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Parental Authority, Youth Autonomy and Marital Decisions

*The family has made this decision [of marriage], not our [couple] decision, we agree to it no doubt about it, but there is the entire family into it. Aditya (M), Married, India*

*Sometimes your family just cannot be the ones who help you in this [marriage] – they are sometimes the ones who are causing the aggravation. Ameera (F), Married, UK*

Family, and the nature of how family is perceived, is crucial in understanding participants’ narratives of relationships, marriage and even of love. My aim in this chapter is to contextualise ideas of what makes a good marriage through a discussion of relations between parents and their sons and daughters. I examine how participants talked about ‘family’ and specifically their relationships with their parents, exploring the role that young people expect and accept from their parents in marital matters.

India

Being ‘family oriented’ is considered a hallmark of Indian middle class society (Donner 2008). My participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of family and family networks in their narratives and proudly compared their family relations with the presumed relations of families in the UK or other ‘western’ countries. For example, Aditya told me:

*People out there [in ‘western’ countries’] are not very keen on, what we say, you know understanding each other or be with family members or be*
Participants portrayed Indian families as particularly close and intimate. The tradition of joint family living was used to demonstrate this attachment and closeness, with participants relating to me the large amounts of time they spent together with their parents and siblings in joint activities, such as watching television. In contrast, ‘western families’ were portrayed as cold, individualistic and uncaring. I often heard participants in Baroda cast aspersions about the lack of familial attachment in the UK, citing the numbers of senior people in retirement homes and the high levels of divorce there as ‘proof’ of their weak family ties.

In addition to the close relations which were thought to characterise ‘Indian family’, participants’ narratives about family indicated a strong identification of themselves (and others) as part of a larger network. In such a way, the culture of each family, which was rooted in part to their particular caste, permeated each member of the family. Participants spoke of themselves and others, in particular potential spouses, within the context of the whole family. To know one person in the family is to know each individual in the family. Individuals have a family and community identity to which personal identity is subsumed (Mody 2008). In this way, a potential spouse could be selected on the basis of their family’s reputation or because certain members of their family were known to the parents.

In turn, when choosing a spouse participants were concerned about the family as a whole, not just the individual. ‘It’s not just we two that are marrying’, they frequently told me. The ensuing marriage is then understood as an alliance between two families rather than just the couple (Rao and Rao 1982). The importance of knowing what family you are marrying into is heightened by the common practice of patrilocality in Gujarat – after marriage the couple are likely to live with the husband’s parents. For many young people, their chief concern as they broker a marriage is whether and how the couple will get along with the wider family. Women tended to worry about adapting to their future in-laws, while men worried about choosing a woman who would ‘fit’ well with their parents and siblings. For example, Aditya spoke at length of his worries about how his wife Geet would get on with his family. He told