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Modern Love, Traditional Boundaries: The Reproduction of Caste, Class, and Gender in Indian Matrimonial Advertisements

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Abstract
For this paper we went through sixty matrimonial ads from Malayala Manorama, the ones kept online in the ReleaseMyAd archive. The question behind it was a plain one: now that degrees, jobs, and foreign postings take up so much room in these ads, what happens to caste, class, and gender? Thirty of the ads were "Bride Wanted" (a family looking for a woman), thirty were "Groom Wanted" (a family looking for a man), and all of them ran in 2025–2026. Each ad got noted down for caste and religion, education, job and class, looks, family background, domestic or traditional expectations, any life abroad, and any openly liberal wording, and after that we counted and read them again. What we found is that achievement gets piled on top of the old hierarchy rather than pushing it out. Eighty-five percent of the ads name a caste, a religious community, or a church denomination. Yet 98.3 percent also mention at least one sign of what we call "structural modernity," meaning a degree, a job title, or a life abroad. The gender gap is sharp. Half of the groom-seeking ads (50 percent) ask outright for a well-qualified or professionally successful man, while just 3.3 percent of bride-seeking ads ask the same of a woman, and words about looks show up only for women. The paper leans on Pierre Bourdieu's ideas about cultural capital and social reproduction to argue that a degree or a good job has become one more thing a family can bring to the table, and that it sits alongside caste, class, religion, and gender instead of weakening them. We call this stratified modernization. The words have moved on. The sorting mostly hasn't.

I. Introduction and Literature Review

People tend to skip past the matrimonial column as a dull list of facts, but it repays a slower read. A matrimonial ad is tiny. In a few lines, a family has to squeeze an entire "suitable" person into whatever details strangers can grasp at a glance. That makes the choice of what goes in revealing. Caste, church, degree, job, height, skin tone, income, visa status, family name: none of these got in by accident, and somebody thought each one would help. This paper does not treat these ads as honest snapshots of what marriage is like. They are sales pitches. Still, a sales pitch tells you something real, namely what the seller thinks the buyer is after.

Put simply, our research question is this: if the language around marriage keeps getting more modern, how do these ads still end up reproducing caste, class, and gender hierarchies? There is a second, smaller question too. Are degrees, salaries, and careers taking over from birth as the things that make someone a good match, or do they just sit next to the older forms of exclusion, maybe even propping them up?

Other researchers have asked versions of this before, and most of them warn against assuming a neat slide from "traditional" to "modern" marriage. Looking at middle-class arranged marriages in India, Banerjee, Duflo, Ghatak, and Lafortune found that people still strongly preferred someone from their own caste, even while they weighed everything else about a prospective partner. Education and upward mobility had not made caste stop mattering to these families (Banerjee et al.). Amit Ahuja and Susan Ostermann ran an experiment on Indian matrimonial websites and found something related. How willing people were to cross caste lines depended on their own caste position and on their class, which suggests caste and class work together in this market rather than as two separate systems (Ahuja and Ostermann).

There is also good reason to doubt that new technology frees marriage up. Sucharita Sen, writing about newspaper and online matchmaking in Kolkata, calls it a "paradoxical modernisation." Families could suddenly see far more candidates, yet the way they picked among them barely changed. In her reading, globalization and matchmaking websites can live comfortably with patriarchal, traditional ways of choosing a spouse, and can even give those ways new tools (Sen, "Tradition–Technology Wedlock"). Her 2025 article on NRI grooms in Kolkata pushes the point. Even a phrase as open-sounding as "caste no bar" can sit right beside selective, limited exogamy and a caste awareness that never really switches off. A family can be highly educated and spread across three continents and still keep sorting by caste (Sen, "Caste No Bar?").

Gender adds another layer. Ramasubramanian and Jain went through 1,065 Indian matrimonial ads and found a kind of trade at work: men were prized for financial security, women for being attractive, fair, and slim. Globalization had widened what women could be on paper (students, workers, professionals) without loosening the gendered checklist for who counted as marriageable (Ramasubramanian and Jain).

The corpus for this study is small on purpose, and recent: just 2025 and 2026. We are not trying to prove that caste or patriarchy still exist in Indian marriage markets. Plenty of scholars have done that already. What interests us is how old and new kinds of status get mixed together inside a single ad. The contradictions are the point. A woman can have a PhD and a postdoctoral position and still be introduced by her caste and her looks. A doctor in the United States can go looking for another doctor and then narrow the search to one Christian denomination. An ad can say "caste no bar" and still put the candidate's own caste in the opening line, or quietly keep the religious boundary in place. Those small tensions are exactly where social reproduction under modern conditions becomes visible. In the section below, we first set out the theory this paper uses, then explain how the ads were collected and coded, and then go through what they show.

II. Theoretical Framework

Most of the thinking in this paper comes from Pierre Bourdieu. His basic move is to say that advantage isn't only about money. Alongside economic capital there is cultural capital, which covers degrees, the right kind of knowledge, and the habits and manner a person picks up from their upbringing, and social capital, which comes from belonging to groups and having lasting connections. People can build these up, and in the right setting one kind can be traded for another (Bourdieu, "Forms of Capital"). So a degree, a professional title, a good family name, or a job overseas is worth more than what it pays. Each of them can also be cashed in when it comes time to find a spouse.

Seen this way, the question about the ads shifts a little. We stop asking whether education has "replaced" caste. We ask instead how a family stacks up education, job, family standing, caste, body, and migration status into something like a portfolio. A medical degree, or a line about IIT or IIM, says more than "this person is competent." It says "this person is a cut above." Short phrases do a lot of work: "Government job," "MNC," "doctor," "chartered accountant," "USA," "Australia PR," "financially sound." Each one is shorthand for class and for a secure future. In Bourdieu's terms, the ad takes credentials and earning power and turns them into symbolic worth on the marriage market (Bourdieu, *Distinction*).

Reproduction matters here because, in many of these ads, marriage links far more than two people. It links two families and where each of them is headed. Phrases like "similar background," "upper middle class," and "financially strong traditional family," along with caste, denomination, and where someone lives, are ways of controlling how much social distance a match is allowed to cross. Marrying within the group keeps the inherited boundaries in place. Marrying someone with similar schooling keeps class advantages in the family. Caste and credentials, in other words, don't have to compete. They can back each other up.

Gender theory adds something else. A patriarchal marriage system doesn't have to keep women out of school or out of work. Deniz Kandiyoti's idea of the "patriarchal bargain" helps here: the arrangement can bend and adapt while the unequal expectations about respectability, family behavior, and how men and women relate to each other stay where they were (Kandiyoti 275). A woman with a strong career can look thoroughly modern and still be judged on her looks, her religion, whether her family is a good fit, and whether her husband outranks her at work. Seeing educated, working women in these ads, then, isn't the same as seeing emancipation.

That is why this paper uses the phrase stratified modernization. Modern life brings degrees, travel, careers, and a more liberal vocabulary into the marriage market. All of that can simply be laid on top of the older machinery of caste closure, class matching, religious matching, and gender difference.

III. Data and Methodology

The ads come from ReleaseMyAd, a public website that archives matrimonial ads printed in *Malayala Manorama*. The site says it shows real ads exactly as they ran in the paper. When the data was collected, it held more than 1,800 "Bride Wanted" ads and more than 1,050 "Groom Wanted" ads, covering 2017–2026 ("Bride Wanted Ads . . . Read & Book Online"; "Groom Wanted Ads . . . Read & Book Online"). The yearly pages listed seventy-nine Bride Wanted ads for 2025 and thirty-one placements for 2026. For Groom Wanted, the counts were forty-five for 2025 and seven for 2026 ("Bride Wanted Ads . . . 2025 Archive"; "Bride Wanted Ads . . . 2026 Archive"; "Groom Wanted Ads . . . 2025 Archive"; "Groom Wanted Ads . . . 2026 Archive").

We wanted an even split, so we took sixty placements, thirty of each kind. By "bride-seeking" we mean the Bride Wanted ads, which usually describe a man looking for a wife. By "groom-seeking" we mean the Groom Wanted ads, which usually describe a woman looking for a husband. On the Bride Wanted side we took the thirty most recent placements with distinct IDs, starting from the ad of 3 May 2026 and working back into December 2025. One 2026 ad showed up several times under the same archive ID, so we counted it once. On the Groom Wanted side we used all seven ads from 2026 plus the twenty-three most recent from 2025, going back to 1 June 2025. The archive lists each year newest first, so anyone could repeat this selection.

We counted placements, not people. That distinction is important, because some separately numbered ads use almost the same wording and might well come from the same family. We kept them whenever the archive gave them different IDs, since nothing public tells us for sure that they're the same person. So the numbers below

say how often a message turns up in the archive. They don't tell you how common a trait is among actual, unique candidates.

Every ad was coded by hand. We recorded caste, religion, or denomination; any stated limits on the partner's community; any wording that loosened those limits; education; job and professional status; any salary or income figure; direct mentions of class; height; words judging appearance; family background; family, traditional, or domestic expectations; life or work abroad; and what qualifications were asked of the partner. We split "modernity" into two kinds. Structural modernity meant a degree, a job title, or a life abroad. Liberal modernity needed open, explicit language, such as "caste no bar," "open minded," "scientific temperament," or something similar that loosened a boundary. Keeping these apart stops us from treating a professional job as proof of liberal values.

Some of the ads were written in Malayalam, and we coded those through short translations of their meaning. We left out phone numbers, email addresses, and any other contact details, and used only the visible text we needed to understand each ad.

These numbers describe; they don't prove anything statistically. Sixty ads from a single Malayalam newspaper can't speak for India. Kerala has its own history of caste, Christianity, migration, schooling, and work in the Gulf, so we read these results as a present-day case study and not as national figures. Table 1 sums up the coding, and the sections that follow go through it one theme at a time.

Table 1
Coded Characteristics of Sixty Matrimonial Advertisements, by Advertisement Type

Coded characteristic	Bride-seeking (n = 30)	Groom-seeking (n = 30)	Total (n = 60)
Caste/religious/community identity named	90.0%	80.0%	85.0%
Explicit same-community/faith boundary	26.7%	6.7%	16.7%
Boundary-relaxing language	20.0%	3.3%	11.7%
Candidate educational credential	53.3%	96.7%	75.0%
Candidate occupation/status	80.0%	80.0%	80.0%
Explicit salary/income figure	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Direct class marker	13.3%	33.3%	23.3%
Height stated	96.7%	100.0%	98.3%
Evaluative appearance term	0.0%	16.7%	8.3%
Familial/traditional/domestic marker	33.3%	23.3%	28.3%
Global-mobility marker	43.3%	30.0%	36.7%
Structural-modernity marker	96.7%	100.0%	98.3%
Liberal-modernity language	20.0%	6.7%	13.3%
Credential/status demand of desired partner	3.3%	50.0%	26.7%

Source: Author's coding of sixty advertisements from ReleaseMyAd's *Malayala Manorama* archive, 2025–2026; see the archive entries under Works Cited.
Note: Bride-seeking advertisements generally present a male candidate; groom-seeking advertisements generally present a female candidate. Percentages are shares of advertisement placements.

IV. Findings and Analysis

Modern Credentials Do Not Displace Community Identity

What stood out first, reading the ads one after another, was how often new achievements and old identities turn up together. Fifty-one of sixty ads (85 percent) give a caste, a religion, or a church. Fifty-nine of sixty (98.3 percent) give some marker of structural modernity, too. If earned status were slowly elbowing out inherited status, the numbers would run the other way. The typical ad doesn't pick "caste instead of credentials," and it doesn't pick "credentials instead of caste" either. It goes for caste plus credentials.

The archive makes this easy to see. One bride-seeking ad from March 2026 puts "RCSC" right next to an MTech degree, a senior software development job, and a posting in Hyderabad. Another names an Ezhava man and, in the next breath, his analyst job at Deloitte in Hyderabad. A February ad introduces a Nair man with an MTech who serves as a naval officer ("Bride Wanted Ads . . . 2026 Archive"). Community, schooling, career, city, and body all get packed into one compact status profile.

On the groom-seeking side, highly educated women get the same treatment. There's a 2026 ad for an Ezhava woman who is described as "beautiful" and whose degrees run from an MA and an MPhil to a PhD and then a postdoc. Her family is upper middle class, and they want a highly qualified groom. Then there's a Catholic woman with a BTech and an MBA, from a family that wants you to know it's financially secure; they'd like a postgraduate engineer, a doctor, a scientist, or a researcher. And there's a woman with a BTech and an MS who

works in Australia on permanent residency. Her ad mentions, right alongside all that, that she is CSI Syrian Christian, and it asks for a "God-fearing," highly qualified man, ideally someone already settled in Australia ("Groom Wanted Ads . . . 2026 Archive").

So this paper thinks of modernization here as layering, not swapping. Degrees and jobs hand families a bigger vocabulary for status. Community labels keep doing the sorting.

"Caste No Bar" Signals Partial, Not Complete, Boundary Dissolution

Just seven ads (11.7 percent) use wording that actually loosens a boundary. A handful of bride-seeking ads say "any Hindu" is fine, or that caste isn't an issue. This should not be dismissed; it does mean someone is willing to bend the tightest rules about marrying inside the group. But "any Hindu" opens one door and leaves the next one locked. It makes more sense, we think, to talk about how much closure there is than to split families into caste-minded and post-caste camps.

Take two cases. A 2026 bride-seeking ad introduces an IT professional as Dheevara and then adds "caste no bar." A separate run of ads for a divorced man with permanent residency in New Zealand welcomes a bride from "any Hindu" background ("Bride Wanted Ads . . . 2026 Archive"). The first drops the caste requirement but still announces the man's caste in public. The second opens up caste but stops at the edge of religion. Sen makes a similar point in her 2025 study of NRI ads, where she warns that "caste no bar" can allow some carefully chosen boundary-crossing without making caste stop mattering (Sen, "Caste No Bar?").

This is why the 85 percent figure carries more weight than the 16.7 percent figure for explicit same-community rules. An ad doesn't need to say "same caste only" for caste or church to function as a filter. Simply writing Ezhava, Nair, RCSC, Jacobite, Marthomite, Orthodox, Catholic, Pentecostal, Muslim, or some other label hands that information to whoever is reading, and lets them sort on it. When an ad doesn't exclude anyone out loud, we don't take that as a sign that nobody cares.

Class Is Communicated through Proxies Rather than Salaries

Given how market-minded marriage talk has become, you might expect to see salaries. You don't. Not one of the sixty ads gives an actual salary or income figure. Class is still all over them, though. Fourteen ads, or 23.3 percent, use direct phrases such as "well off," "financially sound," "upper middle class," "financially strong," or "well settled." Many more signal class sideways, through jobs and institutions: government service, medicine, engineering, multinational companies, chartered accountancy, the senior civil service, the armed forces, permanent residency abroad, and top-tier colleges.

One groom-seeking ad from December 2025 says a lot. The woman is doing a master's degree after studying at a "prestigious institution." Her father is a senior Government of India bureaucrat. The family is described as well settled, educated, and reputed. The groom should come from a "similar background," for example a Group A officer or a professional from a premier institution. And the last thing the ad asks for is an "open minded" groom ("Groom Wanted Ads . . . 2025 Archive").

That last request is worth pausing on. "Open minded" sounds individual and liberal. Yet the same ad shrinks the pool of eligible men by schooling, government rank, profession, family reputation, and likeness of background. In Bourdieu's language, credentials are being used to match class to class. Modern achievement doesn't have to make choosing a partner more open; it can just hand families sharper tools for marrying their own kind.

We saw the same thing in a 2025 ad for a woman who is a doctor and an MCh consultant. The groom has to be either another senior medical professional or someone with an IIT or IIM background. Another ad, this one for a government doctor, asks for "well qualified professionals" ("Groom Wanted Ads . . . 2025 Archive"). Nobody is bluntly asking for money here. The signals are subtler than that. Schooling and job title stand in for likely income, lifestyle, prestige, contacts, and where the family is going.

Gender Inequality Survives through Different Valuations of Achievement

The biggest gender gap shows up in what each side asks of the other. Fifteen of the thirty groom-seeking ads, so 50 percent, say plainly that the man should be highly qualified, working in a profession, financially established, or in some particular high-status field. On the bride-seeking side, only one ad out of thirty (3.3 percent) asks anything comparable of the woman.

That doesn't mean women's education counts for little. Twenty-nine of the thirty women in the groom-seeking ads have some kind of degree, and often an advanced one. They are doctors, dentists, engineers, postgraduate students, PhD researchers, nurses, bank officers, teachers, consultants, and people working for multinationals. Nobody reading these ads would think of the women in them as housewives and nothing more. But their achievements sit inside a lopsided system. A woman with strong credentials is usually expected to marry a man whose credentials are at least as strong, and sometimes stronger.

This fits Bourdieu's idea that one kind of capital can be converted into another, but it also keeps the man in the role of provider. Her education raises her value on the marriage market, and at the same moment it can raise the bar for the job her husband needs to have. Education doesn't have to end the expectation that women marry up. It can just give that expectation newer words. Ramasubramanian and Jain found years ago that Indian

matrimonial ads traded men's financial stability against gendered expectations of women. That finding still holds, even now that women's careers are far more visible.

Looks are another place where the two sides differ. Height appears in fifty-nine of the sixty ads, for men and women alike, so it works as a standard measurement for everyone. Words that judge appearance are a different story: they turn up in five groom-seeking ads and in none of the bride-seeking ones we sampled. Women get called "beautiful," "pretty," or "fair." The postdoctoral researcher in the 2026 set, highly educated as she is, is still called "beautiful," and the MBBS graduate working on her MS in the 2025 set is described as "fair" ("Groom Wanted Ads . . . 2026 Archive"; "Groom Wanted Ads . . . 2025 Archive").

The pairing matters more than the raw count. Beauty isn't crowding out women's education here. The two are being stacked. A woman can hold a PhD and her family will still put her looks on the table as part of the pitch. Earlier research on gendered beauty standards in these ads found much the same thing (Ramasubramanian and Jain). What seems newer in our sample is that this language now sits right next to very strong professional credentials, rather than taking their place.

Global Mobility Reinforces Rather than Weakens Social Boundaries

Twenty-two ads, or 36.7 percent, mention living, working, holding citizenship, or having permanent residency abroad. The places include Australia, the United States, Britain, Ireland, Dubai, Muscat, New Zealand, and other parts of the Gulf. You might think that much movement would loosen local community rules. Many of these overseas ads still screen by religion, caste, profession, or family, though.

A man doing his medical residency in the United States wants a Born Again or Marthomite woman who is a doctor and has either passed the USMLE or works in the United States. A man working in Australia wants a "God-fearing Christian bride" and mentions that his family keeps the Sabbath ("Bride Wanted Ads . . . 2026 Archive"). On the groom-seeking side, a woman with permanent residency in Australia is looking for a "God-fearing," highly qualified man, ideally also in Australia, and a US citizen wants a groom who lives in the United States ("Groom Wanted Ads . . . 2026 Archive"; "Groom Wanted Ads . . . 2025 Archive").

In these cases, moving abroad and matching the traditional way go hand in hand. Living overseas stretches the map of who a family might consider, but it also adds new ways of ranking people. Visa status, foreign professional licenses, citizenship, and where someone is based all become one more resource for finding the "right" kind of similar partner. Sen comes to much the same conclusion: a global marriage market can carry old social distinctions along with it instead of wiping them out (Sen, "Tradition–Technology Wedlock"; Sen, "Caste No Bar?").

The Central Contradiction Is Systematic, Not Exceptional

Fifty-nine of the sixty ads (98.3 percent) carry some marker of structural modernity, yet only 13.3 percent use openly liberal language. That gap matters. A doctorate, an engineering job, permanent residency, or a post at a multinational shows that someone is part of modern schools and workplaces. It says nothing, on its own, about whether they have given up marrying within caste or religion, stepped back from family involvement, or dropped conventional gender roles. Sociologists shouldn't treat economic and educational modernization as if it automatically loosens the rules of private life.

V. Discussion and Conclusion

So, back to the central research question. These ads reproduce caste, class, and gender hierarchies not in spite of modern achievements but often by means of them, by folding those achievements into a bigger, more detailed ranking of who is marriageable.

Across the sixty ads, three things are happening at once. Inherited and community identities are still front and center: 85 percent name a caste, religion, or denomination. Achievement is close to universal: 98.3 percent point to education, a job, or a life abroad. And all of it is gendered. Women now appear as professionals in large numbers, yet the groom-seeking ads are far more likely to demand degrees and careers from men, and in our sample only women get described as beautiful.

None of this fits a simple tradition-versus-modernity story. It would be wrong to call these ads leftovers from an older world of arranged marriage. Any vocabulary that includes software engineering, postdoctoral research, medical specialties, MNC jobs, IIT and IIM degrees, permanent residency, the USMLE, migration to Australia, and "scientific temperament" is plainly of its time. It would be just as wrong, though, to read those words as proof that marriage has become mostly a matter of individual choice, or that caste no longer counts.

Bourdieu helps us make sense of this. Education and a good career are cultural and symbolic capital, and that capital can be spent on the marriage market. Families with strong credentials can look for other families with strong credentials, and the advantage passes down to the next generation. Caste or denomination decides who belongs, education sorts by class, and a life abroad adds one more layer of distinction. These kinds of capital don't fight each other. They get bundled together.

The missing salary figures point the same way. Class doesn't have to be written in rupees to shape who looks like a good match. An MCh consultant, a Group A officer, a doctor, a government employee, a Deloitte

analyst, a naval officer, a chartered accountant, or someone working abroad sends readers clear signals about likely income, standing, education, and way of life. Class can become less openly stated and still be easy to read.

Change on the gender side is partial too. Women's education is one of the most striking things in the whole set of ads, and this should not be played down: the ideal woman in these ads is often a working professional, not only a homemaker. But her career has been pulled into a system where she can still be judged on her looks, her community, her family, and how her future husband's job compares to hers. That isn't old-fashioned femininity left untouched. It is a modernized gender bargain, where achievement gets added to the list of requirements without the older items being taken off.

This study has real limits. Sixty ads can't support claims about India as a whole, and drawing them from *Malayala Manorama* means Malayali life is overrepresented, including its Christian denominations and its history of migration. The archive also records ads, not marriages, so it shows how families chose to present themselves, not who eventually married whom. And because we counted placements, we may have counted similar ads from the same unknown family more than once. A bigger study would compare several newspapers, regions, languages, caste groups, and matrimonial websites, check agreement between more than one coder, separate what candidates say about themselves from what they ask for more carefully, and track change over time.

Even with those limits, the ads give a consistent answer. Education, income-related status, and career success haven't simply taken caste's place as the test of a good match. They work alongside caste, denomination, family reputation, physical criteria, and gendered expectations. Modernity changes the list of what counts as desirable far more easily than it changes the habit of sorting people in the first place.

So the most telling ad isn't the one that looks completely "traditional." It's the one for the postdoctoral researcher whose caste and beauty still get spelled out; for the successful professional woman whose husband must be even better credentialed; for the doctor in America whose search crosses oceans but stays inside one church; or for the well-placed bureaucratic family that wants an "open minded" groom, as long as he comes from a background as prestigious as theirs. These aren't odd exceptions. They show how inequality adjusts to new conditions.

What these ads show, in the end, is social reproduction in a very current form. The marriage market doesn't have to pick between tradition and modernity. It can update the very tools it uses to keep the old boundaries standing. A degree doesn't replace caste or family. Working abroad doesn't end marrying within one's group, and it doesn't undo gender roles. A cosmopolitan vocabulary doesn't guarantee a cosmopolitan choice of spouse. Modern achievement just becomes one more currency in a market that was already ranked. The words families use to describe a suitable match have changed a great deal. The structure underneath them has changed much less.

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