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'Arranged marriage' just a click away on Internet

By Amit Batabyal

When asked to ponder the notion of an arranged marriage, Americans typically express feelings ranging from bemused curiosity to contemptuous disdain.

The disdain and even hostility that many Americans feel toward arranged marriages stems from their erroneous equation of an arranged marriage with a forced marriage.

In a forced marriage, parents and relatives choose a child's future spouse with no input from the child. If the affected child refuses to comply, the implications are often severe. The child may be punished, disowned and, on occasion, even killed. This unsavory state of affairs, although not nonexistent, is increasingly the exception rather than the norm. However, what is the norm, in large parts of the world, is an arranged marriage.

Unlike Western-style love marriages in which an individual wishing to get married finds a suitable spouse, in an arranged marriage, this fundamental task is performed not by the individual contemplating marriage, but instead by parents, relatives and matchmakers.

Modern arranged marriages in nations like India tend to be flexible and, increasingly, the role of parents and relatives, although significant, is ultimately only consultative and not definitive. In other words, a marrying individual is not only consulted actively during the spouse search, but this individual can exercise veto power over a parental choice. In addition, in many modernizing cultures, parents and their children considering marriage jointly look for an appropriate spouse.

Despite the widespread popularity of arranged marriages, most Americans naturally choose the love marriage option. Even so, today, about one-half of these love marriages end in divorce. This saturnine state of affairs raises two questions:

- Is it better to go the arranged route or take the love option?
- Is there any movement in America away from love marriages and toward arranged marriages?

My research shows that because the decision to get married is fundamentally one made amid uncertainty, there is, unfortunately, no unequivocal answer to the first question. For instance, suppose that a key consideration for a marrying individual is the amount of time it will take until (s)he is married.

Then, in an environment of uncertainty, it can be shown that whether one should go with the arranged or the love option depends on the average time to marriage under each of these options.

The answer to the second question is less equivocal. Just as arranged marriages in other parts of the world are increasingly taking on aspects of love marriages, in America, because of time constraints, dissatisfaction with the outcome of love marriages, and the influx of immigrants from nations where arranged marriages are popular, there is movement away from love marriages and toward arranged marriages.

The arranging, however, is being done not by parents and family, but instead by anonymous third parties that rarely use the word "arranged" in their advertising. Instead, they often use names like "Introduction

Service" or, on the Web, eHarmony.com.

The writer Rudyard Kipling once said, "Oh East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." At least in the context of the two most common approaches to marriage, this dictum does not appear to be holding.

Batabyal is the Arthur J. Gosnell professor of economics at Rochester Institute of Technology and the author of [Stochastic Models of Decision Making in Arranged Marriages](#). The views here are his own. E-mail him at aabgsh@rit.edu.



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