

## **The impossible wedding?**

### **The crisis of social reproduction of the South Asian peasantry**

**A special issue coordinated by:**

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This special issue engages with the question of men's bachelorhood in South Asia today (Alter 1997) and analyses its relationship to farming and more globally marriage. If sexuality and gender studies have of late received more attention in the field of social sciences (Aneja 2019; Christy 2017; Roy 2020), it appears as though certain “old issues” (Bourdieu 2007; Brandes 1976) have resurfaced in remarkably different contexts, raising new questions on the making and unmaking of men at the intersection of gender, class and caste or ethnicity (Sobo and Bell 2001; Schubert 2020).

In South Asia, the agricultural sector still employs practically half of the population (GoI 2013). In other words, most rural inhabitants are still farmers owning small pieces of land, daily-wage labourers in the rural economy or largely dependent on seasonal migration. Our hypothesis is that the Indian farmers – possibly farmers across South Asia if not beyond – experience difficulties in getting married today due to a change in representations and a devaluation of rural as well as farmer identities. How is that phenomenon new? Who are the bachelors today in the Indian rural society? What is the differential in trajectories of entry into marriage? What is the magnitude of bachelorhood in Indian peasantry?

Due to policies of liberalization and prices' fluctuation, climate change and depletion of natural resources resulting from widespread industrial agricultural practices and massive changes in land use alongside fragmentation of land ownership, the conditions of farmers have been deteriorating over the last three decades. This situation is particularly noticeable in India where farmer suicides have increasingly fuelled the conversations in the national media alongside movements against land acquisition and special economic zones. While some farmers have successfully turned themselves into neo-rentiers in the new land economy and managed to leave the agrarian crisis “behind” (Levien 2018), a vast majority of peasants are however struggling to cross the threshold of economic reproduction and remain shaky petty commodity producers. More recently, Indian farmers made the international headlines by

mobilizing against a triple reform of the agricultural and food sector engaged by Narendra Modi through his “farm bills”, enacted in September 2020 and eventually withdrawn in December 2021 in the wake of more than a year of variegated yet intense confrontations across North India (Jodhka 2021). Their grievances and numerous testimonies converged to once again highlight rural distress and social downgrading despite their fierce pride for being *kisaan* (peasants) contributing to the country’s food security.

Our aim is to tackle with this salient and highly topical issue of the so-called “agricultural crisis”, however, by changing our lens. Farmers’ hardships will not be discussed through the farmer union demands regarding the regulation of the agricultural market, but rather around the challenges faced by farmers from rural South Asia on the matrimonial market. This approach is valuable not only because it allows us to explore the submerged portion of the iceberg, but also because they were instigated as a matter of concern by participants themselves in the field. To grasp the scale of the crisis of matrimonial relations in the South Asian peasantry, adopting a longitudinal perspective is key. It is indeed worth unpacking the significant differences between the stage of life of celibacy, namely *brahmacarya* which is praised in the Vedic literature; multiple ascetic figures perceived as life-long renouncers of worldly unions such as sadhus, fakirs and bhikkhus; well-documented strategies used by rural families in order to avoid land fragmentation (sending a son to the army or to a religious site) and the involuntary celibacy of men due to the current hardships faced by peasants in contemporary South Asia when seeking to marry. In so doing, demographic changes as well as changing family norms and relationships specific to the region should be kept in mind.

To be more precise, this issue will give special attention to: 1. The reconfiguration of matrimonial norms; 2. The devaluation of the peasant world in the context of a deep agrarian crisis; 3. The emerging aspirations of women; 4. The perceived threats of failed masculinity and finally 5. Matrimony in the wake of structural violence, conflict and vulnerabilities due to climate change. In other words, we shall examine a wide range of issues at the crossroads of an anthropology of kinship, the sociology of family, rural geography, gender studies and environmental research focused on outlining the constellation of potential factors that co-produce and better account for problems of marriage and bachelorhood among South Asian peasants/petty commodity producers.

### **Information for authors**

Contributions are invited from a range of disciplines, including, but not restricted to: anthropology, sociology, geography, political studies, demography and history.

To submit your proposal for this thematic issue, please send us a word document specifying your name, field of research, institutional affiliation, status, a title for your paper, an abstract of 300 words in length and 5 key words.

The deadline is February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

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## **Key dimensions of the special issue**

### **1. The reconfigurations of matrimonial norms.**

The institution of marriage in India has long been depicted as being highly regulated by intertwined laws and social norms based on caste, clan, village and class boundaries as well as on female hypergamy. Research on Indian families has focused primarily “on kinship norms [rather] than on pathology, deviance and breakdown” (Grover 2011: 1). Despite this common narrative of marriage aiming at reproducing social order, an increasing number of researchers recall that regulations of marriage in India are never entirely or passively followed, in line with Pierre Bourdieu’s reflections on matrimonial strategies (1972). Through constant negotiations, new forms of “legitimate” forms of marriage develop and gain acceptance (Dhawan 2011: 150). Yet, and even though old preferential marriages may evolve, as evidenced in Tamil Nadu for example (Clark-Decès 2014; Fuller and Narasimhan 2014), “its basic meanings of ‘rightness’ and sacrifice are not [in decline]” (Clark-Decès 2014: 173). It is indeed striking to see on the one hand the appearance of the so-called “love-arranged marriages” within Indian cities (Mody 2008; Donner 2016), as well as the disappearance of the preferential kin marriage in southern India (Clark-Decès 2014) and the implementation of government programmes that offer financial incentives to inter-caste couples (if either of them is a Dalit) in order to encourage caste exogamy. At the same time, on the other hand, one may note the growing concern for inter-religious marriages targeted as “love jihad” by Hindu nationalists and the persistence of local punitive measures against inter-caste couples that have eloped, notably in northern India (Chowdhry 2007).

By exploring how the agricultural crisis affects the matrimonial market in rural India/ South Asia and how such challenges impact families’ expectations and strategies with regard to marriage, we aim to contribute to the literature on the conflicting configurations of matrimonial norms, negotiations, and reconfigurations. We will explore how the current economic precarity of farmers along with new expectations of life standards and the imbalanced sex ratio have become a concern for rural men, women of marriageable age and their families (Jeffery 2014; Tilche 2018). We will also investigate what prompts a man to choose to remain a bachelor, marry a woman from a lower caste/class, accept an inter-caste love marriage despite his convictions on endogamous unions or search for a cross-regional bride whose caste, social background, language and even religion may differ (Chaudhry 2021; Kaur 2004; Ahlawat 2016; Mishra 2016).

### **2. The devaluation of the peasant world**

This section explores the effect of the evolution of the peasant culture’s valorisation/devaluation of men bachelorhood in the society as a whole. The agrarian crisis, the necessity of seasonal migration and the high level of non-employment in the rural sector are specifically mentioned in the narratives of bachelorhood. Not marrying women of their choice may also be a reason Patidars in Gujarat, Marathas in Maharashtra, Jats in Haryana and Uttar Pradesh and Gujjars in Rajasthan are demanding reservations in government jobs.

The involuntary celibacy of men as well as their late or delayed marriage shed another light on the reproductive crisis of the peasant society, highlighting the links between social crisis

and agricultural and employment crisis. This issue of men's difficulty in finding a woman (willing) to marry therefore becomes an entry point for understanding in a global way, the various tensions intersecting with the questions relevant to the future of peasant cultures in South Asia. Often ignored or neglected by public policies, the issue of men's bachelorhood nevertheless appears to be seriously worrisome to villagers - not only mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, but ultimately all the relatives - see it and experience it as a major crisis in the socio-economic reproduction of the farmers' families.

Of course, constrained bachelorhood is a social figure that may fulfil economic functions, such as protecting families against division and internal fragmentation when the socio-economic objective is to keep the entire family property undivided. As shown by Augustins in the European context (1989), rural communities have invented two differentiated modes of social reproduction: when the priority is the "community of place", the mobility of the family members takes precedence over the fixity of the properties (land and house); when the priority is "the community of blood", priority is reversed: the fixity of family members (and of men especially) supposes the mobility of properties. In the former case, and moreover in the context of a patrilineal society, the eldest son inherits the land, gets married and is thus favoured over the rest of his younger brothers to ensure minimal redistribution and shrinking of the property. The non-marriage of younger brothers was considered in such a light, according to Bourdieu (*op.cit*), a necessary sacrifice to the collective and thus raised little social preoccupation. The proposal of this special issue concerns both the change of outlook on this type of forced celibacy (for reasons relative to social norms) but also and above all, on the celibacy suffered by men in connection with a new socio-economic environment and particularly the current discrediting of the status of peasant in the marriage market. But what happens when such a phenomenon seems to affect the agrarian condition overall? While the non-marriage of younger brothers could be assimilated to the sacrifice of the individual by the collective in "traditional" societies, the present experience of celibacy is endured as forced and anguishing, felt as a form of anomy rather than the extreme respect towards inheritance customs and family indivision.

### **3. Towards new female aspirations?**

The quest of equality regarding the status between women and men in agriculture remains a major aspiration as well as a demand of feminist movements. In India, the national network for women farmers' rights, *Makaam*, is particularly at the forefront of the struggle. Despite the evolution of land inheritance rights, as in India with the 2005 HSA All-India Amendment, the idea of equality that exists within the legal framework does not suffice to change social practices. In India, as in other South Asian countries, women's access to resources, particularly land, remains very low.

However, the work of feminist economists (Agarwal 1994) has clearly shown that access to land is not only a question of equality but also of efficiency (improvement of productivity, better education of children, less violence) (FAO 2011). The feminisation of agriculture, meaning an increased proportion of women in the field when men have outside jobs and migrate, is not necessarily accompanied by an improvement in the conditions of their decision-making and recognition at work (Doss and al. 2018). Faced with the inertia of social norms with regard to the status of peasant women (Guérin and al. 2020), many mothers have apparently chosen not to socialise their daughters to become a peasant, depending on the conditions, in order to avoid working the land as well as looking after kitchen management

for farm workers (Rao and al. 2019). Arranged marriages remain the norm, but increasingly the girls' agreement becomes decisive in the alliance, becoming a marriage by choice (Kalpagam 2008). Men's bachelorhood seems to be linked to a refusal of girls to marry peasants whose incomes are derived only from working the land, which they consider, in the current context, to be too uncertain. Why men farmers remain bachelors is thus a rather biased question that introduces the issue from the perspective of men. It may be reversed and one may ask why women refuse men farmers in order to shift the focus on the agency of women.

#### **4. The perceived threats of (failed) masculinity**

One of our aims consists in assessing how masculinity is challenged by the experience of constrained bachelorhood among farmers, and what this implies in terms of doubts, fears and expectations. Since both marriage and job position are perceived as necessary for achieving full adulthood and mandatory passages in the construction of male identity in India, constrained bachelorhood, and unemployment (or non-employment) might appear to be of great concern for men.

As Prem Chowdhry summarises when referring to issues of diminished masculinity and feelings of marginalisation, “it is not only women but men as well who find it difficult to live up to the stereotypes of a patriarchal setup” (Chowdhry 2005: 5192). Even though the growing ability to secure non-agricultural work is increasingly valued in rural India, it is worth adding that owning land and ploughing the field is essential to assert masculinity in rural India. Dispossessing a farmer of his land is thus framed as “posing a direct challenge to his masculinity” (Gill 2012). One may wonder how the “rural imaginary” (Mooney 2011) and the representations of “hegemonic masculinity” in oral traditions (Chowdhry 2015) enhance and crystallise mechanisms of masculinities among specific communities, such as the Punjabi Jats who are often portrayed as heroes in Punjabi cinema (Gill 2012).

It is also worth interrogating how unmarried landless farmers handle with their status by taking into account their relationships with themselves, with their family and with their community. In Haryana for instance, researchers underline that constrained unmarried men are seen as subordinate and marginalised men who try to express power by punishing “dishonoured” men and women (Chowdhry 2005). Against this backdrop, it is worth investigating to what extent such forms of masculinity compensations strengthen “highly regressive trends in society” (Chowdhry 2005). One should also explore whether a surplus of unmarried men is, as some researchers have controversially asserted (Oldenburg 1992; Hudson and al. 2002), a source of violence or a matter of concern among politicians.

#### **5. Matrimony in the wake of structural violence, conflict, and vulnerabilities due to climate change**

Most societies undergoing rapid and widespread transformations have experienced some form or another of “depeasantisation” (Bourdieu and al. 2020) and a “revolution of aspirations” (Mohanty 2005) amongst rural social groups and the youth, situations in which male and in particular farmers’ “marriageability” can be drastically affected. Conflicts are equally important contributors to social change through their wide-scale effects on nuptiality. This section thus looks at structural violence through the angle of inequalities and vulnerabilities in the farming sector but also recalls the importance of conflictuality and wishes to explore its

relations with men' bachelorhood. Galtung (1969) defines structural violence as an “avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs”, a situation which can arise from direct human intervention or remain largely processual. If marriage qualifies as an essential elementary structure of kinship (Levi-Strauss 1949), then a crisis of matrimonial relations – regardless of its causes and motives – is to be seen as a major upheaval deserving attention.

Among the drivers of structural violence and massive inequalities as well as impoverishment, we especially wish to explore the relations between large-scale dispossession, environmental risks, and matrimony. Whether dispossessed by various kinds of infrastructure, Special Economic Zones or simply despaired by an economic activity permanently on the brink of collapse, farmers have growingly envisaged a future outside of agriculture: it is indeed more and more common to sell one's piece of land to fund children's education or to accede to partial economic diversification. Similarly, the role of the environment in precipitating unfavourable conditions for matrimony in rural areas needs to be explored: vulnerabilities may lead families to shun farmers for arranged marriages or can conversely be a driver of child marriage, such as in Bangladesh (Sundaram 2017; HRW 2015). A combined action of natural disasters and lack of governmental support effectively push people away from agriculture. Coastal areas are known to be particularly prone to such abrupt transformations (Kantamaneni 2020) and usually bear witness, among other signs of anomy, to a crisis of matrimonial relations in peasantry. What have been the effects of such evolutions on the matrimonial markets of these societies? Have these developments contributed to reducing matrimonial chances within the South Asian peasantry? What are the strategies deployed by the “un-marriageable” men to circumvent such objective difficulties or to negotiate this lack of confirmed status in society?

In all, whether precipitated by major “displacement projects” (Padel and al. 2010) or brought upon by environmental transformations if not disasters, the crisis of matrimonial relations in those affected regions powerfully questions the resilience as well as the social reproduction of peasant worlds, still widely perceived to be patriarchal, fundamentally unequal, and conservative universes of values.

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