generalisations, it did emerge that these women may themselves have been wives in abusive relationships. At least 3 of the 6 mothers-in-law (now widows) that I spoke with hinted at their own marriages having been stormy and abusive. Their narratives appeared to show that they had accepted their fate in their own marriages. Far from rendering them more sympathetic to their daughters-in-laws' plight, they appeared to have 'normalised' and sanctioned their son's violent behaviour, in as much as they may have normalised their own husbands' abusive behaviour toward them. Three of the elderly women (aged between 62 and 68 years) shared similar narratives, to the effect that they believed it was the man's duty to keep the women "in line". It seemed that they were quite comfortable with what they saw as their sons keeping *their* wives in line.

In the context of Indian families and Indian wives in abusive marriages there are thus, of course, a thick cluster of wider community and societal level stressors and triggers for violence and abuse that cut across the specificities of racial or cultural categories, such as alcoholism and substance abuse and marital infidelities. This was certainly what emerged from speaking to the crisis interventionists. However, what this focus suggests is that there are also cultural constraints embedded in particular cultures. A major example is in the way these 'cultures' are inclined to larger living arrangements (either financially or emotionally motivated) that draw additional family members into the net. One member of this extended arrangement is the abusive husband's mother, who is seen as wielding immense authority in the household and suggested as being one very proximal trigger for domestic violence against the wife.

For crisis interventionists and feminists working with such communities and with advocacy imperatives, it becomes crucial to realise that this is not simply a case of male violence against women, when (other) women themselves feature in the 'social pathology'.

It becomes vital then that the interventions designed are alert to including all role players in their sessions or interventions. One possibility in such instances is to attempt to include the mother-in-law and draw her in as actor in the discussions with the daughter-in-law, *about her son* and his violent behaviour, in a manner that allows her to understand the harm that the family unit itself suffers.

Family violence researchers suggest that socio-demographic indicators of structural inequality influence propensities for domestic assaults. Feminist scholars argue that domestic violence is rooted in gender and power and represents men's active attempts to maintain dominance and control over women (Bonisteel & Green, 2005). Johnson and Ferraro (2000: 948) point out that issues of control are most visible in the feminist literature that focuses on men using violence to control 'their' women, but that these issues also arise in other contexts, and thus call for wider analyses of the interplay of violence, power, and control in relationships. In the context of the women interviewed in this study, it was clear that the dyadic Indian husband-wife unit was rendered more complex and turned into a triadic relationship with the (complex) figure of the mother-in-law.

### Notes

- 1 Sacred thread is a reference to the marriage necklace-string tied around the neck of the South Indian Tamil bride, and is an integral part of the act of marriage within the South Indian marriage ritual. It is used here rather broadly as a metaphor for 'marriage' within the Indian community.
- 2 This is a reference to data from another related study of mine.
- 3 For opportunistic reasons it proved more difficult to get to any of the homes in Phoenix during the evenings.
- 4 I did pay for the 'tuition' on these occasions. I was comfortable with this as one of my research grants did allow me to remunerate my participants for their time. It is important to point out, however, that at the time of being invited by the women the money or remuneration as such was not an incentive.
- 5 I include these discussions at the suggestion of an anonymous peer reviewer. Although initially not part of the write up, I was guided by the reviewer in including this material.

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