

What's love got to do with it? Experiences and perspectives of young men in a Gujarati village

Abstract

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to outline and discuss some preliminary findings resulting from my recent fieldwork in Gujarat, India. I am currently at the stage of organising and analysing the data and therefore this paper is an expression and reflection of this process, and as such, will not draw significantly from current literature and theory. After a brief overview of the context, methodology and themes of my research, I intend to discuss men's notions and experiences of pre-marital relationships, their clandestine nature and consequences of discovery in the context of a Gujarati village. By attempting to understand the varying notions, perspectives and experiences of pre-marital relationships held by men in different parts of the village, the research will explore the challenges, barriers and opportunities men face in terms of fulfilling sexual needs, gender interactions and aspirations for love and marriage.

Research context and methodology

The fieldwork was conducted over a nine month period in a village in the central district of Kheda, Gujarat. With a population of around 4000, the village was medium in size with a demographic that spanned a range of castes and religions, including Hindu, Christian and Muslim. The dominant caste in terms of economic, political and social power is the Patels followed by the Darbars and Thakors then the lower status groups of Christian and Tadpada with the Harijan caste firmly at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Disconnected, both spatially and socially, from the village and caste structure are the Muslim community. My data collection, whilst establishing relationships and interactions within other castes, was firmly located within the lower status 'samaj' (society or community) of the Christians, Tadpadas and Muslims. In conducting this ethnographic study I lived within the village and benefited from daily interactions and observations of individuals and groups of men from these different samaj. The establishing of relationships and a network of contacts within these samaj allowed me to conduct 38 semi-structured interviews focusing on the life narratives of individual men aged mainly between 17 and 30.

The methodological approach adopted was initially an open and iterative one, allowing the direction and themes of the research to be guided by the participants rather than me, as a foreign researcher, resolving to ask pre-established questions that may or may not have significance to their lives. Alongside the more predictable themes surrounding livelihoods and caste dynamics emerged a complex and intricate series of narratives and perspectives on love, sex and marriage. Whether due to my age, my gender or my disconnectedness from the

community as a foreigner, a large number of the men spoke candidly and openly about their experiences with the opposite sex (and occasionally with the same sex) providing a degree of insight into notions of love and sex, varying attitudes and behaviour towards women, marriage processes (both 'love' and 'arranged'), secret affairs, inter-caste relationships, socio-cultural norms, barriers and consequences to discovery. In the parameters of this paper I will aim to discuss the experiences and perspectives of men from different samaj regarding their clandestine pre-marital relationships and the consequences of discovery within the samaj and wider community.

Discussion of findings

At this stage it is important to, at least loosely, define certain key notions by answering the following questions: What are pre-marital relationships? Why are these relationships conducted in 'secret'? How are they carried out? Only then is it meaningful to discuss the consequences for the discovery of these relationships across the different samaj.

What are pre-marital relationships? Broadly speaking these fall into two categories: a strong, monogamous relationship over a sustained period of time where sex is not the prime motivation; and multiple, often fairly short term, relationships where the prime motivation is sex. The term 'prem' or 'love' was often used to describe both forms of relationships and their various amalgamations, albeit with different connotations and often used, in the case of the latter, alongside such references to women as 'use and throw', 'machines' and 'holes'. In the former relationship type, one young Muslim man described his long love story where he never once kissed the girl during the eight year relationship, which only came to an end when she was arranged to marry another man. Occasionally both forms of relationships appeared to occur simultaneously with one Christian man boasting of having 10 relationships, but distinguishing between one which he considered to be a strong, eternal love and the others, which were to be 'used and thrown.' It is perhaps possible to draw a comparison between these two forms of relationships and the two main forms of media that young men encounter in terms of love and sex: the prohibited, long suffering, self-sacrificing and eternal love of the Bollywood cinema; and the explicit, physical and derogatory acts of lust and sex portrayed in blue movies, which are frequently downloaded on to the mobile phones of young men.

Why are these relationships conducted in 'secret' (and what does 'secret' mean)? In Indian society pre-marital sex is taboo yet the prevalence and frequency of the contravention of this norm seems to imply the existence of an ulterior, 'hidden in plain sight' social norm. Whilst everybody is aware that everybody is having pre-marital relationships, a charade must be played to maintain each individual relationship's secrecy in order to preserve the wider integrity and traditions of society. Secrecy is of course a rather loose term here as more often than not a person's friends are included within their confidence as showing off about your exploits and interactions with the opposite sex is often part of the excitement and prestige related to such relationships. However, 'secrecy' must still be maintained from the remainder of the community, particularly the elders, and especially in circumstances where the relationship is with a 'taboo' partner, i.e. inter-caste or intra-samaj.

How are these relationships carried out? Whilst opportunities within the closely scrutinised public space of the village may be limited, there are a number of strategies employed in order to establish and maintain contact with the opposite sex. Relationships begin with a look and a smile and are soon followed by a proposal (from either party, although predominantly from the male end) along the lines of 'I love you, do you want to fall in love with me?' From there it is a short step to arranging meetings in fields at night or having closely pressed contact on the bus journey to school, or waiting for the husband and children to leave the home before the lover stealthily creeps in. For those attending a city college, the opportunities for interaction are more easily accessible and advantageous than in the village and inter-gender interactions are part of the campus norm.

Despite strategies for secrecy and the best intentioned plans, there is often a sense of inevitability about the discovery of such pre-marital relationships. The consequence of discovery varies between samaj and is dependent on the severity of the contravention of social norms. In the Christian samaj there is a begrudging acceptance of love relationships that lead to marriage, although this is still very much the exception to the norm, and is almost always accompanied by a great deal of problems. By its definition, love marriage is outside the socially accepted traditions and processes of arranged marriage, and therefore if a couple feels they have to pursue this route it is normally indicative of one party's (normally the girl's family) displeasure with the match. This displeasure can become particularly nasty as in the case of one young Christian man, who as a consequence of running away with his girlfriend experienced threats of violence and harassment from her wealthy father who took him to court, bribed the young man's lawyer not to attend, paid the police to abduct his brother, and bribed the village sarpanch and various neighbours to spy on the young couple and attempt to break the relationship. Yet this relationship would not be considered taboo as they were both Catholics from different areas. However, the father, being very wealthy, did not wish for his daughter to marry a poor villager, thus having a negative impact upon his reputation, whilst his creditability took a further blow when he was unable to force her to leave the boy and return home.

In both the Tadpada and Muslim samaj, such 'love' relationships are generally forbidden and in the former couples are engaged as young as 10-12 years old (although they will not live together as husband and wife until the man turns 21) and girls are pulled from education early to prevent interaction with boys from other samaj. In all three samaj there are certain relationships that are strictly and commonly forbidden, the two main forms being intra-samaj and inter-caste. The severity of punishment by the samaj for the culprits of such relationships varies depending on which of these rules are broken. If it is the discovery of an intra-samaj relationship then, in the case of the Tadpada samaj, the panch (samaj council of male elders) will meet and normally issue a fine payable to the goddess. For example one Tadpada man who had a secret affair with a married neighbour for seven years was discovered by the samaj on two occasions; both times he was fined Rs11,500 and made to swear an oath to the goddess that he would not do it again, but in his words 'I could not control so... we continued having sex' (that is until he was married whereby his wife fulfilled his sexual needs and he

was able to finish the relationship with his neighbour's wife). However, community fines are not the only consequence. There is sometimes (particularly in the Tadpada samaj) a current engagement, which is subsequently broken as the father will not marry his daughter to a man who is known for having pre-marital relationships, and this may involve the loss of money already committed to the marriage process. Perhaps more significantly is the impact the discovery of pre-marital relationships has on the reputation and 'credit' of an individual in the eyes of the samaj. In fact this loss of reputation, much more so than the monetary deterrent, is often the main consideration for those who do not embark on certain pre-marital relationships and is certainly the main motivating factor in keeping them a secret. Discovery impacts on a person's standing and status within the community, whether their opinion and advice is valued, whether they are included in samaj meetings and decisions, how people treat and interact with them in the street, and the ability to arrange a future marriage with a suitable partner. Once an individual's reputation is tarnished it is very difficult to regain a previously held status, and such behaviour or actions are not confined to the individual but extend to the person's family as well.

As detrimental as the consequences are for the discovery of an intra-samaj pre-marital relationship, they are not comparable to those of an inter-caste relationship. Regardless of a number of statements and declarations that casteism is fading in India and inter-caste interactions are improving, it is very evident that the caste system still strongly dictates the social, cultural, economic and political life of individuals and communities, and none more so than in terms of sex, relationships and marriage. To illustrate this point I will outline one narrative of a man in his mid-thirties from the Tadpada samaj. He is a wealthy business man who was well respected in the samaj, 'when I speak others would sit and listen', and he had arranged good marriages for his two elder daughters with two brothers (quite a common practice). However, two years ago his eldest daughter ran away with a Christian boy leading to a communal tension resolved only through the interjection of a number of community leaders in the village and the payment of a large sum of money by the family of the Christian boy as remuneration. The matter did not end here as the samaj panch was required to meet and discuss a suitable punishment, not for the girl but for her father as it was his responsibility to control the behaviour of his daughter. The first reaction was to exile the family from the samaj; to ex-communicate and isolate them from all interaction with the rest of the samaj. But still retaining some friends within the samaj the man was able to ameliorate this punishment. Then the panch sought to punish his business by informing members of the samaj to stop buying goods there and for some time trade dried up. However, through the force of his character and the lapsing of time business has slowly returned, but his reputation is still sullied within the samaj and he no longer holds the status of advisor or contributor to community life. He describes the punishment as unfair and unprecedented and maintains that the envy of others within the samaj (a common topic of discussion amongst the majority of interviewees) was the main motivation in the attack upon his business and economic position. Besides this, the engagement for both daughters was broken at a considerable economic cost, and more significantly it had become almost impossible for him to arrange future marriages for his daughters within the same caste. This example illustrates how a brief encounter with

the opposite sex in a taboo pre-marital relationship can have consequences that are magnified many times and which echo on into the future of the family.

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to discuss some of the key findings of my fieldwork, focusing on narratives and experiences of men in terms of different forms of pre-marital relationships and the consequences of their discovery. The varying notions and experiences of pre-marital relationships held by men are indicative of broader social processes and gender relations within a Gujarati village, such as the behaviour and attitudes towards women; changing social interactions through access to higher education; the continuation of traditions and social norms which dictate and constrain male-female interactions, relationships and love; and the complex caste structures that contextualise the everyday lives of men. Whilst further interpretation, analysis and theorisation are required I hope that this paper has provided a glimpse into the intentions and themes of my research and how this might progress over the coming months.